INTRODUCTION

WOMEN’S JOURNALS, FEMINISM, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN CHINA

A most remarkable change took place in the first half of the twentieth century in China: women journalists became powerful professionals who championed feminist interests, discussed national politics, and commented on current social events by editing independent periodicals. The rise of modern journalism in China provided literate women a powerful institution to articulate women’s presence in the public space. In editing women’s periodicals, women writers transformed themselves from traditional literary women (cainü) to professional women journalists (nübaoren) in the period of 1898–1937, when journalism became increasingly independent of and resistant to state control. The existence of hundreds of women’s periodicals testified to women’s public activism at a time when print media just had started shaping the political opinions and participation of the citizenry. These published writings provide us
with the earliest materials with feminist themes produced by Chinese women and provide us with information on how women looked at feminist issues at a time when the country was experiencing waves of nationalism and responding to political and social changes. Women’s media writings in the early decades of the twentieth century not only revealed the historical diversity and complexity of feminist issues in China but also brought up important feminist topics that have survived the nationalist, Communist, and economic reform eras. Today, public debate on women’s issues in mainland China and Taiwan is shaped by past feminist discourse and uses a vocabulary and language familiar to readers of an earlier era.

This book is about how women journalists constructed Chinese feminism and debated patriarchy and women’s roles in the newly created public space of print media in the period of 1898–1937. It studies Chinese women’s public writings in periodicals edited and staffed by women journalists in four major urban centers—Shanghai, Tokyo, Beijing, and Tianjin—at a time when urban society underwent major transformation and experienced drastic political, social, and cultural changes. The revolution that overthrew the imperial government in 1911, an attack on patriarchy by cultural radicals in 1915–1919, and the advocacy of nationalism, liberalism, socialism, and feminism by intellectuals who received a Western-style education worked together to undermine Confucian notions of gender hierarchy, spatial separation of the sexes, and female domesticity among well-educated urban classes. Doors of political participation, public activism, and production cracked open for courageous women who ventured into urban public spaces. From 1898 to 1937, urban women of the upper, middle, and working classes became increasingly visible at modern schools and in career and production fields, political activism, and women’s movements. At the same time, women edited independent periodicals and championed women’s rights. Women’s periodicals provided a site where writers negotiated with nationalism, patriarchy, and party lines to define and defend women’s interests. These early feminist writings captured how activists perceived themselves and responded to the social and political changes around them.
What brought literary women to the field of print media? What did writing for public consumption mean for women writers? How did women journalists edit their independent periodicals, accommodate their own feminist differences, and interact with readers? How did they negotiate with the state, political parties, and male-dominated mainstream media in defining women’s needs, roles, and social position? How did they introduce feminist ideas, report women-involved events, handle controversial gender issues, and circulate news on women’s lives? Did women journalists’ social background, public identity, and editorial concerns change over time? If the press is an agent of change, how did women writers initiate social changes in the direction they desired? What kind of public space did women’s print media provide?

This book takes a historical approach to these questions and uses gender as an analytical category to study the significance of women’s press writings in the years of nation building. Treating women journalists as agents of change and using their media writings as primary sources, this book explores what mattered to women writers at different historical junctures and how they articulated values and meaning in a changing society and guided social changes in the direction they desired. It situates gender issues in the context of nation building and examines how women’s public writings challenged the male dominance of print media, competed for the authority and authenticity of feminist discourse, constructed new feminine positions and gender norms, and integrated gender equality and women’s emancipation into Chinese modernity. This book delineates the transformation of women journalists from politically-minded Confucian gentry women to professional journalists, and of women’s periodicals from representing women journalists’ views to addressing the concerns and needs of the majority of women. It analyzes how the concepts of “feminism” and “nationalism” were embodied with different, even contesting meanings at given historical junctures and how women journalists managed to advance various feminist agendas by tapping on the various meanings of nationalism.

Three issues will be central to this book. First, the book intends to integrate women’s discourses and activities which did not fit into the
national history and party-led women’s movements into the history of Chinese women. The women’s movement in China was composed of women activists who had diverse political and cultural affiliations, such as liberal feminists, Christian women, women suffragists, and female reformers. Partisans of either the Nationalist Party (GMD) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were only part of the story. Besides, different women journalists collaborated and contributed to each other’s campaigns based on their common interests and political needs, and feminist agendas could cut across party and class loyalties and build alliances among women writers. Second, the book explores the changes and continuity of feminist issues as manifested in women’s periodicals. Third, the book investigates the significance that feminist voices held for Chinese women at large. I have often found resonance and encouragement in the writings of Chinese women journalists across time and space.

**Who Were the Women Journalists?**

The political press became a new medium for the male elite to propose national strengthening and envision new modes of polities since the late Qing. When male intellectuals, envisioning the new nation, disseminated knowledge about it in their journals of opinion, women’s involvement in the press revised some basic categories through which scholars understood Chinese social relations, institutions, and cultural productions. In editing women’s periodicals, female journalists remade themselves by articulating their public presence, attacking patriarchy, proposing new gender relations, and advocating democracy for women.

Women journalists differed from traditional literary women in significant ways because they assumed public identity as modern professionals. Traditional literary women used their literary gifts to serve the interests of the family and did not intentionally write for a public audience. They could craft a creative space for themselves in their domestic lives but did not challenge the prevailing Confucian gender system that gave them meaning, solace, and dignity. Their writings and publications were to
preserve women’s voices rather than initiate change in women’s lives. Women journalists, however, were concerned about nationalist and feminist issues and wrote for public consumption. They intended their writings to initiate social and political changes and often challenged existing gender norms and the status quo. Their writings advocated women’s rights, circulated new feminist ideals, and mobilized women for party and feminist activism.

Over the period of 1898–1937, Chinese women from different backgrounds had edited journals with the professed goal of promoting women’s rights. The profiles of women journalists changed over time as the political atmosphere, social background, and cultural milieu in China constantly changed. The earliest women journalists around the 1898 reform were gentry women who received a Confucian female education and were married to gentry officials who championed constitutional reform in China. Attracted by men’s proposals of anti–foot binding, female education, “good wives and wise mothers” (liangqi xianmu), “mothers of the nation” (guominmu), and women as producers, gentry women supportive to reform ventured into the press world to discuss gender equality in education and at home and to advocate women’s political participation. Those elite women journalists wrote in classical Chinese. Besides writing polemic essays, they also appropriated traditional feminine genres—guitishi (boudoir poetry) to express their political consciousness and lienüzhuan (women’s biographies) to introduce Western political and social heroines.1

From 1903 to 1913, Chinese women who received an education in Japan became leading women journalists. Many of them were from gentry households and were versed in Chinese classics prior to their journey to Japan. They went to Japan either as relatives of male political exiles and students or as students themselves. Those women edited many Chinese women’s periodicals in Tokyo and Shanghai, discussing women’s education, career, and marriage, preaching anti-Manchu revolution and republican ideas, and advocating “female nationalists” (nüguomin) and women revolutionaries. Although those women writers were good at classical Chinese, they explored vernacular language (baihua), regional
dialects (e.g., subai, the dialect of Suzhou), and tanci (a Southern-style singing performance accompanied by instruments) in their media writings in order to reach women readers of limited literacy levels. In contrast to revolution-minded women journalists in Tokyo and southern China, women journalists in northern China (Beijing and Tianjin) in the 1900s were often the wives and daughters of court officials and enjoyed special privileges. As advocates of social reform, northern women journalists criticized political corruption from their royalist perspective, exposed social evils and peoples’ indifference, discussed national strengthening and enlightenment (kai minzhi), and proposed women’s patriotism, education, independence, and equal rights. Around the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, many women journalists were revolutionaries-turned-suffragists who belonged to specific suffrage organizations. Women journalists in the early 1910s were often spokespersons for women’s societies with different feminist and political agendas. The political nature of women’s journalism prevented women writers from forming professional alliances or representing public opinion.

In 1915 young urban intellectuals began agitating for reform and strengthening Chinese society through acceptance of Western science, democracy, and schools of thought. On May 4, 1919, students in Beijing protested against the Versailles peace conference’s decision to transfer former German concessions in China to Japan, and the movement led to a patriotic outburst of new intellectuals against foreign imperialists and warlords in China. In the May Fourth era (1915–1923), many women students at modern schools in major urban centers in China were active in journalism. Influenced by liberal and humanist ideas, they explored women’s individual rights in education, career, love and marriage, suffrage, and inheritance in their writings. Beginning in the early 1920s, Communist women and Christian women also edited journals to promote their political causes or religious views. The National Revolution (1924–1927), led by the first united front of the GMD and the CCP, turned some May Fourth feminists into devoted partisans. The political parties defined nationalism as “anti-warlord, national unification and sovereignty,” and women’s movements as “women’s participation in the
Women’s journals became a site where women partisans competed with liberal feminists, Christian women, and women reformers in defining feminist issues and priorities.

The crushing of the CCP in the Nanjing decade (1927–1937) led to ideological polarization of women’s journals. Women journalists in the 1930s were a diverse group from the upper and middle classes—GMD women, CCP women, Christian women, women reformers, liberal feminists, and women students. More universities established journalism departments in the 1920s and 1930s, and academic journals and theoretical books made journalism a more specialized and professionalized field. Women journalists with professional training brought professional standards (objectivity, representing people’s voices, and so on) into women’s journals—they showed greater concern about women’s social issues, interviewed distinguished career women, investigated women-related controversies, and mediated with different opinions. As arbiters of public affairs and defenders of women’s interests, women journalists from different backgrounds formed professional alliances in nationalist and feminist movements. They criticized state policies, social prejudices, male chauvinism, and legal inconsistencies.

**Women Journalists and Feminism in China**

The main drawback of using sources produced by men and political parties to study women’s history and feminism is that such sources did not speak for women’s self-conscious concerns and feminist priorities, nor did the feminine positions prescribed by men and political parties for women match women’s real lives. In the history of how political parties mobilized women in political movements, women were not protagonists. In male discourse on women’s issues, women did not emerge as agents of change. Male reformers and revolutionaries at the end of the Qing and male intellectuals of the May Fourth era wrote on women’s issues intensively in the print media, but their writings largely served nationalist agendas of different time periods. Male discussions of anti–foot binding, female education, and “good wives and wise mothers” at the end of the Qing were for
the purpose of national strengthening. Male proposals that women should engage in republican revolution and devote themselves to industrial production around 1911 were to build a republic. May Fourth men advocated new women as equal citizens with civil rights to support their humanist ideas and advance their enlightened vision of modern China. Male partisans of the mid-1920s lobbied women to achieve emancipation through participating in the party-led National Revolution. Male intellectuals of the 1930s constructed Chinese women as defenders of traditional virtues, proper familial relationships, and social and political order.

Where can researchers have access to authentic feminist voices? Tani Barlow maintains that no written sources can provide unmediated access to the lives of Chinese women. If so, then Chinese women’s public writings at least provide us mediated access to the lives of Chinese women. Women’s periodicals in the first half of the twentieth century have left firsthand information on the feminist and political concerns of women journalists and are good sources to study their agency in constructing feminist discourse, proposing new subject positions, and acting on new feminist ideals. Those writings reveal their ways to advance the feminist cause through adapting nationalist discussions and accommodating the policies of parties and state. Numerous women’s periodicals speak coherently to modern readers on how Chinese women journalists responded to the sociopolitical changes in the early decades of the twentieth century, perceived the relationship between women and the nation, and understood women’s political, social, and civil rights as citizens of a modern nation. Women’s media writing sheds light on the tension between male feminist discourse and the female one and reveals the differences between male-prescribed feminism and the reality of women’s lives.

In Western countries, feminism is a political discourse advocated mainly by middle-class white women, aiming at equal rights and legal protection for women. Western feminists voice concern about gender differences, advocate equality for women, and campaign for women’s rights and interests. Complicated by Western imperialism in China and Chinese women’s reality, “women’s rights” in China at the turn of the twentieth century had two meanings: one was the humanist understanding of