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¹ As with any study purporting to deal with “the Chinese,” “Chinese women,” or for that matter “China,” the work of Tania Angeloff and Marylène Lieber confronted the risk of clubbing under a single synthesising term the immensity of a land and its human diversity – social or ethnic – that would be better categorised as “Chinese population.” It is thus with slightly raised eyebrows that one embarks on the dozen chapters edited by two sociologists who take an interdisciplinary approach by including both established and younger authors, francophone, anglophone, and Chinese. The book launches boldly into the honourable albeit delicate task of treating the lives of Chinese women, without seeking to be exhaustive but trying to provide the keys for better understanding their social lives, which are in constant movement and flux, undergoing rapid metamorphosis. For instance, in her contribution on Chinese women’s sexuality, Evelyne Micollier notes parenthetically that notable behavioural changes are discernible often within the space of four or five years.

² The book sets out to examine whether and how the condition of Chinese women has improved over the last few decades, or in which way these twenty-first century women stand out from their mothers and grandmothers, but clearly no satisfactory answer has emerged. This is because the benefits and losses from three decades of revolution packed with reforms have differently fashioned the generations, whose often radically divergent trajectories converge such that only a limited accounting is possible of a population still suffering from prejudices attached to its gender. As elsewhere, “the attributes and duties that society assigns women” persist (Harriet Evans, p. 159).

³ Professional status, roles within families, experiences of intimacy and family relations, and social representations of femininity serve as analytical frameworks for the contributions, all of which make this undeniable observation: while the condition of women in China has been considerably transformed since the Mao era and especially since the start of socio-economic reforms, this transformation has not changed social relations between the sexes; they are still rooted in strong socio-cultural structures while having spawned new imbalances.

⁴ All the authors in this collection agree on a certain number of elements, which are raised in all the cases tackled. Basically, women remain, in the eyes of society, of men, and of the state, incarnations of eternal values and qualities that influence the position imposed on them and which they too often appropriate. Docility, delicacy, patience, dexterity, and also the sense of communication keep them in service-related activities and jobs and in social mediation (assisting vulnerable people or prostitution), subject to a hierarchy clearly enshrined through a gap in salaries and recognition of competences and access to ill-paid jobs (labourers, domestic workers, or inadequate jobs for graduates). The authors also note the state’s limited and ambivalent intervention. The remarks heard in family units and work places and

articulated through popular culture are in fact validated by official silence and lack of motivation among state agents to strictly apply equity rules. Reactions and opposition to this state of things are rising meanwhile, and show that through migration and progress in social mobility and their consequences on women's sociability, the issue of the feminine condition has left the private sphere and is discussed anew in public space. Emergence of new forms of demand and women's individual or collective action in their private or professional lives demonstrate this considerable advance.

⁵ This feminist awareness is transformed into an implicit dynamic defying the politico-traditional perception of women that the Maoist years, despite egalitarian aspirations going so far as to deny gender differences, only further validated and hardened rather than questioned. Many authors in this collection depict contemporary Chinese women's condition as resulting from multiple heritages: the intellectual upheaval of ideas in the early twentieth century, which put their emancipation from traditions at the centre of reform debates, the Maoist regime's radicalism, and the complex mutations unleashed after economic liberalism set in. Today, in a socio-economic context where nothing is fixed or lasts, and despite the categorisation of identities seeking to situate individual trajectories, women constantly navigate among statuses. Migrant women, urban unemployed women (former government employees), rural women, young graduates, single women, prostitutes, private employees, and workers are categories neither fixed nor exclusive. The tracks are blurred, and as the study of the realities of Chinese women's condition has become more complex, new issues have arisen: equality in law *versus* equality in fact, social and professional discrimination, and other challenges to the norm (hampered maternities, dispersed families, multiple sexualities), etc.

⁶ Various chapters in this contribution to gender studies, which attempts synthesis but whose contrasting descriptions underline ruptures and continuities, afford readers new insights into the private, family, and professional lives of Chinese women today, whether in the isolation of a village or in the heart of a megalopolis. But what about those women who fall between the two extremes and who no doubt make up the majority? In other words, those still swayed by several influences and relying on styles of the moment, advice more or less astute, other people's experiences, and their own intuitions? It is therefore regrettable that little attention has been paid to women in the countryside, small towns, remote provinces, and regions with ethnic and cultural diversity, guided by thought processes and mentalities resulting in life choices different from those who have the will to change. When these women are mentioned at all, it is in their new roles ("migrants," such a broad sociological category that it loses its meaning) with too little focus on their own concerns and original situations.

⁷ Moreover, it would have been gratifying if more voices of such Chinese women had been featured in order to get a more nuanced vision. To be sure, the women discussed in this book are vulnerable but not that much, dissatisfied but not always, discriminated against but also full of convictions, the most ambitious ones managing to overcome social shackles. Listening to them above all would help better distinguish between the self-perception of social representation and the degree of Chinese women's acceptance of or resistance towards official discourse.

⁸ Nevertheless, the book offers new and varied proofs, clearly contextualised and documented, that Chinese women are now experiencing such rapid change that they benefit unequally from the progress, stagnating in various forms of precariousness. They lose their bearings, find it difficult to assert themselves socially, and still await recognition of their economic and social contribution. They somehow continue to seek emancipation, between partial liberation from family shackles and the overbearing state, receiving little help from an

employment market featuring “typically feminine” jobs and little support from men who are deemed to be – perhaps wrongly – unconcerned. Forms change, evolutions occur, but the socio-political structure endures. In the book’s conclusion, Laurence Roulleau-Berger sums it up well: “Chinese modernity seems to be specific in the sense that three decades of communist policies promoting women’s status have not dislodged persisting forms of discrimination in the context of social and economic transition” (p. 233). The studies and analyses in the book leave the impression that many Chinese women are disappointed with the limited benefits of three decades of liberal – but not liberating – reforms, and feel that that neither escape (marrying a foreigner) nor provocation (bloggers) nor self-sacrifice (prostitutes) helps overcome the handicap.

⁹ Anecdotally, it is surprising that despite rising awareness of gender in social science studies, the issue of women, Chinese or otherwise, seems to remain a preserve of women themselves (one male author among 11 females), as if the issue is of little concern to male researchers or as if gender imbalances happen despite them in the scientific gaze focused on the issue.

¹⁰ Finally, it would be good to adopt in future analyses a comparative perspective taking in Vietnamese women, regional cousins subject to an identical unequal gender structure. Such a comparison would be instructive, as Vietnam has gone through similar socio-economic transformations, led by a regime and reforms politically very close to those of China. While their respective situations have not necessarily evolved along the same modalities, they illustrate contemporary advances in two related societies, even though on both sides of the border, women are still far from achieving fulfilment.

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