



Sextant

Revue de recherche interdisciplinaire sur le genre et la sexualité

38 | 2022

Precarious peripheries

Introduction. Gender from the Margins of China

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/sextant/722>

ISSN: 2795-8736

Publisher

Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2022

Number of pages: 7-20

ISBN: 978-2-8004-1777-6

ISSN: 1370-267X

Electronic reference

Jennifer Bond, Coraline Jortay and Chang Liu, "Introduction. Gender from the Margins of China", *Sextant* [Online], 38 | 2022, Online since 01 December 2022, connection on 13 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/sextant/722>



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Introduction

Gender from the Margins of China

Jennifer Bond, Coraline Jortay, and Chang Liu¹

National geographies and gender norms both rely upon neatly drawn boundaries, state-sanctioned behaviours, and socially constructed identities that seek to tell us *who* we are. They are both constructed through the creation of normative centres and peripheries, with clearly demarcated and heavily policed borders. But if the border is a line, the frontier is an area, a liminal space where people do exist on their own terms. Its inhabitants live in constant awareness of their relative marginalisation and of the expectations of the centre. It is through their relative closeness or distance, their deemed “progressiveness” or “backwardness” from the idealized normative centre that they are examined, measured, and defined. But what changes, then, when *we* step away from dominant narratives of the centre to focus with intention on those historically relegated to the periphery? Reflecting on her *grand oeuvre* centring Black history and Black women’s experiences, Toni Morrison stated: “I stood on the border, stood on the edge, and claimed it as central. Claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world come over to where I was.”² In turn, what do we see when we envision gender from the margins of China as pivotal, in the literal sense of the term, that is, worthy of letting our understanding shift over?

This view from the margins which decentres national narratives is well-known to scholars working in postcolonial and subaltern studies. For many decades also, China studies scholars interested in border regions have scrutinized China’s margins and their critical linkages to the centre. They have challenged China’s centredness,³ questioned the homogeneity of hegemonic categories such as the Han,⁴ or compelled us to pay closer attention to the shifting and uneven boundaries of what we have come to call “China” over the centuries.⁵ But what are the epistemological implications of

¹ All authors have contributed equally to this paper and are listed in alphabetical order.

² T. Morrison, interview by J. Wendt, *Toni Morrison: Uncensored*, Beyond Productions, A Presentation of Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1998, video, 6:14, <https://youtu.be/DQ0mMjll22I>.

³ P. K. Crossley, H. F. Siu, and D. S. Sutton, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California, 2006; S. D. Blum and L. M. Jensen, *China off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’i, 2002.

⁴ T. S. Mullaney, *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China’s Majority*, Berkeley, University of California, 2012.

⁵ G. B. Lee, *China Imagined: From European Fantasy to Spectacular Power*, London, Hurst and Company, 2018.

interrogating marginality and marginalisation as they intersect with gender in China, today and yesterday? We think of geographical margins, of course, given the dynamics outlined above, but we think of marginalisation of other kinds, too. Invoking “China” in relation to its “margins” has historically been tied with scholarship focusing on *shaoshu minzu* as categorized in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), often loosely translated as “ethnic minorities” or “minority nationalities” as opposed to the Han majority.⁶ Twenty-five years ago, women’s studies scholars already highlighted how representations of ethnic minority women as “exotic” in mainstream PRC cultural production had, in effect, helped solidify a unified Han majority identity through the essentializing of an “internal Other.”⁷ Though more recent work has nuanced this explanatory framework,⁸ scholarship focusing more inclusively on the critical juncture of gender and ethnicity in China has been booming in recent years, branching out from its original location in women’s studies to include more broadly questions of gender, masculinities, and queerness in their relation to ethnicity.⁹ From earlier attention in anthropology, sociology, and history, such efforts have extended into film and literary studies, as these fields have simultaneously embraced the conceptual tools of feminist, postcolonial and Sinophone studies.¹⁰

This special issue of *Sextant* seeks to further this interdisciplinary effort, looking not only at geographical margins (Hong Kong, Guizhou, Xinjiang) in the strict sense, but also at physical and intangible spaces that have been understood as marginal by a variety of actors. The six articles of this issue take us on a journey which starts from the political margins of China in Hong Kong to diasporic Chinese communities of Mexico City’s popular markets, from alternative spaces within mainstream Internet platforms to underground bars within the capital heartland of Beijing, and back to the geographical frontiers of the PRC in Guizhou and Xinjiang. In the same movement, these articles reach beyond margins in their strict geographical sense: to varying degrees, they examine gender with attention to its intersections with age, religion, race, ethnicity, class, labour, and linguistic differences. In the first article, Gina Marchetti uses a case study of two films by female Hong Kong filmmakers, Ann Hui’s *A Simple Life* (2011) and Flora Lau’s *Bends* (2013), to unpick how class, age and gender intersect

⁶ For a brief discussion of how these categories (along with their English translations) are problematic, see Steven Pieragastini and Arianne Ekinci’s articles in this issue. For a more comprehensive treatment of the socially constructed categories of the Han/non-Han and majority/minority as they have been used in the PRC, see T. S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010.

⁷ L. Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China”, *Modern China*, 23/1, 1997, 69–98, p. 73.

⁸ For a discussion of the limits of ‘internal Orientalism’ as a framework of analysis, see E. Wilcox, “Beyond Internal Orientalism: Dance and Nationality Discourse in the Early People’s Republic of China, 1949–1954”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75/2, 2016, pp. 363–386.

⁹ See for instance L. Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000; M. Bryson, *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017; R. Harris, *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020; K. Shernuk, “Ethnicity—a queerness of relation: The plight of the “ethnic minority” in Chan Koon-Chung’s *Bare Life*”, in H. Chiang and A.K. Wong (eds.), *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*, New York, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁰ A recent example can be found in the literary depictions of the marginalisation of Korean and Russian Jewish women as colonial subjects and refugees in 1930s Manchuria by C. Iwasaki in the article “Homeless in the Fatherland: Xiao Hong’s Migrant Geographies”, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 2019, 31, pp. 162–182.

to entrench the precarity of cross-border lives in the special administrative region. The second article by Ximena Alba Villalever follows another group of migrants to the peripheries of the overseas Chinese diaspora in Mexico. Villalever analyses how cultural constructions of gender and race are used by Chinese migrant women workers in Mexico's markets to resist the precarity of their marginal position and build allyship with Mexican women merchants in a male-dominated business world. Moving from the diaspora to the online world, Fan Wang's article explores how online publishing platforms have provided space for fiction that centers non-normative gender roles, including matriarchal fiction, and the ambiguous relationship they maintain with market capitalism and state regulations. Blurring gender binaries further, Liu Yilong explores embodied queer experiences of sex, happiness, and precarity through the lens of Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (2010). Their night scenes of crossdressing performers in Sanlitun's pubs bring us to the spatial undergrounds that lay within the geographical heartland of Beijing, and to the peripheries of mainstream socio-cultural norms. Finally, we come to the geographic frontiers of the PRC and the sometimes-fraught relationships that they entertain with gender, ethnicity, nation, and religion. Drawing on rich archival sources, Steven Pieragastini explores how state efforts to collectivise agriculture played out along gendered lines in Guizhou in the 1950s. For the same time period, Arianne Ekinci explores the CCP state construction of "modern" Uyghur women subjects through the case study of a former illiterate shepherdess turned model Chinese-speaking proletarian secular performer, hailing from Hotan, Xinjiang.

The Margins of China Through Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In moving through and beyond national boundaries and gender norms, the contributors to this issue simultaneously bring to the fore questions of age, religion, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and linguistic differences – and often several of these together – as co-constructive phenomena that entrench the delineation of the margins. More or less directly or explicitly, they bring this special issue into dialogue with the ground-breaking theoretical work of scholars of colour in the United States on intersectionality. Intersectionality has emerged from Black women's intellectual production in Black feminism and race/class/gender studies in the 1980s, and its coining is widely credited to feminist and legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw.¹¹ At its inception in the United States, it was foremost instrumental in laying bare how race, class, and gender intersect to deepen the marginalisation of Black women, and why

¹¹ K. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 1989, pp. 139–67. For a discussion of the emergence of intersectionality as a field of study within the context of Black feminism and race/class/gender studies and women's studies, as well as Crenshaw's place within this intellectual genealogy, see Collins P. H., "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41/1, 2015, pp. 1–20.

single-axis analyses fail to fully capture the “problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.”¹² Over time, this approach has been taken up by other scholars to analyse the interlocking logics of not only gender, class, and race, but also sexuality, ability, age, nation, ethnicity, and other markers which are entangled in social power hierarchies – not only in the United States, but also elsewhere around the world.¹³

Of course, the question of whether intersectionality could or should be a traveling theory – or even a theory at all – has been a highly contested topic, both geography and category-wise.¹⁴ Scholars have criticized its institutional travels from social movements into the neoliberal academy since the early 2000s, itineraries that have removed it from its radical roots as a social justice project and perhaps, some argue, transformed it into a catch-all phrase of academic liberal feminism.¹⁵ They have pointed out its depoliticising geographical travels into the European context, uneasy passages that have favoured class and gender while stripping away race and racism from their analytical potency.¹⁶ They have singled out the dangers of additive models that simply add up more categories and layers of marginalisation onto the pile at the expense of deep critical engagement with any of them.¹⁷

As one can see, the pitfalls of the theoretical transplant abound. And our intention is certainly not to merely add “China” uncritically onto that pile. First and foremost, as historians, we are acutely aware that time and place matter tremendously. Across different national and transnational contexts and at different points in time, intersecting power relations might take different shapes, and different forms of inequalities might be more or less pronounced – and that affects the ability of concepts to travel unchanged.¹⁸ Without attuning to these particularities, we face the risk of emptying out categories into pseudo-analogical, ahistorical shells.¹⁹ Furthermore, national contexts are not the only ones that need historicising: different kinds of inequalities also possess their particular traditions, histories, and effects.²⁰ It is therefore crucial

¹² S. Cho, K. W. Crenshaw, and L. McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38/4, 2013, p. 795.

¹³ For a discussion on expanding intersectionality’s focus to other related analytical categories, see Kim-Puri H. J., “Conceptualizing Gender-Sexuality-State-Nation: An Introduction”, *Gender & Society*, 19/ 2, 2005, pp. 137–59. For an intersectional analytical framework travelling outside of the US, see for instance M. Alinia, *Honor and Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁴ S. Salem, “Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 25/4, 2018, pp. 403–418.

¹⁵ J. Parker, R. Samantrai, M. Romero (eds), *Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice: Revisioning Academic Accountability*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2010; B. Tomlinson, “Colonizing Intersectionality: Replicating Racial Hierarchy in Feminist Academic Arguments”, *Social Identities*, 19/2, 2013, pp. 254–72; Bilge S., “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies”, *Du Bois Review*, 10/2, 2013, pp. 405–424.

¹⁶ Knapp G.-A., “Race, Class, Gender”, *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 12/3, 2005, pp. 249–265; M. M. Ferree, “The Discursive Politics of Feminist Intersectionality”, in H. Lutz, M.T. Herrera Vivar and L. Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 55–65.

¹⁷ N. Yuval-Davis, “Beyond the Recognition and Re-distribution Dichotomy: Intersectionality and Stratification”, in H. Lutz, M.T. Herrera Vivar and L. Supik (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 155–69; A. Ludvig, “Differences between Women: Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13/3, 2006, pp. 245–258.

¹⁸ P. H. Collins, “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas”, *op. cit.* p. 7.

¹⁹ A. Phoenix and P. Pattyama, “Intersectionality”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13/3, 2006, pp. 187–92.

²⁰ See A. Arondekar, “Border/line Sex: Queer Postcolonialities, or How Race Matters Outside the United States”, *Interventions*, 7/2, 2005, pp. 236–250; N. Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics”, *The European*

to attend to historically-specific patterns of inequality and structures of power. On many levels, 1950s rural Guizhou and the market stalls of Mexico City described in this issue are vastly different from the original context in which intersectionality developed – and are also vastly different from one another.

And yet, one cannot be endlessly relativist and follow the frequent exceptionalist postulation that China absolutely cannot be discussed in certain terms because China would be somehow incommensurably “different”. The dynamics of marginalisation that are at play when projecting that quintessential “Other” smack of Orientalism and share similar dynamics to the kind of power relations that intersectional scholars are trying to unpack. We are ourselves scholars from white and Han middle-class backgrounds working in privileged institutions and academic fields which have, only in recent decades, started to come to terms with their colonial roots. As such, we have witnessed the historical tendency that the study of “China” should stay tightly snug within sinology or area studies departments, in a way that has made it difficult for many of us to engage with our colleagues in history, literature, or gender studies. While the issue is structural, we are nevertheless particularly grateful to *Sextant*, a generalist gender and sexuality journal, for having welcomed us within its pages and pushed through to build up dialogue.

This special issue thus seeks to exist in the space of tension between these two caveats. In putting it together, we were struck by the interlocking logics of marginalisation and privilege that emerged from the contributions that we received. In China, too, single-axis analyses seemed to fail to capture the complexity and co-constructive nature of processes of marginalisation. This special issue thus seeks to build bridges towards cross-disciplinary and cross-areal dialogues – recognizing in equal parts the theoretical potency of intersectional perspectives as conceptual tools, as well as the crucial need for attunement to historically and place-specific structures of power. In this, we were influenced by other approaches drawing from the simultaneous vantage points of critical race theory, whiteness studies, and the legacy of New Qing History.²¹ We follow, in a sense, the invitation of Cho et al. when they speak of “analytical sensibilities.”²² And as time and place are important, before turning to the articles that make up this issue more especially, we will try to outline how those concepts have travelled to China, and to what extent they have or have not been taken up by Chinese feminists or academics themselves.

Journal of Women's Studies, 13/3, 2006, pp. 193–209; D. W. Carbado, “Colorblind Intersectionality”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38/4, 2013, pp. 811–845.

²¹ T. Mullaney, *Critical Han Studies...*, *op. cit.*

²² S. Cho, K. Crenshaw, L. McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, *Signs*, 38, 2013, pp. 785–810.

Intersectionality in the Chinese Context

Despite inspiring both academic discussion and activist action, the question of whether one could or should discuss intersectionality in a Chinese context has been the subject of debate among scholars both within and outside China.²³ Indeed, some categories that have been discussed as pivotal to the understanding of European and North American societies, such as class, race, and sexuality, have been recognized to varying degrees in Chinese academia. Moreover, as a consequence of the radical social changes and revolutions that have marked China's twentieth century, what these categories signify locally has also varied rapidly and sometimes dramatically. For example, the application of the Marxist-Leninist conception of class in China has shifted over time, from the first partial translation of the Communist Manifesto in an anarcho-feminist periodical in 1908,²⁴ its institutionalisation after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and through to the re-emergence of a new "middle class" since the reform and opening policies of 1978.²⁵ As a result of the particular salience of class in the early PRC, a generation of scholars of Chinese women's history both in the anglophone and Chinese contexts used primarily a Marxist framework as the main analytical tool to dissect interactions between gender and class in twentieth-century China.²⁶ Meanwhile, for the other side of the Pacific, the intellectual roots of intersectionality can be found in a corrective to Marxist feminism by Black feminist Marxists in the late 1970s, who while explicitly aligning themselves with Marxism, deplored the lack of attunement of analysis to the specificities of the condition of Black women.²⁷ From this starting point, scholars inheriting their legacy have conducted an extensive critique of the pitfalls of forms of economic reductionism which posit race, gender or sexuality as secondary categories to class, which they argue contributes to depoliticising their intersections.²⁸

²³ Y. Dong, "Does China Have a Feminist Movement from the Left?", *Made in China Journal*, 4/1, 2019, pp. 58–63; Y. Su, "Jiaochaxingliupai deguandian fangfa jiqi duizhongguoxingbieshehuixue de qifa 交叉性流派的观点、方法及其对中国性别社会学的启发 [Intersectionality: A New Perspective for the Chinese Gender Sociology]", *Shehuixueyanjiu 社会学研究 [Sociological Studies]*, 4, 2016, pp. 218–241; Y. Dong, "Xinshijiao xincailliao qianyanmakesizhuyinüquan lilunshijiaoxia de shehuizhuyizhongguoyanjiu 新视角、新材料: 前沿马克思主义女权理论视角下的社会主义中国研究 [New Perspectives, New Materials: Socialist China Studies Seen from Avant-Guard Marxist Feminism]", *Funüyanjiuluncong 妇女研究论丛 [Journal of Chinese Women's Studies]*, 5, 2017, pp. 18–23.

²⁴ L. H. Liu, R. E. Karl and D. Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 5–6.

²⁵ See for example, Li Lifeng, "Jiejihuafen de zhengzhigongneng yixiangguanyutugai de zhengzhishehuixuefenxi 阶级划分的政治功能——一项关于“土改”的政治社会学分析 [The Political Function of Class Division: A Political-Sociological Analysis of 'Land Reform']", *Nanjing shehuixue 南京社会科学 [Social Science in Nanjing]*, 1, 2008, pp. 65–71; N. Pun and J. Chen, "Jiejihuayu de xiaoshi 阶级话语的消逝 [The Disappearance of Class Discourse]", *Kaifangshidai 开放时代 [Open Times]*, 5, 2008, pp. 53–60.

²⁶ For a summary of these historiographical trends, see G. Hershatler and W. Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis", *American Historical Review*, 113/5, 2008, pp. 1404–1421; E. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; D. Davin, *Woman-work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

²⁷ For a discussion of the place of e.g. the Combahee River Collective and Angela Davis within this genealogy, see P.H. Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41/1, 2015, pp. 1–20.

²⁸ See S. Farris, "The Intersectional Conundrum and the Nation-State", *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2014, available at: viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/the-intersectional-conundrum-and-the-nation-state/ (accessed 14 October 2021).

In parallel, the relationships between feminist movements and the state have been vastly place-specific. Whereas in the US feminists have frequently petitioned against the state and have considered the state responsible for consolidating gender inequality, in China feminists' agendas have often been components of the state's various programmes for national strengthening and building of state socialism. In the late nineteenth century, both reformers and revolutionaries seeking to topple the Qing empire promoted women's education for national salvation. Across the twentieth century, the state played a comparatively much larger role in co-ordinating feminist concerns, including women's status in politics, education, health, and employment.²⁹ When the PRC was established in 1949, the All-China Women's Federation, one of the biggest mass organisations in the PRC, quickly set up its branches across China. Today the Women's Federation remains the main state-sponsored organisation with the stated aim of promoting gender equality and women's rights. As Su Yihui points out, the idea of intersectionality emerged from a tide of civil activism in the 1980s US, when feminists sought to build alliances with movements that campaigned against other forms of inequality, such as those of gender and race.³⁰ In contrast, the problem faced by Chinese feminists was quite different in the second half of the twentieth century. As scholars including Wang Zheng have shown, Chinese feminists working within the state apparatus, both pre- and post-1949, had to carefully negotiate their struggles for gender equality within broader national imperatives.³¹ As a result of the monopolisation of feminist concerns by the state after 1978, grassroots feminist activists whose concerns do not align with state-sponsored goals have been marginalised. Their efforts to agitate for change have also been hamstrung by the official view that Chinese women have, since 1949, been liberated from feudal oppression, thus making any sustained critique of the status-quo politically unacceptable.³² Over the last four decades, China's re-entry into global capitalism and turn away from state feminism have given rise to what Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong describe as an "alignment of the post-socialist state's agenda, market forces, and rekindled patriarchal values [that] has culminated in a gendered marriage market that emphasizes hypergamy, institutionalizing women's sexuality as their means to economic security."³³ The increased connectedness of the internet era has also provided more platforms to feminist groups and topics, especially among university-educated urbanites. This context has given rise to many shades of what Wu and Dong call "made-in China feminisms," among which a New Feminist Movement that is internationally well-connected and explicitly concerned with class/gender/sexuality intersectionality. As Séagh Kehoe outlines, there is however, a relative dearth of focus on the ways in which gender and ethnicity

²⁹ G. Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019; G. Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 79–105.

³⁰ Su Yihui, "Jiaochaxingliupai deguandian...", *op. cit.*

³¹ Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2016.

³² For more on feminist activism in China in recent years see W. Zheng, "Detention of the Feminist Five in China", *Feminist Studies*, 42/2, 2015, pp. 476–482.

³³ A. X. Wu, and Y. Dong, "What is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China", *Critical Asian Studies*, 51/4, 2019, pp. 471–492.

intersect within Chinese feminist activism, a blind spot compounded by the difficulty of building cross-cultural feminist solidarity in China today.³⁴

Scholars of contemporary China have given increasing theoretical attention to intersectional questions in recent decades. This has particularly been the case for scholars who examine feminist movements and increasing gender inequality in China after 1978. The introduction of market economy in the Reform era redefined class as well as China's rural-urban divide. Rural women and men moved to work in urban production lines and became part of the so-called "floating population."³⁵ With China's entry into global economic markets, Chinese people also began to migrate to other parts of the world, including Western Europe and North America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Against the background of the evolving economic and political conditions since the beginning of the "Reform and Opening-Up" policy, increasing international academic collaboration and discussions of gender between Chinese and foreign scholars have coincided with a turn away from class antagonism as no longer the only officially approved theory to explain gender inequality. Gender studies in China have blossomed since the 1980s, and some scholars have criticized the reductive horizon of solely scrutinizing gender as a single-axis category of analysis. Qin Fang, for example, has recently raised the criticism that scholars of women's history in mainland China today sometimes tend to prioritise gender over class, region, the family, generation, and ethnicity, and thus limit the horizon of their research.³⁶ Bringing these discussions to bear on earlier time periods, others have tried to show how the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity complicate our understanding of gender relations, women's identities, and social roles during the Ming-Qing periods.³⁷ Generally, scholars around the world have continued to interrogate the critical junctures of gender and race, gender and disability, as well as other *loci*, in shaping marginalisation in China, or more widely transnationally against Asian communities.³⁸

³⁴ S. Kehoe, "Global Connections: Chinese Feminism, Tibet and Xinjiang", *Made in China Journal*, 4/1, 2019, pp. 72–77.

³⁵ T. Cheek, "Reform and Rebuilding, 1976–1988", in J. Wasserstrom (ed.), *Oxford Illustrated History of China*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 226–249.

³⁶ Qin Fang, "Zailishiyuxingbiezhijian daludiqu jindaizhongguofunüshiyianjiu de zhishishilujing 在历史与性别之间——大陆地区近代中国妇女史研究的知识史路径 [Between History and Gender: Understanding the Studies of Modern Chinese Women in Mainland China from the Perspective of Knowledge Production]", *Funüyanjiuluncong 妇女研究论丛 [Journal of Chinese Women's Studies]*, 6, 2020, pp. 74–84.

³⁷ Jo-lan Yi, "Lunzhongguoxingbiezhishiyianjiu de duoyuanjiaozhi 论中国性别史研究的多元交织 [Intersectionality and Chinese Gender History]", *Jindaizhongguofunüshiyianjiu 近代中国妇女史研究 [Research on Women in Modern Chinese History]*, 2, 2017, pp. 167–229.

³⁸ S. Dauncey, *Disability in Contemporary China: Citizenship, Identity and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020; Liu Wen, "Internationalism Beyond the 'Yellow Peril': On the Possibility of Transnational Asian-American Solidarity," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 11/2, 2020, pp. 21–24; Liu Wen, "Narrating Against Assimilation and the Empire: Diasporic Mourning and Queer Asian Melancholia," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 47/1-2, 2019, pp. 176–192.

Where the Margins of China Lie

These analytical sensibilities thus lend a particularly acute approach to explore the experiences of migrant workers, domestic workers, children in rural China, older people, and ethnic minorities, as well as helping us to critically rethink how to build bridges between feminist theories in the Chinese context.³⁹ In this light, the six articles in this special issue start off from a variety of disciplines (film studies, history, literature, anthropology, etc.) to examine the power dynamics at work in the representation of marginalised communities across different social and historical contexts in the PRC from the 1950s up to the present day. These intersections of class, nation, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality play a pivotal role in creating and defining the margins of China itself. They are found at what Leslie McCall has characterized as “multiple subordinate locations.”⁴⁰ These are locations of marginality and inequality, but also constantly moving, fluid spaces which people are pushed and move into, out of, and across according to their personal circumstances, thus shifting transnational consumption patterns and state policies.

Global market forces have a role to play in shaping where the margins of China lie. Marchetti reveals how Hong Kong, once a hub of global trade, has since its return to the PRC in 1997 become increasingly overshadowed by new powerhouses of trade and commerce across the border in Shenzhen. Hong Kong residents are at the mercy of the vagaries of their mainland business partners as well as shifting state policies at the internal border. People can often “fake it” in such rapidly changing circumstances, moving from the centre to the periphery of class, wealth, and gender norms with dizzying speed. This is illustrated in the roller-coaster life story of Anna the housewife in Flora Lau’s 2013 film *Bends*, who rises from humble origins and is then pitched into a dramatic decline in fortunes as she is abandoned by her husband. Neo-liberal capitalism has also resulted in the feminization of migration patterns, in the movement of Chinese women to Mexico, or in the flow of female domestic labour to Hong Kong. Marchetti’s insight that “women negotiate borders differently,” could also be applied to Villalever’s article that highlights how women hailing from different regions of China and speaking different languages have negotiated their positions as transnational agents, but also as marginal outsiders in Mexico’s informal economy.

The margins are therefore essentially porous and precarious zones in themselves, and their contours and visibility are circumscribed by the caprices of the State. This is particularly the case in Pieragastini’s article where rapidly shifting policies towards private land ownership of bride lands in the 1950s had a seesawing effect for minority women, rendering them at the mercy of local and national cadres’ powerplay. Who

³⁹ For example: Du Ping, “Chongshen jiaochaxing nanxingtezhi de liluntipoyuyanjiuqishi 重申交叉性:男性特质的理论突破与研究启示 [Reaffirming the Crossing: Theoretical Breakthrough of Male Trait and the Research Inspiration]”, *Nankai xuebao* 南开学报 [Nankai Journal], 4, 2017, pp. 101–110; Du Ping, *Nangong, nügong: Dangdai Zhongguo nongmingong de xingbie, jiating yu qianyi* 男工女工: 当代中国农民工的性别、家庭与迁移 [Factory Boys, Factory Girls: Gender, Family and the Migration of Rural People in Contemporary China], Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017.

⁴⁰ L. McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30/3, 2005, pp. 1771–1800.

gets to speak for and from the margins is also controlled by the State. A similar power dynamic is at work in Ekinci's work, where former shepherdess Shalamaiti is made to speak with the voice of the State in her stage performances of Uyghur women's new subjectivity, thus enacting her transformation from "helpless victim" of a supposedly "backward patriarchy" to enlightened and productive State subject. Those who are empowered by the centre to speak "for" and "from" the margins accordingly face a double process of marginalization and self-erasure: they must conform to the narrative of the paternalist centre in order to be made visible and able to speak.

Some articles allow us a fragmentary peep inside the margins from the perspective of those living there. The articles highlight the affective and embodied impacts of life on the margins. In Liu's article we are allowed a view into the embodied emotional effects of precarity on the queer identity construction of both Fan Qihui and their drag-queen stage persona Bilang de Linphél, as presented in Qiu Jiongjiong's 2010 film *Madame*. Marchetti's article highlights the physical toll pushed onto gendered labouring and aging bodies within Hong Kong's underfunded public healthcare system. Women's bodies on public display in Mexico's informal markets are subjected to sexualization and harassment in Villalever's work. The health, labour and reproductive potential of minority women's bodies come under state interference and are subject to campaigns in both Pieragastini's and Ekinci's contributions. And while the inner world of the twirling Shalamaiti who performs her 'modern gendered Uyghur identity' on stage remains unknown, the reader wonders what the affective impact is on Shalamaiti as her body becomes both a site of precarity and the promise of a better tomorrow.

Negotiating the precarity of life on the margins and its embodied affects, is also a concern of this issue. As Marchetti highlights, those living in such rapidly changing circumstances must have a "chameleon-like" ability in order to survive. Mutual dependency and trust are also key power dynamics at play as actors negotiate their marginal existences. Villalever uncovers a relationship of mutual dependency and allyship between Chinese and Mexican women in the informal economy in Mexico City, in which the main ingredient for success is mutual trust. While Marchetti also illustrates relationships of mutual dependency at many levels, such as that between Hong Kong and China, in which the main feature is mutual suspicion, the power dynamics that they entail are also made clear. Intersections of class, age and gender create mutual dependencies between Roger and her employer Ah Tao in Ann Hui's 2011 film *A Simple Life*. However, Roger's emotional dependency on Ah Tao can be seen as less existential than that of Ah Tao's economic dependency on Roger, without whom she would not be able to pay for her care. Meanwhile Shalamaiti's career as a Uyghur performer is absolutely dependent on the paternalism of the state in Ekinci's article.

As such, all of the articles highlight the exclusions, but also at times the possibilities, that being on the margins of China represent. In Gina Marchetti's work, the relative marginality of Hong Kong women filmmakers within their industry both exclude and empower them. They work from a place of relative privilege in contrast to the workers they depict despite their own marginalisation within the film industry, and use this privilege partly to tell others' stories, partly for their own advancement. They rely on *guanxi* in their productions, but also use their cross-border positions,

networks, mastery of the English language, and fewer travel restrictions to benefit from the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong society and get access to global networks and audiences. In Ximena Alba Villalever's work, Chinese women in Mexico also benefit from their position as interlocutors who have access to transnational networks, while they remain in positions of vulnerability as women and visible foreigners in the often violent, male dominated world of the informal economy. In both Steven Pieragastini and Arianne Ekinci's work, minority women benefit from their exclusion from state campaigns and control: minority women are able to keep a higher proportion of their bride lands for private cultivation before the Great Leap Forward, and Uyghur women of the early PRC who manage to go beyond the reaches of the state's view also move beyond its control. On the other hand, this invisibility means that they are excluded from access to state benefits including healthcare.

Taken together, these articles reveal how the constantly fluid constellations of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity continue to define and circumscribe the margins of China, yesterday and today. We learn of the extent to which marginal identities can empower, while they simultaneously exclude, and how the affective bodily experience of living on the peripheries is negotiated through layers of mutual dependency, the ability to adapt, transform and perform according to continually changing state and market demands that is crucial to survival in these precarious spaces. In the process of construction of the margins in China, questions remain about the locus of power. If, as scholars of postcolonial history have taught us, the centre and the periphery are mutually constitutive, where and how do the peripheries of China impact on the identity formulations of a male, heteronormative Han-Chinese centre? And, in final analysis, what does the experience of precarity in China, constructed through these intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality tell us about the ways in which state-sponsored Chinese nationalism has flexed itself to subsume and appropriate the voice of the margins, for its own ends?

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