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(Posted by The China Beat on behalf of Nicole Barnes)

Two new English-language books by two of my favorite scholars in Chinese women’s studies are not to be missed: Susan Mann’s *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, and Harriet Evans’ *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*. Harkening to Margery Wolf’s foundational concept of the “uterine family” (see Wolf’s *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*), both works explore Chinese culture and history through the lives of women and their relationships with their sisters, mothers, daughters, and aunts.

Best known for her 1997 book, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century*, whose arguments rely on a more literal and textual analysis of elite women’s poetry, in this work Mann has taken a new direction. She provides a creative reading of the poems, essays, and letters that passed between seven women in three generations of the erudite and prestigious Zhang family of nineteenth-century Changzhou (a city located between Nanjing and Shanghai). The book is as smooth as a novel, but readers like me who trust Mann’s research know that she fills in the gaps with the talent and creativity of a historian-cum-sleuth, who first reads late Qing gynecological health manuals and then deduces that Tang Yaoqing’s aunt probably told her about the importance of women’s orgasm to conception (especially of a son!) in the weeks before her wedding.

Charting their lives through the Taiping Rebellion, Hundred Days’ Reforms, first Sino-Japanese War, and up to the eve of the Boxer Uprising, Mann shows that the oft-neglected “talented woman” (*cainü*) of late imperial China was a direct link to the much-celebrated “new woman,” despite Liang Qichao’s hyperbolic claim that these genteel ladies were late nineteenth-century China’s principal source of cultural backwardness and national shame. She therefore crafts a potent argument for cultural continuity across the empire-nation divide.

). Some of the posters from the latter text are featured in an online exhibition, co-curated by Evans and *China Beat*’s Jeff Wasserstrom.

Drawing on hundreds of personal interviews with urban women in contemporary China, Evans’ new book examines how the mother-daughter relationship has changed in response to the dramatic social, political, and economic changes in China over the past 50 years. With unspeakable candor, these women depict how their “uterine” relationships have alternately served as their principal means of support and their chief source of emotional turmoil. Yet despite differences in class, ethnicity, and personal experience, ultimately all the women relied on relationships with their mothers to make sense of their own gender identity in an era of rapid social change and increasing opportunities.

So why read these two books in tandem? What do the eighteenth-century cainü and the 1980s factory worker have in common? Well, a lot more than you might think. Despite sincere attempts to completely eradicate much of what might be simplistically labeled as “Chinese tradition” in the early twentieth-century New Culture Movement and the 1966 to 1976 Cultural Revolution, Mann and Evans show that contemporary Chinese “superwomen” (*nü qiangren*) are carrying on the legacy of their late imperial sisters, and that in so doing they rely on some degree of cultural continuity to make sense of their lives. And isn’t that the case for all of us?

Although time, space, and mother tongue separate us from the books’ subjects, Mann and Evans bring them right into your heart. Thanks to Evans for honing in on a much-neglected subject, and kudos to Mann for giving us a highly enjoyable read in a field that, sadly, is often chided for its unbearable dryness.