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Teaching Resource You Shouldn’t Miss

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Susan Glosser, professor of Chinese history at Lewis and Clark College and one of the first people to teach me about China in my undergrad years, has a delightful little publication that all manga afficionados and history teachers ought to know about. "Li Fengjin: How the New Marriage Law Helped Chinese Women Stand Up" is Susan’s very clever means of getting an authentic and appealing primary source into English-language classrooms. Her full translation is highly suitable for both secondary and tertiary classrooms, and it’s a steal for only $6.95.

A Saturday morning trip to a Shanghai antique bazaar in 1993 led Susan to a rare treasure: a delightfully (and somewhat childishly) illustrated comic book originally published in 1950 to educate the “masses” about the Chinese Communist Party’s brand-new Marriage Law. This law, whose contents did not much differ from the Nationalist Party’s Family Law of 1931, gave men and women equal rights to divorce and all prospective spouses an individual voice in choosing their marriage partners. All of these details and more are covered in Susan’s fabulous book from 2003, Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953.

Due to its potential to upset the rural social order, the 1950 Marriage Law needed widespread support from urban and rural cadres and civilians in order to help people actually secure their newly decreed marriage rights. This comic book was part of the state’s education campaign and tells the invented story of Li Fengjin, a poor peasant woman who seeks divorce from her monstrously abusive husband. After going through some machinations–some of which are made necessary by the fact that the local CCP official is not yet familiar with the new law, and others which stem from her neighbors’ resistance to the change–Li Fengjin finally secures her freedom, freely chooses her new husband (a chivalrous farmer who had kept her safe from her ex-husband’s goons), speaks out at public rallies about her oppression under the old feudal regime, and prepares herself for a bright Communist future with her new beau. As Susan points out, the drawings are illustrative enough that even the semi- and illiterate would have gotten the point.

Susan’s wonderful translation of this delightful comic book includes an introduction explaining the sociocultural background, the entire text of the 1950 Marriage Law in an appendix, and a bibliography of English-language works on women’s issues and family reform. It is available from Opal Mogus Books, the garage-side publishing press that Susan created in order to launch this project.