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*The China Beat*

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# A Flourishing Profession: Reflections on a Career in Asian Studies

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By Charlotte Furth

*At the March annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, held in Toronto, the association recognized [Charlotte Furth](#) with the AAS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies. Furth is Professor Emerita of history at the University of Southern California and has written and edited five books, including [A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665](#) (UC Press, 1999). Below is an expanded version of remarks that Furth gave at the AAS award ceremony, in which she reflects on the changes to Asian Studies that have taken place since she entered the field in 1959, particularly regarding the presence of women in the academy.*



I feel like a poster child for what the second wave of feminism has done for Asian Studies. We just saw six woman scholars receive book prizes for their scholarship in the field; we are about to hear Gail Hershatter speak as retiring president of our association. This is a moment to celebrate, not only for me, but for a whole generation of women scholars. Thinking about the road we have travelled suggests a trip down memory lane

to my own beginnings on our collective journey. What was it like in 1959, when I started graduate work in history at Stanford University?

The few women graduate students in the history department were welcome to fill out seminars, but we were not expected to get jobs. I fit a typical profile: a faculty wife presumably keeping herself occupied. To underscore this situation, Mary Wright, wife of my Chinese history professor Arthur Wright, worked as a librarian at the Hoover Institution. In spite of the fact that her brilliant monograph *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism* was on my graduate seminar reading list, she was not invited to teach in the department. Jobs in all fields of history were not publicly advertised: they were filled via an old boy's network of phone conversations pretty much controlled by a student's dissertation advisor. I got a job at California State University Long Beach in 1966 mostly because there was a national candidate shortage. I was hired sight unseen: the history department was tired of the merry-go-round of young men who taught at Long Beach only until something better came along. They figured that as a faculty wife at a nearby institution (my husband had moved to UCLA), I would probably stay around for a while. They must have been satisfied; I was their first female tenure-track hire, but they added three more women between 1966 and 1970.

We women scholars who found a foothold because of the post-Sputnik higher education market were the ones available to respond to the affirmative action movement that gathered steam in the 1970s. Today, most women in the AAS have never even heard of a "Committee for the Status of Women in Asian Studies" Joyce Kallgren, Carolyn Elliott, Hanna Papanek, and Barbara Ramusack had a lot to do with getting this committee going in the early 1970s. For a number of years we would comb the AAS program for evidence of female participation on panels and membership on committees. I recall driving with fellow member and friend Karen Leonard from Los Angeles to Arizona to meet with Richard Park, AAS President at the time, to get him to commit to the national campaign for an Equal Rights amendment to the US constitution. The feminist goal was to get professional associations to boycott holding conventions in states that refused to ratify the amendment. This is America; we never did get an Equal Rights amendment, but the AAS board did withhold commitment to a convention venue in New Orleans for a time.

In fact, the movement of women into the academy was unstoppable, and by the early 1990s so few came to its meetings that the "committee on the status of women in Asian Studies" quietly went out of business. Barbara Ramusack was the last chair.

Along with women scholars came research on women and gender. Sometime in the early 1970s, John Fairbank called a meeting of the contributors who were writing for the late Qing and Republican volumes of the *Cambridge History of China*. There were two

women in room, Susan Mann and me. Her topic was late Qing merchants and dynastic decline; mine was reform intellectuals. Toward the end of the meeting, I suggested that maybe the *Cambridge History* should add an essay on women. Fairbank was a classy guy: he said he would look into it. But the truth was that at that time there was no research. Susan and I did not begin to do feminist scholarship until the early 1980s. I recall Joyce Kallgren, then editor of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, telling me quietly that since I had tenure and a book out, going in this direction was now "safe."

As the saying goes, "everything changed" in the following twenty years. It was fun to troll AAS meetings for papers on feminist and cultural studies topics that I could recruit for the new journal, *Late Imperial China*, that I edited with James Lee. And I particularly remember a series of wonderful conferences. There was the "Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State" conference held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in February 1992, organized by Merle Goldman, Gail Hershatter, Christine Gilmartin, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White. It became a volume of the same name in Harvard's Contemporary China Series in 1994. In June 1993, Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang organized "Women and Literature in Ming Qing China" held at Yale, which led to the book *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford 1992). Dorothy Ko gathered a group of us who were working on pre-modern women in Japan and Korea as well as China in La Jolla, California in the summer of 1996, and this became the volume *Women and Confucian Cultures in Pre-modern China, Japan, and Korea* edited by Ko, JaHuyn Kim Haboosh, and Joan Piggott (UC Press 2003).

These group efforts bring me to the subject of collaboration in general. It is certainly not the case that conferences and edited volumes are exclusively "women's work" in Asian Studies or other fields. People trained, like me, in the early 1960s recall the wonderful series *Confucianism in Action*, and *The Confucian Persuasion*, edited by David Nivison and Arthur Wright, that set the standard for intellectual history of East Asia for our generation. But I do think that collaboration is often given less respect than it deserves as scholarship, and not just "service." It accelerated the development of feminist scholarship on China, and I believe that the intellectual contribution made by my collaborative work is an important reason why my achievements are being honored tonight. So please take away a commitment that we continue to support and encourage it.