3-8-2009

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Readings for International Women’s Day

March 8, 2009 in The Five-List Plan by The China Beat | No comments

In honor of International Women’s Day, China Beat posts two reading lists, one of contemporary (recent and by no means exhaustive) visions of Chinese women and another of historical visions of Chinese women.

Contemporary:

1) Xinhua reports on the increasing services for victims of domestic violence in China, following new regulations on police response to domestic violence calls implemented today:

Yu Xiuli, a victim of domestic violence, can turn to police for help if her husband continues to beat her thanks to a regulation which came into effect on Sunday. The 40-year-old woman in eastern Shandong Province has been bearing the cursing and beating of her husband for years, but has never thought of asking police for help.

“I believed it was not the business of police to stop domestic violence so I has never thought of alerting police,” said Yu.

But from Sunday women like Yu could alert police if they fall victim to domestic violence according to a regulation of the province that came into effect Sunday.

Many provinces in China have set up police centers to handle household violence after a national regulation that was issued in September last year requiring police to be dispatched whenever they receive a 110 emergency call regarding household violence.

2) That controversial symbol of femininity, the Barbie Doll, has acquired a new residence in Shanghai, the House of Barbie, where shoppers can not only purchase Barbie merchandise but also sip Barbie cocktails (at NPR, by Louisa Lim):

The lure of the China market was one reason that Mattel chose Shanghai for its first House of Barbie. It’s aggressively pursuing developing markets, such as Eastern Europe, Russia and India, which aren’t already Barbie-saturated. But when deciding where to place the House of Barbie, Shanghai beat other contenders — including London, Paris, Milan, New York and Los Angeles — because of its strong cross-generation reaction to the doll and the brand.

“There was an amazing connection to Barbie’s values,” Dickson said. “Barbie in this culture represented a world of possibilities for girls and for women. She’s had amazing careers, she has the cars, she has the plane, she has the boyfriend — and she looks fantastic doing it.”

Tibetan barbies have also taken up posts at the Lhasa airport, reports Shanghaiist: "The plastic princesses are part of a line of special edition 'ethnic' dolls meant to represent the minority groups of China."

3) As part of a month-long look at women in China, China Crossroads includes the translation of an interview with Professor Zhao Jun on the plight of China’s Xiaojies (hat tip Shanghaiist):

12年从警经历，中国人民大学社会学博士后，潘绥铭弟子的身份，让赵军选定了“女性性工作者被害问题”作为研究课题。Having 12 years experience as a policeman, the People’s University sociology postdoctoral, Zhao Jun selected “the murder of female sex workers” as his subject for study.

尽管“小姐被杀”的新闻频频出现，但在中国，目前鲜有学者关注这一领域，即使在公安机关，也未专门设立这一类别的案例分析系统。Although the murder of female sex workers (in Chinese, xiaojie is the euphemism for female sex workers) appears in the news frequently, little concern has been given to this problem at
Even in the public security organs, they do not have a special case category involving female sex workers.

近10年来，赵军是以“入圈式”调查方法来收集案例的，在餐厅、在洗脚屋、在KTV，以及在足球场里。这位38岁的学者以“朋友聊天式的非正规访谈”找到了知情者。于是，那些内幕以及现象背后的社会逻辑，就在觥筹交错和足球的起落中浮出水面。During the past 10 years, Zhao Jun engaged himself in collecting related cases. The 38-year-old scholar was able to find insiders by chitchatting with the workers in a friendly way either in restaurants, foot massage parlors, KTV or football fields. Thus, he gained first hand knowledge about a social issue that has been ignored for a long time.

赵军选择的调查样本，主要来源于一个中等规模的地级市和一个发展开发程度较高的沿海城市，结论则是“‘小姐’被害案共性大于个性”。‘小姐’群体的权利在事实上已被严重边缘化，虽然她们的合法权利在形式上也应得到法律的保护。”赵军说。Zhao Jun’s selected case samples are mainly from medium-sized cities and coastal cities with a relatively higher degree of development. The conclusion of his study is that the murder of xiaojies is a problem threatening the whole group rather than a single problem among a few individuals.” In fact, Xiaojies’ rights have been severely marginalized and their legal rights should also be protected.” Zhao said.

4) Sexy Beijing on Valentine’s Day celebrations in China:

5) With all the attention to Leslie T. Chang’s Factory Girls, this review reminded us of the first major scholarly work on women workers in the Chinese “miracle,” an award-winning book by C.K. Lee (who has just relocated to UCLA), Gender and the South China Miracle (1998):

Ching Kwan Lee makes a major theoretical and methodological contribution in her ethnographic study of two shop floors in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. This study highlights both the differences and the similarities between the worlds of labor and challenges theories of labor process, state, feminism and gender and work.

The author shows two worlds of factory women. Localism and familialism are invoked by both workers and managers to interpret events and social relations in the factory. “Localistic despotism” and “familial hegemony”, respectively, characterize the conditions of dependence of migrant daughters in Shenzhen and veteran working mothers in Hong Kong. In these two factories, localism and familialism generate consent, but also provide opportunities for tactics and resistance. This study shows how management and women workers cooperate and contest, how gender and class relations intermesh in social and cultural processes on the shop floors, and how a politics of identity is constitutive of and constituted by production politics.

Lee argues very convincingly that management’s interests, like those of workers, cannot be assumed, but are constituted in specific conditions. Gender is not just inscribed in the organizational hierarchy, but is an integral part of the power process and is also found in accepted notions about who women workers are and what they need. Gender is a cultural construction and is a recurrent reference by which labor-management relations are conceived, legitimized and criticized. They have material roots in shop-floor organization and are shaped by a set of social institutions outside the shop-floors in the labor market, the family, kin networks and even the state.

Historical visions

1) A collection of Agnes Smedley photos, including this one:
2) The online full text article by Harriet Evans on the terms for women’s liberation:

Critiques of the Party’s failure to live up to its promise to women have largely started out from socio-economic and political analyses of empirical data—for example, of discriminatory employment and remuneration practices, unequal access to education at different levels of the educational system, unequal representation in political bodies, and gender discrimination in the formulation and implementation of population control policy. Many of these analyses have also drawn attention to the inadequacies of Marxist theories of women’s emancipation. Recent analyses of dominant discourses of sexuality in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have broadened the debate to argue that a hierarchical biological essentialism has been a persistent constraint on the conceptualisation and implementation of gender policies since 1949. This paper adopts another approach through focusing on the term and concept of ‘liberation’ \([\text{jiéfăng}]\) as a central component of the Communist Party’s discourse on women. On the basis of analysis of CCP and related documents produced between the early 1920s and 1950s, I argue that the texts written about and often for women produced fixed and hierarchically arranged meanings of \(\text{jiéfăng}\), which consistently denied identification of women as agents of gender transformation, and which insisted on the absolute privileging of class over gender in analyses of gender inequalities. The effect of this was not only to subordinate the ‘women’s movement’ to the goals of social and national revolution as a whole. It established the only language in which gender issues could be publicly discussed. \(\text{funü jiefang}\) thus became a discursive and ideological tool of Communist Party authority, always and necessarily indicative of pre-ordained approaches to women as social agents. The word produced and reinforced many of the hierarchies that its integration into the rhetoric of revolution ostensibly sought to challenge.

3) A review in English of a Japanese book about nushu (women’s writing, which is central to Lisa See’s popular novel, Snow Flower and the Secret Fan):

This volume by Endo Orie is a welcome addition to the growing body of works in the extraordinary script known as Women’s Script or \(\text{nūshu}\) which is used by peasant women in remote villages in Jiangyong county, Hunan province in China. Women’s script, as it is known to its practitioners, is a
phonetic script quite distinct from Chinese character script. It comprises about seven hundred graphs representing the sounds of Jiangyong dialect (also known as Xiangnan tuhua). Women’s script came to international attention only in the early 1990s, after its (re) discovery by Chinese ethnographers in the 1980s. Very few practitioners remain. Endo expresses deep concern that Women’s Script will vanish from active use before the phenomenon has been thoroughly investigated...

Endo is not a sinologist and is apparently unaware of western scholarship such as the substantial studies by anthropologists William Chiang and Cathy Silber. Her book is written in a clear and accessible style for the general public in Japan, where it deserves a wide readership, not least for its poignant renditions of Women’s Script material exposing the suffering of Jiangyong women under Japanese occupation. But Chūgoku no onnamoji has much to interest anyone with an interest in women’s oral and material culture and is of relevance to those interested women’s studies generally, linguistics, Chinese history and anthropology.

4) A review of Some of Us (a book of memoirs of growing up female under Mao that counters the Wild Swans version) at Frog in a Well:

I recently came across a book called Some of Us, recommended to me by one of the contributing authors, Dr. Jiang Jin. The book is a collection of memoirs and stories put together by 9 women who lived through China’s Cultural Revolution and subsequently got their Ph.D.s and now are teaching (or in Jiang Jin’s case, was teaching) in the states. What brought them together was a discussion among 3 of them about such Memoirs as Wild Swans and Red Azalea, and the subsequent discovery that these memoirs do not accurately represent their feelings and experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, what these memoirs had done was create a specific image of Maoist era people in the West, almost an Orientalizing process, if you will. Everyone was either a victim or a victimizer, and everyone’s families had either been killed, torn apart, or driven to insanity during the Cultural Revolution.

5) A review of Charlotte Furth’s important study, A Flourishing Yin:

A Flourishing Yin opens a new and important chapter in the history of medicine and gender in China between the Song and the Ming dynasties. Charlotte Furth’s account traces the shifts in medical and gender discourses from the ‘androgynous’ medical narratives and the yin-yang harmony of the legendary Yellow Emperor to the late imperial literature on health and medicine circulating among medical practitioners and the literary public. Based on analysis of medical texts, popular handbooks, recorded teachings of doctors and case histories, it gives particular attention to the development of fuke (medicine for women) as learned discourse between the Song and the Ming. It shows how the changing language of the body between social and medical discourses appears as a rich source for reflecting on the cultural construction of gender. In doing this, it also gives a sophisticated critique of the ‘orientalising’ view of a single holistic body informing the principles of Chinese medicine.