Review of Women's movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan

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Book Review: Women's Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan
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What is This?
provides a tangible example of this, using the experiences of the Centre of African Studies (CEA) in Mozambique and the Norwegian Agency of Development Cooperation (NORAD).

In addition to the lack of research autonomy, another consequence of donor-funded research is the development of the “academic consultant,” whose role, as Ampofo and Pereira explain, is essentially the result of a funding shortage bought on by neoliberal economic policies that effectively cut government subsidies to higher education. The “consultancy syndrome,” as Arnfred and Ampofo maintain, imposes a significant danger for feminist work in Africa. Most published research on women in Africa reflects a western epistemological world view that is singularly concerned with fertility, family planning, and population expansion. Ampofo calls on African feminists to take an authoritative role in representing their continent and the lived experiences of their mothers, sisters, and aunts.

Although the book effectively achieves what it sets out to do, readers who approach the text with hopes of learning about African feminist theoretical perspectives and ongoing research are likely to be a little disappointed. The best chapters in this book are Illumoka’s contribution on women’s reproductive and sexual health and Lewis’s critique of the superficiality of feminist rhetoric in global policy on women and gendered issues. Both are eloquently written critiques that tie into but also go beyond the text’s main themes. But while it is informative, the book’s specific audience may be limited. Faculty in women’s and other area-studies departments/programs might find it useful, and feminists and women scholars who intend to work in African universities will benefit most.

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Doris Chang explores the development of women’s movements and changes in feminist discourse as they are influenced by political regimes in Taiwan from the 1920s to the present. Chang concludes that soft authoritarian political regimes facilitate the emergence of women’s movements (e.g., the 1920s and post-1970s), whereas hard authoritarianism suppresses their development (e.g., the 1930s).
Chang describes women’s movements from the 1920s and to the early 1930s, a part of the social and political movements in the larger society, whose primary goal was to emancipate from Japan’s colonial domination. Autonomous women’s associations advocated female worker’s rights; they also provided assistance and emotional support for these workers. In contrast, government-affiliated women’s organizations served to reinforce Taiwanese women’s identification with the Japanese nation. Taiwanese feminist discourse was influenced by Japan’s left-wing ideologies, China’s New Culture movement, Soviet Russia’s Marxism-Leninism, and Western liberalism. Chang discusses two approaches of Taiwanese feminist discourse in this period: One follows Western-inspired individualism and advocates women’s self-realization and equal opportunities outside the home; the other incorporates Confucianism and emphasizes women’s obligations in the family.

During the postwar period (1945 to the 1970s), Madame Chiang and government-affiliated women’s organizations under her leadership shaped the mainstream discourse on women’s gender-specific roles in the family and society. Although child care facilities in rural areas were created to relieve the burden of peasant women, the primary goal was to strengthen the nation’s future force by producing and protecting healthy children. Women’s education was also advocated to better equip women for transmitting national identity to the next generation. Confucian family-centered ideology remained strong. It was not until the 1970s that the activists of the autonomous women’s movement started to critique the Confucian patriarchal ideology.

Hsiu-lien Annette Lu was one of the most important feminist pioneers in Taiwan’s history. She launched the first Autonomous Women’s Movement in 1972. Lu’s gender ideologies were largely influenced by Western liberal feminists such as Margaret Mead, Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as well as by Confucian family-centered ideologies. She encouraged women to fully participate in the workforce and politics, but she also believed that women should take on more domestic responsibilities than men in the family. Moreover, Lu promoted women’s rights by advocating gender equity laws on the issues of abortion, equal pay, and marriage. Lu’s gender ideologies greatly influenced later feminists and women’s movements in Taiwan. She later devoted herself to political participation and became the first female vice president in Taiwan.

In the 1980s, Lee Yuan-chen and her fellow feminists founded *Awakening*. Similar to Lu’s strategies for ensuring the movement’s success in the 1970s, *Awakening* feminists compromised with the conservative political regime by highlighting the nation’s benefits in their discourse. In both the
1970s and 1980s, Taiwan’s autonomous women’s movement aimed to promote human rights and the development of women’s self-realization and potential. The *Awakening* feminists successfully lobbied the legalization of abortion in 1984, which helped to promote other pro-women legislation in the post–martial law era.

After 1987, Chang describes how Taiwan’s democratization facilitated diversities in feminist discourse and women’s movements. For instance, the Homemakers’ Union advocated for environmental protection; Women’s Rescue Association offered support and legal consultation for prostitutes; and the Warm Life Association helped divorced women achieve financial and emotional independence and challenged the social stigma attached to them. Lesbianism and women’s sexual liberation also emerged in feminist discourse.

In a book about women’s movements, Chang’s emphasis on political regimes and dynamics weakens her discussion concerning the social influences that women’s movements create in different historical contexts. At times, much of the excessive coverage of political events, though not completely irrelevant, does not directly address the issue of how politics affects feminist discourse or the development of women’s movements. Factors other than politics, such as economic, social, and cultural contexts, are discussed to a lesser extent in the book. There is not much discussion of the social influences of women’s movements on Taiwanese perceptions of gender norms and ideologies. Moreover, the book’s descriptive approach makes one yearn for more analytical synthesis.

This book makes an important contribution as it is one of the few texts that introduce the history of women’s movements in Taiwan. Chang provides very detailed historical contexts that illustrate how political regimes, public policies, social movements, and cultural ideologies have shaped or oppressed women’s movements in different time periods. She also describes numerous women’s organizations, changes in gender equity, and major feminist discourse in each historical period. The book’s focus on and extensive coverage of political contexts adds to its significance and uniqueness. It is useful for students and scholars in the areas of history, political science, Asian studies, and women’s studies.

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