



WOMEN'S  
LITERARY  
FEMINISM  
IN  
TWENTIETH  
CENTURY  
CHINA

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AMY D. DOOLING



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*Amy D. Dooling*

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*For Peter and Molly*

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INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AND  
FEMINISM IN THE LITERARY HISTORY  
OF EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
CHINA

This study undertakes a critical inquiry into the powerful connections between emergent feminist ideologies in China and the production of “modern” women’s writing in the period spanning the demise of the last imperial dynasty and the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Proceeding through a series of primarily formal and historical analyses of literary examples drawn from a variety of narrative genres, I accentuate both well-known and under-represented literary voices who intervened in the heated gender debates of their generation and historically contextualize the formal strategies used in imagining alternative stories of female experience and potential. My analysis investigates two overarching questions: first of all, how the advent of enlightened views of gender relations and sexuality influenced the literary practices of the small elite of modern-educated “new women” who made their debuts in the cultural public sphere at the time, in terms not only of narrative content but also the narrative forms and strategies they deployed, the readership they sought to address, and the publication venues of which they availed themselves. Second, it analyses how, in turn, these representations themselves attest to the various ways in which early twentieth-century female literary intellectuals engaged and expanded contemporary social and political concerns by self-consciously writing women into stories of national salvation, social transformation, and revolution. Throughout, I reexamine the critical paradigm of feminism’s subordination to the modernizing discourses of Nation and Revolution and instead build on contemporary research while presenting new evidence that the early paradigm fails to account adequately for the creative strategies China’s new female literary intellectuals employed as they questioned dominant gender ideologies *within* a moment of revolutionary social transformation. But in order to understand why the literary history of women and feminism in early-twentieth-century China should be recast we will need to come to terms with the crucial theoretical and conceptual coordinates that inform this important branch of literary study. The aim is not simply a revisionist literary history, but the development of an analysis that will cement a broader, richer knowledge of the period by augmenting recent theoretical readings with a significantly expanded set of primary materials. If a new paradigm is

to take hold it might fruitfully employ a whole range of formal and historical sources.

\* \* \*

Some notable scholarship on the subject of “women and gender” in modern China paints a discouraging picture of the feminist project of challenging the power and logic of patriarchal ideology. To the extent that the conditions of women’s material lives have undergone any significant improvement in China since the beginning of the twentieth century, this is apparently in spite of, not because of, the work of feminism (*feiminieshimu; nüquan zhuyi; nüxing zhuyi, nannü pingdeng zhuyi, nüquan yundong; funü yundong*).<sup>1</sup> Historians have documented at least two troubling patterns. First, while from the late nineteenth century onward the goal of female liberation<sup>2</sup> was quickly (and often conspicuously) absorbed into progressive political discourse on a theoretical level, in practice specific feminist agendas tended to be subordinated to or, to borrow Margery Wolf’s apt phrase, perpetually “postponed” by the ostensibly more pressing political struggle at hand (be it national salvation, anti-imperialist resistance, or socialist state-building [Beahan, 1976; Croll, 1979; Andors, 1983; Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985; Gilmartin, 1995<sup>3</sup>]). Second, the gestures made by late Qing reformers, May Fourth intellectuals, or Communist Party officials were underpinned by a persistent paternalism that casts serious doubt on just how “feminist” was the modern Chinese discourse of female emancipation. With respect to the latter, the point, in my opinion, is not that men can’t occupy a legitimate place in the feminist project or lend genuine support to women’s struggles; however, insofar as male radicals have dominated both intellectual debates and the political management of modern gender reform in China, women have arguably remained as disenfranchised and marginal as ever, the passive beneficiaries of male authority. Few would deny that the legal rights and expanded opportunities in the economic sphere which this “imposed” liberation brought, marks a vast improvement over traditionally sanctioned modes of female subjection; feminist transformation, however, it is not.

In the arena of cultural politics (a primary focus in this book), feminism has fallen under similarly valid scrutiny. The recent surge of critical interest in the representation of gender in twentieth-century Chinese fiction and film on the part of contemporary scholars has focused long overdue attention on the ways in which the apparently “enlightened” narrative treatments of women (ranging from critical realist exposés of female suffering under the traditional Confucian order to socialist celebrations of empowered working-class heroines) were often complicit in consolidating repressive modern ideologies of gender. That is to say, in spite of radical innovations in both the content and form of narrative representations of women in the modern period, there are startling continuities with inherited gender assumptions. It has been persuasively argued, for instance, that gender liberation served as an immensely fertile *rhetorical* terrain through which self-styled modern male

intellectuals were able to work through and articulate their disavowal of traditional forms of authority. In other words, their (almost) obsessive preoccupation with the female condition (and hence persistent urge to write about or otherwise represent women) arose not so much from deep allegiance to a feminist political or social agenda (with concrete ideas and ideals about women's equality or self-determination) *per se*, as from a desire to come to terms with modernity in general. In recent rereadings of canonical works that seem to indict traditional Chinese patriarchy, for instance, critics have revealed that in many cases the figure of the afflicted female victim functions as a pretext to showcase the enlightened emotional and political stance of a male narrator/protagonist, supplying an object through which to register the modern male subject's moral outrage at social injustice in general and *his* desire for social change (Chan, 1988; Wang, 1989; Chow, 1991; Yue, 1993; Lieberman, 1998; Zhang, 1999; Louie, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, narratives of female liberation (the many stories inspired by Ibsen's Nora in the 1920s, for instance, or the popular legend of the white-haired girl (*Baimao nü*) that circulated widely during the Sino-Japanese war), inscribed "woman" as the object of heroic male rescue, whether that hero be in the guise of the sympathetic May Fourth intellectual or the benevolent Communist Party cadre.<sup>5</sup> Hence, even if what one critic calls the "salvation impulse" driving such narratives may be said to reflect an important emergent consciousness of women's *problematic* social position, the gender hierarchy these fictions implicitly reinforced—male as active savior/female as helpless victim—seems to leave the conventional symbolic structures of masculine power/authority more or less intact.

Yet another troubling rhetorical pattern contemporary scholars have duly discerned in the modern Chinese literary and film canon is the enlistment of the image of the oppressed female body as an allegorical space on which to inscribe (his)stories of the nation: would-be "feminist" concerns about women's physical mutilation (foot binding, in particular), rape, prostitution, female suicide, and so forth have found vivid expression in twentieth-century cultural narratives but routinely operate on a symbolic or metaphorical level to articulate the violation of China's *national* body, rather than specific instances of *women's* experience of physical and sexual violence (Ma, 1989; Liu, 1994; Liu Kang, 1993; Zhang, 1999).<sup>6</sup> Even if such texts can be said to contain a latent critique of patriarchy, in pointing to or standing in for other levels of meaning—for example, the brutality of traditional culture, the nation's plight vis-à-vis imperialist aggression, class exploitation—that critique is again either perpetually "postponed" as a matter of lesser urgency or dissolved into an imaginary resolution of China's political liberation.

The influential view of the failure of Chinese feminism—both as a social movement and as a cultural politics—is informed by at least two historical contexts. First, it owes much to the rise of feminist theory in the field of Chinese studies beginning in the late 1980s and to the increasing sophistication of critical methodologies being brought to bear on issues of women and gender. In literary studies, this has sparked a reevaluation of

canonical texts and engendered greater sensitivity to the complexities of the sexual–textual politics underlying modern Chinese representations of women and men and the ideological contexts in which these were/are embedded (Chow, 1991; Barlow, 1994; Zhang, 1996; Larson, 1993, 1998; Lieberman, 1998; Zhong, 2000; Louie, 2002). Accordingly, not unlike the development of feminist literary studies of the Anglo-European tradition, there has been a marked shift from predominantly empirical, content-based interpretations to a critical engagement with the historically contingent meanings of form, genre, and language in relation to modern constructions of gender difference.<sup>7</sup> The prevalence of seemingly “positive” representations of women (whether via a sympathetic rendering of their victimization or affirmative depictions of female empowerment) in mainstream twentieth-century Chinese literature, we have now come to better appreciate, does not necessarily reflect a nascent feminist consciousness; on the contrary, it may be one of the very factors that most inhibited such a political consciousness from truly taking root.

Second, the critique of feminism’s failure in the Chinese context is informed by the post-Mao challenges to the official rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that claims credit for having successfully realized the modern project of “liberating” women (*jiefang funü*). According to the assumptions that inform the latter, the key to achieving gender equality resides in women’s entry into the productive workforce. For, as was proclaimed at the First All-China Women’s Congress in 1949, “only through active participation in production can women raise and consolidate their position; improve a step further their own living standard . . . and free themselves from the feudal yoke.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, insofar as Chinese women were widely integrated into social production after the founding of the People’s Republic, the logic goes, their status no longer remains a problem. Adding to this rosy picture has been official government endorsement of women’s equal rights and abilities. The basic policy on women, voiced by official state organs such as the Women’s Federation, or *Fulian*, has worked as a powerful obstacle in fully confronting the realities of gender inequities and identities in the PRC.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, efforts to expose the state’s mythology on women’s liberation and to rearticulate gender as a relevant political category clearly remain of central importance to Chinese feminists and feminist Sinological research.<sup>10</sup> Critique strategically focused on the gaps and contradictions between the official party line on women and the historical record, and on the incommensurability of the modern rhetoric and realities of gender, undertakes the vital task of repoliticizing gender as an arena of unresolved conflict and struggle.

In delineating the limits and contradictions of the ostensible endeavors to transform gender relations in China over the course of the twentieth century, however, we need to be mindful of the pitfalls of another potentially dangerous, and equally monologic, countermyth; namely, the myth of a masculine modernity. It is one thing to critique the ways in which women and women’s liberation have been strategically appropriated by contending modernizing discourses, it is quite another to conclude that such processes

effectively precluded women from asserting their own visions, voices, and desires as historical subjects.

Without diminishing the value of feminism to the recent study of Chinese literature and culture, I would suggest that it has sometimes played into precisely such a myth.<sup>11</sup> Neglectful of what literary scholar Patricia Yaeger refers to as “moments of emancipation and empowerment” in women’s cultural productions,<sup>12</sup> some scholarly accounts unwittingly give the impression of an omnipotent patriarchy that condemned modern Chinese women to silence. Nothing much has changed for, let alone been changed *by*, women over the past century since, it is contended, women ceased being objects within the masculine Confucian symbolic order only to be reobjectified by its Communist correlative. Thus, in the words of one contemporary critic, “Women’s emancipation in China failed not only because a new patriarchal order attempted to replace an old one by using women’s representational power, but also because Chinese women, for lack of gender awareness, could not sufficiently resist their reductive roles as representations of masculinist ideology.”<sup>13</sup> Appearing in the preface to a collection focused on twentieth-century Chinese literature, the implication would seem to be that the Chinese women writers (journalists, novelists, playwrights, poets, translators, cultural commentators, and critics) who actively protested discriminatory gender attitudes and practices in the twentieth century not only failed as agents of social change but in fact served as unwitting conspirators in the modern reinscription of patriarchy.

But assuming that the women referred to in the above quotation are not Chinese women in general, but the elite cosmopolitan female intellectuals, artists, and writers who in actuality enjoyed expanding opportunities to assert their own “representational power” as a result of historic changes in women’s education, in public literary culture, and in politics in the early decades of the twentieth century, how much is currently known about the various ways in which they resisted (or failed to resist) the structures of silence that threatened to render them the mute metaphors of China’s self-styled “new” men? On what grounds can it be claimed that such women were insufficiently self-conscious of the new politics of gender being negotiated during this complex historical juncture, or that they ultimately failed to transcend their inherited status as the mere objects of masculinist discourse? And why should we take for granted that the intense focus concentrated on women and feminine experience in the pre-1949 era arose chiefly as a product of male endeavors to reshape their own history?

A great deal of recent feminist literary scholarship, while offering theoretically astute rereadings of the modern canon and analyses of post-Mao women’s writing, has evinced comparative disinterest in the cultural interventions Chinese women themselves have undertaken at earlier points in the past century.<sup>14</sup> Even as current archival work by contemporary Mainland Chinese scholars radically reshapes the contours of twentieth-century literary history—bringing back into print the work of long-forgotten female authors, and enabling the recent publication of the first comprehensive



modern women's literary histories—Western-based critics tend to focus on a relatively small handful of writers (Ding Ling, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, and, most recently, Zhang Ailing), to the detriment of a broader understanding of the modern period.<sup>15</sup> This raises other important questions: for instance, is the apparent lack of women's representational power in China simply a result of powerful local patriarchies? That is to say, to the extent that women's roles in the formation of modern literary culture appear restricted to that of figures of representation, could this not also have something to do with prevailing literary historiographic practices that, for example, either severely limit the number of women writers who are considered, or persist in taking male-authored texts as the privileged site of analysis? While the cultural productions of early-twentieth-century urban female intellectuals "on" women were undoubtedly influenced, sometimes overwhelmingly so, by the masculinist logic permeating the cultural discourses of modernity in China, the construction of the recent past as an inevitable story of male domination is excessively pessimistic.<sup>16</sup>

My point is not to advocate a conventional model of writing-as-resistance to interpret the practices of the new breed of literary women that the modern historical era produced, but that we need to acknowledge and account for the counterexamples that disrupt the historical narrative of the past hundred years as an unchanging continuum of male domination.<sup>17</sup> Surely, to construe women as the inevitable victims of modern Chinese men is to construct a *critical discourse* that replicates the very logic of silence feminism deplores? Rather than presume that feminist cultural interventions were doomed to failure, we might instead ask: How did the young female intellectuals who turned to creative literature to critically articulate issues and themes of gender discrimination in novels, autobiographies, and dramas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries register awareness of the fraught ideological context that relentlessly impinged upon their portraits of female suffering and exploitation? What effect did mainstream literary appropriations of the repertoire of imagery and rhetoric conventionally claimed by feminists elsewhere have on the emergence of an effective oppositional discourse of gender in twentieth-century China? How, if indeed at all, did radical women intellectuals and writers meaningfully articulate and critically oppose practices of gender discrimination at a moment when the very images and narratives of female suffering and victimization were being co-opted for other cultural-political agendas, imbued with symbolic meanings and connotations often at odds with the values and interests of feminism itself? Did they realize how their textual representations might have played into rather than against the masculinism they were consciously seeking to overturn? Is it possible, finally, to understand Chinese women not only as discursive constructs or textual configurations but also as active producers of stories and histories of their own making?

Historian Wang Zheng's recent *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999) provides invaluable insights into the lives of radical women prior to 1949 that, among much else, force us to rethink many of our assumptions

about female historical agency at that time. Intended as a revision of “gender-blind” accounts of the May Fourth movement, including Vera Schwartz’s seminal *The Chinese Enlightenment* (1986), the study reassesses the advent and impact of emancipatory gender discourses in the pre-1949 period by tracing the historical construction of the so-called New Women’s (*xin nüxing*) subjectivity. Rather than treat New Women as merely a male-formulated textual trope, Wang investigates how alternative terminologies, concepts, and images of womanhood circulating in the urban media beginning in the teens and twenties were absorbed and, in turn, transformed by the (newly) educated young women who comprised the female readership that many New Culturalists targeted. To answer these questions, Wang relies primarily on extensive interviews conducted in the early 1990s with veteran activists whose lived experiences of attending modern secondary schools and colleges, involvement in political and social movements, and career pursuits make them representative of their generation of middle- and upper-class urban Chinese women. The resulting oral histories, in which women emerge as historical protagonists, offer an immensely provocative narrative of the May Fourth era. More specifically, they begin to illuminate a crucial chapter in the history of modern Chinese feminism, by demonstrating the centrality of the liberal-humanist feminist discourses to women’s self-definitions, the meanings they attributed to their professional achievements, and to their personal memories and recollections of this formative era. In other words, contrary to standard accounts that credit the Party for having “liberated women” (*jiefang funü*), Wang argues that New Culture feminism altered the lives and indelibly imprinted the consciousness of the generation of new women who came of age at the time.

Like *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, the present study is motivated by an interest in the formation of women’s feminist subjectivities in the early twentieth century and a desire to help break from the literary historical narrative that has long obscured the record of the “new” women’s cultural work and activism. Whereas Wang Zheng usefully examines agency in terms of a reconceptualized notion of women as readers, I argue that we must also take into account the ways in which such women participated in literary culture *as authors* to confront orthodox gender assumptions and to construct more empowering definitions of female identity.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, then, this study addresses women’s emerging discursive power to imagine and inscribe new possibilities of gender through a critique of feminist resistance in literature by modern Chinese women writers from the period spanning the collapse of the last imperial dynasty and the consolidation of the modern socialist state (1900s–early 1950s). It considers the complex historical matrix under which “woman” was appropriated as a central trope in both the modern literary and political imaginary, and the specific implications of this imaginative centrality for female authors committed to improving women’s domestic and public roles and status. While I take seriously the charge leveled by critics that at times this centrality, paradoxically, entailed a certain erasure of women as subjects, this study proposes that our critique must

nevertheless account for the concrete ways some women writers themselves began to engage with the politics of gender during the first half of the twentieth century. The socio-historical impediments progressive writers encountered as they struggled to claim a public voice in feminism were often considerable, as I outline below; these obstacles did not, however, preclude effective literary opposition to male domination. By showing, via close readings of selective texts, how specific writers drew upon, challenged, and transformed the emergent narrative plots and rhetorical patterns shaping modern definitions of “woman,” the four central chapters propose a more nuanced and complex account of women’s relationship to the literary and political debates around gender in the period.

This study explores the historical challenges women writers in early twentieth-century China faced, but also the narrative solutions they fashioned, in claiming woman as a subject of feminist representation. Despite the misogynist legacy of the Confucian orthodoxy and the masculinist logic lurking beneath the emergent discourses of modernity, there are important examples of literary women writing from self-consciously anti-patriarchal perspectives, which reveal a keener, more inventive and imaginative feminist cultural praxis than has previously been analyzed. Availing themselves of the vast resources of the burgeoning modern literary culture, Wang Miaoru (1877–1903), Qiu Jin (1875–1907), Bai Wei (1894–1987), Lu Yin (1898–1934), Shi Pingmei (1902–1928), Chen Xuezhao (1906–1991), Xie Bingying (1906–2000), Yang Jiang (1911–), Su Qing (1917–1982), and others critically appropriated existing narrative forms, from utopian fantasy to autobiography, in order to address the problems facing contemporary women and to articulate a desire for historical change. In so doing, they also negotiated with the powerful patterns and conventions underpinning the narrativization of “woman” in modern fiction, expanding and embellishing alternative plots, while critically contesting others. Their writing, while often directly engaged with the central concerns of dominant culture (nation-building, personal subjectivity, political revolution, and so forth), also departs in subtle and often significant ways from much of that writing in that it resists the tropes of gender that had come to inform its narrative practices. More importantly, it afforded new perspectives on these very concerns—producing bold new narratives and meanings of concepts of nation, the individual, and revolution.

The relationship between feminist literary discourse and narrative practice invariably evolved as the political-cultural matrix shifted over the course of the early twentieth century. Who constituted the intended target audience of the feminist writer and what her/his creative motivations were, underwent subtle and profound permutations as both material and ideological circumstances changed for writers and readers alike. On a primary level, then, my investigation is historical, in that I strive to recontextualize particular textual practices within the immediate political and literary landscapes they inhabited, as well as the conditions affecting women as producers and consumers of literary texts. The point is not merely to supply

pertinent background material against which to read discrete textual examples. Literary texts, as they are understood in this study, are embedded within ideological and social formations, in the sense of being both shaped by and helping to shape such historical dynamics. Moreover, as a literature that by definition engages a politics of personal and social transformation, feminist writing is not content to passively reflect its historical setting but instead actively wrestles with present conditions, even as it may be constrained by them. In order to appreciate the significance of both the narrative forms different writers appropriated and the array of rhetorical strategies they practiced, therefore, it is imperative to locate them within the historical fabric of which they were a part.

By foregrounding both well-known and some relatively unknown women writers active in the decades spanning the end of Qing dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), this study also seeks to contribute to current efforts in the field of Chinese studies to broaden the scope of our knowledge about women's roles in and contributions to the formation of modern literary culture. Let me emphasize, however, that my intent is not to make claims for a "female tradition" in general, nor even to systematically trace a feminist sub-tradition within modern women's writing.<sup>19</sup> Rather, what I attempt to provide is a critical understanding of specific problems in the evolving relationship between feminism and women's narrative practices during an era of enormous historical turmoil and transformation in China. Given the dominant discursive patterns that continually threatened to co-opt woman, what strategies did female writers use to circumvent or subvert them? What were the contexts that enabled or empowered them to do so? To what extent were they successful in preserving an oppositional edge in their feminist writing? To answer these questions, I will provide in-depth analyses of works by nearly a dozen women writers and the narrative genres they deployed: fantasy, realism, autobiography, and comedy. At the same time, these analyses give occasion to reflect on subsequent mechanisms that have worked to obscure the literary struggles, achievements, and perspectives of feminist women.

Here I will address the ways in which the category of feminist narrative is currently being theorized within feminist literary criticism as well as articulate the basic assumptions that underlie my own treatment of the category "feminist narrative." I will then provide a conceptual overview of the salient issues surrounding feminism and literary representation in modern China prior to 1949 in order to establish a framework for the readings to follow.

## THEORIZING FEMINIST FICTION

In spite of its keen interest in the politics of women's literary production, feminist criticism has paid relatively scant attention to the category of feminist fiction as such. According to Maria Lauret, who attempts to redress this gap in her book *Liberating Literature* (1994), there are at least two reasons for this critical lacuna.<sup>20</sup> First, feminist scholars have tended to

conceptualize women's writing *in general* as politically subversive, and therefore have not felt compelled to differentiate between literary practices arising from the marginalized position from which women have historically written in patriarchal traditions and those that derive from more or less self-consciously held ideological views vis-à-vis the constructed nature of gender. It is not difficult to discern this tendency in many of the most influential feminist studies of women's writing from the past few decades: in a work that has shaped the field, Gilbert and Gubar's pioneering *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), for instance, the authors trace what they describe as a tradition of palimpsestic writing, whereby nineteenth-century female authors employed covert narrative strategies to articulate ideas and desires at variance with those proscribed by the dominant culture.<sup>21</sup> A sequel of sorts to this book, Rachel DuPlessis's equally influential study *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985) argues that twentieth-century Anglo-European women's writing carries on this subversive project but is marked by a more overtly transgressive impulse to rewrite the master-narratives (in particular, the heterosexual romance plot), which have traditionally scripted patriarchal gender roles.<sup>22</sup> This influential paradigm of women's writing as a subversive literature<sup>23</sup> is also manifest in some feminist analysis of the Chinese female literary tradition. In *Fuchū lishi dibiao* (Emerging on the horizon of history) (1989), for example, a major critical study of modern Chinese women's writing, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua endorse the definition of *nüxing wensue* as a rupture from dominant culture.<sup>24</sup> This break is explained as a coming-to-consciousness by women intellectuals in the modern era to both their historically marginalized gender status and to their feminine "difference," which in turn is inscribed in their texts.

Second, Lauret points out, as feminist critical methodology and theory grow more sophisticated, the sometimes didactic and propagandistic bent of feminist fiction render it an unappealing object of literary study. This is understandable, to a certain degree. Still, she suggests, as contemporary scholars become increasingly attuned to theoretical problems of textuality, subjectivity, and ideology many now view the preference for realist forms among self-styled feminist writers—autobiographical fiction, the confessional novel, the female *bildungsroman*—as something of an embarrassment. Such literary practices have been subject to frequent attack by theorists for being naively "embedded in traditional conceptions of identity and referential modes of representation; [they] merely reproduced conventional constructions of reality instead of challenging them."<sup>25</sup> Lauret is right that much of this approach has followed the rise of postmodernist aesthetics and the high value subsequently accorded to linguistic and formal modes of experimentation. It should be pointed out, however, that even less theoretically inclined literary critics like Elaine Showalter seem to find explicitly feminist writing objectionable: in the evolutionary schema she sees at work in the British tradition of women's writing (or, alternatively, within the personal evolution of the individual female author), the feminist phase is defined by an instrumental use of literature as a didactic vehicle for social and political

protest.<sup>26</sup> In Showalter's opinion, such writing is fueled by the rage the politicized woman writer harbors toward society and the narrow roles to which she has been assigned, and therefore lacks the aesthetic merits of other modes of women's literature.

For other critics, however, the literary practices generated by the historical advent of feminism deserve more rigorous consideration than they have typically received. An important dimension of women's literary history, feminist writing is not synonymous with women's writing; and while always political, it is never simply the transparent medium for feminist ideology. In addition to Rosalind Coward's significant early essay "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" (1980), key studies exploring the intersection between feminism and literature include Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989); Anne Cranny Francis' *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (1990); Ann Ardis's *New Women: New Novels* (1990); Gayle Greene's *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (1991); Maria Lauret's *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America* (1994); Eve Taylor's *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (2000); Anna Wilson's *Persuasive Fictions: Feminist Narrative and Critical Myth* (2001).<sup>27</sup>

While different in important respects, these studies share certain key premises. Most obvious, perhaps, is the need to resist eliding the cultural productions by women in general and those by feminists. Gayle Greene enunciates this view in no uncertain terms: "[f]eminist fiction is not the same as 'women's fiction' or fiction by women; not all women writers are 'women's writers', and not all women writers are feminist writers, since to write about 'women's issues' is not necessarily to address them from a feminist perspective. Nor are feminist writers necessarily so all of the time . . ." <sup>28</sup> Such demarcations may sound self-evident when they are articulated in as blunt terms as these, but in fact the distinctions have potentially far-reaching implications for feminist literary critique: above all, they shift the focus of inquiry away from a totalizing and vaguely defined conception of "gender"—how the woman writer's gendered social position or feminine subjectivity supposedly informs her oppositional writing practices—to the more specific role of political ideology in shaping feminist writing. The former approach (which links the otherwise dissimilar literary theories of gynocriticism and *écriture féminine*)<sup>29</sup> attempts to posit "a necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary structure, style, or form," which is in turn valorized for its opposition to masculinist culture.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the latter view holds that feminist narrative effects are not the natural, automatic product of a "female aesthetic" emanating from the woman author's biological gender or gendered experience, but are brought about as a result of political motivation and/or the ideological (consciously or unconsciously), which determine how a writer narrates a given story, the manner in which she organizes its constituent elements, the mode of address she adopts vis-à-vis her implied reader, and the formal strategies she decides to use. This nonessentialized

approach to the notion of feminist writing helps us account for why not all women writers are feminists; why a given author's *oeuvre* may contain both feminist and nonfeminist work; why feminist effects can emerge in a literary text at an unintended or unconscious level; and why some male authors produce feminist literature.

One possibility Greene overlooks is whether feminist writers must by definition be *women* writers. The issue of male authors engaging sympathetically with feminist ideas may be justifiably bracketed in the Western context on grounds that, with few exceptions, feminism has developed as a form of dissident politics by and on behalf of women themselves. Such is clearly not the case in China (nor indeed in many other modernizing Asian nations), where male radicals emerged as vocal advocates of women's interests from the initial stages of feminism's history in the 1890s.<sup>31</sup> Many of the most influential works of modern fiction depicting the struggles of women under the cruel tyranny of Confucian patriarchy ("Zhufu" [New year's sacrifice, 1926]) and the psychological and sexual quandaries of the "New Women" (*Hong* [Rainbow, 1930]), not to mention countless polemical tracts and essays on women's liberation, were in fact authored by reform-minded men. This phenomenon (to which I will return below) is further evidence that feminism is after all a matter of ideology not female biology; yet, it poses a certain paradox: how can the cycle of male domination be broken by men? That is to say, can men authorize the end of patriarchy without assuming authority over women? The well-known May Fourth women writer Lu Yin once commented on the extraordinary zeal with which China's "new men" had taken up feminist issues in a way that highlights this quandary. Referring to a photo taken at Beijing Women's Normal College of the Alliance for Women's Rights, she wonders sardonically "nearly two-thirds [of those in the photo] are men while a mere third are women. How truly astounding; could it be that Chinese men are exceptionally open-minded? Instead of being the enemies of women they express their utter sympathy for us; and such being the case, women don't even need their own movement."<sup>32</sup> Lu Yin, like many of her contemporaries, lamented the apparent political apathy of modern Chinese women; what her remarks here reveal is that this may, in part, be one of the stifling effects of the male co-optation of feminism. Her view was not unique. Educated women throughout this period, from the pioneers of the feminist press in the late Qing to Su Qing in the 1940s, articulated a similar distrust of the conspicuously male voice of Chinese feminism. In my view, this reminds us of the strategic value of incorporating some notion of women's cultural agency within our definition of feminist literature. It is not that men cannot produce effective feminist texts, but that it is clearly more significant, politically and culturally, when women write as feminists to challenge male "authority" over women's images.

But what does it mean to define feminist literature as a political cultural praxis? Is the author's oppositional stance articulated only on the level of content, that is, in the thematic representation of male-female relations and women's experience, or is it inscribed on the formal dimensions of her text

as well? And, to the extent that meaning is generated in the encounter between the text and its reader, what conditions make feminist texts possible? Obviously these are complex questions. They relate to ongoing debates on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, the meaning of literary form, and the role of literature as an agent of social change. Their difficulty is further compounded by the fact that feminism itself has historically encompassed an immense range of ideological positions, practices, and tactical strategies—all of which arise and change in conjunction with specific social and cultural constellations, thus making definitive answers all the more elusive.

Indeed, precisely because of feminism's historically contingent nature, critics like Rita Felski propose that an understanding of its literature(s) cannot be sought in a fixed notion of "feminist aesthetics." That is to say, there can be no *a priori* feminist styles, contents, or formal practices, only those deriving from and in response to the ideologies and practices of particular cultural formations. If, on its most elementary level, feminist literature expresses resistance to the subordination of women, the ways in which that resistance is given expression are determined not by some intrinsically feminist sensibility or consciousness, then, but by the political (and other) imperatives of particular moments. Accordingly, how and what the specific dynamics were in early-twentieth-century China that engendered the feminist literary practices of women writers will be carefully examined in the course of this study. The "dominant" culture, however, is hardly an unambiguous concept in the context of Chinese feminism. Western critics, for instance, have often taken for granted that feminist cultural practices exist in what is described as a "politically and aesthetically hostile environment" that, in turn, provides the point of reference against which "oppositional" strategies (including textual ones) are developed.<sup>33</sup> The early rise of feminism in China, by contrast, coincided with a wholesale reassessment of traditional values, practices, and textual conventions by intellectuals and political reformers. Arguments in support of gender equality, far from being contentious ideas that pitted female activists against a disapproving or hostile male establishment, were from the outset vigorously embraced in the name of national salvation, modernization, and eventually revolution. Consider, for example, the manifesto put forth by the "Woman Question Research Association" (*Funü wenti yanjiuhui*), an organization comprised of May Fourth male intellectuals:

That the world has a Woman Question is the ignominy of humanity; that China has only in recent years discovered the Woman Question is China's ignominy. The woman problem is the historical result of men's unjust oppression of woman; the discovery of the woman problem is the awakening of humanity to the harms of this oppression. Until the individuality (rengē) of the female half of the population is properly recognized, and they fully achieve freedom and are able to participate in culture, no matter how much progress society makes it stills lack humanity; and no matter how developed a culture, it



still will be a prejudiced one. Therefore the women problem is the world's greatest problem, not just the problem of one segment of humanity.<sup>34</sup>

If this statement betrays a certain connection between feminism and male anxieties about Chinese modernity (note here, for instance, how the woman problem is invoked as evidence that China has “caught up with” with the rest of the world), it also reveals the centrality accorded to women's issues in that historical project. This is not to say that feminism's war was won before it was even fought; on the contrary, it made (and continues to make) the lines of conflict more difficult to trace and should be seen as one of the complex conditions with which women feminists in China had to contend.

Foucault's notion of reverse discourse may be instructive here, insofar as it offers a compelling hypothesis of how dominant cultures may actually work to open up discursive space for voices of dissent and opposition. Citing the example of nineteenth-century homosexuality in western European society, he argues in *The History of Sexuality* (1980) that the various mechanisms of power and prohibition (including modern discourses and practices of science and medicine) that sought to discipline sexual practice had the simultaneous effect of generating a new social category whose subjects, in turn, “began to speak on [their] own behalf, to demand that [their] legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged.”<sup>35</sup> In terms of Chinese feminism, then, the fact that the ideal of the emancipated woman was from the outset “mainstreamed” may well mean that the conditions conducive to the emergence of a subversive female subject never fully materialized. It may help explain, for instance, the thwarted formation of autonomous cultural institutions—presses, magazines, bookstores, and so forth—through which women themselves could promote and represent issues of importance to them. Such institutions arose out of necessity in other national cultures where feminism met resistance, but they also proved (and have continued to prove) crucial in providing alternative and autonomous discursive spaces for women to develop the forms of gender self-awareness and political experience that are, after all, central to the feminist project. In China of course there were successive endeavors by early activist women to carve out just this kind of space—the pioneering founders of the feminist magazines (*nübao*) in the late Qing, for instance, defended the need for separate women's publications on the grounds that, in their view, the reform press had not adequately addressed their needs. (On the other hand, one finds nothing equivalent in scope to, say, *Seito* [Bluestocking, 1911–1916], the influential woman-run feminist literary journal founded in Japan by Hiratsuka Raicho).<sup>36</sup> Another important, though less well-known example is the Women's Bookstore (*Nüzi shudian*), a publishing collective comprised mostly of women intellectuals who ran a bookstore and a small press in Shanghai from 1933–1936.<sup>37</sup> In addition to actively promoting women's writing, the Women's Bookstore also provided social service-type assistance to young women in need. Such examples, while vital testimony of the neglected story of women's contributions to Chinese literary feminism, were nevertheless exceptions at a

time when women writers, including political writers, were courted by the mainstream press that was all too eager to cash in on their modern “difference.”

In certain respects, Elaine Showalter’s vision of the propagandist who commandeers the literary text to protest on behalf of wronged womanhood is not an entirely inaccurate description of the feminist writer. An instrumental view of the role of literature in gendered social transformation has to a greater or lesser degree stimulated feminist textual practice—like the early suffragette fiction Showalter examines, the “new novels” promoting the advancement of female education and equal rights that appeared in the late Qing, for example, were blatantly intent on delivering new ideas and information to the female readers to whom they were addressed.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, to view the feminist text as merely the transcription or articulation of a political ideology that preexists independently of and outside the realm of fiction, however, is to fail to address literature’s own role as a specific form of meaning production.

For, beyond overt political proselytizing, feminist writing also engages in complex, nuanced, and often highly self-conscious ways with the *narrative tradition* of which it is a part, as several of the above-mentioned critics demonstrate. The New Women novelists of Victorian England, for instance, contested the conventional romance plot in which female characters had long been contained by inventing fictional heroines who aspire to erotic, political, or professional goals beyond the yoke of marriage (Ardis, 1990). The feminist practitioners of popular fiction studied by Cranny-Francis appropriate familiar popular narrative genres in order to play upon reader expectation and thereby “make visible within the text the practices by which conservative discourse such as sexism are seamlessly and invisibly stitched into the textual fabric, both into its structures and into its story, the weave and the print.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the contemporary writers of feminist metafiction examined in Gayle Greene’s study incorporate self-reflexive commentary on narrative structure and technique to draw attention to the manner in which imaginative literature encodes gender roles and hence to its complicity in maintaining the patriarchal symbolic order. The “political” intervention a given feminist text makes, in other words, should not simply be seen solely in terms of its ideological opposition to the external sociopolitical order but also in terms of its engagement with language and narrative as important battlegrounds in resisting male authority. Maria Lauret thus broadly defines feminist fiction as having a twofold function: it is writing that not only contests “dominant meanings of gender” but, in interrogating the boundaries of genre and narrative convention, also challenges “established standards of ‘literariness.’”<sup>40</sup>

The emphasis on the textual politics of feminist fiction is not simply a formalist ruse designed to deflect attention from the “real” contradictions of the material world. Rather, it is predicated on the theory that narrative participates in the cultural construction (and maintenance) of sexual difference. According to this view, narrative constitutes one of the fundamental

semiotic practices shaping human perception, knowledge, and desire—through the selective highlighting of events and information, their organization into patterns of coherence, and the assignment of value and significance. The prevalence of particular narrative conventions and paradigms naturalize certain versions of reality over others and, simultaneously, render deviations or disruptions from dominant stories abnormal, implausible, or even simply unimaginable.

Adapting and elaborating on these insights in its analysis of patriarchal gender ideology, feminist criticism posits a number of fundamental polemics: first, traditional (or dominant) narrative representations of women have tended to support and sustain sexist configurations of society by producing feminine subject positions in accordance with those configurations. Again, the claim here is that narrative never *simply* reflects the hierarchical relations of power between men and women in society, but that it actively enables and authorizes those relations by providing the emotional, ethical, cognitive, and imaginary structures that induce individuals to accept and identify with their “proper” gender assignments. Indeed, elucidating the ideological function of narrative enables feminist critics to explain (at least in part) why patriarchy has been so successful historically in reproducing itself and, in particular, why women (and women writers) themselves so often become subjectively invested in the norms of a system based on assumptions and structures of male superiority.<sup>41</sup>

But narrative, however effective a mechanism in perpetuating normative values and assumptions, is neither the exclusive domain of masculine culture nor impervious to resistance and contestation. This is the second major point that needs to be emphasized. Rather than reject narrative as an inherently patriarchal mode (as was the case of feminist avant-garde artists in the United States and Europe the 1970s and, more recently, some French theorists who call for an “anti-narrative” aesthetic) there is a continuing need to confront and unravel the alliance between patriarchy and narrative discourse. This can occur either through feminist literary critique, which works to uncover the patriarchal effects of formal strategies in artistic expression and in turn helps to construct new “resisting” readers,<sup>42</sup> or through alternative representational practices that deliberately undermine the “coherence” of dominant narrative conventions. As Teresa de Lauretis comments, “Because of their capacity to inscribe desire and to direct, sustain, or undercut identification (in all senses of the term), [narrative and narrativity] are mechanisms to be employed strategically and tactically in the effort to construct other forms of coherence, to shift the terms of representation, to produce the conditions of representability of another—and gendered—social subject.”<sup>43</sup> With regard to the latter, however, it is emphasized that the aim goes beyond formal experimentation and stylistic innovation, which do not in and of themselves “bear any necessary relationship to the political and social goals of feminism.”<sup>44</sup> Rather, one objective of the feminist writer is to inscribe new ways of narrating reality so as to heighten political consciousness, to expand imaginative possibilities, and to produce new forms of subjectivity.

Analysis of the intersections between literary practice and feminist politics thus requires an approach that can attend to the historical, and cultural, specificity of the conditions under which a given text is produced and circulated. For, like any oppositional political aesthetic, feminist writing can never be known in advance on the basis of a fixed style, content, or formal practice, but only by the styles, contents, or forms that emerge in conjunction with particular historical exigencies and material conditions. To understand how the feminist text generates meaning, moreover, requires attention not just to the manifest level of thematic content, but investigation into the formal workings of the text in relation to dominant literary discourse. That is to say, how meaning is produced and reproduced in a particular patriarchal context is crucial to an understanding of how a given feminist writer devises strategies of intervention in her own representation of “reality.” This includes, of course, the ways in which she addresses her reader, a topic that remains implicit in the following chapters.

### CONCEPTUALIZING FEMINISM AND LITERATURE IN PRE-49 CHINA

Having elaborated in general terms my approach to the category of feminist literature, let me turn now to the specific cultural and historical contexts to be examined in this book.

The appearance of feminist literary texts in China at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with political endeavors among treaty port elites, including a small but growing number of educated women, to elevate the status of women in Chinese society in conjunction with national modernization efforts. As late Qing reformers began to take concrete action to reform female education and abolish foot binding (the two earliest causes to garner wide public support), many also turned to the nascent periodical press to promote women’s causes among a broader urban audience. Glimmers of a proto-feminist consciousness have been traced in Chinese fiction and drama prior to this period, the most notable example being the 1828 fantasy novel *Jinghuayuan* (Flowers in the Mirror) by Qing literati-writer Li Ruzhen.<sup>45</sup> For the most part, however, the critiques these texts offered tended not to be anchored in a vision calling for a major overhaul of gender–power relations in Confucian culture but focused on discrete social practices (foot binding and concubinage, for instance). Nor were they coterminous with an organized women’s movement that provided new opportunities and avenues for women’s public political activism. For these two reasons, then, such literature in my view is to be differentiated from the politicized fiction calling for a “new women’s world” (*xin nüjie*) that burst on the literary scene around the turn of the century.

Unlike the rise of feminism in the West, where enlightenment philosophy precipitated in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries a social movement for women’s individual political and civic rights, in China feminism arose in the context of national modernization projects that swept the country in the