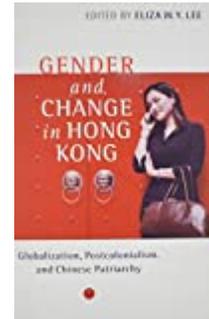


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eliza W. Y. Lee, ed. *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. viii + 216 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2790-8.



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Published on H-Urban (April, 2005)

Chinese Women's Struggle for Equity in Postcolonial Hong Kong

Chinese women have walked a long hard road in their search for gender equity. Except for in a few small villages, Chinese society has been highly patriarchal. Even today, we see evidence of this imbalance in the great preference for baby boys over baby girls. The concept of gender equity has reached China slowly and quietly, and its advent has met with varying reactions in the different regions of the country. Hong Kong is a good laboratory in which to examine the dawn of gender equity in China. Today's Hong Kong is a modern, bustling society filled with opportunities. In the office buildings, on the street, indeed almost everywhere, people walk and work with intense speed. People from all over the world come to Hong Kong for business, sightseeing, shopping, and research. For those who know Hong Kong's history, Hong Kong is experiencing a unique transformation right now in the wake of its 1997 return to China after a hundred years of British colonial domination. At the start of the twenty-first century, which coincides with the start of Hong Kong's reunion with China, it is worthwhile to examine the extent to which gender equity has been achieved in Hong Kong.

The nine chapters of *Gender and Change in Hong Kong* arose from a 1997 conference held in Hong Kong

called "Gender and Development in Asia." The presenters of several papers at the conference came together to coauthor the book. The editor, Eliza W. Y. Lee, wrote the introductory chapter as well as two additional chapters titled "Individualism and Patriarchy" and "Prospects for the Development of a Critical Feminist Discourse." Authors of the other chapters include Carole J. Peterson ("Engendering a Legal System"), Lisa Fischler ("Women's Activism during Hong Kong's Political Transition"), Stephen Wing-Kai Chiu and Ching-Kwan Lee ("Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream?"), Ka-Ming Wu ("Discourse on Baau Yih Naai [Keeping Concubines]"), Wai-Ching Wong ("Negotiating Gender Identity"), and Siumi Maria Tam ("Empowering Mobility").

The book covers a very wide range of topics and perspectives on Chinese women's struggle for gender equity in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, suggesting that Hong Kong's current gender relations were formed under Chinese male-centered social practices mixed with the colonial legacy and rapid economic development under global capitalism. Before 1997, the colonial state lacked a sense of gender equity. However, the rising educational attainment of women since the 1960s helped to reduce the disparity between men and women. The economic transformation from manufacturing to service industries since the 1980s and the numerous social movements that

sprang up in the wake of the reunion with China have provided opportunities for upward mobility for Hong Kong's women despite the general male-centeredness of society. Some women have made impressive progress, while others have not.

Carole J. Peterson's chapter, "Engendering a Legal System," examines women's fight for equity in Hong Kong during the handover from Britain to China. Peterson believes that the women's movement has had some successes, such as the establishment of legal institutions like the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) to pursue equal opportunity, the repealing of the ban on female inheritance of land in the New Territories, and the enactment of Hong Kong's first sex discrimination ordinance. However, after reviewing 451 complaints filed with the EOC, Peterson reports that very few Hong Kong women actually go to court and fight vigorously for equity. Frankly, not too many women can afford, financially and socially, to fight against gender discrimination in court. Therefore, most complaints end up in conciliation. More importantly, after interviewing female complainants, Peterson points out that conciliation does not necessarily come with a judgment of right or wrong. Consequently, Peterson concludes that in the future the women's movement may want to focus less on pursuing additional legal rights and more on strengthening enforcement of the existing system. Peterson's arguments are clear and well documented with examples highlighting landmark cases and key figures in Hong Kong's women's movement.

Lisa Fischler studied women's activism during Hong Kong's political transition between 1984 and 1997 by examining women's political participation in the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and elections for the 1994 district boards and the 1995 legislative council. Fischler interviewed twenty women who attended the 1995 conference and twenty candidates in the 1994 and 1995 elections, observed candidates' campaigns, and reviewed three local Chinese newspapers, two local English newspapers, and related archives. Fischler concluded that the political transition in Hong Kong from colonialism to reunion with China has given women chances to raise gender issues and organize more groups and actions. At the same time, the incoming Chinese government expects loyalty and support. This fact may limit the women's movement. With abundant data sources arising from different circumstances and perspectives, Fischler's analysis is solid.

Lee's study, "Individualism and Patriarchy," argues

that women can succeed in Hong Kong, despite it being a patriarchal society under both colonialism and capitalism. Lee, who interviewed lawyers in Hong Kong, including twelve female entrepreneurial lawyers, concludes that women in Hong Kong can deal with this male-centered world without losing their sense of self. Hong Kong women can achieve professional careers combined with well-managed marriages and maternal responsibilities. Lee also points out that these successful Hong Kong women are aware of the lack of collective action to fight for gender equity. But they are satisfied with their achievements. Additionally, their acceptance of traditional gender roles has stopped them from taking any action. Twelve female lawyers may be a rather small sample to represent successful women in Hong Kong. However, an increase in sample size may not necessarily lead to different conclusions.

Stephen Wing-Kai Chiu and Ching-Kwan Lee's chapter "Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream?" examines the impact of industrial restructuring on female manufacturing workers. Based on official statistics from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, Chiu and Lee argue that Hong Kong's manufacturing labor share was replaced by commerce, services, and finance and business industries between 1981 and 1994. The employment opportunities lost in manufacturing were similar for both men and women between 1987 and 1995. But, in contrast to male manufacturing workers' increasing average daily wage, the female workers' wage dropped. This means female manufacturing workers suffered from both the loss of job opportunities and the decline in wages. Chiu and Lee incorporate data obtained through telephone interviews with 1,004 male and female workers in 1995. They find that female manufacturing workers suffered a higher unemployment rate, spent more time searching for new jobs, and received lower wages than men. Chiu and Lee's study is hampered by their use of different statistical timeframes, which are somewhat confusing. For example, the statistics on employment by sectors cover the years between 1981 and 1994, whereas the statistics treating wages and manufacturing employment by gender cover the period between 1987 and 1995, and the telephone survey was done in 1995. However, these disparities seem not to have influenced the analytical framework or the points that Chiu and Lee want to make. There is room for discussion about whether the telephone survey is based on a random sample of manufacturing workers, as Chiu and Lee claim on page 105. Fortunately, the healthy size of 1,004 cases relieves some of the concern about data reliability.

Ka-Ming Wu's "Discourse on Baau Yih Naai (Keeping Concubines)" studies citizenship and identity of concubines in postcolonial Hong Kong. Wu differentiates Hong Kong men's practice of keeping Chinese women as concubines from their having affairs with other women. Hong Kong people, Wu argues, have built up a sense of superior "Hongkongness" and have separated themselves from the mainland Chinese due to a different process of ethnocultural self-construction. The superiority can be marked through language, vocabularies, clothing, behavior, attitudes, tastes, and habits. Many Hong Kong men keep Chinese women on the mainland as concubines because they can afford it financially, considering the lower cost of living on mainland China. Besides, many Chinese women want to live and stay in Hong Kong, which gives them an incentive to enter into such arrangements. Being concubines and having Hong Kong men's children offers a chance at getting Hong Kong citizenship. The Hong Kong government, in response, has taken very cautious steps toward providing citizenship to these Chinese women and their children, taking into consideration the possible consequences such as the impact on social welfare, the job market, and social security. Although Hong Kong has been reunited with China, Wu argues, the relationship between Hong Kong men and their Chinese concubines suggests that Hong Kong acts as both a cultural and an economic colonizer. While Wu's arguments are successful, I believe a study contrasting Baau Yih Naai in Shanghai and in Hong Kong can raise the level of this Baau Yih Naai discourse to a different level. The relevance of Hongkongness to this discussion, however, may lessen, because not all of those men who practice Baau Yih Naai in Shanghai are from Hong Kong.

Wai-Ching Wong's "Negotiating Gender Identity" examines two cases that demonstrate how Christian women in Hong Kong used their religion to fight for equity, despite that Christian indoctrination women should listen to their husbands and honor their sons, in that men's center role is even more secured. The first case is Christian women's fight in the 1920s against Mui Tsai, a system in traditional Chinese society whereby rich families purchase young girls for domestic services. Not surprisingly, this practice is also linked to child sex abuse. During the 1920s, Chinese women were still pressured by a very strong patriarchal tradition. Nonetheless, Hong Kong women got involved in social movements against Mui Tsai. Wong states that these women were also motivated by Western humanistic ideas of equality and freedom, accompanying their acceptance of Christianity. Hong Kong women succeeded in their battle against Mui

Tsai such that, in 1923, one legislative council passed a law to regulate forms of domestic service, which reached full enforcement in 1933. The second case is that of a Christian group's battle against the New Territories Ordinance in the 1990s. The Hong Kong Women's Christian Council (HKWCC), which actively supported women's demands for equal rights in inheriting family property, fought against the New Territories Ordinance of 1910, which prohibited female inheritance of land in the New Territories. In 1993, after the HKWCC exerted public pressure, an amendment to the law made it possible for women to inherit land. Although there are numerous groups also fight against the New Territories Ordinance in the 1990s, HKWCC's endeavor is consistent. In both cases, as Wong argues cogently, Hong Kong women's fight for gender equity had a basis in Christian belief.

Siumi Maria Tam's "Empowering Mobility" examines Hong Kong women who migrated to Australia between 1989 and 1997, while their husbands stayed in Hong Kong and financially supported them. Tam interviewed, surveyed, and observed Hong Kong women in Sydney between 1996 and 1998, and concluded that many of these women had to become new household heads, take care of the children, learn English, learn how to drive, and face uncomfortable truths, such as the fact that their children were gradually losing the ability to speak and write in Chinese, their husbands were not at home, and they were living in free-standing houses surrounded by non-Chinese-speaking neighbors. However, as Tam points out, despite these difficulties, after moving away from husband-centered homes in Hong Kong, these women successfully managed to overcome language barriers, social isolation, and their sense of insecurity; what is more, of course, they became very able household heads in Australia. One possible criticism of Tam's methodology lies in her snowball sampling procedure. In studies of this sort, it is very possible for interviewees with similar characteristics to recommend each other as possible subjects. In addition, women who failed to adjust to the new living environment might have moved back to Hong Kong, such that they escape the embrace of Tam's research framework.

In the concluding chapter, "Prospect of Development of a Critical Feminist Discourse," editor Lee briefly recounts the complex heritage of Hong Kong women who experience a combination of patriarchy, globalization, postcolonialism, and authoritarianism, and argues that Hong Kong's feminist movement should grasp at new opportunities in the next few years when Hong Kong's political reconstruction and economic development are

further along.

This book successfully portrays diverse takes on women's studies in contemporary Hong Kong. The coauthors devote much time and skill to collecting and analyzing diverse data; and the presentations in these chapters confirm the editor's initial announcement that Chinese women's struggle for gender equity in contemporary Hong Kong demands a variety of perspectives. I look

forward to these researchers' follow-up studies.

One final note: For Chinese sociological studies published in English, ideally authors should provide both the Chinese characters and English translations. This book provides Chinese terms in both Pingyin and Cantonese following the English translations, which is helpful because Chinese terms often are expressed and pronounced differently in Pingyin and in Cantonese.

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Citation: Kanghu Hsu. Review of Lee, Eliza W. Y., ed., *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

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