

# The journal *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* celebrates its 25th Anniversary

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Some twenty-four years ago, *The Newsletter of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)*, issue number 20 (November 1999), featured an interview between myself and Giovanni Vitiello, then an IIAS Post-doctoral Fellow and now Professor of Chinese Literature and Language at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. This dialogue began with a focus on the background of the launch that year by Brill Academic Publishers of the journal *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, and my plans as founder and managing editor of the publication to pursue its mission. That mission, which remains the same now as then, is to engage in the study of Chinese men, women, and gender in a wide range of disciplines, including history, literature, linguistics and language, anthropology, archeology, art and music, law, philosophy, medicine/science, and religion. Now that the journal is approaching its twenty-fifth anniversary, it seems a good time to review its history, changes to its chronological scope, and the shifts in disciplinary approaches to gender studies of China.

Aside from the IIAS 1999 *Newsletter* article, the IIAS had another connection with the founding of *Nan Nü*. The idea of establishing the journal in the first place relates to a Leiden University workshop I organized in September 1996, when a group of European and Asian senior and junior scholars representing different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences had the opportunity to meet and exchange information concerning Chinese women during the mid-to-late imperial era. The IIAS, along with several Leiden University funding institutions, generously financed this occasion. While it may seem nothing out of the ordinary nowadays that universities sponsor conferences and workshops, back in the 1990s, such munificence was not always available, and in particular not for subjects like women and gender studies, which were only just then attracting interest in the echelons of higher education.

Although the bulk of the first scholarship on Chinese women in the Western academy during the 1970s focused on the modern and contemporary eras, and the question of 'women's liberation', by the 1980s the first published research appeared about the lives of empresses and other imperial relatives as well as Buddhist and Daoist nuns as alternatives to the dominant Confucian ideology. These publications stimulated new work on women as 'historical agents' instead of 'victims'. Also in the 1980s, literary studies began to scrutinize the rich legacy of Chinese women's writing and artistic production, and in particular, courtesan poetry and painting. By the 1990s, scholars were publishing translations of female-authored writings, producing analyses drawing on theoretical works about culture and power and thereby utilizing the gender concept to investigate how male/female identities in imperial China were constructed. The 1990s also saw the first attempts to go beyond the study of Chinese women, and to investigate masculinity, homosexuality, and male homo-social relations outside the boundaries of the patriarchal family.<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, as I edited the papers presented at the 1996 Leiden workshop, which ultimately were printed in the volume

*Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1999),

I approached the publisher to consider establishing a journal that would give more scholars, both senior and junior, a forum to communicate their research and findings on Chinese women and gender matters with others. My appeal to Brill was met with success, and so in October 1997, the first *Nan Nü* Board of Editors met in Leiden to formulate the journal's goals and foci. The original Board comprised of six editors representing universities and research centers in the USA, UK, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, formed a fabulous team. They worked extremely well together with authors and peer-reviewers as well as myself—and that close contact between myself and the Board members, I believe, has been a key to the long-term realization of the *Nan Nü* project. Since then, the Board has expanded in number, and now also includes scholars based in Australia, while the regular communication between myself and the Board members, who give generously of their time and expertise, has not wavered over the years.

At that first Editorial Board meeting in 1997, it was decided the primary chronological focus of the journal should be before 1900, that is, early and imperial China; hence the initial title of the journal, *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*. The editors, who had already published studies situated in this era, sensed that there was much documentation, including writings by and about women, as well as visual materials, awaiting discovery, investigation, and analysis. By then, the pioneering studies by Patricia Ebrey, Dorothy Ko, and Susan Mann were drawing much attention, not only because of the excellence of their scholarship, but also because of the path-breaking revelations about Chinese women and gender relations.<sup>2</sup> These scholars and others overturned the long-established narrative, that previous to the twentieth century all Chinese women, of whatever class or geographical background, were passive and powerless "victims" of a so-called "traditional society," and countered the common assumption of Chinese women's oppression until more recent times. A vast library of printed monographs focusing on Chinese female rulers, family life, education, religion, work, literary output, law and property, concubines and courtesans, bodily practices (including foot binding), and medicine emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, exposed women's voices both in and outside their homes, and demonstrated the variability of gender norms with regard to class, locality, life-stage, and ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> Many of these publications, including those in Chinese, were reviewed in *Nan Nü*, which was a regular feature of each issue.

In the journal's first years, the book review section had only included publications about Chinese women and gender matters relevant to the period before the twentieth century. But as China scholarship by the early 2000s became increasingly blurry with regard to common parameters and intellectual paradigms that had at one time bound its chronology, such as 'premodern' and 'modern', it seemed appropriate to change the title of the journal to its current name, and to expand the chronological range to the twentieth century and beyond to the

present one. Moreover, as the alluring power of the Chinese revolutionary ideal faded and the country transformed from a socialist collective to a neoliberal consumer economy, research on men, women and gender also took on new challenges. Articles and reviews appearing in *Nan Nü* represent these shifting trends in research and writing about gender matters. Many of these studies incorporate new disciplinary approaches to well-known facets of China's historical and literary record, such as the application of recent archaeological findings to burial practices or the interpretation of religious texts.<sup>4</sup> While such topics as family relations, sexual orientations, and sexual practices have been the foci of studies published in the journal both in the past and present, the significance of the more recent analyses seems to accentuate the consequences of rapid economic reform. A recent article on 'leftover men' in today's PRC makes clear that their socioeconomic marginalization is a result of how the last twenty years have seen exacerbated class and gender differences as well as rural-urban inequality there.

In its twenty-five-year history, *Nan Nü* has tried to make more transparent to its readers the substance and consequences of China's changing gender relations against the complexity of the country's values and current changing mores. That complexity may be viewed in the journal's multi-disciplinary, broad-sweeping chronology and multi-faceted foci, which affirm the centrality of gender dynamics toward understanding China historically as well as in its current circumstances. Thus, the reader may expect, as the contents of a recent issue reveal, a variety of sources and approaches: from analyses of pre-imperial classical texts that idealize male-female hierarchy—to late Qing reformers seeking to demonstrate the historical record of female rulers exposed to patriarchal oppression; from seventeenth-century Buddhist discourses which censor women killing animals, and the impact of these treatises on twentieth-century elite cosmopolitan women's religious practices in Shanghai—to the gender politics of

transnational family formation in present-day Guangzhou.<sup>5</sup> These *Nan Nü* studies connect Chinese men and women and thereby fulfill the journal's mission to use gender as a category of analysis in a variety of disciplines and over a wide time span.

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## Notes

- 1 For a systematic annotated listing of important books (including reference works) and research articles about Chinese men and women, see Harriet Zurndorfer, "Gender Issues in Traditional China," *Oxford Bibliographies Online: China Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; revised 2017), 45 pages.
- 2 These three publications are: Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth-Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- 3 For an analysis of these publications, see Harriet Zurndorfer, "Waves of Publications on Chinese Women and Gender Studies," *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 26.4 (2018): 357-366.
- 4 Every five years since 2003, *Nan Nü* issues an index of its contents, which also reprints the listings of past indices. These listings are arranged alphabetically in three main sections: according to the authors' names (of both research articles and book reviews), according to the titles of articles, and according to the titles of reviewed books. The next index to appear will be in issue 2 of volume 25 (2023).
- 5 These articles appeared in *Nan Nü*, volume 24, no.1 (2022).

