
How do we negotiate space for the female body in the age of economic and cultural globalisation? Feminism celebrates it. Nationalism disciplines it. Global consumerism profits from it. The cover of the book is an eye-full – sexy, sensual, poudré and glossy. The popular culture concept and the motifs are apt. Item: delicate nostril; mouth, lips shining with *femme fatale* lipstick; skin, flesh peach-toned; Chinese flag, red and yellow, central and uppermost on a ball that substitutes for the ‘o’ in ‘Global’; titles, pictogram-style. Hyper-real! Exaggerated! The female body is a contested site for the power struggle between feminists, nationalists, capitalists and neo-colonialists. Dr Zhu suggests that Third World women or women of colour feel trapped by the incumbent discourses and the dilemma is complicated by an ‘often voyeuristic, even pornographic, global popular culture’ (1). Post-colonial theories turn against Western values and a Euroamericentric male-dominated world.

This review ventures little in the way of my personal opinion except to say that Aijun Zhu’s project not only justifies itself but makes fascinating reading for any person voyaging out towards the Asian diaspora from an English base, and for any reader interested in the transnational crossing of cultures from a feminist perspective. *Feminism and Global Chineseness: The Cultural Production of Controversial Women Authors* is, as Professor Jianmei Liu of Maryland University acclaims, ‘ambitious, original and provocative’ and a work of ‘solid scholarship’ (xiii).

Dr Zhu examines four controversial authors from four different geopolitical Chinese locations. She argues that each location is a distinct local construct and that she chooses her sites in order to problematise and decentre notions of Chineseness. She declares that Chineseness is not only about ethnicity but about the instability of migration and border-crossing. Zhu’s project explores cultural exchange and places the accent on flexibility, fluidity and hybridity of cultural and literary production as well as critical negation.

What makes women’s bodies controversial? Professor Liu suggests that it is not only because they deal with audacious topics – sex, desire, politics, all taboo subjects for traditional Chinese women – but because the politics of literary and cultural criticism imagine and construct tensions between gender, race and ethnicity. Zhu herself contends that notions of controversy are produced in essential and reductive frameworks of feminism, nationalism and consumerism and identifies the cause of controversy in literary production as ‘representational inevitability’, a mindset which holds that any Third World text inevitably represents the totality of Third World national or racial realities and that Third World authors speak for their national or racial communities. She argues that ‘representational inevitability’ is the masculinist and nationalistic discourse under which women are made controversial and feminism is appropriated. She says that her task is to unproduce the controversy and open out the terms to more flexible meaning production and the recognition of ‘issues’.

Zhu is a Chinese-born, naturalised Chinese American feminist critic and writes in her introduction that the outsider/insider status gives a unique perspective...
and freedom from any one authority. Her research is not confined to the context of the ‘English literary tradition’. She groups English and Chinese text together ‘based on their shared negotiated experience with Chineseness and feminism’ (xx). Her work also takes place in a bilingual context, pushing out the boundaries of transnational fusion across disciplines and theoretical frameworks. She is interested in the wheels within wheels of transcultural negotiation and the potential for progressive social change.

Zhu writes that her theoretical base finds support in Stanley Fish’s reader-response theories on ‘interpretive strategy’, Stuart Hall’s cultural studies theories on ‘encoding and decoding’ and Patrocinio Schweickart’s feminist theory of reading: feminist critics must fight for the development of reading strategies within a community of readers who are qualified by experience, commitment and training to take control of the reading experience and so read against the grain. They must resist ‘immasculation’. Zhu maintains that you may ignore race and class perhaps but not the situated female reader. Her thesis is founded on the argument that women writers do not represent a discourse but produce the discourse, and literary and cultural criticism produces the cultural significance as it negotiates ‘in-betweenness’.

Zhu’s analysis also draws on the discipline of Cultural Studies which examines conformity to the violence and frivolity of commercial culture with its craziness and morbidity. She takes issue with the idea that the female body is ‘out-of-control’ and suggests that it is too often cited as evidence of ‘plague’. She also faults the publishing industry for the cultural production of meanings – sex made commercial for instance – and the negative stereotypes embodied in women writers. She suggests that popular culture may seem revolutionary but it is limited because it is voyeuristic and often Eurocentric, motivated by a desire for profit rather than political commitment to social change.

Feminism and Global Chineseness focuses on four controversial Chinese women authors.

Zhu uses Maxine Hong Kingston’s fictional autobiography, The Women Warriors, to illustrate the tensions between the women’s movement and the Asian American cultural nationalistic movements in the United States. Zhu suggests that the problem is the canonization of the Chinese American female body in what she calls ‘the Chinese American heroine [who] must develop her individuality outside her repressive community in order to come back to transform and remap it’ (7). In writing the novel Kingston found that she could not write one story for both Chinese American women and Chinese American men so she wrote two books once published separately but now presented together in one volume. Zhu argues that the split in Women Warriors between female and male voices is a product of a time when gender and ethnicity/nationalism were constructed as mutually exclusive but today that kind of separatism is not politic. Professor Liu asks a leading question. Does Kingston expose the ‘silencing sexism in Chinese American culture’ or does she merely give White-centred American readers what they want to read about, the story of the subordination of Chinese women?

Zhu writes that ‘China’ and ‘Chinese America’ are two different sites and that her inclusion of Chinese America in mapping global Chineseness is, in the first instance, designed to complicate both nationalisms in the global context. She also
speculates on two more questions. Will new immigrants from China to the United States carry with them an even stronger imprint of China? Will the notion of China as a potential rival or enemy impact on how Kingston is read in the future?

The chapter on Wei Hui confronts the male-centred nature of contemporary Chinese literary and cultural criticism. Shanghai is an imaginary urban space, an international and post-colonial metropolis which provides a backdrop for women authors to negotiate gender and cultural/national identities. Controversy arises in the freedom, ‘ambiguity and danger of female sexuality embodied in the new-generation urban female author who distances from nationalist discourses, flirts with popular culture, and fully embraces anything Western’ (7).

Zhu suggests that the ban on Wei Hui’s novel Shanghai Baby is a wake-up call to Chinese feminist critics to keep a critical edge. The women’s liberation movement in modern China is at the crossroads: ‘it reveals the predicament of sex phobic and homophobic state-approved contemporary Chinese nationalist feminism, protected and largely consumed by the nationalist discourse’ (7). The masculine gaze dominates. The Wei Hui controversy demonstrates the limited feminist space in the revolutionary nationalist incumbency and has ramifications for both the fashioning of a new generation of urban authors and the construction of a new generation of readers nationwide.

Li Ang is an influential figure in the cultural and literary circles of Taipei. This writer structures her work around the insider/outside feminist negotiation over Taiwanese nativism/nationalism in order to oppose the China-identified authoritarian government rule. Zhu writes that Beigang Incense Burner ‘deliberately sexualises national politics with three figures of the female body: the Grieving Mother of the Nation, the Lustful Widow, and the Unrestrained Woman’ (8). However, the media constructs Beigang Incense Burner as a love triangle and reduces the text to roman à clef. Zhu writes that what is interesting is that while both Chinese and Taiwanese feminism desire a newly shaped nation, Wei Hui’s books are banned and Li Ang’s sell. This comparison demonstrates the ambiguous nature of popular culture and illustrates how differently produced nationalisms and feminisms bring about different policies and regimes. Li Ang’s production embodies ‘the relative freedom and critical distance of Taiwanese feminism from the male-centred nationalist interpellation’ (270).

Hong Kong today is a crowded, high-rise, roofless city in-between its colonial past as a British satellite and a return to the motherland of China. Li Bihua takes an insider/outside position. She works through ‘conventional yet oppositional fictional plots of love and romance’ (271), employing a hierarchy of gender which might seem regressive. Chapter Five in Zhu’s book is called ‘Romanticizing the Nation’. Zhu suggests that on one hand the feminist-nationalist tension is limited and full of irony because love and romance replaces the masculine dominant discourses, but on the other hand Li Bihua’s female characters are strong and conventional, existing outside China-centred or even Hong Kong alternative spaces: ‘it is in the conventional love/romance that nationalist boundaries are transgressed, and individuality is acknowledged’ (8).

Zhu writes that the Hong Kong of the imagination has an urban identity and air of vitality with its fusion of Chinese language and Western culture and strength in
fiction and prose. The city is associated with the perspective of cultural studies and the concentrated excitement of festivals to promote literary interest with the younger generation. However, she argues that because Li Bihua relies on the ambiguous role of popular culture and since the signature culture of Hong Kong is commodity driven both feminism and nationalism lose their political charge. Then again, on the positive side, the writer is popular with both the general public and literary and cultural critics, symbolising the transformation of the city from a cultural desert to a chameleon literary culture which embraces flexibility and metamorphosis. Zhu argues that there are other writers (like Xi Xi for instance) who are passionately concerned for the island’s past, present and future but Li Bihua is made controversial because she plays with popular culture and distances herself from nationalistic discourse. Zhu also suggests that the use of popular culture for critical purposes is always viewed with suspicion, often labelled superficial; however, in Li Bihua’s case, the writer’s popularity is meaningful under the microscope for the developing identity of the new Hong Kong.

The city space of Shanghai, Taipei and Hong Kong allows the flows of culture to mingle and the lines of demarcation in cultural and literary criticism – feminism, nationalism and post-colonialism – to bend and realign. However, in these Asian cities past and present intertwine in the imaginary and nostalgia for the glory days of colonial prosperity can revive all the old clichés. Zhu says that mapping global Chineseness is temporary and contingent and that “it is crucial to participate in the cultural production of popular culture” (274). She affirms that it is a responsibility of feminists to be ever watchful and intervene.

Zhu recognises that women writers of colour do not all speak with one voice but she does suggest that all have an intimate and treacherous relationship with nationalist politics, mass production, and literary criticism, and above all with their own bodies. Furthermore controversy is not limited to Third World women authors. Some European authors connect with Third World women, learning from differences and finding affinities. Different global locations often distort and appropriate feminist knowledge production in totalising stances but Zhu believes in oppositional and flexible methods of feminist critique. She suggests that the feminist mission must always seek to redefine issues and produce controversy. Zhu says that she wants to build solidarity beyond essentialist notions of race and gender and to be critically involved in world building.

Dr Zhu’s project, *Feminism and Global Chineseness: The Cultural Production of Controversial Women Authors*, demonstrates that women’s bodies can have representative power at their own determination. She concludes that women can stand for morality or sexual revolution, for the power of desire or the need to control. Her work maps women’s movement.

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