
Book Review

Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China

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Min Dongchao's new book *Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China* offers a fascinating account of the history of feminist theory and practice in the People's Republic of China in the past three decades. Using the metaphor of 'travelling theory', Min traces the process of how feminist ideas have been introduced into the Mainland Chinese context via translation, academic discussions and social movements, and how they have been received, debated and contested by different stakeholders within China to empower Chinese women and to develop feminist theories and activism that speak to the Chinese context. Such a process, as Min convincingly demonstrates, is fraught with tensions, contestations and even pitfalls; it nonetheless shapes feminism in China as it is today and makes feminism a highly politically pertinent project in a world of global neoliberalism. Weaving together rich historical data and astute critical analysis, Min's book marks one of the best scholarships on feminism in China to date. The work is an interdisciplinary project that is at once theoretical, historical, and empirical, and it makes a significant contribution to the intersecting fields of gender studies, cultural studies and translation studies.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework of the book, i.e. an 'alternative travelling theory'. Building on Edward Said's notion of 'travelling theory', which Min sees as not only Euro-American-centric but downplaying unequal power relations between the West and the non-Western world as well, Min's book aims to establish an 'alternative travelling theory'. This theory takes into account the reception and adaptation of Western theories in different geographical and cultural contexts; it also pays meticulous attention to the links between discursive and material conditions, as well as the complex power relations that shape the trajectory of travels. I find Min's emphasis on the materiality and the political economy of travelling theories most insightful. Diverging from the over-emphasis of the linguistic and discursive dimensions of theoretical production in much of the previous scholarship on translation and feminist theories, Min's book insightfully shows how the material conditions and the funding models of feminist scholarship have shaped feminist theories in China in specific ways. For example, The Ford Foundation played a critical role in developing women and gender studies in China in the 1990s, with its generous support of various women and gender studies programmes, non-governmental organisations, conferences and seminars in China. The support was both financial and ideological, as a particular version of US-centric women and gender studies was introduced to China, and the development of women and gender studies in China became a part of neoliberal capitalism's expansion in the Global South. What is more, the 'doing projects' model of feminist scholarship funded by international foundations in the late 1990s and the 2000s led feminist scholars away from asking significant and fundamental theoretical questions, such as the relationship between gender and social development. Min interrogates: 'what role the terms "gender",

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“development” and “NGO” play in the neoliberal development agenda, and how this discourse has ensured that gender has achieved a place within international social movements?” (6). By laying bare the political and ideological underpinnings of transnational feminism, Min urges readers to consider feminism as a political project aimed not only to challenge a patriarchal social order but neoliberal capitalism as well.

‘Translation’ is seen as a vehicle for knowledge and theories to travel. Drawing on the notion of ‘cultural translation’ as well as feminist and postcolonial approaches to translation studies, Min sees translation not as a direct rendition from a ‘source language’ to a ‘target language’; instead, translation is seen as a constant process of negotiation shaped by different power configurations and underpinned by individual translators’ agency. In the book, Min painstakingly delineates the material and discursive conditions of translation, as well as the strategic and contingent decisions made by translators. The academic discussions about how to translate feminism and ‘gender’ in the 1980s and the 1990s serve as good examples. In the 1980s, despite the lack of access to Western feminist works and the general lack of foreign language competence, Chinese women studies scholars managed to translate Western second-wave feminist ideas of ‘asserting gender justice into state-organised capitalism’ into Chinese ideas of ‘asserting gender justice and gender difference within state-organised socialism’ (37). In the 1990s, with more opportunities for transitional exchange of ideas, the critical attention paid to the legacy of socialist feminism in China was unfortunately lost and subsequently a reworking of the Western concept of sexual difference as the Sinicised *nüxing* took its place in the national and transnational craze of ‘connecting to the international track’. The proliferation of translated works in Chinese was accompanied by the loss of opportunities for Chinese scholars to reflect on China’s own historical conditions and theoretical legacies in order to develop feminist theories that speak to these cultural specificities. The ‘gains’ and ‘losses’ in translation are thus equally important issues to ponder upon. Chapter 2 to 6 trace the development of feminism in China from the 1980s to 2010s to chart the fascinating trajectory of how feminism travels to and takes root in China. Min takes time and great care with primary sources to demonstrate show different stakeholders, including feminist scholars and activists, the Chinese state, international foundations, and various non-governmental organisations interpreted feminism in their own ways. The process of ‘travelling theory’ is full of contingency and coincidence, but nonetheless following the flow of capital in a postsocialist market economy. For example, The All China Women’s Federation, in its compliance with the state and complicity with neoliberal capitalism, effectively depoliticises and deradicalises feminism.

Min uses some indigenous terms and concepts, including ‘awakening’, ‘dialogue’ (*duibhua*) and ‘connecting to the international track’ (*jiegu*), to account for the contexts and the imperatives of how feminism travels in China in different historical eras. These terms and concepts are part of a powerful rhetoric which not only offers historical contexts and discursive conditions of ‘travelling theory’, but also conditions whether and how theories travel. For example, the *jiegu* discourse in the 1990s not only connects Chinese economy to transnational capitalism; it also forces Chinese feminists to connect Chinese feminism to global feminism, especially liberal feminism from America. And this has significant implications: liberal feminism becomes a benchmark for Chinese feminism and is intertwined with the official ideology of state-led market liberalisation. In the process, the discourse of gender differences becomes a tool for social stratification and serves to mark middle-class distinction in a neoliberalising China.

One major insight of Min’s book is that China has missed an opportunity to develop an indigenous version of feminism, based on China’s historical conditions of socialism and the scholarship of socialist feminism. This is primarily because the ‘bias’ of how theories travel: while liberal feminism travels easily to China in the 1990s because of China’s official endorsement of market liberalism, Chinese scholars’ obsession with the Euro-American liberal feminist experience and rigid methodological empiricism has made socialist feminism a missed opportunity. Observing emergent interest in socialist feminism and younger generations’ feminist activism in China today, Min seems cautiously optimistic about the future of feminism in China.

Min’s book should be read not only as a critical analysis of the development of feminist theory and praxis in China; it should also be read as a personal account of a Chinese feminist scholar and activist. Having actively participated in the development of feminism in China, Cao offers a first-person insider’s account of the history and status quo of feminism in China. Her transnational perspective also allows her to examine and assess the issues critically and free from the limitations of China-exceptionalism or self-orientalism. Her first-person narrative, as part of her feminist methodology, allows her to clearly acknowledge her own subject position and effectively articulate her feminist politics. This book can be read both as a fine piece of theoretical work on transnational and Chinese feminisms, and a source book with precious historical data, original interviews, first-hand experiences and accounts of Chinese feminists.

Min’s focus on academic and activist feminism is methodologically understandable; however, this also means that her account of feminist history is bound to be incomplete and at times even seem elitist. Other forms of feminism in China, including popular, vernacular and even folk interpretations and experiences of feminism also require critical attention and they also constitute diverse ways of how theories travel. Ordinary women may not be familiar with the works of feminist scholars and activists, but this does not prevent them from developing their

own understandings of feminism, often by mixing different theoretical and empirical trajectories of knowledge. The effort of delineating a clear, linear and progressive narrative of feminism in China is commendable; what such a history may omit or conceal is also an important question to ask: how does an ‘alternative travelling theory’ travel?

Considering that transnational feminism is a keyword for the book, the author’s definition of transnational feminism could have been more clearly articulated. ‘Transnational feminism’, in the book, is seen, on the one hand, as the global dominance of a Euro-American centric feminism, what some scholars call ‘global feminism’, pushed by the United Nations and various international foundations through political and economic means in order to ‘liberalise’ the global south as part of the neoliberal hegemony. On the other, it is seen as a diverse range of informal and grassroots exchange of ideas, people and movements across borders, represented by the Chinese Society of Women’s Studies, a transnational feminist organisation which was sympathetic to the development of feminist theories that speak to the Chinese context and which gradually adopted a participatory and dialogic approach to feminist knowledge production. The two forms of transnationalism need to be distinguished in order to account for the theoretical complexities of transnational feminism.

Overall, this is a fascinating piece of work that combines historical and theoretical scholarship, and interrogates fundamental questions about transnational feminism and Chinese feminism. Written in clear language and employing a lucid style, this book will become an indispensable reference for anyone interested in feminism, China and translation.

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