

1-1-2014

# Teaching the History of Women in China and Japan: Challenges and Sources

Danke K. Li

Fairfield University, [dli@fairfield.edu](mailto:dli@fairfield.edu)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License by ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts  
Available at: <http://www.asianetworkexchange.org/index.php/ane/article/view/80>

---

## Repository Citation

Li, Danke K., "Teaching the History of Women in China and Japan: Challenges and Sources" (2014). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 64.  
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/64>

## Published Citation

Li, Danke. "Teaching the History of Women in China and Japan: Challenges and Sources." *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 21.2 (2014): 63-73.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

## Teaching the History of Women in China and Japan: Challenges and Sources

Danke Li

**Abstract:** Studying the history of Chinese and Japanese women provides American students with a thematic approach to Asian Studies. This paper reflects on the challenges I face in teaching women's histories in China and Japan. It also discusses the pedagogy and sources I use in teaching the course. The paper argues that teaching the history of women in China and Japan will allow us to move beyond the conventional regional or nationally focused approach to Asian Studies and enable us to reimagine old narratives and introduce students to new methods of understanding both the universality and diversity within Asian history.

**Keywords** China; Japan; Women

Studying histories of China and Japan can provide American Students with a thematic approach to Asian Studies instead of a conventionally geographical approach. Although China, as an emerging economy, and Japan, as an existing economic powerhouse, are no strangers to most American undergraduates, many do not know much about women in China and Japan. Most textbooks on modern Chinese and Japanese histories cover very little about women. If there is coverage, it tends to be abstract and remote to many American students of the twenty-first century. As recently as last year, I asked my American students what first came to mind when thinking about Chinese and Japanese women during the first class of my "Women in China and Japan" course. The predominant answers given still cast Chinese and Japanese women as subservient victims of patriarchal society. Examples often include foot binding, one-child family policy in China, or geishas in Japan. The overall images are often ones of passive and agencyless women. While these images do reflect some truth, it is only a partial if not a misleading one. The prevalence of such one-dimensional impressions about Asian women underscores the fact that *what* and *how* to teach American students about Chinese and Japanese women still remains a challenge in the twenty-first century. These challenges are discussed and exemplary sources presented in the following.

**Danke Li** is a Professor in the Department of History at Fairfield University

### CHALLENGE NUMBER ONE: WHAT TO TEACH—THE CONTENTS

The first challenge involved in teaching the history of women in China and Japan pertains to content—what to include in the course materials. Most of the generalized and to some degree stereotypical images of Chinese and Japanese women as viewed by American students perhaps partially arise from a relative lack of representation of Chinese and Japanese women's own voices in Western language scholarship.

There is an uneven representation of Western and non-Western scholarly voices in feminist academic work. For example, Japanese feminist scholars have noted an asymmetry in dissemination of feminist scholarship. Since the 1970s, a considerable body of scholarship and literature on women in Japan has been published by Western scholars and translated and made available to Japanese readers. However, very few Japanese scholarly works on the same subject become available in Western languages for Western audiences (Fujimura-

Fanselow and Kameda 1995, xi). The situation in China is about the same. Additionally, in most of the existing Western works published in the 1970s, 1980s, and even the early 1990s, Chinese and Japanese women are treated mainly as the subjects of study and theorizing. And since feminist theories and the very field of women's studies themselves first arose in the West, Japanese and Chinese scholars also heavily relied on these Western theories in their own work when they first began to engage in research on women and feminism during the early 1970s and throughout the 1980s. It was not until the late 1980s and the 1990s that some of the Japanese and Chinese scholars' research became known in the United States, though they remained in the academic periphery.

Women's studies is a relatively new academic field in Japan and China. In Japan, the Women's Studies Association was established in 1979, and in China it was established in the mid to late 1980s. In both countries, the development of women's studies into an interdisciplinary discourse has been influenced by Western feminist and gender theories and scholarly works. However, since the 1990s, especially after the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, women's studies has not only blossomed but also continually matured in both countries. Moving beyond the initial stage of absorbing Western theories as models for women's studies in their countries, Japanese and Chinese scholars are now developing their own perspectives and theories on women in their respective countries and believe that their studies can enrich the field both in and outside of Japan and China. For example, in China, more and more scholars have explicitly begun to challenge the universality of Western-born gender and feminist theories. One of the leading Chinese scholars of women's studies even states that Chinese scholars "respect Western-based feminist theory, and yet they still believe that Chinese women's studies has its own background and circumstances unique to Chinese history and social reality. Western feminist theory is certainly valuable as a rich source of reference, but Western feminist tradition can hardly provide a standardized answer to all Chinese women's questions" (Li and Zhang 1994, 148). Chinese scholars are challenging the notion that gender representation is one size fits all.

Western scholars—for example, Christina Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White—had advocated for the creation of "a dialogue that would challenge the dichotomy between Europeans and Americans as theory makers and Chinese women as objects of theory" (1994, 7). Many efforts, including joint conferences, publications, and foundation-sponsored projects have been developed to promote such a dialogue. However, while Western scholarship on women's studies has continued to inspire the field in Japan and China, Japanese and Chinese scholarship has still not attained the same status in the West. In general, Western scholars and Japanese and Chinese scholars predominantly work and publish in separate circles and have not had enough active intellectual cross-fertilization between them. In addition to the fact that Japan and China do not hold the same level of global political and cultural clout as the U.S. does, the countries' political, cultural, and linguistic differences make it more difficult for Japanese and Chinese scholarship in the field to gain the same prestige enjoyed by Western scholarship. Most of the scholarly works published by Japanese and Chinese scholars in their respective languages remain read mostly in Japan and China and have had little impact on the field in the U.S. and elsewhere, except among scholars who can read Chinese or Japanese. This uneven representation of scholarship was first observed by scholars in the United States. In its 2010 Call for Papers, The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) pointed out: "Although the problem of omissions, silences, and distortions in women's studies has been analyzed for decades, too often feminist scholarship continues to theorize on the basis of hegemonic frameworks, false universals, and a narrow range of lived experiences. The legitimate terrain of feminist

theory, inquiry, and politics remains contested.”<sup>1</sup> The voices, lived experiences, and perspectives of Chinese and Japanese women in particular, and of Asian women in general, are part of a still-underrepresented area of feminist scholarship. In China, for example, Chinese scholars of women’s history have recognized the importance and have “shown a tendency to approach women’s problems from women’s points of view and demonstrate a strong sense of needing to reveal women’s actual life experiences” (Wang 2006, 318). But most of the Japanese and Chinese scholarly works are not available in English. In light of this situation, the question of what to include and how to recognize Japanese and Chinese scholars’ and women’s voices into a gender and women course for American undergraduates is a significant challenge.

In my “Women in China and Japan” course, I try to strike a balance between Western feminist and gender theories, interpretations, and the voices and lived experiences of Japanese and Chinese women as well as their scholarly works. In addition to introducing existing gender and feminist theories and framework by Western scholars, I try to include materials written by Chinese and Japanese women to show that Japanese and Chinese scholarship can enrich the field both in and outside of Japan and China. Many Japanese and Chinese scholars in women’s studies are not only interested in writing about women in their countries, but also in pushing for changes in women’s status in government policies and society. Their insight on women’s studies and women’s movements in their respective countries will enhance intellectual understanding for people outside of Japan and China. It is also important for American students to see the usefulness of Japanese and Chinese scholarship as an integrated part of the field. To reach this goal, American students need to hear the voices of Japanese and Chinese women.

The textbook I use to present Chinese scholarship on women is  *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women, the Past, Present, and Future*  (Mow, Tao, and Zheng 2004). This book is the first collection of essays on Chinese women written by Chinese women scholars. The book covers the history of Chinese women from the Song dynasty to the early 2000s, as well as a wide range of issues and themes, from Chinese women’s own efforts in promoting women’s education in the nineteenth century, to women in the Peking opera, to women’s education and women in politics in the twenty-first century. The textbook for Japanese women is  *Transforming Japan: How Feminism and Diversity Are Making a Difference*  (Fujimura-Fanselow 2011). This book is also a collection of essays on Japanese women written by Japanese women scholars. The book is an updated version of  *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*  (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1995). One reviewer commented that the 1995 book “in offering Western readers Japanese research and points of view, is path-breaking and full of opportunities for breaking down Western ethnocentrism, even feminist ethnocentrism...” (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1995, back cover). The 2011 book retains five historical essays from the 1995 volume while developing new topics ranging from single mothers’ struggles, lesbian partnerships, the formation and growth of the men’s movement to activism for the rights of minorities and the politicization of housewives in Japan. As the editor of the book points out, the text intends to showcase a comprehensive picture of diverse Japanese women living in a multicultural society (Fujimura-Fanselow 2011, x).

To add Japanese and Chinese women’s perspectives and lived experiences, I rotate the following books on Japanese women:  *Office Ladies and Salaried Men*  (Ogasawara 1998), on Japanese women in the workplace;  *Sandakan Brothel #8: An Episode in the History of Lower-Class Japanese Women*  (Yamazaki and Colligan-Taylor 1998), on Japanese women who were sold into prostitution;  *Haruko’s World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community*

(Bernstein 1983), on Japanese farm women and their community; *The Secrets of Mariko: A Year in the Life of a Japanese Woman and Her family* (Bumiller 1995), on middle-class urban women and their lives; *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: the Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist* (Raicho and Carig 2010), on one of the early Japanese feminists; and the *Prison Memoirs of a Japanese Woman* (Fumiko and Inglis 1991), on a radical Japanese woman who was executed for plotting to assassinate the emperor. I rotate the following books on Chinese women: *A Daughter of Han: the Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (Pruitt 1945); *A Woman Soldier's Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying* (Brissman 2001); *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Li 2010), an oral history of twenty Chongqing women who experienced the Second Sino-Japanese War; *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Honig and Hershatter 1988), a study of Chinese women during the early reform era; *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Hershatter 2012), a book on rural women during the early People's Republic of China; *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* (Zhong, Wang, and Bai 2001), a collection of personal essays by China-born female scholars who live and teach in the United States about being female under Mao's China; and *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Women* (Yue 1985), an autobiography of a Chinese intellectual woman who lived through the Maoist era and the Cultural Revolution.

Since most students today are netizens, I include in the syllabus some credible websites that provide useful information, for example, the Bibliography of Asian Studies, Stanford University's online source center on Japanese studies, the website of the Universities Service Centre for China Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the German Heidelberg University's online information center on Chinese women.<sup>2</sup>

Clips of documentary and fiction films are also used in this course. For the history of Chinese women, in addition to the usual suspects, such as *Raise of the Red Lantern*, *Judou*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *Road to Home*, and *Small Happiness*, I also use the documentary films *China Blue*, *Not One Less*, *The Last Train Home*, *Marrying from the Heart of the Dragon* series, *Chinese Foot Binding*, *Women in China: Up Against the Wall*, *Nushu*, and *A World Without Fathers or Husbands* to provide an array of visual images of Chinese women to American students to show how diverse women in China are. For the history of Japanese women, I use clips from *Sandakan Brothel No 8*, *Black Rain*, *Street of Shame*, *No Regret for the Youth*, *The Woman in the Dunes*, *Twenty-four Eyes*, *Kabe: Our Mother*, and *Granny Gabai* as well as documentary films such as *Japanese Women*, *Faces of Japan*, and *Mother's Way Daughter's Choice*, to break the stereotyped presentation of the images of Japanese women. I also find that YouTube provides many useful clips on gender and women for courses on gender and feminism. For example, I use a four-minute video presentation called "Socialization and Gender Roles within the Family"<sup>3</sup> on YouTube to stimulate conversation on what gender is and how it is constructed in China and Japan.

In choosing the assigned readings and audiovisual materials for the course, it is important to include materials that inform American undergraduate students about Japanese and Chinese women beyond the conventional categories of family, marriage, motherhood, and sexuality, in other words, women's lives in domesticity. The course materials also encourage students to study women and war and the LGBT movement, as well as women's lives in education, work, religion, and politics. In the case of China, I include readings and visual materials about non-Han Chinese women, for example the documentary films of *Nushu*, a film about a unique women's language developed and used exclusively by women in Yongjiang, Hunan Province, and *A World Without Fathers or Husbands*, a film on the Mosuo women who still live in a matrilineal society in Yunnan Province, to show that gender and feminist

studies intersect not only with social class but also with ethnicity in China. China has fifty-six recognized nationality groups, and conventional scholarship on Chinese women covers mainly women from the Han majority, not minority groups. Readings encourage students to consider the issue of gender and ethnicity in Japan as well. For example, they are given readings on the experiences of Korean and “Other” Asian women who live in Japan (Faier 2008).

#### CHALLENGE NUMBER TWO: WHAT TO TEACH—THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The second challenge of teaching history of women in Japan and China is to introduce and engage American undergraduate students with existing gender, feminist, and women’s studies theories, and draw their attention to competing theories and ongoing debates on the question of the universality of gender, feminist, and women’s studies theories. In her 2006 study of the rise of Chinese women’s history as part of the development of social history in China, Shou Wang noticed that although gender, feminist, and women’s studies in China were inspired and continued to be inspired by theories developed by scholars in the West, since the 1990s more and more Chinese scholars have recognized the limitations of these theories and their applicability to the Chinese situation. For instance, Wang points out “the term ‘gender,’ which is widely used in Western works in women’s studies, does not have a fixed Chinese equivalent.” Some of the Chinese scholars even worry about the danger of “theoretical colonization” of the study of Chinese women’s history by Western scholars (Wang 2006, 320). Thus, developing reading materials that help American undergraduate students understand important concepts regarding gender, feminism, and women’s studies while recognizing their usefulness and limitations for studying women in non-Western societies is a challenge.

To help students understand the importance of gender and feminist theories and studies, I find several books particularly useful. The first is *Women: Images and Realities* (Kelly, Parameswaran, and Schniedewind 2011). This book not only introduces the concepts of women’s studies, gender, gender studies, and the question of the LGBT, but also showcases how gender intersects with class, race, and ethnicity by providing examples of lived experiences of multicultural Americans. It also includes men’s voices in supporting women’s rights movements and masculine studies. Another book is *Gender in Modernism* (Kime 2007). This is a collection of essays grouped into twenty-one thematic sections. I find the essays on the theme of gender and global location particularly useful for the study of the history of Japanese and Chinese women. *The Evolution of American Women’s Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies and Change* (Ginsberg 2008) is useful as well, especially the introduction chapter. This chapter highlights the three waves of feminist movement and related scholarly works in the United States and points out their weaknesses and challenges. The three books together can introduce American students to the basic theories and knowledge on gender, feminism, and women’s studies and provide them with some frameworks to probe what the prevailing theories are and whether they are useful in studying the history of women in Japan and China.

Another aspect of the theoretical challenge in teaching the history of women in Japan and China is to make sure students understand that gender and feminist studies are not just academic fields but also opportunities for everyday activism for promoting social justice and equality in the world. I find *Grassroots* (Baumgardner and Richards 2005) inspiring and a fun and absorbing text for undergraduates. It is aimed at pointing out to young people that everyone, regardless of social and economic status and political standing, can be an

activist and make a difference in the world. In teaching the history of women in Japan and China, the above-mentioned books on gender, feminist, and women's studies theories and activism may be connected to the geolocation and realities of Japan and China presented in the introduction chapters of *Chinese Femininities and Chinese Masculinities* (Wasserstrom and Brownell 2002) and *Transforming Japan: How Feminism and Diversity Are Making A Difference* (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 2011).

By connecting American undergraduate students to theories of gender, feminism, and women's studies in general and the Japanese and Chinese realities regarding women's history in particular, a course on the history of Japanese and Chinese women could engage the students to think critically. For example, last year in the discussion of the articles in Amy Kesselman's *Women: Images and Realities*, students in my class noticed that the authors argued that "feminism is continually developing a more multicultural and inclusive perspective, mirroring the lives of women in all races, ethnic groups, and classes. Feminists of varied races and ethnicities are generating theory and practice that address their particular experiences and consciousness, broadening and deepening the scope of feminist analysis" (Kesselman, McNair, and Schniedewind 2006, 12). Then, questions emerge: if feminism allows different races and ethnicities to practice and address their particular experiences and consciousness, do non-Western women groups, for example Chinese and Japanese women, experience gender the same ways as white middle-class Western women do? According to Ginsberg, in the 1960s and 70s there was a clear goal for scholars and activists about women's studies and feminist movements in the United States. Do Chinese and Japanese scholars and activists have a similarly clear goal about women's studies and movement in their respective countries? What is it? Is the goal of Chinese women the same as that of Japanese women? Is the goal of Chinese and Japanese women the same as the goal of women in other parts of the world? What unites and defines the category of women? Is womanhood defined universally in all countries? How do we strike a balance regarding universalism and cultural relativism in gender and women's studies? How do we create an inclusive feminism that does not have the West-non-Western divide? Many of these questions are probably relevant to all history courses, not only those on gender and women's studies, but also to Asian studies in general.

Although we never reach consensual answers to these questions, the study of Japanese and Chinese women's history helps students engage critically with the renegotiation of gender theories. It makes them see the challenge of the common usage of Western theories as a unitary standard for women's histories elsewhere in the world despite their development in the historical particulars of Western experience. In teaching the course on history of women in China and Japan I realize that we need to encourage students to consider the necessity and possibilities for intellectual cross-fertilization to create a dialogue challenging the dichotomy between Euro-Americans as theory makers and non-Western women as objects of theory and see that gender representation is not one size fits all. Students need to learn not only pertinent knowledge of gender and women in general, but also historiography of gender and women's studies in China and Japan.

Studying history of women in Japan and China provides American students with the opportunity to consider the commonly-shared concerns of all women as well as the unique issues facing women in these countries. For example, students are asked to consider whether socialist revolution and industrial modernization liberate women in China and whether industrialization and the Pacific War mobilization improved women's status in Japan. Teaching history of women in Japan and China helps students understand that gender construction is complex and that a multicultural and historical approach to women's

histories is necessary. As women's contributions and participation are included in Chinese and Japanese history, subjects of inquiry are recast and causes and impact of major events like China's revolutions and Japan's industrial modernization are also revised. By understanding women's position in gender relations, students gain a more realistic and comprehensive knowledge of the values of Chinese and Japanese cultures, the functioning of their societies, and the nature of historical continuities and changes.

### **CHALLENGE NUMBER THREE: HOW TO TEACH—PEDAGOGY**

The third challenge in teaching women in Japan and China is what pedagogy to use and how to make the course interesting. I employ a student-centered and interactive pedagogy to motivate students to become active and engaged learners and critical thinkers.

The format of the course includes lecture, discussion based on assigned readings, debate, and audiovisual material presentations. In addition, last year I also arranged an e-mail penpal exchange between Chinese college students and my American students. A former student of mine taught English at the Central China Normal University and I asked her to mobilize her Chinese students to exchange emails with my students. This e-mail penpal project enables American students in my class to actually interact with young Chinese peers to exchange views on topics in the course.

In my course, all students are expected to participate in class activities by contributing thoughts, perspectives, anecdotes, and so forth on the readings, classroom experience, and lectures. All students are required to lead one week of discussion, questioning and integrating the theories and arguments of the assigned readings and forging their own critical opinions on the subject matter. To ensure the quality of each week's discussion, a weekly assignment is given. Before coming to each week's class, students are required to finish a two-page reflective essay on the week's readings. They are asked to show that they understand the main ideas, themes, and assertions contained in each reading and are able to identify the information supporting the author's statement, as well as evaluate the weakness and strength of the author's ideas and presentation. In addition to the short essay, students write out a few conceptual questions that will lead to a meaningful discussion. In order to help students make intellectual connections to the various readings they are assigned each week, they are asked to take one or more ideas and facts for the week and think about how they can contrast, compare, clarify, call into question, or relate to knowledge and concepts they have gained in previous weeks or from other sources, like outside readings, other courses, and life experience. This course also requires students to produce a substantial final research paper on their chosen subject pertaining to women in Japan and China at the end of the semester. Both the weekly reading reflective papers and the final research paper are useful materials for assessing the learning outcomes of the course.

In teaching the course I realize that it is easy for many students to unconsciously fall into the trap of false gender universalism by using their own twenty-first century Western-gendered glasses to view women in Chinese and Japanese history. By measuring women in Japan and China with a yardstick determined by life in the United States in the twenty-first century, it is easy for students to jump into a premature and asymmetric comparison and conclusion that women in Japan and China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are much worse off than women in the twenty-first century United States.

One of the male students from my course stated the following in his weekly short essay: "In a way, I feel as if my original views on the status of Japanese women in their nation and society are gradually being worn away, bit by bit. When I first began reading about the stigmas, biases, means of discrimination, strict cultural expectations, and other such woes



that Japanese women have had to and continue to endure, I more or less had a knee-jerk reaction in which I wanted to more or less brand the whole society as a living trap of sexism from my personal point view. However, according to the week's readings, it would appear that yet again, I was extraordinarily hasty to dole out my over-generalizations borne out my strong emotional reaction. As I see, at least in the realm of politics, Japanese women continue to make strides, bit by bit, as seen through the profiles of Aokage Takako and Mitsui Mariko, or the growing influx of 'housewives' into the political sphere, as described by Yoko Sato in 'From the Home to the Political Arena.'<sup>4</sup>

A female student in the same course also commented on the readings on the subject of the growth and movement of Japanese feminism, pointing out that the feminist movement in Japan is "in some ways like the American feminist movement, a grassroots movement that has undergone different waves and has had different leaders throughout; it is important to realize that while there are similarities/universalities to the feminist movement throughout the world, each country's movement has slightly different cultural issues it is dealing with and there are different timelines that events occurred for each country. The readings for this week focused on the growth of the Japanese feminist movement since the late 1890s and traced its progress throughout today; the feminist movement is not a static organization; it has changed and its goals have progressed with the time period."<sup>5</sup> With proper guidance and intensive intellectual discussion and debate, undergraduate American students can see that it is important to think like a historian and to strike a balance in the debate of universalism and cultural relativism.

Another common challenge encountered in my "Women in Japan and China" class is that it is easy for American students to assume that there is no difference between the experiences of Chinese and Japanese women. They often are surprised to see that although women in the two countries share some common experiences and aspirations, they face many different challenges and have different development stages pertinent to their own history, society, and cultural traditions. For example, during the Pacific War, while Japanese women's organizations were banned or forced to serve the military state, the war provided opportunities for Chinese women to develop their organizations and movement for liberating their country and themselves. Another example is from the middle of the 1960s to the late 1970s; when Chinese women dealt with the challenges of the Cultural Revolution and were cut off from the feminist movement in the West, the Japanese women were aware of the movement and started to launch a feminist movement of their own. Thus it is important for students to know that in studying women in Chinese and Japanese history, a multicultural and historical approach to women's studies is necessary. It is important to locate women's history within a society's national history as well as to describe its role in an integrated history of East Asia. When we teach about East Asia, we need to strike a balance between recognizing the region at large as an organizing unit in our teaching and drawing attention to the individual East Asian countries' unique identities and cultural traditions.

Gender theories and feminism are not just scholarly engagements; they are also aimed at promoting activism. One of the objectives of teaching a gender/women course is to help students link classroom learning with activism for diversity. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their 2011 study point out that in the twenty-first century extracurricular activities are an integral part of American undergraduate student life and play an important role in shaping campus culture in many colleges (Arum and Roksa 2011, 3). Taking advantage of this reality, last year when I taught the course on women in Japan and China, I challenged students to connect our classroom learning with the real world of our everyday life. The students took the challenge and made the connection through a class project. After a

brainstorming session, they decided to stage three mock Chinese weddings on campus to promote diversity and cultural awareness of China.

In the course, marriage is introduced as an institution that is vital in understanding a society; wedding ceremonies symbolize and showcase a society's values and rituals. The mock weddings project provides a great opportunity for the students and the onlookers to learn about and understand the importance of marriage and wedding in the construction of womanhood, family, and gender relations, and in reproducing class structures in China from the late imperial times to the current economic reforms.

The students acted out three Chinese weddings: a traditional wedding, a revolutionary wedding presumably during the Maoist era, and a post-Mao wedding of the economic reform era. They staged a prewedding negotiation between the groom's and bride's families to show the audience that marriage in traditional Chinese society was not just the union of the young people who were getting married, but the union of the two families. They also paraded the wedding dowries to show off the economic and social standings of the groom's and the bride's families in the local community. During the ceremonies, a narrator told the audience the historical background of the weddings, the meaning of each act, and the change and continuities of the ceremonies from the traditional to the Maoist revolutionary and the economic reform era as a result of the change and lack of change in China's political and social structures.

During the course of preparing for the event, we not only learned a great deal about Chinese marriage and wedding culture, but also established our class as a learning community which went beyond the classroom. Since this project was included as part of the Multicultural Monday events, we worked closely with the University Activities and Student Diversity Programs Offices. The students wrote a grant proposal and got funding from a foundation for the event. Throughout the preparation process the students not only learned organizational skills and grant proposal writing, but also contributed to the promotion of diversity and cultural awareness on campus. This project made the students realize that learning about East Asia can be fun and meaningful to their everyday life. It provided them with an opportunity to connect academic learning with the promotion of activism and multiculturalism on campus and encouraged them to consider that as global citizens, they could think globally but act locally.

## CONCLUSION

Anyone teaching the history of women in China and Japan in America faces challenges of how to select balanced course materials and introduce women-related theoretical perspectives that include the voices of Chinese and Japanese women. I believe that with carefully selected course materials, we can help American students hear Chinese and Japanese women's voices, which will not only enable students to better understand the history of these two countries, but also enrich the existing feminist and women's studies theories and practices in the U.S. A challenge of teaching Asian histories in the United States today is that it is difficult to make a connection between the subject matter and American students' everyday life. An East Asian women's history course can employ feminist activism and an active pedagogy to make such a connection. The study of Chinese and Japanese women's history may engage students critically with the renegotiation of gender theories and realities in the East Asian countries under study, in particular acknowledging the common usage of Western theories as a unitary standard for women's histories elsewhere in the world despite their development in the historical particulars of Western experience. Teaching the history of women in China and Japan will allow us to move beyond the conventional "area studies"

and the nation-state boundaries, to reimagine old narratives and introduce students to new methods of understanding themes of both universalism and diversity within East Asian history.

#### REFERENCES

- Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgardner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards. 2005. *Grassroots*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bernstein, Gail Lee. 1983. *Haruko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brissman, Lily Chia and Barry Brissman, trans. 2001. *A Woman Soldier's Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bumiller, Elisabeth. 1995. *The Secrets of Mariko: A Year in the Life of a Japanese Woman and Her Family*. New York: Random House.
- Faier, Lieba. 2008. "Runaway Stories: The Underground Micromovements of Filipina 'Oyomesan' in Rural Japan." *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 4: 630-659.
- Fujimura-Fanselow, Kumiko, and Atsuko Kameda, eds. 1995. *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Fujimura-Fanselow, Kumiko, and Atsuko Kameda, eds. 2011. *Transforming Japan: How Feminism and Diversity Are Making A Difference*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Fumiko Kaneko and Jean Inglis. 1991. *Prison Memoirs of a Japanese Woman*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.
- Gilmartin, Christina, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, eds. 1994. *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ginsberg, Alice E. 2008. *The Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies and Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hershatter, Gail. 2012. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter. 1988. *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kime, Bonnie Scott, ed. 2007. *Gender in Modernism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Kelly, Suzanne, Gowri Parameswaran, and Nancy Schniedewind, eds. 2011. *Women: Images and Realities*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kesselman, Amy, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind, eds. 2006. *Women: Images and Realities*, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Li, Danke. 2010. *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Li Xiaojiang and Zhang Xiaodan. 1994. "Creating a Space for Women: Women's Studies in China in the 1980s." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20, no. 1: 137-151
- Mow, Shirley, Tao Jie, and Zheng Bijun, eds. 2004. *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women, the Past, Present, and Future*. New York: the Feminist Press.
- Ogasawara, Yuko. 1998. *Office Ladies and Salaried Men*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pruitt, Ida. 1945. *A Daughter of Han: the Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Raicho Hiratsuka and Teruko Craig. 2010. *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: the Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wang Shou. 2006. "The 'New Social History' in China: The Development of Women's History." *The History Teacher* 39, no. 3: 315-323.
- Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N., and Susan Brownell, ed. 2002. *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yamazaki, Tomoko, and Karen Colligan-Taylor. 1998. *Sandakan Brothel #8: An Episode in the History of Lower-class Japanese Women*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Yue Daiyun. 1985. *To the Storm: The Odyssey of A Revolutionary Chinese Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zhong, Xueping, Wang Zheng, Bai Di, eds. 2001. *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

#### FILMS CITED

- Black Rain*. Directed by Shohei Imamura et al. 1989; Wilmington, NC: AnimEigo, 2009. DVD.
- China Blue*. Directed by Micha Peled. 2005; Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2005. DVD.
- Chinese Foot Binding: The Vanishing Lotus*. Directed by Fung Wing Chuen Tely. 2000; New York: Filmmakers Library, 2004. DVD.
- Faces of Japan: Woman Soldier*. Directed by Dick Cavett, et al. 1988; New York: Pacific Mountain Network, 1988. VHS.
- Granny Gabai*. Directed by Hitoshi Kurauchi. 2006; Tōei Bideo, 2006. DVD.
- Heart of the Dragon: Marrying*. Directed by Mischa Scorer et al. 1985; MediaOutlet.com, 2012. DVD.

- Japanese Woman*. Directed by Kalle Lasn. 1984; Irwindale, CA: Barr Films, 1984. VHS.
- Ju Dou*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1990; Studio City, CA: Razor Digital Entertainment, 2005. DVD.
- Kabei: Our Mother*. Directed by Yoji Yamada. 2008; Culver City, CA: Strand Home Video, 2009. DVD.
- The Last Train Home*. Directed by Lixin Fan. 2009; Zeitgeist Films, 2011. DVD.
- Mother's Way, Daughter's Choice*. Directed by Kyoko Gasha. 2009; New York: Filmmakers Library, 2011. DVD.
- No Regrets for Our Youth*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1946; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2007. DVD.
- Not One Less*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1999; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2000. DVD.
- Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China*. Directed by Yue-Qing Yang. 1997; New York: Women Make Movies, 1999. DVD.
- Raise the Red Lantern*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1991; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- The Road Home*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1999; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD.
- Sandakan No. 8*. Directed by Kei Kumai. 1974; Video Action, 1986. VHS.
- Small Happiness*. Directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon. 1984; New York: New Day Films, 1990. VHS.
- The Story of Qiu Ju*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1992; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.
- Street of Shame*. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. 1956; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2008. DVD.
- Twenty-four Eyes*. Directed by Keisuke Kinoshita. 1954; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2008. DVD.
- The Woman in the Dunes*. Directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara. 1964; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2007. DVD.
- Women in China: Up Against the Wall*. Directed by Laurie Layton Schapira. 1998; Derry, NH: Chip Taylor Communications, 1998. DVD.
- A World Without Fathers or Husbands*. Directed by Eric Blavier and Thomas Lavachery. 2000; New York: Filmmakers Library, 2001. DVD.

#### NOTES

1. <http://lists.csustan.edu/pipermail/facnet-l/2010-January/002138.html> (accessed May 3, 2013)
2. <http://jguide.stanford.edu>, <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk>, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/womag/>
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txI-A3QMtXY&feature=fvsr> (accessed May 8, 2013)
4. Geoffrey Staysniak's weekly reflective essay for HI 366, Women in China and Japan, 2010.
5. Elisabeth Muller's weekly reflective essay for HI 366, Women in China and Japan, 2010.