

The Limits of Sympathy: International Feminists and the Chinese 'slave girl' Campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Limits of Sympathy:
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Campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s**

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The focus of this study is one of the important campaigns of Western feminism over China, the campaign over the slave girls of China. The image of the silent, suffering and childlike figure became the image and symbol of Chinese womanhood for the West. Set alongside the emerging figure of the modern Western girl, healthy, active and independent, the Chinese slave girl remains silenced, mute, passive and childlike, linked in the Western archives to a traditional culture and the practices of antiquity.

Women's organisations engaged in both Britain and Australia in the inter-war period refined and sustained a traditionalist feminist and maternalist paradigm of care for the mothers and children of China. This feminism employed an essentialist and colonialist project without a concern for cultural difference. At another level, as this paper will argue, some Western feminist groups and individuals, particularly those on the ground, articulated a different feminism, more internationalist and racially aware. This article studies these shifts in the work of Western feminist activists in and around mainland China in the 1920s and 1930s. Western women were 'thinking with interest and sympathy of the women of the East', wrote the British activist Edith Pye on her return from China in 1928.¹ Western feminists were interested in China in the inter-war period, and they were sympathetic towards the modern Chinese woman and the Chinese girl. This paper also seeks to critique such notions of sympathy.

In traditional Chinese society the *ximin* or male slave exhibited all the characteristics of classic chattel slavery.² The boy *ximin* could be bought and sold for life, and could be passed on as part of an owner's legacy to his heirs. The practice, however, was indigenous only to Southern China, and by the twentieth century had long since died out. By comparison the *mui-tsai* or girl slave can only be called a slave for the period of her life that she lives as a domestic servant with a family, for although she can be bought and sold, when she reaches puberty she is usually married, or sold again as a prostitute, or taken as a concubine within the master's family.

This final experience of marriage or concubinage means that in a patrilineal family system she becomes part of her new master or husband's family, and thus not strictly owned for life.³

The history of slavery in China is not well established in Chinese historiography, and current Western scholarship reflects on some of the silences and omissions in this history.⁴ Jenner, for example, argues that Marxist historical paradigms assume a transition from a slave society to a feudal order, following Engels' view of history, and thus influence Chinese views that slavery formed no part of modern twentieth-century China.⁵ One recent study of contemporary slave girls from Hong Kong represents oral histories of the women themselves.⁶ In an extraordinary and powerful study of several generations of *mui-tsai*, Maria Jaschok shows how their lives intersected with the men and the women of the family and how as *mui-tsai* they participated in a number of differing relationships. They were more involved and potentially more powerful than many have given them credit for, for in becoming concubines they held sway over paid servants. But Jaschok also underlines the entrenched nature of family culture that made it difficult for change. She concludes that:

...the phenomenon of the *mooi-jai* was intrinsically connected with a resistant patriarchal culture that was not open to change; that the *mooi-jai* practice fed on widespread, entrenched poverty among the labouring masses, that the victims carried with them the weight not only of physical oppression but also of psychological conditioning inducing a state of self-abnegation, which would demand more than government decrees and proclamations to be rectified.⁷

Jaschok's project recognises the histories of the bonded servants in Hong Kong, and collects stories from the women themselves, but turns on a construction of the individual psyche of the slave girl.

The international context for an understanding of...



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