

Book Review

Review of *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Periodical Press*, by Joan Judge. University of California Press. 2015

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Over the last decade the proliferation of databases providing full text access to Chinese journals and newspapers from the late Qing through 1949 has radically changed the research style of scholars in the fields of modern Chinese history and literature. No longer do we have to travel to libraries in China to search out rare copies of early 20th century journals: now, with the click of a mouse, we can search authors and subjects across hundreds of journals, download *pdf* files, and begin to read. There is no question that ready access through use of such databases has allowed scholars to undertake research projects that would have been impossible a few years ago—not only opening the door to projects that use quantitative data to explore changes in ideas and language, but also providing access to relevant articles that appeared in obscure journals that in an earlier day would never have been consulted.



Well aware of the benefits of the new research tools, few of us stop to consider what has been lost. In *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Periodical Press*, Joan Judge provides a wonderful reminder of the benefits of reading the old-fashioned way. She shows us how much can be gained by looking at articles in the context in which they originally appeared, alongside other articles, letters to the editor, photos and advertisements. We enjoy with her the very materiality of the experience of

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leafing through an issue of a magazine, exploring the interesting combination of articles and illustrations that would have been a major part of the experience of a journal's original readers.

Republican Lens is an extended introduction to and analysis of the first commercial women's journal published in China, the *Funü Shibao*.¹ The magazine was published by the *Shibao* press, which was the publisher of a major Shanghai newspaper that had been established in 1904 and was closely associated with the reform movement led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao.² The first issue of *Funü Shibao* appeared in June 1911, only months before the revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty, and its 21st and last issue appeared in April 1917, two years before the start of the radical student-led May Fourth Movement that would change the terms of discussion about gender and so many other issues. Each lavishly illustrated issue was between 114 and 146 pages, with colorful cover illustrations provided by specially contracted artists. The magazine quickly gained an audience that included not only women but also men and Judge argues that the magazine might best be considered a general magazine with a focus on women, rather than as an exclusively women's magazine. Print runs ran between 6000 and 7000 copies, and since magazines were commonly passed from reader to reader, Judge speculates that it may well have had a readership of over 140,000.

One of the special features of the *Funü Shibao* was its use of high quality photos, and Judge gives much room to the analysis of the photos—offering a guide on how to read and understand the hundreds of photos that appeared in the journal. Many of the photos came from two organizations that were part of the *Shibao* group of companies, the Minying Photo Studio and the Youzheng Book Company, producer of fine arts publications. *Republican Lens* includes more than 80 black and white images from the journal as well as eight color plates, allowing the reader to share the visual experiences of early twentieth century Chinese readers.

Joan Judge is an ideal guide for this exploration in close reading. She has published two earlier books on the popular press: the first, *Print and Politics:*

1 Judge's book grew out of a collaborative project on early 20th century women's magazines organized by Barbara Mittler of Heidelberg University, Grace Fong of McGill University and Joan Judge and funded by foundations from Germany, Canada, and Taiwan. The project has produced a website that includes articles about and digital reproductions of four major women's journals, including *Funü Shibao*. The website can be found at:

[<http://kjc-sv013.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/index.php>]

2 For details on the *Shibao* publishing company, see Joan Judge's earlier book, *Print and Politics: 'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China*, Stanford University Press, 1996.

'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China is an examination of the parent company of *Funü Shibao* and its relation to the reform movement in the late Qing, and the second, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China*, is an examination of discourses on women in the late Qing and early Republican periods based on a wide-reading of newspapers, women's magazines and overseas student journals. Her deep knowledge of both the popular press and of the discourses on women's issues in the period allows her to draw out multiple and complex meanings in her reading of *Funü Shibao*.

Republican Lens begins with an introduction to three approaches to reading that are used in the book, which the author refers to as "horizontal," "integrated," and "situated." The first of these approaches involves reading complete issues of the journal from cover to cover, a method that aims, "to restore the material integrity and social ecology of individual journals and issues of journals by tracing the connections among their images, texts, and advertisements, and among their contributing editors, artists, and authors" (p.39). The second style, which she calls "integrated" reading, places the journal in the "textual milieu" of the time, comparing it with other journals and publications. And the final approach "involves 'situated' readings of the contents of the journal in relation to the life trajectories of its authors, circulating biomedical discourses, global commercial forces, and China's revolutionary history" (p.39). I personally found the horizontal reading of particular interest since this seems to me to be the element that has been most clearly lost in our contemporary research styles with their reliance on articles downloaded from databases, separate from the surroundings in which they were originally located.

Judge spends some time describing the aim of the journal and its editors, who she argues were striving for a "democratic mode of cultural production" in which readers were encouraged to contribute both text and photos. The journal, much like the parent newspaper, targeted what we might think of as a "middle brow" audience, striving to bridge divisions and to share cultural, scientific and literary knowledge. The journal's editors placed great stress on recording everyday experience and urged their readers to contribute short prose essays, diaries and other records of daily life. While the editors expended great effort in trying to induce readers to contribute to the journal—holding essay contests with subscriptions to the journal as prizes—their efforts were often frustrated. While the journal did get contributions from readers, many of them were from men—often the husbands of their female readers. Judge notes that one of the complications of analyzing the journal is trying to determine the gender of authors because of the common use of pen names. One of those male contributors was the young Gu Jiegang,

who later became a well-known historian and promoter of the study of Chinese folk traditions. Gu contributed several essays to the journal, using the name of his wife.

A further complication in soliciting work from readers was related to writing style. As we know from the work of many scholars working in Chinese women's history including Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko,³ poetry was a major means of self-expression and communication for well-educated women of a slightly earlier day, and as Judge notes it was the preferred style of writing for many of those who eventually contributed to the journal. However, in the late Qing women's traditional education, especially poetry writing, had come under attack from Liang Qichao who had argued that, "What people called 'talented women' (*cainü*) in the past refers to those who tease the wind and fondle the moon, pluck flowers and caress the grass, and then compose some *ci* or *shi*-style poems to mourn the spring and lament parting."⁴ The reform movement headed by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao had been deeply involved in the establishment of the *Shibao* newspaper, and the editors of the *Funü Shibao* shared Liang's views about women's poetry, urging contributors to submit their contributions in prose rather than poetry. In spite of the editors' wishes, the journal received and eventually published many poems on a wide variety of subjects including politics, the revolution, and daily life experiences, evidence that writing in the poetic mode could be used for more than frivolous expression of emotions.

Chapter two of the book on Republican ladies discusses the role of *Funü Shibao* in making respectable women more visible. As we know from Judge's earlier works, as well as the work of Susan Mann and others, until the early 20th century the wives and daughters of good families (*guixiu*) were rarely seen in public. One of the biggest changes in the last decade of the Qing and the early Republic was the gradual acceptance of women in public venues. The beginnings of formal education for women played a major role in this transition, as schoolgirls going back and forth to school walked in the streets in their school uniforms and posed for class photos. *Funü Shibao* played a major role in promoting this new visibility of respectable women by publishing hundreds of photos—everything from class graduation photos to

3 Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, University of California Press, 1997; Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, University of California Press, 2007; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

4 Quoted from Liang Qichao's Lun Nüxue in Nanxiu Qian, "Revitalizing the Xianyuan (Worthy Ladies) Tradition: Women in the 1898 Reforms," *Modern China* 29: 4 (2003) 399–454.

wedding and family photos of prominent individuals. Many of the photos were taken in photo studios, including that of the Minying Photo Studio, which was located on the third floor of the *Shibao* building.

In a later chapter on “liminal sexualities” Judge discusses the methods she used for a cultural reading of the photos. Before *Funü Shibao* began its efforts to include the photos of respectable women in the journal, most photos of Chinese women were of courtesans. Beginning in the last several decades of the 19th century courtesans in Shanghai had begun to have their photos taken as a form of advertisement, and the Youzheng book company which was affiliated with the *Shibao* group not only produced fine art reproductions, but also albums of photos of courtesans. These albums were often advertised in the pages of *Funü Shibao*. So one of the questions Judge first faced was how to tell the difference between photos of courtesans and those of respectable women. Judge discusses her approach, which involved looking at the clothes and poses of the women in photographs. Since many of the portraits of respectable women were taken in the same photo studios and often used the same painted background curtains and props, the easiest way to tell whether a photo was of a courtesan or a respectable woman was the attached text: courtesans were usually identified only by their names, while the names of respectable women were always followed by the honorific “Miss” (*nüshi*).

Judge notes that from the late 19th century on, courtesans were seen as fashion leaders, and there was a popular genre of posed studio portraits in which courtesans were pictured with the various symbols of modern life, for example riding in “airplanes” and automobiles. While most of the photos that included such props were studio portraits of courtesans, in the conclusion Judge picks up the story of Zhang Xiahun, who is often referred to as China’s first female flyer. Photos of Zhang and references to her accomplishments have appeared in many studies on the visual culture of the early Republic. I had seen these photos in earlier studies and assumed that Zhang was China’s first female pilot—since the photos dated from a time when the first female aviators were making an appearance in the West. Judge’s account of the events behind the photo—of how Zhang Xiahun visited a flight exhibition and insisted on taking a ride, making her the first Chinese woman to fly in an airplane. She was not, however, a pilot. Judge’s account continues the story, noting that the flight ended in a crash that injured Ms Zhang, and the book includes a later photo of Zhang that shows her as an unremarkable woman wrapped up in heavy clothing, a very different image from that of the female flyer.

Funü Shibao had another major goal—to spread scientific knowledge, particularly information that should be of particular importance to women.

Chapter four, on public bodies, is a detailed analysis of the journal's articles on reproductive health. In the early twentieth century China had unusually high maternal and child mortality rates and the editors of the journal devoted much space in the journal to promoting safer childbirth methods and the importance of replacing traditional childbirth assistants with trained midwives. In their articles on modern medical knowledge and reproductive health—and in their treatment of other issues related to daily life—the editors of the journal made extensive use of materials from Japanese journals and newspapers. Many of those involved in editing and writing for the journal had studied in Japan, and they drew heavily on new knowledge and materials from Meiji-Taisho Japanese media. In some cases the materials were marked as translations from Japanese, but in many other cases articles adapted ideas from Japanese publications without offering explicit recognition of the sources.

The chapter on “public bodies” also offers an intriguing analysis of the advertisements for various kinds of patent medicines. Advertisements for medicines like “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People” often included testimonials from real people. The advertisements, which promoted various patent medicines that were designed to deal with problems that particularly affected women including menstrual pain, were usually in the voice of male relatives (husbands or fathers) of the woman who was featured. This was again another way in which respectable women were made visible—in this case not with photos, but with illustrations that were presented as sketches of the woman whose recovery after taking the pills was being featured.

Republican Lens makes an important contribution to our understanding of the important changes in gender relations in Chinese society in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century and of the role of the popular press in creating and spreading new visions of a society in which women were active participants. The book picks up and fleshes out many of the themes of the author’s earlier work that showed that important changes in gender relations had begun in the late Qing at least a decade or more before the launching of the radical May Fourth movement.⁵ The focus in this volume on visual images makes the book very accessible to a larger audience, and can also serve as methodological guide for those who are interested in exploring the burgeoning world of the popular press in pre-war Chinese society.

5 For a discussion of Judge’s earlier work and that of others whose work critiqued understandings of gender history in the early 20th century, see my essay “Reconsidering the May Fourth Consensus: Recent American Studies of Chinese Women’s History,” which was published in Japanese in *Gender History*, no.5 (2009), pp.107–114.