

11-1-2013

Elisabeth Croll. *Feminism and Socialism in China*. London, Henley, and Boston: New York: Routledge, 2011.

Lin Jiao

SOAS, University of London, lin_jiao@soas.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jiao, Lin (2013) "Elisabeth Croll. *Feminism and Socialism in China*. London, Henley, and Boston: New York: Routledge, 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 22.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1184

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol5/iss1/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Elisabeth Croll. *Feminism and Socialism in China*. London, Henley, and Boston: New York: Routledge, 2011.

The year 2013 marked the 35th anniversary of Elisabeth Croll's ground-breaking book *Feminism and Socialism in China*. Although more than three decades have elapsed since its publication, the fundamental questions explored in her book are still being asked and examined in current studies of Chinese women's history, such as (1) how the status of women in China has changed over the last century, (2) whether there is currently an independent feminist movement in China, (3) how the feminist movement fits into broader contexts, such as the national revival and socialist movements, (4) the extent to which the women's movement has benefited from revolutions and reforms and the extent to which it has been confined or constrained by them, (4) how the women's movement redefined women's roles in private and public spheres, and, finally, (5) how successfully it did so.

Influenced by the second wave of feminist movement in Europe and North America, *Feminism and Socialism in China* was the first comprehensive scholarship of the Chinese feminist movement published in English in the Western academic world. When Croll penned her book in 1978, the contemporaneous understanding of the Chinese feminist movement was very much focused on class-analysis, and particularly on rural women and urban working class women, who were portrayed as active participants in the socialist movement in the PRC narratives. In contrast to this, Croll depicted the Chinese feminist movement as occurring broadly within a nationalist and socialist context, which she examined from the late 19th century to the time of the Cultural Revolution¹ by analyzing various materials including Western testimonies, classical Chinese documents, memoirs, periodicals, and interviews. In this way, Croll's work marked a clear departure from other scholarly works on the topic at the time.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 constitute the most exciting part of the book, which examines the tension among feminism, nationalism, and socialism. Although the title of the book is *Feminism and Socialism in China*, chapter 5 actually focuses on the complex relationship between feminism and *nationalism* in China. Early feminists pursued women's rights in every aspect of their lives, particularly those associated with financial stability, education, right of vote, personal well-being, and freedom of love and marriage. At first, nationalism was often used to justify women's objectives with respect to these pursuits. However, feminist claims inevitably challenged the privileges of men and sometimes conflicted with China's nationalist scheme; as such, eventually, hostility against feminism exploded. The Guomindang (often translated as "Chinese National Party") even suppressed feminist movement by brutal violence. After the split of Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), women under the Guomindang government control² were encouraged not to pursue their political roles but rather their "personal development" (Chapter 6). Under the CCP, women were encouraged to gain economic independence, though the party regarded national unity as more important than women's issues and, therefore, opted not to "rock the boat" too heavily in terms of supporting feminist initiatives (Chapter 7). Ultimately, both the Guomindang and the CCP attempted to win women's support, but neither party would place feminism above nationalism or support it as an independent movement apart from national revival.

¹ The Cultural Revolution was a social-political movement that took place in the People's Republic of China from 1966 to 1976. Set into motion by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, its stated goal was to enforce communism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional, and feudal elements from Chinese society and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. The revolution marked the return of Mao Zedong to a position of power after the failed Great Leap Forward.

² After Guomindang's persecution of CCP in 1927, China was divided into two areas, one ruled by the Guomindang government which initially occupied the majority of China's territories including cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing and Chongqing, and the other by the CCP which occupied parts of Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia provinces.

Recent historiography has challenged some of Croll's assumptions and arguments. In Chapter 2, Croll demonstrates that traditional Chinese women had long been suppressed economically and physically. Some of the sources in this chapter need further critical analysis, however; for example, Croll cites doctrines from the *Book of Rites* and the *Classic for Girls*, without questioning the extent to which women actually followed such doctrines in their daily lives. Current studies have challenged this argument of Croll's by emphasizing women's agency. In the real world, critics say, there are always possibilities for flexibility and negotiation.

Another weakness of the book is that it was written at a time when not only was the availability of sources more limited than it is today but also when materials pertaining to communist China may have been more broadly convincing to Western ears, given the political context of the Cold War. Croll's writing of the communist period was almost a eulogy of feminist achievement, as the interviews she conducted and periodical materials she reviewed may not have been interpreted sufficiently skeptically. Croll may have too easily accepted the propagandized messages appearing in available materials regarding the feminist movement. For instance, many stories were directly cited from an official women's magazine, *Zhongguo funü*, without questioning the nature and the reliability of the materials. Additionally of concern is the nature of the interviews that Croll conducted. Croll briefly mentions in her acknowledgement that the interviews were carried out during a short visit to China in 1973. However, she failed to provide any further information of the circumstances of the interviews such as how she reached out to the interviewees, whether the interviews were monitored by any authorities, and whether there were any restricted topics of conversation.

Overall, Croll was optimistic about the socialist feminist movement in China. Croll felt particularly thrilled when, during the anti-Confucian and anti-Lin Biao campaigns, both urban and rural women had the opportunities to reflect on the Confucian ideology that had oppressed women for so long. During these campaigns, women's issues were formally discussed, and these discussions were placed in the center of people's everyday lives. New notions of gender and gender roles were implemented, though often with resistance. Memoirs written during the Cultural Revolution proved that in many girls growing up in the Mao era, a gender-equal belief was cultivated, and many women strived for both personal and social equality with men during that time. Despite her enthusiasm for the progress feminism made, however, Croll also voiced some concern regarding women's roles during the Communist period. For example, women were discouraged from discussing their dilemmas; their domestic work was also seldom acknowledged or discussed, requiring women to balance their public and private roles in a way that was not required of men, leading women to bear a double burden. This, Croll believed, hampered the possibility of ultimate change for women.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the launch of the subsequent Reform and Opening up enacted by Deng Xiaoping in 1978,³ the feminist movement was ultimately marginalized. Although the Women's Federation still existed, and the policy of gender equality still existed on paper, the nationwide feminist campaign lost its momentum due to the shift in the political scene, when women became more associated to consumption rather than production. Previously enthusiastic women's study groups and women's solidary groups ceased their activities. Ironically, the Cultural Revolution, although energetically supported at the time by Maoists and Mao's "Red Guards," was ultimately reckoned as a great tragedy in China for millions lost their lives,⁴ and as such, the achievements of the feminist movement (which had

³ After regaining his power in the central government, supported by other reformists, Deng Xiaoping initiated a Reform and Opening up policy in China in 1978, aiming to restore the social, political and economical orders, by political reform and adapting a market economy.

⁴ During the Cultural Revolution, dissenting voices met with violence and persecution, and thousands of individuals were sent to labor or detention camps or killed for appearing disloyal to Mao. Deng Xianoping described the revolution as a "catastrophe," a perspective that is now widely shared, for which he claimed Mao bore chief responsibility. However, the period in history also

made great strides and enjoyed broad popularity during an otherwise politically oppressive period of time) were neglected and sometimes criticized, having become unfavorably associated with the Maoist regime. Unfortunately, this meant that many steps that had been taken in terms of women's equality and progress were "reversed" with the advent of new political leadership. Women's biological differences and reproductive roles were once again emphasized. Guidebooks of femininity flooded the book market, claiming that the biological differences of men and women were essential to women's social and familial roles. New norms of the ideal woman, mother, and wife emerged. Even more disappointingly, the women's movement was retrospectively considered to have "gone too far." The heroines of the Mao era, such as the Iron Girl suddenly represented a lack of femininity and, it was then proclaimed, such role models only increased the likelihood that women would ultimately be "physically harmed" by their competition with men. Feminists were portrayed as aggressive and ungentle and were said to be women who "didn't care" about being women or their femininity. Women's concerns regarding social issues declined even more severely in the 1990's. In Lisa Rofel's anthropological work, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* published in 2007, she explained that young urban Chinese women became more concerned about their personal successes, their ability to consume material goods, and their consumerist lifestyles than with enacting political change. Indifferent to feminism or any other social issues, they in this way distinguished themselves from their mothers' generation, a generation that had sought to serve all women by changing public perception of gender and gender roles.

At the current time, the historical pendulum seems to have swung back to the Guomindang era, a period during which feminist leaders such as Song Meiling encouraged women to pursue an education and personal success rather than political rights. Thus, thirty-five years after the initial publication of Croll's work, it is hard to comment on the extent to which the status of women in China has improved since the late 1970's. Current issues such as infanticide of female babies, gender discrimination in the job market, and sexual and domestic violence against girls and women have all forced Chinese women to once again reconsider what they have gained from a century's worth of revolution and reform. They may ask themselves what good the feminist movement achieved (despite having occurred during the notorious Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution). They might wonder why the nationwide feminist movement appears to have ceased and why the word "feminism" has become a stigmatized word among ordinary women, cultural elites, and in the popular press. The answers to these questions (raised in and inspired by this book) still remain open to more thorough academic discussion.

Croll's book (particularly the chapters on the Republican period) provides a nice entrance to undergraduate students who wish to get a broad idea of women's history in modern China. The chapters on Communist China are more problematic in terms of chronology, as Croll seemed to regard the year of 1973 as the end of Cultural Revolution, while the official record would mark the year 1976 instead. Overall, *Feminism and Socialism* is still inspiring to current studies of gender issues in China, even if the fundamental questions the author raised in this book cannot be fully resolved at this time.

Lin Jiao
SOAS, University of London
lin_jiao@soas.ac.uk