

# Modern Women in China and Japan: Gender, Feminism and Global Modernity between the Wars

*At the dawn of the 1930s a newempowered image of the female was taking root in popular culture in the West, also challenging the Chinese and Japanese historical norm of the woman as homemaker or geisha in the East. Through a focus on the writings of the Western women who engaged with the Far East, this book reveals the complex redefining of the self taking place in a time of political and economic upheaval. An appealing read for those interested in gender, cultural exchange and cultural borrowing, says **Valentina Boretti**.*



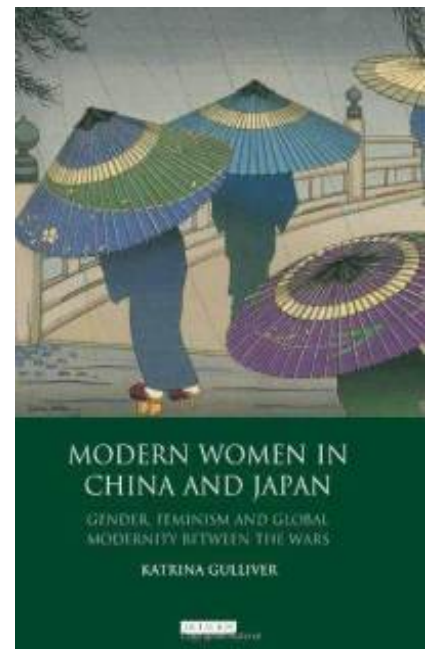
**Modern Women in China and Japan: Gender, Feminism and Global Modernity Between the Wars. Katrina Gulliver. I.B. Tauris. 2012. 190 pages.**

## Find this book:

How and from which vantage point does one define modernity? Cultural historian (and [most influential historian](#) on Twitter) [Katrina Gulliver](#) looks at how six expatriate and local women in China and Japan between the wars perceived, expressed and prescribed the state of being, becoming or acting modern, on a private and public plane. Her work is thus located within the growing body of scholarship that maps the multifaceted character of gendered modernities – and the significance of cultural encounters.

Gulliver focuses on the Modern Woman, an icon of “new” femininity whose disputed and varying defined characteristics included education, independence, public-mindedness for the sake of the nation, and whose non-wholesome other was sometimes constructed as the careless, self-indulgent and wasteful female. In order to detect whether the Modern Woman was culturally specific or transnational (p. 1), and to explore the “internationalism of interwar feminist discourse” (p. 2), she succinctly examines the life and work of writers and artists who crossed geographical or metaphorical boundaries while at the same time producing and disseminating knowledge, as they were, or felt, part of a (mainly textual) international community. In so doing they defined their identity, crafting and enacting their oft-ambivalent rendition of femininity, both in relation to the Modern Woman trope and against the backdrop of an-Other, namely “modern” or “traditional” *foreign* womanhood, be it East Asian or Euro-American.

Encounter, mediation, ambivalence, self-definition and performance are indeed among the key themes highlighted in Gulliver’s description of her subjects. If American intelligence officer Caroline Bache McMahon was, as an unmarried independent female working in Japan, a “successful” incarnation of the Modern Woman and an insightful observer of Japanese womanhood, British novelist and suffragette Stella Benson, whom Gulliver terms an “observant *flâneuse*” (p. 56), struggled with her own contradictions and expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of progress that women had made, which she noted in China too. Instead, Japanese writer Uno Chiyo literally embodied her own peculiar version of Modern Woman – or rather Women – through the effective performance of a multiplicity of roles, re-creating and exposing her public and private personae.



Likewise, Japan-born American woodblock print artist and poet [Lilian May Miller](#) skilfully employed her “foreignness” to transgress boundaries when in Japan – but she performed masculinity as well as (selectively appropriated) Japanese-ness for her American audience. She thus crafted herself as a bridge person, and was exoticised. As Gulliver all too briefly but perceptively points out (p. 121), Miller was constructed as not having spoken English as a small child, which reminds one of tales of children raised in the wilderness. The same construct was used by American writer Pearl Buck. Raised in China, she drew on her professed cultural bilingualism to position herself as the ultimate mediator between China and America. And from her carefully fashioned liminal standpoint, she expounded her ambivalent prescriptions: if foreign condescension towards the supposedly sorry state of Chinese women was misguided, for America was no perfect model, new Chinese femininity should consist of a blend of old and new attitudes. Ambivalence was also felt by Chinese first female university professor Sophia Chen Zen, who combined her American higher education with a refusal of outright westernisation. Rather active in communicating her own vision of past and present Chinese femininity to foreigners, Chen Zen enacted and advocated thoughtful renewal: the ideal new Chinese woman should preserve attributes of the pre-modern “talented women”, and carefully “enrich and enlarge that inheritance” (p. 12) with modern elements.

Throughout the book, Gulliver convincingly highlights the many-sided character and tensions of her subjects’ femininity, thus showing that there exist(ed) in fact no one Modern Woman, like – one adds – there exists no one monolithic modernity. Moving from the premise that women must be seen “not as signifiers of modernity but as authors of it” (p. 9), she effectively albeit somewhat sketchily depicts her subjects’ engagement with change – not as passive recipients, but as independent agents who appropriated and produced a discourse. The performative and relational aspects of their “modern womanhood” are rather well explored, illustrating a process of active if ambivalent self-fashioning, for themselves and for an audience, often against an “exotic” background. Indeed, exoticisation and cultural encounter elicit some of Gulliver’s most perceptive insights such as, for instance, those on the selfishness and condescension that may lie behind the desire to preserve “the East” unspoiled and unchanged (pp. 100, 123), or her comments on Miller’s “exoticism” and performative blurring of boundaries (pp. 121, 129-130).

Despite the presence of a few generalizations (e.g. the “subjection of women” in Chinese culture, p. 38), this work is in fact quite rich in noteworthy points that unfortunately do not emerge as forcefully as they deserve to. This may be due to a certain imbalance whereby too much space is devoted to providing background information and extensively quoting the doubtless relevant works of the book’s subjects, and too little is dedicated to critically engaging with them. Gulliver states in the introduction that in all the cases under analysis the “role of expatriation is key”: they performed a role “significantly away from cultural reinforcement of their home culture”, so that “in the absence of other models, the role of the self becomes the defining, normative form” (p. 1). The role of the self may well have been the defining and normative form, but that self – though expatriate – had most likely internalised at least some home reinforcements. And, as Gulliver herself shows, the interplay between norms and reactions, familiar and foreign, past and present, is among the most captivating aspects of these women’s performances and views. Also, such statements scarcely apply to Uno Chiyo, who was not educated abroad and performed her roles surrounded by (and against) Japanese cultural norms – which by no means diminishes her relevance. In fact, one wishes the discussion of her case were complemented by the mention of some similarly non-expatriate Chinese “modern women”: consulting Wang Zheng’s *Women in the Chinese enlightenment* might have been valuable to that effect.

These shortcomings aside, this book does make an appealing read for those interested in gender, cultural exchange and cultural borrowing, especially in that its counterpoint of Euro-American and East Asian voices underlines how no one could claim a copyright on the Modern Woman.

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