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Twentieth-Century China, Volume 43, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 24–44
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2018.0002>



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THE WOMAN QUESTION AND THE AGRARIAN QUESTION: THE FEMINIST AND POLITICAL-ECONOMIC WRITINGS OF WU JUENONG, 1921–1927

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This article explores connections between two sets of writings by the twentieth-century Chinese intellectual Wu Juenong (1897–1989). One was devoted to the “woman question” (*funü wenti*); the other focused on the “agrarian question” (*nongmin wenti*) of China. During the 1920s, Wu wrote or translated over 50 articles related to feminism, but he published them under the pseudonym “Y.D.” This shared identity has only recently been discovered through evidentiary research, and this article explores how these two major research interests were connected in conceptual and theoretical terms. Wu’s intellectual trajectory highlights that an early interest in ostensibly cultural gender questions could have been generative of later concerns with political economy. The pivot between the two debates was his larger concern with “social organization” and the feminist critique of reification. His story provides a crucial reminder of the shared historical origins of the “woman” and “agrarian” questions in modern and contemporary China.

KEYWORDS: agrarian question, feminism, intellectual history, *Ladies' Journal*, woman question, Wu Juenong, Y.D.

This article explores connections between two sets of writings by the same author, the twentieth-century Chinese intellectual Wu Juenong (吳覺農 1897–1989; Figure 1). While one set of works was devoted to the “woman question” (婦女問題 *funü wenti*), the other focused on the “agrarian question” (農民問題 *nongmin wenti*) of China.¹ These two topics attracted serious intellectual debate around the world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and China was no exception,

1 *Nongmin wenti* could easily be translated as “the peasant question,” but I believe Wu Juenong was consciously patterning his analysis after Lenin’s “The Agrarian Question and the ‘Critics of Marx’” (1901) and Karl Kautsky’s *Die Agrarfrage* (1899), both of which were translated as “agrarian question” in English.

as social critics there increasingly placed at the center of their political analyses the traditionally marginalized figures of the Chinese woman and the Chinese peasant.² Existing historical scholarship has expertly analyzed the debates that revolved around these two questions, outlining how each was connected to an overarching fixation on modernization and nationalism, but historians have rarely considered the two in combination.³ As the rare figure who actively participated in both debates, the intellectual trajectory of Wu Juenong suggests the value of considering them laterally, that is, of trying to understand how the woman and agrarian questions developed as parallel and overlapping discourses on the social relations animating everyday life in China during the May Fourth era.

This article builds on recent evidentiary scholarship by Maeyama Kanako, a Japan-based historian of Chinese feminism who has established that the true identity of Y.D., the author of 1920s feminist articles, was in fact the agrarian economist Wu Juenong. The concrete case of Wu highlights that an early interest in purportedly “cultural” gender questions was generative for later concerns about political economy—even though the latter eventually led Wu to subordinate the woman question to the cause of nationalist revolution.⁴ For Wu, the pivot between the two debates was his larger concern with “social organization” (社會組織 *shehui zuzhi*), namely, a broad critique of how women and workers were “commodified” by the combination of traditional culture and industrial capitalism. His specific trajectory from cultural feminism to agrarian economics may prove useful for future comparison with writers who contemplated the same set of social problems at the time, both in China and worldwide.

Wu Rongtang (吳榮堂) was born in Shangyu, Zhejiang in 1897, and he adopted the pen name Juenong (literally, “awakening the peasant”) as a young adult while studying agricultural economics in Japan.⁵ He would spend the remaining six decades of his life pursuing agronomy, particularly the economics of tea, and it is as Wu Juenong that

2 Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women 1900–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sam Moyo, Praveen Jha, and Paris Yeros, “The Classical Agrarian Question: Myth, Reality and Relevance Today,” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 2, no. 1 (2013): 93–119; Sanjay Seth, “Nationalism, Modernity, and the ‘Woman Question’ in India and China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 273–98.

3 Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Christina K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Xiaorong Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant, 1900–1949* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

4 Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 213–16; Gail Hershatler, “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (November 2004): 1028–34; Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 105–11.

5 John Fitzgerald has observed that, within the “culture of the period,” the term “awakening” (*juexing*, *juewu*) was “one of the most common expressions” in artistic, scholarly, and political prose. The trend originated with the New Culture movement (ca. 1915–1919), around the time that Wu Juenong decided to change his own name. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3–4. On Wu’s decision to choose the character *nong*, see Wang Xufeng, *Cha zhe sheng: Wu Juenong zhuan* [Saint of tea: a biography of Wu Juenong] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2003), 15.



Figure 1. A photograph of Wu Juenong taken in the 1920s. Courtesy of Ning Wu.

he has been remembered for his lifework. In the 1920s, however, he lived an intellectual double life. During this time, he adopted the pseudonym “Y.D.” for a series of over 40 articles concerning female chastity, erotic love (戀愛 *lianai*),⁶ widow remarriage, divorce, and motherhood. Wang Zheng has described such topics as “liberal cultural” ones, concerned with the “cultural values” of “male-centeredness,” as opposed to more explicitly political writings on socialist revolution.⁷ In tackling such topics, Wu joined a chorus of writers who debated the woman question within the major feminist journals of the day, publications such as *Modern Woman* (現代婦女 *Xiandai funü*), *Women’s Criticism* (婦女評論 *Funü pinglun*), and *Ladies’ Journal* (婦女雜誌 *Funü zazhi*). Until recently,

6 Barlow translates *lianai* as “erotic passion” or “erotic love.” Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 112.

7 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 104.

Wu's feminist works were not attributed to him, as most scholars—Chinese, Japanese, and American—assumed Wu and Y.D. were two different people. And when scholars *have* been aware of the connection, they have treated the woman question as a footnote to his agrarian research, or vice versa.⁸ This paper is a preliminary attempt at an analysis that brings the two questions into dialogue.

The debates over the woman and agrarian questions took shape during an era, roughly the decade spanning 1915 to 1925, of “unparalleled intellectual exploration” in twentieth-century China.⁹ In this window between the collapse of the Qing Empire (1644–1911) and the escalating rivalry between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, writers publicly experimented with a variety of political positions, from radical to liberal to conservative, voiced through new magazines and organizations dedicated to the most pressing social issues of the day. Though the problems of gender inequality and rural poverty had garnered attention during the last decades of the Qing, a distinct, modern discourse on the woman question first arose in the journal *New Youth* (新青年 *Xin qingnian*) in 1917; debates over the agrarian question, revolving around topics such as poverty relief, education, and political organization, followed five years later in *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌 *Dongfang zazhi*).¹⁰ By the mid-1920s, both “questions” had attracted enough interest to support several journals, and the Nationalist Party and Communist Party attempted to formally mobilize women and peasants for their political aims. Historians have mostly treated these two bodies of activism separately, but a cross-inspection of existing literature reveals striking parallels.

First, writers on both topics shared a trajectory from examining oppression to promoting activism, and they adopted diverse and overlapping political positions.¹¹ Among those devoted to the agrarian question, Liang Shuming (梁漱溟 1893–1988), for instance, famously espoused a traditionalist faith in Confucian culture, Yan Yangchu (晏陽初 1890–1990; also known as James Yen) promoted rural reconstruction as a project of liberal outreach, the Nationalists championed economic development, and the Communists pursued peasant revolution.¹² Feminist writers, in the same period, could be distinguished as cultural liberals or socialists.¹³

Second, both debates have been subsumed into the broader historical trajectory of Chinese nationalism. That is, historians of each movement have noted the disjuncture of subject position between authors and their objects of analysis—early feminist

8 For instance, Wang Xufeng, *Cha zhe sheng*, 32–45; Wu Juenong xuanji Bianji zu [Selected works of Wu Juenong Editorial Team], “Dai qianyan” [Preface], in Wu Juenong, *Wu Juenong xuanji* [Selected works of Wu Juenong] (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu chubanshe, 1987), 2.

9 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 3.

10 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 48; Wu Juenong, “Zhongguo de nongmin wenti” [The agrarian question of China], *Dongfang zazhi* 19, no. 16 (1922): 2–20; Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 19–72.

11 Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 69; Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 79.

12 Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-Ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

13 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 104.

critics were almost always men, and writers on the agrarian question were mostly urban intelligentsia—and the typical explanation has been that these male, urban writers turned their attention to women and the countryside precisely because a concern for marginalized groups was central to the project of modern nation building. At the individual level, writers, by criticizing traditional Confucian culture for oppressing women and peasants, sought to project their own sense of alienation and frustration, while, paradoxically, promoting themselves as enlightened individuals.¹⁴

Collectively, any large-scale project to build a new China could only succeed by integrating the women and peasantry, who represented the majority of the populace.¹⁵ Thus, it was “the Chinese nation, rather than the Chinese peasantry,” wrote Xiaorong Han, that was “the starting point and the end all of the intellectuals’ peasant movements in China during the first half of the twentieth century.”¹⁶ More concisely, Christina Gilmartin stated that “modern feminism in China was a handmaiden of nationalism.”¹⁷

A combined reading of Wu Juenong’s works during the 1920s, however, yields insights that complicate this nationalist interpretation. First, even if the debates on both the woman question and the agrarian question were ultimately subordinated to the *goal* of nationalist revolution, Wu’s writings underscore that, in terms of content and inspiration, they initially depended on global ideas and were experimental in their analyses, as they discovered debates about feminism and capitalism that had been brewing for decades among Euro-American and Japanese thinkers. In the case of Wu, he stumbled upon both debates while studying in Japan from 1918 to 1921, and he was as much inspired by Swedish feminist Ellen Key (1849–1926) and Japanese feminist Yamakawa Kikue (山川菊栄 1890–1980) as he was by studies of the Russian Narodniks. Nationalism and internationalism are of course not mutually exclusive, but it is important to note that, in Wu’s early writings, he sought to situate the women and peasantry of China *within* a global context, rather than arguing for Chinese exceptionalism.¹⁸

Second, even though both the Nationalists and the Communists would eventually claim that national and class emancipation came before the emancipation of women, the case of Wu highlights that, historically, the sequence was often the reverse: for many, “liberal cultural” feminism arrived in China first, and socialist ideas from abroad came later. This pattern had precedents, for, as a recent study has shown, “it was Chinese feminism that first translated communist thought [in 1908] . . . and introduced it to China (by way of Japan), not the converse.”¹⁹ Similarly for Wu, the woman question was a generative one. He could pivot between cultural feminism and rural economics because both aimed to confront the same larger phenomenon of what he called “social organization.” In his mind, the problems of widow chastity and sexual morality were not unrelated to the

14 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 59–60; Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 24, 34.

15 Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 1–2.

16 Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 167.

17 Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 21. See also Seth, “Nationalism, Modernity, and the ‘Woman Question’” and Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*.

18 Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 67–71.

19 Rebecca E. Karl, Lydia He Liu, and Dorothy Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 5.

disappearance of the family farm. If the former dealt with the division of labor between men and women within a Confucian worldview, then the latter addressed the division between city and countryside in an aggressively industrializing world market. Feminism imparted to him lessons about the commodification (商品化 *shangpinhua*) of female bodies in traditional China that anticipated his subsequent discourses on the exploitation of peasants and workers endemic to industrial capitalism. In short, he repurposed a cultural critique of traditional Confucian ideology into a materialist critique of modern economics. His trajectory thus strengthens Tani Barlow's claim that "theoretical work on the 'woman question'" was "central to Chinese social theory generally speaking" and not simply limited to the domains of liberal and cultural individualism.²⁰

Within the specific field of feminism in the May Fourth era, the story of Wu Juenong highlights intellectual connections and formations that depart from typical accounts. Years ago, Gilmartin successfully challenged the conventional wisdom that "Marxism and feminism [were] basically incompatible" by demonstrating the profound influence of feminist ideas during the nascent years of the Communist Party.²¹ Nevertheless, she shared with Wang Zheng the notion that feminist writers of the time could be divided between, on the one hand, "liberals" and "culturalists," who focused on analyses of the individual, and, on the other, Communists, who foregrounded social and economic relations.²² Wu Juenong defied both labels, for he was neither a Communist politically—and in fact later worked for the Nationalist government—nor strictly "cultural" and "liberal" in his approach, despite affiliating with writers within that circle. Instead, he consistently interwove analyses of the individual with questions of alienation stemming from the phenomena of "materialism" and "capitalism" on the scale of society. Thus, the value of his story lies not so much in his singular achievements as in the way that it makes strikingly clear how the "cultural" and the "economic" problems of the early twentieth century, which recent historiography has often treated as peripheral to one another, were historically connected in mutually reinforcing ways.

To illustrate my argument, I believe it makes most sense to begin with the historiographical before the historical. In the first section, I introduce the figure of Y.D. and analyze his role within historians' understanding of 1920s Chinese feminism. I then situate Wu Juenong's work on the woman question within his broader intellectual trajectory, emphasizing his connections within the literary world of May Fourth Shanghai and the personal experiences that attracted him to the debates on the woman question. In the second section, I take a closer look at his pseudonymous writings on the woman question by connecting them to his lifework on agrarian economics. Most importantly, he was drawn to feminism's critique of commodification and reification, or, the transformation of human relationships into relationships between things. I conclude with a broader consideration of how his early engagement with feminist thought continued to shape his subsequent work in agrarian political economy.

20 Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 65.

21 Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 15.

22 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 60; Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 215.

Y.D. AND WU JUENONG

Intellectuals in China had begun to foreground the problem of inequality between men and women as early as the turn of the century. These writers were mostly men, such as Jin Tianhe (金天翮 1873–1947), Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao, with notable exceptions such as He-Yin Zhen (何殷震 1884–ca. 1920) and Qiu Jin (秋瑾 1875–1907).²³ The debates picked up steam in the 1920s, as the activity of Shanghai presses and the momentum of the May Fourth movement converged to create an unprecedented level of publishing activity. Essays on the woman question were central to this period, and these theoretical debates, Barlow has argued, would eventually create the foundations for progressive Chinese feminism. In her study, she isolated the two-volume work *Collected Discussions of the Chinese Woman Question* (中國婦女問題討論集 *Zhongguo funü wenti taolunji*; 1929 and 1934) as a “feminist canon” for China.²⁴ The collection contained over 150 articles, translations, and rejoinders revolving around the woman question, originally published in Shanghai. One of the main contributors to this debate was a pseudonymous author who went by the initials “Y.D.” and who, between 1921 and 1927, published over 40 pieces on topics ranging from marriage practices in the US to female suicide in Japan, the majority of which were translations of feminist works by European, American, and Japanese writers. Y.D.’s work has appeared in the scholarly analyses of North American, Chinese, and Japanese researchers, who naturally speculated about Y.D.’s true identity based upon existing theories.²⁵ In recent years, however, Maeyama Kanako, expressed her doubts about the existing candidates, and—after first misidentifying Y.D. in an early article—she followed up with new research connecting Y.D. to Wu Juenong.

Her conclusion rested on two main clues. First, Y.D. mentioned in his articles that he was writing from Japan. Originally, many people reasoned that Y.D. was a writer named Li Rongdi because the Japanese pronunciation of Li's name was *Eidai*, or, under spelling conventions at the time, *Yeidai*. Wu Juenong could also claim the same initials: his birth name was Rongtang, which in Japanese was pronounced *Eidō*, or, *Yeidō*, also yielding Y.D. What differentiated Wu Juenong was the fact that Y.D. claimed to be writing from Makinohara in Shizuoka prefecture, the green tea capital of Japan and the same location where Wu Juenong was studying tea cultivation. Maeyama discovered that although Wu Juenong published almost entirely about agrarian economics in his later lifetime, he did publish a handful of articles on the woman question in the early 1920s on topics that overlapped greatly with Y.D.’s, a fact that supported Maeyama’s hypothesis.²⁶ Ultimately,

23 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*; Karl, Liu, and Ko, *Birth of Chinese Feminism*.

24 Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 74.

25 Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 481; Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 238; Chen Rongli, *Dadao zhi xing: Hu Yuzhi zhuan* [Practicing the great wisdom: a biography of Hu Yuzhi] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2005); Zou Zhenhuan, *20 shiji Shanghai fanyi chuban yu wenhua bianqian* [Translation, publishing, and cultural transformation in twentieth-century Shanghai] (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000); Maeyama Kanako, “Fujo mondai kenkyūkai to ‘Xiandai funü’” [The woman question research group and *Modern Woman*], *Surugadai daigaku ronsō*, no. 32 (2006): 172, 180.

26 Maeyama Kanako, “‘Y.D.’ towa dareka—Nihon no josei mondai wo shokai—ronhyō shita Wu Juenong ni tsuite” [Who is Y.D.? On Wu Juenong, who introduced and commented upon the woman question of Japan], *Chūgoku joseishi kenkyū* 17, no. 2 (2008): 64–88.

evidence for Y.D.'s identity was readily available, if only one knew where to look.²⁷ It was simply the case that scholars of Chinese feminism and agrarian economics had never sought to place Y.D. and Wu Juenong side by side and interrogate their respective writings.

And why should they have? At first glance, Y.D.'s essays on chastity and love marriage appear to be unrelated to the projects and collaborative networks most often associated with Wu Juenong. Wu's lifelong pursuit was not feminist activism but rather the technocratic activity of commercial development in the tea industry. His political-economic views tended toward Marxist thought, resembling the approach of the left-wing journal *Rural China* (中國農村 *Zhongguo nongcun*), which was edited by his friend, the Comintern agent Chen Han-seng (Chen Hansheng 陳翰笙 1897–2004). Wu, for his part, was not a member of the Communist Party, and in the 1930s he spearheaded the Nationalist government's efforts to reorganize tea production in the rural districts of Anhui, Zhejiang, and Fujian. These projects were part of the National Economic Council (全國經濟委員會 *Quanguo jingji weiyuanhui*)—an initiative of T. V. Soong (Song Ziwen 宋子文 1894–1971)—the most ambitious political-economic project in China prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China.²⁸ In 1949, Wu was appointed joint general manager of the national China Tea Company, the largest in China today, and vice minister of agriculture in the Communist government. He also nurtured friendships with some of the most influential economic thinkers of twentieth-century China, including Chen, Zou Bingwen (鄒秉文 1893–1985), and Ma Yinchu (馬寅初 1882–1982). This basic biographical sketch can be found in Chinese- and Japanese-language biographies, but little effort has been made to analyze the connections between his later achievements in agricultural economics with his endeavors in the 1920s, when he contributed at least 54 pieces on feminism (mostly as Y.D. but also under his own name), far outnumbering his output on agrarian economics at the time.²⁹ Remarkably, Wu's main vocation during these formative intellectual years was not as an economist but as a translator of and commentator on feminist texts. The underlying connections between these two bodies of work become clear only once we explore his winding path through the intellectual world of 1920s Shanghai.

In 1915, when Wu Juenong was only 18 years old, he published his first article in the recently launched *Ladies' Journal*, a publication in which his work would appear over 40 times. Introduced by the Commercial Press in Shanghai that year to a modest readership of 3,000, *Ladies' Journal* would eventually become “the most influential,” with “the widest circulation, the most subscribers, and the longest life of the mainstream women's magazine[s]” in China.³⁰ But the journal underwent several incarnations, and Wu's own trajectory illustrates the difference between its versions before and after May Fourth.

27 In one essay in the 1980s, Wu Juenong recalled his experience from decades earlier translating and writing for *Ladies' Journal*. Wu Juenong, “Wo he Kaiming shudian de guanxi” [My relationship with the Kaiming book company], *Wu Juenong xuanji*, 527.

28 Zanas, *Saving the Nation*, 81–101.

29 Maeyama Kanako, “1920 nendai shotōni okeru Nihon to Chūgoku no josei teiki Kankōbutu: Wu Juenong ga shōkai, sensō shita josei undō kara miru” [Japanese and Chinese publications on the woman question at the start of the 1920s: an examination through Wu Juenong, who introduced and debated the women's movement], *Surugadai daigaku ronsō*, no. 42 (2011): 1–34.

30 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 67.

Initially, *Ladies' Journal* was edited by a man known more for romance stories than for political theory, and it featured practical strategies for lifting up the “poor quality” of Chinese women. Stories covered home economics, health, childcare, and new consumer goods: in short, how women could become good wives and mothers.³¹ Wu Juenong's first two articles conformed to these themes, as one described how to raise honeybees and the other addressed the cultivation of peony flowers.³² These early pieces foreshadowed his lifelong devotion to agricultural science as well as a subsequent career writing for feminist periodicals in the 1920s, but by then both his personal politics and the intellectual mission of *Ladies' Journal* had changed dramatically.

From 1918 to 1921, Wu lived in Shizuoka, Japan, studying tea agriculture, and by his final year overseas he had established the practice of publishing articles on agrarian economics and on feminism under two different names: the former as Wu Juenong and the latter as Y.D. In fact, he began publishing as Y.D. starting in July 1921, one year before he first wrote about the agrarian question for general publications. Wu was childhood friends with Hu Yuzhi (胡愈之 1896–1986), the new editor of *Eastern Miscellany*, which became the most widely circulating Chinese periodical of its day. Through this friendship, Wu published an influential essay for *Eastern Miscellany*, simply titled, “The Agrarian Question of China,”³³ which was perhaps the first usage of the phrase later adopted by the nascent Communist Party. His piece also served as the centerpiece of a special issue devoted to the “agrarian question” worldwide (Figure 2), which Wu himself edited and which was even distributed by a young Mao Zedong in the latter's early work as a Communist activist.³⁴ For the next five years, however, Wu wrote on agrarian topics only sparingly. Instead, the majority of his intellectual production throughout the decade was devoted to feminist debates under the name Y.D.

Once again, Hu Yuzhi provided the critical connection. He introduced Wu Juenong to Zhang Xichen (章錫琛 1889–1969), another Zhejiang native who had just taken over editorial duties at *Ladies' Journal* in 1921, after the Commercial Press began to feel pressure from the antitraditional May Fourth student movements of 1919. As the novelist Mao Dun noted, “*Ladies' Journal*, which had promoted good-wife-and-virtuous-mother-ism for five years, was forced to change with the powerful current of the times.”³⁵ Zhang's appointment by the Commercial Press marked the beginning of the magazine's most theoretically sophisticated, intellectually influential, and commercially successful period, during which it reached a circulation of 10,000. To help with his new responsibilities, Zhang recruited friends Zhou Zuoren (周作人 1885–1967) and Zhou Jianren (周建人 1888–1984), as well as other writers from his hometown of Shaoxing, Zhejiang. Thus, a new network of Zhejiang male authors who debated the woman question installed itself in early twentieth-century Shanghai. Their most visible imprint was the establishment of the

31 Jacqueline Nivard, “Women and the Women's Press: The Case of *The Ladies' Journal* (Funü Zazhi), 1915–1931,” *Republican China* 10, no. 1 (1984): 44.

32 Wu Juenong, “Mifeng siyang fa” [How to raise honey bees], *Funü zazhi* 1, no. 11 (1915); Wu Juenong, “Mudan zaifei fa” [How to grow tree peonies], *Funü zazhi* 4, no. 12 (1918).

33 Wu, “Zhongguo de nongmin wenti.”

34 Wang Xufeng, *Cha zhe sheng*, 33–34.

35 Quoted in Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 79.

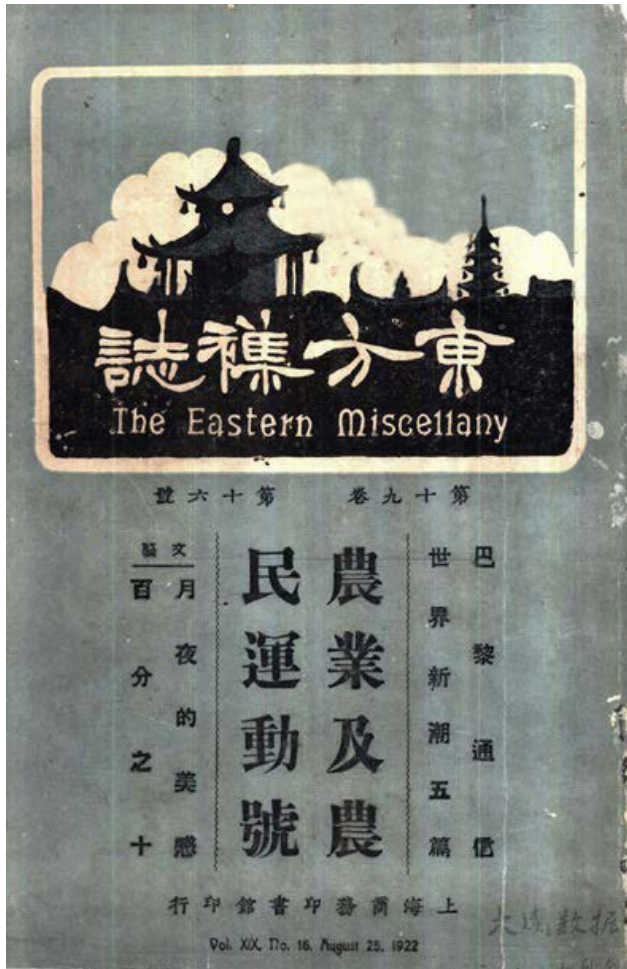


Figure 2. In 1922, Wu Juenong edited and wrote the lead article for a special issue of *Eastern Miscellany* devoted to agriculture and peasant movements, both in China and worldwide. Wu Juenong, ed., “Nongye ji Nongmin yundong hao” [Agriculture and Agrarian movement issue], special issue, *Dongfang zazhi* 19, no. 16 (1922).

“Woman Question Research Group” (婦女問題研究會 *Funü wenti yanjiuhui*). Formed in 1921, almost all of the group’s 17 members (only 3 of whom were women) were from one of two towns in Zhejiang, Shangyu and Shaoxing.³⁶ This second generation of writers for *Ladies’ Journal* replaced practical advice on housekeeping with theoretical and globally oriented discussions on the themes of love, free marriage, divorce, and emancipation. In his second stint writing for the journal, from 1921 to 1927, Wu did not discuss honeybees and peony flowers but rather turned to political topics such as the commodification of women’s bodies under industrial capitalism.

36 Maeyama, “Fujo mondai kenkyūkai to ‘Xiandai funü,’” 171–73.

According to his biography, Wu Juenong also revealed that his attraction to feminism stemmed partly from his misgivings about the traditional male-female relationships that surrounded him in his personal life. He had painful memories of growing up in a large household with parents married through arrangement. Once overseas, he paid particular attention to Japanese writings about modern marriage.³⁷ Wu had earlier agreed to an arranged marriage, but in Tokyo his faith in traditional arrangements eroded. There, he met his future wife, Chen Xuanzhao (陳宣昭 1902–1998), a self-proclaimed “new woman” who, like Wu, had traveled to Japan to study modern industrial methods for producing a valuable east Asian export commodity—in her case, silk.³⁸ With their interests in modernizing the Chinese economy and their internationalist perspective, Wu Juenong and Chen Xuanzhao treated each other as intellectual equals, coauthoring several articles, and their relationship encouraged him to delve further into debates on feminism circulating in Japan.³⁹

Another influential personal experience for Wu was witnessing firsthand how his female family members struggled in the new urban economy of China. In an article for *Ladies' Journal* entitled, “Employment and Women,” Wu, writing as Y.D., explained that women in China were stuck between the traditional family on the one hand and modern industrial capital on the other, ultimately suffering the worst of both worlds. He concluded with the following anecdote:

I have a sister-in-law [阿嫂 *asao*] who was stifled by household duties for about 10 years. Last year, my brother and I brought her to Shanghai, made sure she was taken care of, and introduced her to one of China's most famous tobacco factories. There, we know, workers come to work at six o'clock a.m. and work until ten o'clock p.m. without a break. After only three days, she was already much thinner. She switched jobs to a textile factory where the work days are 12 hours and individuals are expected to work half of their lives. In less than one week I heard she fainted and fell into a coma and only recovered after resting for 10 days.

*From this story, we can see how far the suffering and misery within a capitalist and industrial society is worse than that of the traditional household! Woman comrades, do not fear. We need only make sure we have a fighting spirit, and we will see to it that in the future our sisters will enjoy true happiness.*⁴⁰

Here, Wu Juenong made clear that he understood the problems facing Chinese women as being the same as those of labor and capital. Aside from the professional and personal connections that led him to ponder the woman question, the most intellectually fertile

37 Wang Xufeng, *Cha zhe sheng*, 28.

38 Tea and silk were, by far, the most valuable export commodities in late nineteenth-century China and Japan. In both cases, Japan had surged ahead of China in terms of levels of industrial technique by the twentieth century.

39 Wang Xufeng, *Cha zhe sheng*, 26–31. For comparison, see biographies of other male feminists during this period in Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 34–37.

40 Y.D., “Zhiye yu funü” [Employment and women], *Funü zazhi* 7, no. 11 (1921): 11. Emphasis added.

aspects of Wu Juenong's feminist writings were the *conceptual* links between feminism and political economy. In particular, he paid attention to European feminists' critique of how traditional and modern societies alike objectified women's bodies, a critique that carried over into his policy prescriptions for improving conditions in the Chinese countryside.

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF REIFICATION

Though a lifelong agricultural economist, Wu Juenong's articles on the woman question did not begin from conventional economic premises, such as an analysis of class and income. Rather, they foregrounded the ostensibly personal and bourgeois themes of marriage, love, chastity, and motherhood. As early as 1918, liberal voices such as Hu Shi and Zhou Zuoren had attacked sexual morality as a double standard and an affront to the political ideal of equality, and such cultural themes remained popular into the next decade.⁴¹ Nearly 40% of Wu Juenong's feminist works were translations of works by other writers, many by Japanese thinkers but the majority by the Swedish feminist Ellen Key. Under his different names, Wu Juenong published four translations of Key's works and also translations of other works that featured her thought. Furthermore, Key's ideas helped set the terms of debate for many Japanese feminists of the time, several of whose writings Wu translated. The majority of Wu Juenong's output on the woman question was conceived, directly and indirectly, then, in response to Ellen Key's philosophy.

Ellen Key's thought was introduced into Japanese feminist circles in 1912. Her most famous work, *Love and Marriage* (1903), was first translated by Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) in a 1913 special issue of *Seitō* (青鞥 Bluestocking) magazine dedicated to “the new woman” and “the woman question.” *Seitō* was one of the earliest Japanese journals dedicated to women's issues, and even after it folded in 1916 Hiratsuka and others continued to debate Key's controversial views. Key would today be considered a “difference” feminist who rejected absolute equality between men and women and instead placed sexual difference—the biological distinctions between male and female—at the center of her theories. She pioneered the school of “maternal feminism,” which championed the twin ideals of (1) relationships based on love and (2) the special role of motherhood for women. She also invoked a framework of social Darwinian evolution, but unlike other social evolutionists she spoke about women in general rather than in racial or national terms. For this reason, perhaps, her work had an intuitive appeal for feminist thinkers outside Europe and especially in East Asia.⁴² Translations of her work appeared for the first time in China as early as 1918.⁴³

From today's perspective, Key's idea that women's special talents lay in motherhood appear highly conservative. Although Key was considered radical at the time, her critics then already took umbrage at her suggestion that women should not seek paid employment. Nevertheless, her ideas appealed to social progressives. From a survey of Wu Juenong's

41 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 51–52.

42 Dina Lowy, “Love and Marriage: Ellen Key and Hiratsuka Raicho Explore Alternatives,” *Women's Studies* 33, no. 4 (2004): 361–74.

43 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 49.

work, I believe Wu *did* admire Ellen Key and her humanist criticism of materialism and utilitarianism, which she attributed to industrial capitalism. He also found pleasing the idyllic imagery of motherly love, one admittedly founded on an essentialist view of sexual difference. However, we cannot assume that just because Wu translated Key he therefore fully subscribed to her beliefs. To the extent that Wu Juenong borrowed Key's opposition between materialism and maternalism, he also supplemented it with an analytic framework more sensitive to questions of *social* power, and specifically of capital and labor.

One of Wu Juenong's most illuminating essays during the 1920s was a brief comment, published under the name Y.D., for the journal *Modern Woman*. In this short reply, he rebuked an author who had been critical of "proletarian feminism." In order to do so, he reviewed the four basic feminist positions within China at the time: the "philanthropic" (慈善事業 *cishan shiye*), the "politically participatory" (參政 *canzheng*), the "proletarian" (第四階級 *disi jieji*; literally, "the fourth estate"), and the "maternalist" (母權運動 *muquan yundong*; literally "mothers' rights"), represented by Ellen Key. Wu sided with the proletarian camp, but he also praised Key:

Ellen Key's thought is both pure and lofty; she truly is the world's number one theorist of the female sex [女性 *nüxing*]. However, in today's world, it can be said that her "maternalist movement" is only a theory and cannot be realized at this time. I once had a long discussion about these issues with the prominent Japanese feminist socialist Yamakawa Kikue. She told me: "I greatly admire Ellen Key's ideas, but in a world where socialism has not been achieved, her ideas are too abstract and empty [空論 *konglun*]." I agreed with her. Thus, I will conclude that the proletarian feminist movement is the path for the "human" question of liberating women, and it is also the path forward for the maternalist movement.⁴⁴

Wu Juenong reasoned that socioeconomic questions came before all others related to inequality. For instance, in reply to philanthropic feminism, Wu argued that philanthropy was merely the result of "begging the capitalist classes, whose riches come from the accumulated surplus value of the laboring classes, to let a little bit of their wealth trickle down [水膏藥式去 *shuigaoyaoshi qu*] to the poor masses." Philanthropy was a result of capitalist exploitation, not a solution to it. Wu then argued that each of the purportedly personal and cultural issues that concerned feminists, such as the hypocrisy of sexual morality, could be resolved only after eliminating the social problem of scarcity:

If you look at the world today, who knows how many millions of boys and girls [*nannü*] cannot marry due to economic pressures? Who knows how many millions remain single all their lives due to economic relationships? Who knows how many millions of couples impacted by economics become homeless and wandering?

44 Y.D., "Lun disi jieji de funü yundong zhi Xi Ming xiansheng" [On the proletarian women movement: a reply to Mr. Xi Ming], *Xiandai funü* 7, no. 11 (1922): 2.

Thus, until we first resolve economic questions, we cannot really discuss the question of sex.⁴⁵

Wu Juenong concluded with the politically participatory faction. This movement was spearheaded by Zhang Xichen, and it consisted primarily of a liberal suffragist agenda, such as constitutional rights for women, greater educational and career opportunities, and a prohibition on footbinding and female slavery.⁴⁶ In Wu's characterization, the politically participatory faction sought to use "political means to reform unequal laws and a harmful system."

In my opinion, reforming laws and the political system isn't very difficult. What is really worth focusing on is whether or not the majority of women have enough real power to realize this new system, whether they have enough knowledge to participate in political movements. Otherwise, even if there are several seats for women in the legislative assembly, and even if there are several female bureaucrats in government, their power will remain minuscule as before. The results will only affect a small portion of women. All we will see are little misses and madams [小姐太太 *xiaojie taitai*]⁴⁷ becoming female capitalists, female gentry, and female bureaucrats! For the proletariat, there will still be no relief. As far as the corrupt and dirty atmosphere of our political world, it truly will not tolerate [new women]. I speculate that clear-minded women, once they enter into the thick of politics, will be like "a white flag placed inside a jar of dye" and will definitely "get mixed in with the filth."⁴⁸

But whereas this short piece suggested that, for Wu Juenong, economic and women's issues could be separated and ranked in order of importance, his more rigorous writings showed that he also saw overlap and parallels between the two. Both feminism and socialism offered criticisms of social objectification, the treatment of humans as passive objects to be used for others' gain. In the passage above, Wu cited his conversation with socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue, whose work he had translated the previous year.⁴⁹ Wu's views were also shaped by another Japanese author, one of whose lectures he had translated about the same time: Oyama Ikuo (大山 郁夫 1880–1955), activist leader of the Labor-Farmer Alliance (*Rō-nōha*). In the piece, delivered before an association of Chinese students in Japan and titled "The Commonalities between the Woman Question and the Labor Question," Ōyama argued that the systems of social oppression facing women and workers shared the process of commodification:

45 Y.D., "Lun disi jieji de funü yundong," 1.

46 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 99–102.

47 *Taitai*, which normally means "wife" or "Mrs.," assumed a negative connotation during the 1920s. It implied dependency, submission, passivity, and consumerism, all traits antithetical to the "new woman" subject of feminism. Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 20.

48 Y.D., "Lun disi jieji de funü yundong," 2.

49 Yamakawa Kikue, "Laodong funü de jiefang" [Liberation of working women], trans. Y.D., *Funü pinglun*, no. 21 (1921).

The labor movement arose because with the development of industrialization laborers became subject to a type of commodification. Thus, they sought to shatter [打破 *dapo*] this commodification and restore their former social nature [人間性 *renjian xing*]. As for the women's movement, it is the same. First, the movement seeks to shatter old morality and its commodification of women. For instance, the marriage of women is a lot like the selling of their bodies.⁵⁰

Ōyama then provided a brief, Engels-inspired history of how the early rise of the private property system had led men to treat women themselves as property. "In every country," he wrote, "we see the history of 'marriage through plunder' being replaced by 'marriage through buying and selling.' This is the expression of women's commodification." He concluded by arguing that the real problem facing women was not sexual difference or moral inferiority but rather "social organization," or, the treatment of some classes or groups as objects to be bought and sold by others. Concerning "the commodification of labor and the commodification of women," he wrote that "both their origins and the suffering they cause are completely identical." Thus, the women's movement was a part of the larger socialist movement. "The commodification of women is a result of the system of private property," Ōyama wrote. "Once the labor question is truly resolved, then the woman question will resolve itself."⁵¹ This was the same position voiced by Wu Juenong when he wrote, as quoted above, that "until we first resolve economic questions, we cannot really discuss the question of sex."

However, though Yamakawa and Ōyama criticized those strands of feminism that ignored the role of "social organization," both also admired elements of Key's thought. Key's ideas were hotly debated in Japan at the time precisely because her observations about modern materialism resonated with the experiences of those living in economic centers such as Tokyo and Osaka, and the same could be said for writers now discovering her work while living in bustling Shanghai. Specifically, Ōyama's claim that women and workers were both subject to the same phenomenon of "commodification" also regularly appeared in Wu Juenong's translations and exegeses of Key. In an essay titled, "Ellen Key's Maternalist Movement," Wu explained,

Ellen Key is an advocate of "spirituality" [精神主義 *jingshen zhuyi*], and she opposes the excessive development of "materialism" [物質主義 *wuzhi zhuyi*] and "utilitarianism" [功利主義 *gongli zhuyi*]. She says that "since the nineteenth century, all people have come under the control [支配 *zhipei*] of materialistic trade [物質上的貨殖 *wuzhishang de huozhi*]. The power, reputation, and glamor of material life has become a sort of heavenly god [天國之神 *tianguo zhi shen*]. Thus, women also place material gain as the highest human value; this is not a surprise! Thus, "mother care" [母的注意 *mu de zhuyi*] is now seen as unimportant, and people believe that they can gain more profit [利 *li*] by giving up their children to

50 Ōyama Ikuo, "Funü wenti yu laodong wenti de gongtongdian" [Commonalities between the woman question and the labor question], trans. Y.D., *Funü zazhi* 7, no. 12 (1921): 8–10.

51 Ōyama, "Funü wenti yu laodong wenti de gongtongdian," 10.

specialized caretakers and then seeking outside jobs. In reality, this is extremely uncivilized. This is being confused and mystified by materialism.”⁵²

Though Key would have agreed with Ōyama’s critique of “commodification,” she chose to use language that focused on the general phenomenon of reification, or, the transformation of dynamic social relationships “between men [and women]” into “a relation between things.”⁵³ As a putatively transhistorical category, reification could accommodate Ōyama’s description of commodification under industrial capitalism, a process dating back to the nineteenth century, as well as the ancient treatment of women in traditional, precapitalist societies, Key’s focus.⁵⁴ In this interpretation, Ōyama’s “commodification” of workers’ bodies was only the most recent manifestation of a long history of reification, which originated in the treatment of women by patriarchal culture. A modern working woman who views men as a “mere means to have children” is then no different from men who “for thousands of years viewed women as mere organs for reproduction [生殖機關 *shengzhi jiguan*],” Wu summarized. “This has become a situation of revenge.”⁵⁵

In another series of essays, focused on the theme of chastity, Wu Juenong again invoked the idea that different social systems have treated women as things to be bought and sold. He translated an essay from the pragmatist philosopher Hoashi Riichirō (帆足理一郎), who argued that old views on chastity were methods to keep women subordinated as mere “things” or “objects” (物品 *wupin*) or “slaves” (奴隸 *nuli*) to men.⁵⁶ And in another essay, titled “Modern Views on Chastity,” Wu wrote,

Since the start of history, our country has viewed women as men’s property [所有物 *suoyou wu*], and so-called “chastity” is a one-sided practice to tie down women.... So-called women are merely the organs of reproduction within the family clan system.... [Women] are seen as an “accessory” [附屬品 *fushu pin*] to the family system, the sexual plaything [性的玩弄品 *xing de wannongpin*] of a male-dominated autocracy. So-called chastity is a shackle that men place on women, but it has no hint of human dignity [人格 *ren 'ge*].⁵⁷

52 Wu Juenong, “Ailunkai de muqun yundong lun” [On Ellen Key’s maternalist movement], *Funü zazhi* 9, no. 1 (1923): 76–77.

53 Karl Marx, quoted in Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1923), in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 86.

54 Whether reification was a specifically modern or a transhistorical phenomenon is a question that has attracted some debate. For György Lukács, one could find traces of reification in ancient, precapitalist societies, especially in ancient Greece (Lukács, “Reification and Consciousness, 111). Key would have agreed with this observation, as would Wu Juenong, for he located reifying processes in the traditional Confucian family system. Ōyama and other Marxists, however, would forcefully claim that reification was specific to modern capitalist societies.

55 Wu Juenong, “Ailunkai de muqun yundong lun,” 78.

56 Hoashi Riichirō, “Xin shehui ziyouren de zhencao guan” [Views on chastity by liberated people in a new society], trans. Y.D., *Funü zazhi* 8, no. 12 (1922): 20.

57 Wu Juenong, “Jindai de zhencao guan” [Modern views on chastity], *Funü zazhi* 8, no. 12 (1922): 6. On the translation of *ren 'ge*, or *jinkaku* in Japanese, see Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 114–24. Other translations include “personal being” or “moral quality.”

In sum, Wu Juenong believed the central problem of the “woman question” was *traditional forms* of reification. Conversely, behind his interest in political economy was the problem of an industrial global market that engendered *new and modern forms* of reification. Regarding the woman question, he criticized traditional society’s commodification of women as property. Regarding the agrarian question, he criticized industrial capitalism’s commodification of peasant labor. Both “questions” revolved around the problem of reification, but they located the origins of this dehumanizing practice in distinct sources.

Wu Juenong’s feminist writings did not just borrow from his economic ones, either, as traces of the feminist critique of reification also made their way into his analysis of the countryside. For instance, his famous 1922 essay “The Agrarian Question in China,” which focused on the general immiseration of the Chinese countryside, also devoted several sections to the problems faced specifically by peasant women. He repeated a theme from the feminism debates, that the appropriation of women was common to both the urban capitalist economy and the traditional village. In the city, “capitalists accumulate concubines and slave girls,” and in the “ancient household system” of the village, “fathers and mothers own their sons and daughters as private property [私有 *siyou*], marriage is extremely unfree, and several generations are packed into one house,” he wrote, echoing the essay on chastity that he wrote at about the same time. His immediate solutions also borrowed directly from the feminist debates, for example, setting minimum ages for marriage and establishing a “new-style small household” model that would give young adults independence from older generations.⁵⁸

More conceptually, the critique of commodification that animated Wu Juenong’s feminist writings was also mirrored in every aspect of his vision for agrarian cooperatives. While studying in Japan, he developed an interest in various Japanese and European back-to-the-land movements, and he brought the same analysis to the Chinese context. He honed in on the pressures from “urban industry” that threatened to dispossess peasants and reduce them to the status of urban workers with nothing to sell but their “labor power.” However, Wu was also hopeful that peasants could resist such commodification. Unlike workers who were already divorced from their property, peasants still held onto part of their land, and Wu insisted that they retain this crucial advantage as China attempted to catch up with industrial competitors around the world, who had surpassed China in production of tea, silk, wheat, and cotton. Chinese peasants needed better tools, land management, transportation, pesticides, irrigation, and so forth: in short, a program of economic modernization. Staunchly opposed to the typical path of “capitalist” modernization in Europe and America, however, he insisted that the Chinese peasantry never become divorced from its property and hence never become entirely commodified. By pooling together land, labor, and savings, the cooperative society would enable the peasantry to gain education and improve techniques without sacrificing control.⁵⁹ He extended this logic to his specific analysis of peasant women, too. In that section, he attributed women’s status as “privately owned” commodities to a lack of economic independence and education, and his

58 Wu Juenong, “Zhongguo de nongmin wenti,” 18–19.

59 Wu Juenong, “Zhongguo de nongmin wenti”; Wu Juenong, “Ribei nongmin yundong de qushi” [Trends in the Japanese peasant movement], *Dongfang zazhi* 19, no. 16 (1922): 51–65.

solution was to send out “traveling female instructors”—particularly graduate students of agronomy and sericulture (such as Chen Xuanzhao) and female teachers-in-training—to survey conditions, make plans for rural improvement, deliver lectures on modern methods, and consolidate “organizational unity” (團結 *tuanjie*).⁶⁰ For peasant women, as for the Chinese peasantry as a whole, Wu Juenong’s overarching goal was to undo the process of commodification. Put another way, the cooperative shared a basic resemblance with the vision of maternal feminism championed by Ellen Key, insofar as it offered a model of cooperation that sought to recover human-based relationships, as opposed to the object-based relations fostered by traditional patriarchy and modern industrialization.⁶¹

Wu Juenong clarified his philosophy in subsequent writings on Chinese agriculture. In 1924, he and his friends, inspired by the First United Front alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists, started a journal dedicated to modern agriculture. In explaining the goals of *New Agriculture Quarterly* (新農業季刊 *Xin nongye jikan*), he cautioned that modernization needed to be balanced against a critique of commodification. It is striking to observe just how closely Wu’s language here resembled his own translations of Ellen Key above:

Although it is progressive to promote agriculture and industry, we cannot be one-sided in our approach. But capitalism has already begun to infect and spread throughout the world. This one-sided materialist civilization has numbed modern humanity and caused the proletarian classes to sink into a state of deprivation!

Mencius once said: the people come first, the state second, and the ruler last. Engels once said: besides humans and nature, there is nothing else. This type of humanist spirit is so spirited and generous. From the specific standpoint of agriculture, we say: if we promote the development of agriculture but do not plan for the well-being of the peasants, if we research science but not in the name of the welfare of all, if we respect things and disrespect humans, then we have got the order of things all wrong! As agriculture and industry develop further, then the enslavement of peasants and laborers will be intensified further as well!⁶²

In sum, Wu Juenong’s philosophy for agrarian reform emerged from a critique of the commodification of the peasantry. This was influenced by—and, at its core, shared the same form with—the critique of the commodification of women’s bodies advanced by European and Japanese feminist writers.

60 Wu Juenong, “Zhongguo de nongmin wenti,” 19.

61 Notably, Wu Juenong did not make a special effort to explain how reorganizing the peasant economy would benefit women specifically. This relative silence, I believe, reflected his own belief, shared with Yamakawa and Ōyama, that problems of gender inequality would naturally be resolved once one solved economic problems.

62 Wu Juenong, “‘Xin nongye jikan’ faxing zhiqiu he sheping er ze” [On the publication of *New Agriculture Quarterly*: aims and two points of appraisal], in *Wu Juenong xuanji*, 469.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, scholars have noted that the connections between feminist and political-economic theory in China have been weakened by the rise of a market-centered, individualist feminism and an attendant “revisionist” scholarship that “sharply separates women’s liberation from” socialist struggles in Chinese history.⁶³ Within this context, stories such as Wu Juenong’s provide a crucial reminder of the shared historical origins of the “woman” and “agrarian” questions, although he represents only one provocative example of a history of collaboration between feminism and economics that surely ran beyond the surface level of journal titles and mysterious pseudonyms.

Such collaborations were also fleeting and subject to abrupt transformation, contingent upon rapidly changing circumstances. Wu Juenong’s stint as a feminist writer was short lived, as, indeed, was the politically experimental atmosphere of the 1920s. In 1925, Zhang Xichen left *Ladies’ Journal*, and the tone of the magazine soon grew more conservative.⁶⁴ Wu Juenong and his pseudonym Y.D. also disappeared from debates over the woman question after one final piece published under the Y.D. byline in March 1927. In subsequent decades, Wu’s humanist critique of commodification and materialism disappeared from his economic writings as well, at least on the surface. Faced with a different audience, and under a more politically restrictive environment in the 1930s, Wu expressed his concern over labor commodification in different forms. He sublimated the rather theoretical explorations of his youth into more specialized, quantitative, policy-oriented suggestions for improving tea production in central and southeast China.

Although the earliest discussions about the rural cooperative began with a small group of student voices during the May Fourth era—Wu Juenong was prominent among them—it was eventually embraced and popularized by the Nationalist government in the 1930s. Between 1923 and 1935, the total number of rural cooperatives exploded from 19 to over 26,000, attracting a wide variety of political actors and ideologies. For the Nationalist government and modern banks, they were a sound financial investment as well as a force for tempering social radicalism.⁶⁵ For famed conservative Liang Shuming, they offered

63 Lin Chun, “Whither Feminism: A Note on China,” *Signs* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1282–83; Min Dongchao, “Awakening Again: Travelling Feminism in China in the 1980s,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 28, no. 4 (2005): 274–88.

64 Ma Yuxin, “Male Feminism and Women’s Subjectivities: Zhang Xichen, Chen Xuezhao, and The New Woman,” *Twentieth-Century China* 29, no. 1 (2003): 3–8; Nivard, “Women and the Women’s Press,” 42–44.

65 Chang Chi-Hsien and Shih Chao-Ying, eds., *The Chinese Yearbook 1936–1937, Second Issue* (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1968), 1272–73; Han-Seng Chen, “Cooperatives as a Panacea for China’s Ills,” *Far Eastern Survey* 6, no. 7 (1937): 71–73; Zanasi, *Saving the Nation*. Kate Merkel-Hess has recently argued that the cooperatives were originally focused on education and community but that these themes disappeared once they became integrated into the Nationalist bureaucratic structure. Kate Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 101–6. Yixin Chen has argued that the Nationalist government’s goal with cooperatives was to make gradual changes through top-down measures that would check the more radical land reform proposals by the Communists. Yixin Chen, “The Guomindang’s Approach to Rural Socioeconomic Problems: China’s Rural Cooperative Movement, 1918–1949” (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 1995).

protection for the traditional Chinese village, and for James Yen, they were a vehicle of Christian social uplift.⁶⁶ What I wish to emphasize about Wu Juenong is that for him the cooperative was an end in itself. He was one of the first to promote the cooperative as a new form of “social organization,” a vision that emerged from his critique of traditional social relations. Rather than preserving the past, the cooperative sought to overcome it, precisely by empowering those who had historically borne the brunt of commodification: the Chinese woman and the Chinese peasant. If we survey Wu’s lifework collectively, we can trace common threads between his later economic studies and his youthful experiments with feminist philosophy. When Wu wrote about Key’s maternal feminism, he often invoked the ideas of *tuanjie li* (團結力 the ability to unite together) and *jingshen shenghuo* (精神生活 spiritual life), and the same phrases reemerged in his bureaucratic reports during the 1930s.⁶⁷ Also, Wu had earlier warned against a “one-sided materialist” (片面的物質 *pianmian de wuzhi*) approach to economic development; in his later proposals for reviving the tea industry, he again emphasized that development should not be undertaken for the sake of pure profit-seeking and that material growth should be accompanied by improvements of culture, lifestyle, and education.⁶⁸

One final question worth asking remains: if the substance of the woman and agrarian questions overlapped so greatly in Wu Juenong’s mind, then why did he segregate his writings under two different aliases? Aside from the general observation that writers during this period employed pseudonyms regularly, two further hypotheses come to mind. First, autobiographically, Wu perhaps saw his Y.D. persona as a way to indicate a departure from his other writings. Whereas his feminist works were more concerned with urban, middle-class, and cultural questions of the family, his agrarian-question essays concentrated on a broader analysis of social structure. Perhaps his priority was not to hide his identity but rather to reserve the pen name “Juenong” for articles dealing with rural economics.

Second, Wu Juenong’s choice may have been dictated by journal editors who sought to reduce the recognizably male presence of their authors. By one estimate, 90% of the readership for feminist journals at this time was male, and most of the writers were also men. *Ladies’ Journal* editors encouraged women “to be more brave, to publish their writings and contribute to women’s liberation,” but they were disappointed that many women were only willing to be published secretly.⁶⁹ A pseudonym such as Y.D. was gender neutral to Chinese readers, and the use of Latin letters communicated an air of European modernity. Insofar as Y.D. was less identifiably masculine than “Juenong,” it might have been preferred by both the editors and Wu himself.

Ultimately, the question of separate pseudonyms remains impossible to answer conclusively, for Wu Juenong did not discuss his decision in any published works. And though we should not dismiss the assumptions behind such practices, this question also

66 Alitto, *The Last Confucian*, 212–15; Hayford, *To the People*, 170–73.

67 Anhui shengli chaye gailiangchang, *Pingli chaye yunxiao xinyong hezuo baogao* [Report on the transport and credit cooperative for the Pingli tea industry] (Qimen: Dawen yinshuasuo, 1934).

68 Wu Juenong and Hu Haochuan, *Zhongguo chaye fuxing jihua* [Plans for reviving the tea industry of China] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), 169, 173.

69 Nivard, “Women and the Women’s Press,” 44–48.

should not distract us from the fact that Wu was, *in practice*, unable to keep his concerns over feminism and agrarian economics divorced. This was because his feminist engagement with questions of power was theoretically broad enough to encompass not just the interpersonal relations between men and women but also the social contradictions between capital and labor. For Wu and many others in China, feminist theory introduced an expansive universe of debates about society ranging across the globe, providing analytical tools they would employ for decades afterward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For helpful feedback and comments, I thank my coparticipants and the audience for an Association for Asian Studies panel on Chinese economic thought, the anonymous reviewers for *Twentieth-Century China*, and Tani Barlow and Yvon Wang, who read earlier drafts. I especially thank Rebecca Karl for organizing the panel at which this paper was presented and for encouraging its publication. I also thank Ms. Ning Wu, whose perspective on her grandfather has given me a deeper understanding of him and his intellectual trajectory.

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