
At the turn of the twentieth century China underwent a dramatic transformation that altered its most fundamental cultural, philosophical and political systems. Intellectual and political leaders preoccupied themselves with reinterpreting the significance of China's past while simultaneously creating new understandings of China's relationship with the West. To find solutions to China's state of national crisis they looked deep into China's historical past, out into the West's diverse present, and across to Japan's recent success. They wrote newspaper articles, scholarly books, pedagogical tracts and fiction aimed at spreading the message of social and political change to the literate masses. So turbulent and uncertain were these times that one educator recommended readers use his book as a "precious raft" (baofa 寶筏) to transport themselves safely through the ebb and flows of the epochal changes their nation was undergoing.

There is a plethora of scholarship available on the major political and intellectual shifts that occurred in the late Qing, but Judge's volume provides us with a crucial insight into how ordinary people were exhorted to engage with the myriad proposed, and actual, transformations to their society and culture. She reveals how teachers, writers, journalists and officials sought to facilitate the population's very personal negotiation through these turbulent times. Following a centuries-old pedagogic tradition, the genre of biography emerged as a key tool in this process. Abstract theorizing may have engaged an intellectual elite, but biographies of exemplary individuals provided concrete ideas for readers seeking to effect personal change in order to keep up with the rapidly changing times and stay afloat in unpredictable seas. The book demonstrates in intricate detail the way that China's educators, politicians, intellectuals and creative writers sought to guide their fellow country-men and women through their sophisticated interaction with globally-circulating ideologies of gender, tradition, modernity and nationhood.

In *The Precious Raft* Judge deftly demonstrates that the "woman question" was central to their deliberations about China's history as it related to its promised "modern" future. Through a detailed analysis of the genre of female biography Judge shows the myriad and often-competing ways that "woman" became vital to the actual changes occurring in China in the lives of ordinary people as well as to the changing political and intellectual conceptions of China's historical and idealized place in the world. Transforming the place of China's women within Chinese society was important not simply for the burgeoning feminist movement, but also as a mechanism for personalizing an individual's engagement with a competing array of projections for China's future. Women's biographies provided an intimate connection with processes of social transformation for male and female readers. But, as Judge shows us, the potential pathways to modernity were many and the advice on which route to chose was frequently contradictory.
The vigorous nature of the competing ideas about how to manage China’s national identity crisis produced the turbulent times that prompted the need for a safety raft. Judge provides us with a convincing categorization of these competing routes for the raft. Once you were safely onboard, which direction did you go? Judge has identified four prominent chronotypes through which “individuals reappropriated paradigmatic moments in the past in the political service of the present and future” (p. 12): eternalists, meliorists, archeomodernists and presentists. These four groups of thinkers promoted contesting visions of how Chinese people should engage with their past (or, more specifically, the current constructions of their past) to participate in the production of a reinvigorated future China. Eternalists, for example, argued that women were immutable markers of tradition—symbols of stasis to comfort worried masses in times of rapid change. Meliorists similarly valued women as icons of a great Confucian/Chinese tradition but tweaked this tradition to embrace schooling for girls and eliminate the chastity cult while celebrating the virtuous and talented women of the late imperial era. In contrast to advocates of these former two chronotypes, archeomodernists eschewed the female exemplars of their recent past and sought models in the West. The presentists were the most radical of all—they invoked Chinese and Western models of womanhood that were marked by courage (rather than virtue) with an aspiration for heroism. Through this four-fold framework Judge introduces readers to the debates between key intellectuals pondering the fate of their nation: including Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873-1929), He Xiangning 何香凝 (1878-1972), and Shimoda Utako 下田歌子 (1854-1936) as well as a host of other thinkers and writers.

From within the four competing chronotypes of China’s “past-present-future” Judge explores a vast range of biographical texts, including stories of both Western and Chinese women. She analyses the evolution of particular women’s stories over time to reveal how changes to the narrative reflect the redactors’ political and didactic goals. Other times, the biographies change to accommodate Chinese readerships tastes and expectations. The Precious Raft brings well-known Chinese figures (Ban Zhao 班昭 [ca.48-ca.120], Hua Mulan 花木蘭 [ca.500], Chunyu Ti Ying 淳于綰縻 [ca.167 BCE]) alongside Western exemplars (e.g. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Joan of Arc, Sofia Perovskaia). In this diversity readers learn about the symbolic significance of “the West” to China—we read of occidentalism in action.

Two broad features of the volume particularly appealed to me. First, The Precious Raft provides concrete examples of the creator-consumer intersection within the rapidly changing education sector. While we are all broadly familiar with this transition from the perspective of institutional histories of late Qing society Judge provides us with a fascinating insight into what this meant “on the ground”. Judge shows us the story of evolving pedagogical materials at a time before formal textbooks were codifying women’s education within a public school structure. For example, The Precious Raft demonstrates the manner in which educational texts moved from domestic to public space, and between the moral, pedagogical and