

**T**hrough *Chinese Women's Eyes* was filmed in Shanghai and Beijing by Dr. Mayfair Yang, professor of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Barbara. This film looks closely at the contrast between Maoist and post-Maoist China through the words and experiences of female factory workers, office personnel, academics, entrepreneurs, and women employed in new categories of service work like today's popular "hospitality girls." Using a seamless integration of narration, interviews, and background information, this very important film focuses on the dramatic effects on women and women's lives of the shifts from socialism to a market economy and globalization in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the provocative style familiar to those who know her writings, Dr. Yang creatively argues that women's lives have changed dramatically since the end of the Maoist era, in some ways for the better, and in other ways in rather alarming directions. Under Mao, Chinese women were liberated, not by a struggle from below but instead by what she labels "state feminism" which was from above, by fiat by the state. This unusual situation meant, according to Yang, that while Chinese women were moved into the world of work outside the home in unprecedented numbers, there were two unanticipated long-term effects. In the first place, she argues, the only categories available for women were male, and being treated according to male ideals had the effect of masculinizing women. (According

## Through Chinese Women's Eyes

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to her argument, this accounts for the strong sense of betrayal felt by Western feminists when Chinese women, like women in the film, discovered and celebrated their femininity in the '80s and '90s).

Secondly and more controversially, Yang argues that the longer-term effects of state feminism in fact retarded women's liberation. Because women had not developed an awareness of their oppression on their own, they were thus hampered in responding to changes in their situation like the commercialized culture of the recent reform era, which overtly links sexuality and the market. Yang decries the new phenomena of consumerism and the media and their obsession with the language of female sexuality, and she is very distressed at the alarming tendency of many sectors in Chinese society to hire only young, attractive women while retiring older women at 45 (or even 40 as in many state enterprises today).

Yet even in the midst of these changes, Yang finds some reasons for cautious optimism. She believes that the new situation allows more freedom for many women,

like the female entrepreneurs she interviews, plus it will hopefully make women's oppression clearer than the previous double messages of Maoist times. Her hope, then, is that the new era will result in a more unified, more cohesive women's consciousness and a true women's liberation, by women for women.

This film would be excellent for upper level classes

studying modern Chinese history, women's history, the new global economy and cultural studies. While it is China specific, it directly confronts issues relevant for all of us grappling today with new roles and in responding to the new conditions of the modern global age. ■

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