Global Feminisms Project and History Pedagogy: Center the Other

Today, I want to briefly talk about in what ways the Global Feminisms Project can be used in undergraduate history teaching. Because this project has already been framed as an Oral History project since its conception, here I will not talk about the process of collecting narratives, storytelling, memory, or power relations between the interviewer and the interviewee, but instead, focus more on how the information already presented in the material can be used as teaching material in history.

I remember that one prominent feminist scholar once lamented that oftentimes once a material is labeled as “Women’s Studies,” it is shelved in one designated section in the library and not being used very much by students of other disciplines. I believe that this project, located in the field of Women’s Studies, can benefit our history students tremendously, if we find ways to integrate its material into the first year history classroom and lead the students to ask some fundamental but important questions about history and historiographical theorizing.

The first-year history class is very much about training the students to think and read critically. They will face questions such as “what is history?” “what is evidence?” As a Chinese feminist working on and teaching pre-modern Chinese history, I find myself ask: Can the students learn to ask critical historiographical questions without reading Joan Scott? How do we help them challenge the Euro-centric historiography in more ways?

1. (Add Slide) First, I think this material will prove to be useful for thinking about centering the Other in historiography.

A historian is a translator. She translates historical material from one language into another; she translates one time period into another. History is the product of such
translations across time and space. There are conscious (and unconscious) choices made by a historian in producing and analyzing a source material.

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In all these ten Chinese interviews, the student will find a lengthy footnote for the translations of two Chinese terms, nuxing zhuyi and nuquan zhuyi, which are translated into the same English term “feminism.” Ironically, they are the two terms that have been used by most Chinese feminists as the translations for the English term “feminism.” The students will also find many of these interviewees discuss in great detail the theoretical and political differences between these two terms and that they use them in very different ways.

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This is a very simple description of the literal meanings of these two Chinese terms and how they are being used. [Awkward language such as “female-ism,” “feminine-ism” and “woman-right-ism” suggests a complicated history behind the word “feminism.”]

We have revised this footnote many times and are still not very comfortable with its current version. The complexity of the creation, circulation, and revision of the translation of the English term “feminism” in Chinese history is yet to be fully explored. We know this is a long process, which has lasted for almost a century and involved a handful of regions, including the U.S., Europe, Japan, the mainland China, and Taiwan. The awkwardness of the English translations of the two Chinese terms for “feminism” in this simple footnote, as well as the attention given by these interviewees on these terms, demonstrates the entanglement of history and translation.
In a Women’s Studies classroom, the discussion about this footnote could be directed to the discussion about the global movement of “feminism” in the twentieth century; an American student could look at this interesting phenomenon as an “outsider,” because he/she does not have to experience the translational dilemma. Although, for example, U.S. interviewees also talked about the terms of “feminism” and “feminist” in English within the U.S. women’s movement, the translational problem does not necessarily intersect so much with “language” as with the translation of experience. However, in a history class, approaching the translation of “feminism” as a historical phenomenon, students would realize that the problem of translation destabilizes our knowledge base in history, such as the question “What is history?” “What is ‘event’?” and the foundational notion of “evidence.” They might also come to realize that the so-called “other histories” is an integral part of historiographical theorizing for the field of history as a whole. In addition, the students do not have to read Joan Scott to understand that history is also a “linguistic” event and language itself could be a historical event.

When we were translating and footnoting, we tried to remind the reader/audience which of these two Chinese terms a particular interviewee was using at a certain point. However, the narratives themselves demand the audience to abandon a rigid correspondence between a term and its presumably fixed usage. [Add Slide; give example: Li Huiying—strategic usage of each term; Chen Mingxia—always mentioning the two together and feminist politics] When we train the first-year history students in textual analysis, the teacher could use this example to ask the students to think: Would the difference between theoretical discussion and personal conversation affect a person’s use of terms? Which is more likely to end up in written records, the kind of primary
source that historians use most often? What other historical analyses do we have to conduct, in order to understand the interviewee’s feminist theories and practice without reading too rigidly into the usage of terms like *nuquan zhuyi* and *nuxing zhuyi*?

I think this would be a good methodological training in history, because the narratives given by these Chinese activists compel the students to seriously think about the construction of historical evidence, the complexity of archival source, and the multiple layers of historical reality in a translational event. Foregrounding “translation” destabilizes the conventional historical thinking, which is represented in the centrality of English in historiography.

2. Next, I will quickly talk about how the Global Feminism interviews can be used to decenter “the modern” and “the Western” in historical thinking.

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The GF interviews from the four sites provide researchers with a wonderful source to do comparative studies. But how do we guide the first year students to do a cross-site reading? In my undergrad Chinese history class, I often warn the students of the danger of simplistic comparison, because in such comparisons, often the Other is further “othered.” But the GF material offers a new possibility to do comparison.

Historians have argued that concepts such as “race” and “sexuality” are modern and often “Western.” The existence of these categories in our modern minds prevents us from better understanding pre-modern history and non-Western histories, because modern sciences and ideologies have naturalized these categories. Historical scholarship that discusses these issues is extremely important but oftentimes it is very difficult for first-
year students to digest. The GF interviews can be used to create a good pedagogical model that “centers” the “other” and “decenters” the modern and the Western in order to challenge conventional ways of historical thinking.

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He Zhonghua is the only minority interviewee in the China site; her ethnicity is Naxi. In her notes, my colleague Desi writes: “Americans (me included) may not understand why Naxi is relevant. So, are the Naxi like the different Native American tribes? Or like different groups of Latinos in Latin America? Or indigenous groups in Mexico?” I really liked this question and reminder. When the teacher asks the students to think about the meaning of “ethnicity” in Chinese history and the seeming “marginality” of the question of race/ethnicity in the contemporary Chinese feminism, they will understand the importance of contextualizing analytical categories in history, such as “race,” and employing “local” terms when studying “difference” in pre-modern history and non-U.S. histories.

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Another interesting phenomenon that appears in this project is the relative “absence” of the term “sexuality” in the Chinese interviews. A discussion about the absence of the term “sexuality” in the Chinese interviews could become an entrance into a variety of historiographical inquiries in the classroom. How do we explain this “silence?” Does this reflect a contemporary issue, a Chinese issue, or a historiographical issue? Does “sexuality” have the same meaning across time and space, as a lot of people are taught and uphold as the eternal truth of human beings? In what ways is the theme of “sexuality” implicated, though not explicitly mentioned, by the interviewees? Learning to answer
these questions will help the students to challenge our “modern” perspective and
approach pre-modern history and non-western histories more critically.

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Feminist historians have quite successfully challenged conventional historiographical
assumptions. If feminism and Women’s Studies material could enter the first year history
students’ training, we will find one more way to “mainstream” “Women’s Studies” and
foster interest in feminist scholarship in more students. In the meantime, this Women’s
Studies material will help the students cultivate a critical historical mind toward
conventional historiography.