

The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China. By HARRIET EVANS. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. xi, 235 pp. \$85.00 (cloth); \$32.95 (paper).
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This is an incisive and highly articulate study of mother–daughter relations in contemporary China. Relations between mother and daughter, particularly the married-out daughter, tend to cut across the patrilineal structures of Chinese kinship systems. For this reason, they have been much less studied than traditional patrilineal norms. While the earlier work of Margery Wolf and Ellen Judd offered valuable insights into the impact of patrilocal marriage on women, *The Subject of Gender* is the first work to specifically treat the affective bonds between mother and daughter over the course of their lives. Relying on the broad methodologies of oral histories, narrative analysis, gender and memory studies, Harriet Evans draws on intensive interviews conducted with

thirty-one women from 2000 to 2004 to construct a fine-grained portrayal of what it has meant to be mother and daughter for women born in the People's Republic since the 1950s.

The chapters are structured thematically in order to illuminate problems that have constantly engaged scholars with an interest in the status of women and gender issues in contemporary China. Why do older women reflect with disillusionment on the promise of the Communist revolution? What is the impact of the state's one-child policy on the raising of the next generation, and on traditional values such as filial piety? Are notions of the "inner" and "outer" still relevant to how the younger generation of Chinese women understand their own status? Does this generation still feel discriminated against? How do mothers shape their daughters' understanding of their physical self, of gender-imposed constraints, and of sexuality?

Evans begins her study by setting out the importance of mother–daughter relations and their ambiguous niche in Chinese kinship study. She then turns to the unfortunate impact of the early separation of mother and child that often took place during the years of revolutionary fervor (1950s and 1960s). Many of the older women interviewed were raised without a strong motherly presence. Others felt estranged from mothers who were completely submissive to patriarchal or abusive husbands. A significant consequence of this was the decision of many women born in the early socialist period to construct a much warmer affective bond with their own daughters in order to make up for the frustration of their childhood years.

Evans explores the strong bonds this generation sought to build with daughters born in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The key term was *goutong* (communication), a word denoting a close, expressive relationship distinctly different from the hierarchical bonds of the earlier period. This new generation of mothers sought vicarious fulfillment through the lives of their daughters, which, in turn, put new pressure on the latter not to disappoint their mothers' rising expectations. While the younger generation was much more privileged than their mothers with regard to educational and economic opportunities, boundaries between "inner" and "outer," not to mention the traditional "double-burden" of employment and housework, continue to bedevil male–female relations in the contemporary period. Mothers continue to educate daughters in gendered expectations of behavior, including women's responsibilities toward the nurturance of the "inner" or family domain.

One very big change between the generations is much greater openness about sex, the inclusion of sex education in schools, and much greater sexual discourse in the media in the contemporary period. This tends to make up for the relative reticence of older mothers about "the sexed body." The cardinal value of filial piety, too, is being reshaped in the contemporary age, as many mothers of single daughters look to them for emotional and sometimes physical support as they get older.

This is a study that wears its learning lightly. Interpretive frameworks drawn from psychoanalysis, gender studies, and oral history are discussed primarily in the footnotes, not in the body of the text. It is striking that although the

women surveyed came from varying urban, rural, and ethnic backgrounds, interview results were relatively consistent within generational cohorts. This could be attributable to the dominant role of the state in constructing gender discourse over the past fifty years, or possibly the nature of the cohort surveyed (all now based in Beijing and working as academics or other professionals). Given the crucial importance of the mother–daughter bond demonstrated here, this relationship can no longer be regarded as marginal in the study of Chinese kinship systems. *The Subject of Gender* will be required reading for those with an interest in social change in contemporary China, comparative family systems, and mother–daughter relations. It offers vivid and innovative material to China-focused courses in anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and contemporary history.

ANNE E. McLAREN
University of Melbourne
mclae@unimelb.edu.au



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Author/s:

McLaren, AE

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