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Chinese Women's History: Local or Global?

The juxtaposition of two turn-of-the-twentieth century magazine covers, one from an issue of China's first commercial women's journal, another from America's leading "ladies'" magazine, suggests something of the global intricacy of the content and practice of modern Chinese women's history. Rather than suggest that China had to mimic "the West" in order to "catch up" and become modern, a recent article by Professor Joan Judge offers a different perspective on the relationship between the global and the local in early twentieth century China. It asserts that *The Ladies' Home Journal* cover operated as just one piece of the complex back story to the portrait on the *Funü shibao* (The women's eastern times) cover. Other elements of this back story include the treaty port city of Shanghai, a Jesuit orphanage that provided training in Western art to young Chinese boys—including the creator of the cover on the left—and an expatriate community whose members subscribed to American magazines.



Figure 1:
Funü shibao
(The women's eastern times)
12 (January 10,
1914);

Figure 2: *Ladies' Home Journal*
(February 1899)

Tracing various pieces of historical evidence, Judge shows that the young orphan artist who became one of China's first commercial artists, Xu Yongqing (1880-1953), found a discarded copy of the February 1899 issue of the *Ladies Home Journal* in one of Shanghai's second hand bookstores. He tore off its cover, added it to his copybook, and seamlessly assimilated elements of its

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aesthetic into the cover he created for the Chinese magazine. Images like Xu's did not signal a derivative global modernity but a moment of new local possibilities for women—and men—in China's early Republic.

This story of *Funü shibao's* January 1914 cover illustrates one of the important trends in recent Chinese women's history that Judge's article highlights. While the field of Chinese women's history is highly attuned to globally circulating images, models and theories, its focus is on the specific processes through which global information was processed in China. This trend is evident in three particularly fertile areas of recent research. The first is the uncovering of a "feminist analytics of reform" in women's writings at the turn of the twentieth century. These writings suggest what could have been an alternative path for the unfolding of China's twentieth century history by asserting that historical change could be grounded not only in new imported knowledge but in the creative engagement within China's own past.

The second area of fertile new research is in the theorization and practice of women's medicine from the imperial through the communist eras. Exciting new work examines the complex maneuverings between longstanding Chinese and more recent Western biomedical approaches to women's reproductive health. The third area is the uncovering of non-textual avenues to Chinese women's historical experience. These include material objects, oral interviews, and visual sources—among them photographs, film, videos, and cover images like the one that opens this research note. Together, these areas of research constitute exciting new directions in the study of women's history in China.

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This research brief is based on an invited article by Professor Joan Judge in the *Journal of Women's History* - the first journal devoted exclusively to the international field of women's history - for its 25th anniversary issue (Vol. 25 No. 4, December 2013). The article is entitled "Chinese Women's History: Global Circuits, Local Meanings".