Abstract

Chen Jo-shui in "Empress Wu and proto-feminist sentiments in Tang China", introduced the term "proto-feminism" to illustrate the nascent form of feminism in Empress Wu and Tang China. However, the imposition of "feminism", formulated only in the 1850s, on the context of pre-modern China is problematic. Looking into the concept of "feminist impulse" used by Chen to support his proposition, a clearer definition of proto-feminism which is lacking in Chen’s paper will be provided. This definition will reveal important distinction between proto-feminism in Tang China and that advocated today such that the suggestion of early existence of feminism is no longer a direct imposition of the modern day concept upon the pre-modern China context.

Under the defined framework of proto-feminism, this thesis goes on to justify Chen’s claim for the presence of proto-feminism and address the individual component of proto-feminism which is lacking in his paper. This individual component, having encompassed individual quest for equality to power in fields where females were barred, allowed many empresses who ruled as regents to be classified
as proto-feminists. Hence, extension of proto-feminism beyond the Tang dynasty to include the entire course of pre-modern China’s history can be justified. In order to further discern proto-feminism from modern feminism, four main characteristics of proto-feminism were identified. Different factors which contributed to the failure of proto-feminism evolving into modern feminism before the twentieth century were also brought up to address the inevitable question of why proto-feminism did not come into fruition. Finally, in arguing for the presence of feminism in pre-modern China as proto-feminism, this thesis seeks to justify that Empress Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in China, is indeed a valid signpost of such.