

Roces, Mina; Edwards, Louise (Hrsg.): *Women's Movements in Asia. Feminisms and Transnational Activism*. London: Routledge 2010. ISBN: 978-0-415-48703-0; 288 S.

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This is the fourth book on women in Asia, Mina Roces and Louise Edwards have published together over the past ten years.¹ The two leading scholars have hereby made an important contribution to excavating the 20th century history of Asian women and women's movements – a scholarly field that still has to catch up and balance the domination of research on Western women's movements and thus the prevalence of a Eurocentric perspective in global gender research. Their most recent book is an interdisciplinary collection of twelve essays, each written by a different author and in the form of country studies from Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Singapore, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Korea, Cambodia and India covering almost entirely the culturally diverse Asian region. The contributions are structured as a historical synopsis of 20th century women's movements and organizations. They recount the cultural, religious, political and class context which shaped those movements and were in each case the frame for continuously shifting challenges and alliances that limited or increased both the movements' successes and contact with transnational feminisms.

One prime example is China where alternate periods of openness and closure influenced how strongly Chinese women's organizations cooperated with international ones. A period of openness between 1920-1940 in which literate urban Chinese were successful women campaigners for suffrage and imitated British suffragists' actions followed a long period of state feminism and isolation even from citizens in fellow socialist nations and reluctance against Western 'bourgeois' feminism (p. 55). Another example is Pakistan, where the Islamization of politics and society since the late 1970s has made it hard for women to act within a transnational framework (p. 170).

The editors have contented themselves maybe a bit too much with the observation that women's movements in Asia are rather

the product of „[...] the national than the global influences“ (p. 7). Nevertheless, the book allows for a comparative reading and fulfils its overarching aim to trace the transnational elements of particular feminisms in Asia as the subtitle of the book „feminisms and transnational activism“ promises to do.

It was the colonial period that initiated the contact between Asian and 'Western' feminists. Those relations secured in many cases a first connection to transnational campaigns. In Japan, in the 1920s and 1930s, Japanese women's organizations forged links with the major international women's organizations. They were in contact with the International Alliance of Women (IAW) which inspired them to argue for suffrage back home (p. 96), and they engaged in peace work via the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and also played an important role in setting up the first Pan Pacific Women's conference in 1928 (p. 97). In Singapore connection to transnational campaigns was strongest during colonial period when wives of colonial administrators were active in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (p. 85) and Chinese upper-class women formed women charities. When mostly left with no other choice than to join the nationalist movements during the anticolonial struggles or as in the case of Japan to jump the imperialist bandwagon (p. 102), women turned away from transnational agendas because they were dominated by Western feminists, whose agendas and methods were considered unsuitable for Asian women. Following the pressure of male nationalists, women's organizations in Indonesia (p. 23) and the Philippines (p. 40) for example had to look for pre-colonial, 'indigenous' concepts to find a gender order that would represent a modernized but post-colonial nation. In the Vietnamese case, the belief in a Vietnamese distinctiveness that went back to a mythological femininity standing above patriarchal Confucian Chinese values was continuously revived and used as a shield against French colonizers (p. 128).

¹ Louise Edwards / Mina Roces (eds.), *Major Works on Women in Asia*, 4 vol., London 2009; idem (eds.), *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*, Sussex 2007; idem (eds.), *Women's Suffrage in Asia*, London 2004; idem (eds.), *Women in Asia. Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation*, Sidney 2000.

Another phase of increased visible transnational orientation was the International Decade of Women from 1975-1985 and the four global women's conferences (1975-1995) at UN level. As the host of 4th UN women's world conference in 1995 in Beijing, China started to engage with UN women's agencies after a long period of political closure and Chinese feminists' isolation from feminists abroad (p. 67). In the same period, in Thailand and the Philippines, women NGOs started to fight for the rights of prostitutes in a transnational framework. The feminist critique of Philippine women's exploitation as prostitutes and domestic workers overseas required lobbying of governments abroad. Philippine women have contributed to global feminists debates (p. 34) and are considered international experts in the field of trafficking and migration. In Korea, women's organizations have pushed to take the Japanese government for Korean 'comfort women' during World War II into responsibility with the case being presented to international human rights NGOs. They also formed a transnational alliance in 1992 with women from other South East Asia countries who were victims of this specific case of sexual slavery (p. 199). Finally, Vietnam's first Law on Gender Equality of 2006 is product of a filtering back of Vietnam's participation at UN women's conferences (p. 139).

In spite of some factual insights into the involvement of Asian women's organizations in the transnational arena, the articles stop short of going into a more detailed analysis of concrete agency of Asian women on transnational or inner-Asian feminist platforms. It is rather the „implicit transnational dimension“² than transnational activism itself which the authors highlight. After all, the mere fact that selected women in Asia have received visibility at the UN women's conferences or that there is a general discomfort with 'Western' feminism as an alien concept does not provide much of a new insight. An exception is Sumi Madhok's article about „Rights talk and the feminist movement in India“ which assesses the NGO-ization in the 1980s and 1990s in the framework of development funding in Asian 'developing countries' more critically and points to a „universalist-style UN feminism“ that is strongly related to the production of

the 'Third World Woman' (pp. 231-232). Also Susan Blackburn, with her article on Indonesia's feminist movement shortly mentions the problem that it is often donors of foreign aid decide which feminist activities they support. There has been an especially high funding for projects and organizations in Indonesia that focus on reproductive health issues for example (p. 24).

The strength of this book is that important historical and future trends for a wide range of Asian women's movements are outlined and listed in a comprehensive and broad way. Since several themes are tackled at once and almost the whole of Asia is covered, omissions are inevitable. The book is rather a collection of national histories which might disappoint those readers who expect to read more about the part Asian women played in the larger history of transnational feminist organizing. This goes along the line of what Rocés points to herself in the introduction, namely that „the specific impact of Asian feminists on the international scene is one important area of future research“ (p. 16). Yet, this book is a must-read for any gender scholar who wants to engage more with Asia and eye-opening to those who are still caught up in a single regional perspective.

Leonie Rörich über Rocés, Mina; Edwards, Louise (Hrsg.): *Women's Movements in Asia. Feminisms and Transnational Activism*. London 2010, in: H-Soz-Kult 26.04.2013.

²Su Lin Lewis, Women on the move, in: The Review 18 (2012), URL: http://www.ias.asia/sites/default/files/IIAS_NL61_1819.pdf (12.03.2013), pp.1-2.