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Assistant Professor's Research Focuses on Women's Roles in China's Modern Transformation

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FACULTY

Assistant Professor’s Research Focuses on Women’s Roles in China’s Modern Transformation

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON MARCH 15, 2021



Dr. Aihua Zhang Working on Book About Beijing Young Women’s Christian Association

In her childhood, Dr. Aihua Zhang, assistant professor of history at Gardner-Webb University, was fascinated by Chinese and East Asian cartoons, stories and books. As she grew older, these interests led her to a deeper study of cultures and histories. Then, in college, she began exploring the relationships among East Asian countries and their interactions with the rest of the world. She also focused on women’s roles in history and their contribution to China’s modern transformation.

Since arriving at Gardner-Webb in 2019, she has taught Western Civilization I, modern Chinese history and Western Civilization II. She moved to Gardner-Webb from New Jersey, where she taught at Stockton University. Her desire was to teach at a university where she could combine her faith with her academic interests. “I have my wish fulfilled at Gardner-Webb,” she observed. “I like the collegiality among the faculty members and their cooperative interactions. Students are humble, understanding, smart, and promising. The whole community is like a big family: sharing, supportive, and caring about each other.”



Because Chinese women’s history was not studied in China, Zhang came to the United States to pursue her Master of Arts in history at Bowling Green State University in Ohio in 2005. She earned her Ph.D. at State University of New York at Stony Brook in 2015. “The United States takes the lead in the study of women and gender,” Zhang affirmed. “Also, I was curious how the Chinese history was approached in the U.S. I wanted to make a comparison between the Chinese and Western perspectives, which I believed would open my eyes and deepen my historical understanding.”

Zhang has published several articles in peer-reviewed journals. Most recently, her research, “[Reinventing Tradition and Indigenizing Modernity: the Beijing New Women and Their](#)

▲ Dr. Aihua Zhang

[Leisure in the Early Decades of the 20th Century](#),” was published in “Women’s History Review.”

The article focuses on Beijing New Women, because Zhang said most other scholarly works on the New Woman in Republican China tend to discuss Shanghai and present Shanghai New Women as an icon of the country’s modernity. “In response to this scholarly imbalance, my paper examines the generally neglected Beijing New Women with a concentration on their leisure-time activities such as skating, appreciating Beijing opera, and hosting salons (venues for intellectual exchange, socials and friendship),” Zhang described. “I argue that what characterized these women’s pastimes was their combination of tradition and modernity, which they achieved by imbuing Beijing’s historical legacies with modern elements and adapting Western models to the city’s conditions.”

Zhang added that the New Woman distinguished herself from traditional women in her Western-style education, her modern look (such as bobbed hair and heeled shoes) and her social and political awareness. She argues that their activities transcended entrenched gender boundaries and demonstrated their power. These pastimes also went beyond self-recreation and turned out to be instrumental in sustaining the city’s modern enterprises through the hard times of 1928 to 1937.

Zhang is also working to publish a book this year, titled “Materializing a Gendered Modernity: The Beijing Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) (1927-1937).”

By exploring the interplay among gender, religion, and modernity, her book explains the part Chinese Christian women played in the country’s quest for a strong nation in general and in Republican Beijing’s modern transformation in particular. “With a focus on the Beijing YWCA, I examine how the Association, guided by their Christian beliefs, tailored its Western models and devised new programs to meet the city’s demands,” Zhang shared. “Its programs ranged from providing women- and child-oriented facilities to promoting constructive recreational activities, and from reforming home and family to improving public health, some of which turned out to be pioneering work in social and community service in China.”

[Learn more about the Department of Social Sciences.](#)

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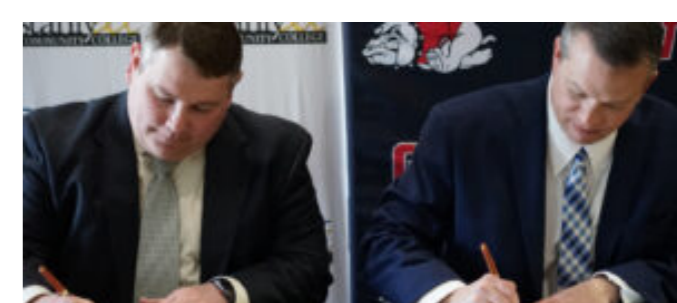
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