

# Women in the History of Philosophy

## Beyond Europe: methodological considerations

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**ABSTRACT** | Worldwide, pre-nineteenth-century philosophical works by women are almost entirely undocumented. However, this fact has so far caused little concern to the vast majority of authors, even those who wrote the most comprehensive histories of world philosophy. Due to a predominantly masculine perspective in the discipline, the exclusion of women from the canon of the history of philosophy continues to this day. This tendency has also affected attempts to reconstruct, document, and integrate “non-Western” philosophical traditions into global discourse, attempts which have been under way since the 1980s. A contemporary revision of the canon of the history of philosophy, however, cannot take place solely from an intercultural or global perspective; it must also address and correct patriarchal structures of exclusion in all regions of the world. The paper discusses the specific challenges of reconstructing the history of women philosophers outside Europe.<sup>1</sup>

**KEYWORDS** | History of Philosophy; Women; Feminist Historiography; Methodology

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## 1 The Problem

When I asked the author of an introduction to contemporary Chinese philosophy at a book launch a few years ago why he had not included women philosophers, he seemed to be surprised by my question (which he had obviously never asked himself) and replied that there were no women philosophers in China. In response to the disbelieving expression on my face, he added that there were probably already women at philosophy departments in China and Taiwan, but not yet philosophical works by women worth including in an introduction. In view of a strong patriarchal culture in Chinese academia (which was illustrated at the World Philosophy Congress in Beijing in 2018 by the fact that at the opening event in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, only men sat on the podium while women only made an appearance to serve tea, a circumstance that was heavily discussed and criticised at the congress), one would hardly want to blame the colleague for his omission of women philosophers in his introductory book. However, this experience illustrates quite vividly a certain state of consciousness in the international academic community, as well as the situation of women philosophers in the academy. Despite regional differences, it can be said that the situation is characterised by the following two features:

- Little attention is paid to the contribution of women to philosophy and its history, and the absence of women philosophers in departments, curricula, and survey works is rarely perceived as a shortcoming.
- Prejudices that assume that women are either incapable of doing philosophy or only capable of doing it to a very limited extent, and that their achievements in the discipline are mediocre at best, have been widespread and continue to this day.<sup>2</sup>

This problem also affects the field of intercultural philosophy as well as regional histories of philosophy. In recent decades great effort has been exerted worldwide in intercultural philosophy, and in similar disciplines such as transcultural, comparative, and global philosophy, to bring to light historical and contemporary philosophical traditions excluded from the dominant discourse and to in-

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Hagengruber and Karen Green (2015) provide an illustrative example in their introduction to the special issue of *The Monist*, "The History of Women's Ideas." Here they refer to an article by David Stove (1993) in which Stove argues that the lack of significant contributions to philosophy by women provides sufficient evidence for women's inferior intellectual capacity. He also claims: "There is not a single passage, intended for publication, in any philosopher that I know of, in which the intellectual equality of the two sexes is asserted." (5)

clude marginalised voices in an equal, non-hierarchical, nonviolent, open discourse. However, little has been done to include women philosophers in this discourse. The programme of making “non-Western”<sup>3</sup> philosophical traditions visible in academic discourse and integrating them into teaching and research on an equal footing, thus contributing to epistemic justice in the global philosophical discourse, has thus far not extended to women philosophers’ works in those traditions. On the contrary, the same gender bias that we are already familiar with from European and North American philosophy to a large extent pervades intercultural philosophising and regional as well as global histories of philosophy. For example, a brief examination of publications in German and English from the 1980s to the 2000s shows that, with very few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> women philosophers are not included in reconstructed histories of philosophy in the Islamic world, India, and China.<sup>5</sup> The same applies to reconstructions of South American and African philosophies.<sup>6</sup> This reveals a research gap unaddressed by intercultural philosophy, feminist and gender studies, and regional and global histories of philosophy. So who tells the story of women philosophers outside Europe and North America?

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<sup>3</sup> For lack of a better term to describe philosophical traditions that have so far been excluded from the dominant philosophical discourse, I have decided to use the equally problematic term “non-Western” in this essay. I use this term to refer to philosophical traditions in Africa, Asia, and South America, but also to hitherto suppressed philosophical traditions such as those of the First Nations people in America, the Maori in New Zealand, etc.

<sup>4</sup> See Kralle and Schilling’s (2004) edition of *Schreiben über Frauen in China* (Writing about Women in China). However, this book is less about women philosophers and more about women writing and writing about women. For India, see Adamson and Ganeri, “Better Half: Women in Ancient India,” episode 16 of Peter Adamson’s podcast *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*. The podcast’s episodes on African philosophy portray numerous Black women philosophers.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding China, this concerns such classics as Feng Youlan’s *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948), as well as recent books. For the German-speaking context, see among others: Moritz, *Die Philosophie im alten China* (1990); Bauer, *Geschichte der chinesischen Philosophie. Konfuzianismus, Daoismus, Buddhismus* (2001); Schleichert and Roetz, *Klassische chinesische Philosophie* (2009); and Heubel, *Chinesische Gegenwartsphilosophie zur Einführung* (2016). In the field of Islamic philosophy, see Rudolph, *Islamische Philosophie* (2004); Turki, *Einführung in die arabisch-islamische Philosophie* (2015); and Hendrich, *Arabisch-Islamische Philosophie* (2011). And on Indian philosophy, see Lorenz, *Indische Denker* (1998).

<sup>6</sup> For Latin America see Krumpel, *Philosophie in Lateinamerika* (1992). In the case of Africa, there is development: while Masolo mentions no women in his book on the history of African philosophy in the 20th century, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1994), Barry Hallen mentions the gender question and some representatives of feminist philosophy in chap. 8 of his book *A Short History of African Philosophy* (2009).

## 2 The Task

Only recently has an awareness developed that women philosophers in “non-Western” traditions constitute a doubly marginalised group, hitherto invisible in regional and intercultural discourse, and barely perceived even in feminist philosophical historiography. There are – fortunately – a few exceptions, such as Raúl Fornet-Betancourt’s *Frauen und Philosophie im lateinamerikanischen Denken* (Women and Philosophy in Latin American Thought, 2008). However, it is primarily thanks to the tireless interventions of contemporary women philosophers that women’s contributions to “non-Western” philosophical traditions are slowly becoming the focus of research.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, research on the philosophical work of women outside Europe and North America is still a great rarity which faces entrenched prejudices. Assertions that equate women’s lack of visibility with inability show clear parallels to arguments that have long been used to legitimise exclusion of or ignorance about “non-Western” philosophical traditions. Because women’s contributions are invisible, it is assumed that there are none, and therefore, women must be incapable of contributing at all. No other reason for the invisibility is sought or posited. If causes are named, they are located in the biological constitution of the individual or in climatic conditions, but not in underlying social, political, or epistemic structures. Underlying both forms of prejudice is a lack of interest in excluded traditions of philosophising. Moreover, such prejudices often go hand in hand with a patronising attitude that only credits a narrowly defined group of people with the ability to philosophise. In doing so, the marginalised and fragmented state that results from structural, patriarchal, and colonial oppression, and the targeted destruction of such knowledge traditions, is presumed to be the cause of their invisibility.

In the early 1990s American philosopher Sandra Harding pointed to the overlapping mechanisms and arguments that exclude entire regions and groups of people from both the history of philosophy and contemporary discourse (Harding 1991).<sup>8</sup> She argued that analyses of such overlapping structures of discrimination require an intersectional approach that studies the intertwining of mechanisms of oppression and exclusion and the multidimensionality of subject positions. Unfortunately, for a long time her insights had hardly any impact on research methodology; they have particularly played no role in philosophy. And although Elizabeth Spelman criticised the “white, bourgeois orientation” of feminist theory as early as 1988, the feminist historiography of philosophy has so far hardly succeeded in

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<sup>7</sup> See also, among others, the research project *Extending New Narratives/Pour de Nouveaux récits en histoire de la philosophie* project led by Lisa Shapiro and others.

<sup>8</sup> In this context see also Harding and Uma Narayan (2000).

linking the feminist perspective with a larger inclusive and emancipatory agenda; at best, insufficient efforts have been made to do so. The fact that philosophy and the historiography of philosophy, area studies (such as Indology, Sinology, African studies, etc.) and gender theory have long been pursued side by side without contact has certainly contributed to this. Thus, the task that philosophical research – including intercultural philosophy – faces today is to establish an intersectional approach as an important methodological tool. The intersecting exclusions of “non-Western” women from the predominant narrative of the history of philosophy as well as feminist, and regional historiographies of philosophy clearly point to the fact that previous research lacks awareness that thought traditions may be discriminated against in multiple ways. An intersectional approach raises precisely this awareness and enables an interweaving of feminist, anti-racist, and global perspectives as well as closer interdisciplinary cooperation.

### **3 Challenges**

A reconstruction of the history of women philosophers faces considerable challenges. As the research on reconstructing the history of women philosophers in Europe and North America has already shown, a number of specific problems arise.<sup>9</sup> Let me mention a few important challenges here:

- Overcoming a tradition of thought/worldview that a priori denies that women have the intellectual ability to philosophise.
- Overcoming traditions and schools of philosophy in which basic philosophical concepts – such as reason, rationality, or objectivity – connote masculinity.
- Investigating the structural causes that have led to the exclusion of women philosophers and their works from the canon of the discipline.
- The study of structural causes that have prevented women from engaging in intellectual activities.
- The elaboration of methods and the identification of sources for the reconstruction of the knowledge of women philosophers, for example, by conducting basic research to find philosophical works by women and to reconstruct the lives and works of women philosophers.

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<sup>9</sup> See Tuana (1992), Alanen and Witt (2004), and Witt and Shapiro (2020).

In my opinion, discussions that have taken place within the tradition of European-North American feminist philosophical historiography can be fruitfully used for a reconstruction of the work of “non-Western” women philosophers, even if other contexts pose specific problems of their own. Commonalities across cultures make such use possible and reasonable. For example, the same combination of misogynistic ideology and structural and institutional discrimination against women is found in Europe, Asia, and the Islamic world. Of course, the results of “Western” women’s studies cannot be transferred to “non-Western” contexts without further research due to the specific historical conditions in each case. Beside differences in the cultural or religious contexts, European and North American feminist historians of philosophy do not speak from a colonised situation and its of oppression and ruptures in traditions of the history of ideas. Colonialism and slavery, as philosophical problems, have only recently been addressed in the feminist historiography of philosophy, as has the question of the extent to which European and North American women philosophers have or have not taken a critical stance against colonialism and slavery. These historical events and their consequences, which continue to have an impact today, are central to the reconstruction of histories of philosophy in a number of “non-Western” contexts.

“Non-Western” philosophical traditions must also be confronted with the question of why few or no women appear in their historical narratives. The specific factors responsible for the exclusion of women must be investigated in detail for each context. The extent to which basic terms and concepts of “non-Western” philosophical traditions have been shaped by a male perspective and misogyny, and the extent to which gender roles have limited women’s intellectual activities, must both be examined. To my knowledge, such an investigation has not yet been undertaken with regard to “non-Western” philosophical traditions. It is also necessary to investigate which institutional and structural conditions have led to the exclusion of women from the narratives of “non-Western” philosophical traditions, and which theories and arguments have been used to legitimise such exclusion. Empirical studies in “non-Western” contexts may also open up new perspectives on exclusion mechanisms in Europe.

The development of methods and the discovery of new sources for reconstructing the ideas of “women philosophers” are further important aspects which connect research in “non-Western” regions with European and North American feminist philosophical historiographies. However, the challenges of methodological questions in “non-Western” regions go beyond the state of the discourse in European-North American feminist historiography of philosophy. It is striking that published European and North American histories of women philosophers show a far-reaching attachment to written texts. Although the theories and names of

women philosophers of Greek antiquity, for whom there are no extant texts and whose names are handed down in works by later philosophers, are usually included in narratives of the history of philosophy, only women who have left texts are included in accounts of later centuries. Here, a text-centred approach seems to predominate. It is therefore no surprise that the majority of detailed studies in recent years have concentrated on the period from the sixteenth century onwards, where texts written by women in a wide variety of genres are available. There has barely been any opening in the discipline of the historiography of philosophy to study non-written sources, materials, and practices.<sup>10</sup> This particular challenge now confronts research towards the reconstruction of the history of women philosophers outside Europe, especially where oral traditions were predominant. Reconstructing the history of a philosophy based on oral traditions is difficult to begin with; how can women's philosophical knowledge be recovered in such a context? It seems an almost hopeless endeavour; authorship of oral philosophies is mostly unknown, and traditions with gender-neutral languages present further complications.<sup>11</sup> However, there are narrative traditions, as well as religious or cultural practices, that were passed on only matrilineally or in female peer groups, and thus perhaps there is also philosophising that is practised only by women. This could possibly be a starting point for reconstructing knowledge specifically transmitted by women in oral traditions, which could be examined for its philosophical relevance.<sup>12</sup> This is an unusual and, moreover, tentatively explored approach to reconstructing philosophical knowledge whose outcome is uncertain. Nevertheless, feminist, European, and North American historiographies of philosophy can benefit immediately from discussions about oral philosophy, for example, by expanding source materials. In North America, this question particularly concerns the reconstruction of the philosophical knowledge of First Nations people and Black women.

From a feminist perspective, the reconstruction of the philosophical heritage

<sup>10</sup> Studies in this direction tend to emerge from *Black feminism* (see Hill Collins (1991)).

<sup>11</sup> See, among others, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's study on the Yoruba language, *The Invention of Women* (1997). Oyèwùmí shows that there are no gender-specific words in Yoruba to designate son or daughter; rather, gender-neutral terms such as "offspring" and "siblings" are used. Yoruba names are not gender-specific, nor are the *oko* and *aya*, often translated as "husband" and "wife" (29, 44f.). Likewise, the concept of "women" in the sense of a social group with shared interests and a common social position, namely as subordinate to men, did not exist in this community before contact with Europe. She writes that the "creation of 'women' as a category was one of the first accomplishments of the colonial state" (124). The uncritical transfer of English terminology to the history and culture of the Yoruba has contributed to a "patriarchalisation" of their history and culture.

<sup>12</sup> For example, a wide-ranging discourse has developed on the specific knowledge of Maori women (*Matauranga Wahine*) (see among others Jahnke (1997), and Jenkins and Pihama (2001)). The philosophical relevance needs to be investigated.

in oral traditions entails a number of new challenges that have hardly been considered so far.<sup>13</sup> But even in cases where written material exists, the reconstruction of female philosophers' theories poses specific challenges to us, since here we are confronted with text genres that are not usually considered "legitimate" sources in the prevailing discourse of the historiography of philosophy, such as poems and other literary forms,<sup>14</sup> religious texts,<sup>15</sup> hagiographies,<sup>16</sup> and letters. In recent decades, however, a number of works have appeared in feminist research on the history of philosophy which address the handling of sources and the need to include more genres of texts in the reconstruction of the history of women philoso-

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<sup>13</sup> An exception is the Sage Philosophy Project initiated by Henry Odera Oruka (1990) in Kenya in 1974, in which sages, including women, were interviewed. In this context, the American philosopher Gail Presbey is particularly committed to the inclusion of women. She specifically documents and analyses the knowledge of wise women within the framework of the Sage Philosophy Project in her works (1997; 2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2012).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Phillis Wheatley (1753–84), who was brought to North America as a slave and the first Black woman to have her poetry published, is a central figure in African-American literary history. Her work is increasingly being analysed from a philosophical perspective (see Gates (2003) among others). On Wheatley's inclusion in the philosophical canon, see the arguments in Adamson and Jeffers's "Young, Gifted, and Black: Phillis Wheatley," one of the Africana Philosophy episodes of the *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*.

<sup>15</sup> Hence, in the *Upanishads* we find the names of those women who are now considered to be the two most ancient Indian female philosophers: Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. Both are mentioned in the 6th and 8th Brahmana of the third chapter of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* as dialogue partners of the sage Yajnavalkya. Gargi is considered in Vedic literature as a great philosopher of nature and a *Brahmavadini*, a person who has great knowledge of *Brahma Vidya*. Maitreyi, a wife of Yajnavalkya, is also considered a *Brahmavadini* and participates in the dialogue. It is difficult to say if the figures from the *Upanishads* are historical persons – a significant question for the history of philosophy. In general, there is little doubt that they are historical persons. In the Islamic world, there is little documentation of the work of women philosophers, especially from early centuries. Among the names of women thinkers which have come down to us are Rābī'a al-'Adawīyya al-Qaysīyya, also known as Rābī'a of Basra (713/717–811); Fāṭima bint al-Matannā, also known as Fāṭima of Cordoba (12th century), a Sufi master and teacher of the renowned philosopher Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240); and 'Āīša bint Yūsuf al-Bā'ūniyya (ca. 1517), who is also known as a Sufi master and poet. The Islamic tradition of the African continent, particularly in the regions south of the Sahara, also has hardly any known writings by or traditions of scholarly women. In this respect, it is a fortunate coincidence that we have a number of texts by Nana Asma'u (1793–1864) from the Sokoto Caliphate (in the north of present-day Nigeria), mostly religious doctrinal poems.

<sup>16</sup> An example is the hagiography of Walatta Petros (1592–1642), a Christian nun who was given the status of a saint in the Ethiopian Coptic Church because of her resistance to the Catholicisation of Ethiopia. We have no transmitted texts from Walatta Petros herself. Our knowledge of her life, deeds, views, and statements has been handed down exclusively within the framework of a hagiography. That her resistance to Jesuit influence and the political and religious subjugation of Coptic Ethiopia to the rule of Catholicism, as well as her independence from male decision-makers, be it her husband or the king, is an expression of firm political, religious, and moral positions cannot be doubted. Nevertheless, it is not easy to decide whether a hagiography offers sufficient and reliable source material with which to justify Walatta Petros' inclusion in a history of philosophy (Galawdewos 2015).

phers. The Austrian-American historian Gerda Lerner, for example, described the methodological problems in tracing women philosophers in past centuries in the following way:

They are nearly impossible to find if we apply to them criteria we apply to male philosophers. Due to the constraints and disadvantages under which thinking women had to live and due to their isolation from institutional recognition, their work and careers look different from those of men. [...] I do not propose to elevate to the level of philosopher any women who had ideas of any kind or who pursued intellectual interests. But I think we need to be sensitive to the possibility that women's thought, just like women's art, would find different modes of expression than would men's. (Lerner 2000, 10–11)

Lerner argues that “[to] find them we have to stop looking for women in the male model” (11). The search for women philosophers must become more open and include other genres of textual production, and other practices for the transmission of thought and concepts, than the conventional male-centred historiography of philosophy. It is important to consider smaller works and messages delivered in other forms, for example, in poems like Emily Dickinson's, and even to study fragmentary, partially developed insights. One of the basic demands of a feminist historiography of philosophy is finding new source material: utilising different textual genres and a broader range of modes of expression and philosophical practices. (Alanen and Witt 2004) Philosophical treatises in the classical sense can hardly be expected from women because of structural discrimination, such as the centuries-long exclusion of women from academic professions and institutions of higher education. Women were forced by circumstances to resort to other media and literary genres to express thoughts, concepts, and theories. In this respect, the reconstruction of the history of women philosophers must examine a variety of practices and genres of philosophising.

#### **4 Conclusion**

A proper revision of the canon of the history of philosophy cannot be carried out solely from an intercultural or global perspective, but must also address and correct patriarchal structures of exclusion – in all regions of the world. Such a revision aims to do justice to women philosophers marginalised or forgotten solely because of their gender and despite the originality or relevance of their ideas. But more fundamentally, it is a matter of correcting an image of philosophy that has

been shaped to this day by male philosophers – and, consequently, by a male perspective – and which seems thereby to provide a tacit historical justification for male supremacy in the history of philosophy. In this respect, a critique and reform of the historiography of philosophy from a feminist perspective has direct implications for our understanding of philosophy. Linking the feminist perspective with an anti-racist and global perspective is thus of particular relevance. The aim must be to bring together the theoretical and methodological reflections from global and feminist research on the history of philosophy and to draw conclusions for a historiography of philosophy for the future.

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