

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Gender Identity in Action: Chinese Female Activists' Gender Repertoires in a Globalizing Context

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/590803wp>

Author

Han, Ling

Publication Date

2008-02-01

Gender Identity in Action: Chinese Female Activists' Gender Repertoires in a Globalizing Context

Ling Han¹

Chinese feminism has undergone a complex and intriguing development. Chinese women were first acculturated with Marxist women's liberation ideology during the Mao era, and in preparation for the 1995 United Nations Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, Chinese female activists were open to new possibilities of gender consciousness. The shift in Chinese gender ideologies denotes a change in the emphasis on gender sameness to difference. Embedded gender ideologies are important contributing factors to gender equality and inequality in China. This paper examines the gender consciousness adopted by the Chinese female activists and argues that "gender" (*xinbei*) is still a floating concept in China. The cultural frames of gender consciousness adopted by the female activists may depend on their social and cultural locations, and the activists personal repertoires of gender consciousness serve as a tool kit to draw from during times of organizing. This patchwork of gender consciousness allows activists to maneuver with the authoritarian government and also work with international funding agencies. The study explores the different terminologies adopted by female activists to convey the idea of "gender," and the conceptualizations are analyzed according to activists' social upbringings. The paper then discusses the prevailing gender repertoires that exist in China, and how the concept of "gender"(*xinbei*) and "social gender"(*shehui xinbei*) is conceptualized in the Chinese vocabulary and allow spaces for practical action.

The Tool-kit of Gender Repertoires

Culture (Swidler 1986; 1995; 2001) is a like a "tool box" that actors draw different pieces, even not perfectly matched ones, to fabricate the reality they believe and know. Therefore, culture in practice could be reproducing or transforming the reality depends on actors' innovative

¹ Working draft—do not cite. Please direct all queries to Ling Han, UCSD Sociology, l2han@ucsd.edu

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

creation of these cultural tools. Swidler (1995) argues that culture plays central role in social processes and is crucial for social movements. Social actors could use different cultural resources for their purpose of action, and personal identities are linked to broader frames of social actions. In this study, I employ Swidler's "tool-kit" concept to explore the pieces that Chinese female activist draw when describing her gender consciousness awakening experiences and involvement in women's organizing.

Method

The data for this project was collected during my three-month master field study in China, 2005. I incorporated mainly intensive and semi-structured interviews of twenty-six female activists and staff at four women's organizations in Beijing.² I also conducted participant observations at the organizations to observe how female activists carry out their activities. I use Cultural Revolution as a divider to categorize my interviewees into two generations (pre-1976 and post-1976)³ and examine whether different activist generation differ in their conceptions of gender.⁴ Besides Cultural Revolution, I further divide these twenty-six interviewees into three categories: Diasporic Activist, Local Activist, and Career Activist/Staff in the organization.⁵ Diasporic activists and local activists are women who serve as the directors and decision makers in the organization, but the only difference is that diasporic activists received their graduate education in foreign countries. Career Activists/Staff in the organization are women who took up administrative or clerical works in the organization. These are crude categorizations of the activists that serve as a leverage for analysis, and I recognize that activist's identities change overtime.

² The four women's organizations that I interviewed are consisted of a female migrant worker's association, a women's legal counseling agency, women's hotline, and a queer/lesbian community based organization.

³ The Chinese Cultural Revolution started in Oct, 1966 and ended in Oct, 1976.

⁴ Cultural Revolution is an extraordinarily life-shaping experience for many Chinese people, and many of these women became activists because of their experiences during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Zhong, Wang, Bai 2001). Studies on US women's movement have acknowledged that feminist generations differ in their conceptions of feminism (Whittier 1995).

⁵ The titles for these categories are temporary, and I welcome any suggestions to refine them.

Personal Characteristics and Gender Repertoires of Female Activists

The current or previous professions taken by the twenty six interviewees are described in Table 1. The different terminologies that these three groups of female activists used to describe their understanding of gender, and why they participate in women’s organizing are presented in Table 2. It should be noted that these categorizations could be viewed as a continuum of activists’ gender identity. The possible explanations to these different gender repertoires are: activists’ educational background (foreign or Chinese), the degree of interactions with the international community (funding agencies, conferences, etc), the degree of participations in women’s organizing, and activists’ professional identities (female cadres, professor, worker, etc). By further categorizing these activists into two generations using the Cultural Revolution as a time divider, we can also observe the subtle shift in gender repertoires by activists of different generations.⁶

Table 1: Professional Background of Female Activists in this Study

Type	Pre-1976 Generation	Post-1976 Generation
Diasporic Female Activists	Professor: 1	Graduate Student/ NGO director: 1
Local Female Activists	ACWF: 3	N/A
	Professor: 9	
Career Activists/ Staff in the organization	ACWF: 1 Lawyer: 1 Others: 2	Student: 7 Worker: 1

Note 1: The number represents the number of people in this study who have taken up that profession currently or previously.

Note 2: ACWF is All-China Women’s Federation, which is the Chinese Communist Party affiliated women’s organization.

Diasporic Female Activists are believers in the feminist analytical category of *gender* and women’s rights. They received graduate education in foreign institutions. During the interview, they used a language of gender that is widely recognized by the international community and called themselves feminist without hesitation. They left China after college and received

⁶ Unfortunately, I did not get to interview any post-1976 generation local female activists. This generation of activists is still in their twenties and most of them fall into the categories of Career activists/staff that do not hold decision-making positions in the organization.

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

training in Western feminist discourses. These interviewees expressed that in a foreign land, they had the opportunity to reflect upon their understanding of the Communist ideology on female emancipation and developed their gender consciousness in the Foreign academia. Their social locations in the foreign land provided them a more autonomous space to directly support or critique different gender phenomena in China. For the older generation in this category, activist engages in women and gender studies curriculum building project with her collaborators in China and is a firm believer in mainstreaming gender discourses through academic discipline building. The younger generation in this category engages in women's community building that focuses on female sexuality and do community outreach for queer youth to educate them that fluid gender identity is acceptable.

Local Female Activist is a complex group, and most activists in this category have an "amphibious" (Zhang 1999) identity as female cadre or university professors and women's organization's directors. For those activists who have some experiences in the All-China Women's Federation, the terminologies they used to describe their gender consciousness were a "fusion" of Marxist framework on women and the ideals of gender equality promoted since the UN Fourth Conference on Women in 1995. These activists could cleverly use gender languages to talk about gender mainstreaming as recognized in the international community, but when asked how they came to participate in women's organizing, they talked about the official propaganda of women's Four-Selves Spirit and Marxist framework of female emancipation to rationalize their decisions.⁷ For them, gender equality is equated with equality between men and women as promoted by the Chinese government. In their organized activities, they promote a "Socialist Women's Theory with Chinese characteristics" that incorporate the existing female emancipation framework with an international touch of gender equality.

For *Local Female Activist* who holds a professorship at the university, they often talked about the uniqueness of women's angle and the importance of Women's Studies curriculum

⁷ *Four-Selves Spirit* is one of the propaganda promoted by the Chinese Communist Party during the Fifth Women's National Representative Conference in 1983. The Four-Selves Spirit refers to: Self-esteem, Self-love, Self-respect, Self-improve.

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

building. They said that it was the moment that they realized their social status as “women” (*funu* and *nuxing*) marked the important gender consciousness awakening experiences. These activists came out of the Cultural Revolution, which under socialist ideals, they were taught to de-feminize and mirror themselves to men.⁸ However, during China’s transition to market economy in 1978, these activists realized that capitalism has brought commercialized images of women and the condition of female workers were exacerbated. Many of these activists participated in the 1995 United Nations Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing and established connections with their foreign sisters. They also told me that it was during the preparation for the UN conference that they learned about the analytical concept of “gender.” The flooding of international funding after UN conference on gender-related projects and the crowning of gender equality as part of Chinese Communist state policy provided these activists a bigger vocabulary of gender. Nevertheless, during the interview, these activists rarely referred themselves as feminist but emphasized the unique lens of women and women’s experiences. Interviewees explained that because they were embedded in the Chinese authoritarian contexts, they usually adopted a mild advocacy approach to gradually transform the government without violent confrontation. One of the local activist told me that while the diasporic activist often thought of her as “less radical,” she believed that the way to organizing in China should adopt a “middle-way approach” (*zhongyong zhidao*) in order to gain both international and governmental support.

The category of *Career Activist/ Staff in the Organization* is mostly women who do administrative or clerical works in the women’s organization. Some of these women were volunteers before taking a full-time job. Though these staff had received gender training and participated in gender workshops conducted by the foreign funding agencies, most of these women had vague conceptual understandings of “gender.” For the older generation in this category, they often resorted to languages in Marxist and Communist ideologies to talk about their gender identity. They also related experiences on gender back to their marriage and family lives to explain why they decided to work in the women’s organization. For the younger

⁸ Interviewees also described the points in their lives that their concepts of gender were transformed, such as the “iron women” ideal during Cultural Revolution and the “feminine” appeals after the economic reform.

generation in this category, they were not acculturated with Marxists ideals and had not been through the traumatic cultural experiences during Mao’s rule, they believed that their involvement in women’s organizing is to rid gender discrimination and lift the stigma attached to minority women’s group, such as rural women who migrated to the city for jobs. Younger generations of women in this category also related their gender experiences to their own sexuality while the older generations were more reserved about their love lives and sexuality in general.

Table 2: Gender Concepts adopted by the Female Activists in this Study

Type	Pre-1976 Generation	Post-1976 Generation
Diasporic Female Activist	feminist/feminism gender (<i>in the western sense</i>) women’s and gender studies	queer, sexuality, gender feminism
Local Female Activist	Marxist theoretical framework on Women, spirit of Four-selves, Gender equality Women’s studies (<i>funuxue</i>), “social gender”(<i>shehuixingbei</i>), gender mainstreaming, women’s unique angle, Female Studies (<i>nuxingxue</i>)	N/A
Career Activist/ Staff in the Organization	equality between men and women, Four-selves spirit, taking the side of the women, provide social services to women	gender discrimination, provide service to minority women’s groups

Notes: These are the concepts that activists used to answer my questions about how they come to realize their gender identity and gender consciousness.

“Gender” (*xinbei*) vs. “Social Gender” (*shehuixinbei*)

Translations of cross-cultural ideas are disjunctures in this globalizing age and could create spaces for activism. There are currently two dominate conceptualizations of gender (*xinbei*) in China: the social gender (*shehuixinbei*) and gender (*xin/bei*) in the Chinese context. “Social gender” denotes the social constructionist aspect of gender as understood in the Western feminist discourse. Gender as “xin/bei” in the Chinese sense has already embodied the social constructionist and the biological aspect of sex/gender. *Xin* means sex in Mandarin, and *bei* means difference. Even with these distinctions, the concept of “gender” (*xinbei*) in the Chinese context is an umbrella concept to mean many things. Sometimes it is equated with

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

“women/female,” sometimes alluding to socialist ideals of female emancipation, or connoting the social constructionist aspect of “gender” in a feminist context. Regardless of the incoherence in the personal understanding of gender discourses, “gender” becomes the keyword for activists seeking financial support and be connected to the global women’s movement.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Croll (2000) points out that many Asian women’s movements often emphasized their distinctive gender cultures and female qualities. In the case of China, many platforms of women’s movement often attempts to “combine both an international interest in women’s rights and culturally specific elements of femininity which cannot be adequately summarized by the English language term ‘feminism’”(Croll 2000: 139).

In this exploratory study, I discovered that different culture has its own distinctive system of gender meanings, but in a globalizing context, these gender repertoires are fused with international egalitarian ideals. While generation is one way to explain why activist adopt particular gender repertoires, what is common for all these activists is that in order to secure a space for women’s activism in China, they need to strategically manipulate pieces of gender rhetoric that are acceptable by the Chinese government and also appealing to a broader international community for supports. The still-floating concepts of “gender” in China allow activists the flexibility to create new spaces for female activism.

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

References

- Badsen, Sally and Anne Marie Goetz. 1997. "Who Needs [Sex] When You have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourse on Gender in Beijing." *Feminist Review, Debating Discourses, Practising Feminism*, 56:3-25.
- Basu, Amrita. 1995. *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 1995. *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- 2000. *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Hsiung, Ping-Chun, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (Ed.). 2001. *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*. Oxford: Berg.
- Milwertz, Cecilia. 2002. *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement*. Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.
- Ray, Raka and Anna Korteweg. 1999. "Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization and Autonomy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25:47-71.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2005. "Toward an Ethics of Transnational Encounters, or 'when' Does a "Chinese" Woman Become a 'Feminist'?" in *Dialogue and Difference: Feminism Challenge Globalization*. edited by Marguerite Waller and Sylvia Marcos. New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.
- Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51: 273-286.
- 1995. "Cultural Power and Social Movements," Chapter 2 in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans eds. *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, Zheng. 1996. "A Historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China." *Signs*

Ling Han
PhD Student, Department of Sociology, UCSD
2008 Thinking Gender Conference

22(1):192-99.

----- 1997. "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China." *Journal of Women's History* 8(4): 126-152.

Wesoky, Sharon. 2001. *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization*. London: Routledge.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 1999. *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Whittier, Nancy. 1995. *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 1999. *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Zhang, Nai-hua. 1999. "Searching for 'Authentic' NGOs: The NGO Discourse and Women's Organization in China." in *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*, edited by Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan. New York: Beg.

Zhong, Zueping, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di (ed.). 2001. *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.