

Chinese women and feminist thought: an international symposium

An international symposium on Chinese Women and Feminist Thought was held in Beijing on 22–24 June 1995, hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, funded by the Ford Foundation, and originating in the annual Philosophy Summer School organized jointly by academics from China, Britain and Australia. About fifty women participated, including a number of non-Chinese women from the UK and the USA. The objective of the symposium was to help create a dialogue between Chinese and Western women concerning feminism and the situation of women in both China and the West. It is only recently, of course, since the advent of the new 'socialist market economy' in China, the withdrawal of direct state control from many areas of Chinese life since the end of the period of the Cultural Revolution, and the opening of China to Western visitors, that such a symposium has become conceivable. Many of the papers given and the discussion groups held focused on the tensions and contradictions in the experience of Chinese women during a period of official social and cultural change.

For fifty years there has been an official ideology of sexual equality in China, backed by the bringing of women into public production on a large scale and frequently coercive education programmes to hammer the point home. Yet there still exists widespread belief in the biological basis of differences between the sexes, preference for boy children, and in some areas arranged marriage – which amount to a 'traffic in women'. With the coming of the market, women are made redundant first or not hired on the pretext (patently bogus, given the one-child policy) that their maternal role interferes with their job performance. The official policy and widespread involvement of women in work in the public sphere also seem to have had little impact on the sexual division of labour in the home, leading to the familiar 'double burden'. Hence the position of women is still seen as a social problem, and part of the motivation for this conference seems to have been an interest within intellectual circles in academic feminism in the West as a possible source of 'theory' which could address this problem.

But Western feminists refused to privilege particular moments of feminist theory over others, emphasizing instead the contradictory and diverse positions that face women, which lead to plurality in both theory and practice. Furthermore, the Chinese presentations showed contradictions and differences in the positions of Chinese women. Not only were there differences between urban and rural women (and unaddressed differences between women of different ethnic groups); but for some, economic change brought possibilities of personal autonomy and enhancement, where for others the removal of state protection produced the feminization of poverty with which we are all very familiar. Moreover, the advent of the market has led to the commercialization and commodification of female labour and the increasing use of women as objects of sexual exploitation. The comparison between the Chinese and Western participants formed a network of overlapping similarities and differences which made it impossible to speak of distinct and separately homogeneous Chinese and Western perspectives.

One of the recurrent themes was the issue of whether sexual equality or sexual difference was the right strategy for women to pursue. The official line on sexual equality had been to attempt to make women's lives as much like men's as possible, with acknowledged differences being perceived as weaknesses by a paternalistic state. Insistence on difference, however – visible in the feminine clothes of some of the younger women and heard in the desire expressed by some for more time to devote to their personal and familial lives – runs the risk of reinforcing essentialist claims, justifying exclusions from the job market. These dilemmas were familiar to all the participants, although for Western women the moment of demands for sexual equality has been in a capitalist system without the protection of a paternalist state. The appropriate moment of feminism cannot be generalized in either system. It involves making strategic decisions on specific issues. There were, however, recognizably common aims around the need to reorganize public life so that the options were not equality on men's terms or difference and discrimination.

The issue of sexual difference echoed through the debate on ethics. There was considerable interest in the so-called feminist ethic of care, often contrasted with ethical theories centred around rights and justice. Here particular context was given to discussion of the comparison between the care ethic and elements of Confucian thought. There was hot debate between those who thought Confucianism could be reformed and those who regarded it as responsible for the entrenched traditionalism with regard to women's position. Those adopting the latter view argued that women badly need a framework of rights to protect them in the face of an emphasis on sacrifice for the social good, which had been a feature of both Confucianism and the version of Chinese Marxist thought which formed the background to some of the presentations. It became clear that the masculinity which some feminist writers have detected in elements of liberal political thought required contextualizing.

The patchwork of similarities and differences was also evident in discussions of reproduction and the family. The one-child policy means that state policy reaches right into the most personal aspect of women's lives – not least in that continual abortions represent a considerable health risk for women. The procedure for allocating housing, which requires marriage, means that the heterosexual family unit is strongly privileged. The response of women was at times ambiguous. Domestic violence is being recognized as an issue, as is the restriction on women's free time imposed by domestic labour, but the commitment to the family unit still appeared strong, and most of the calls received on the women's hot line concerned not violence but the distress caused by a husband finding an alternative partner and wishing for divorce. There was a marked silence on issues of sexuality and preferred sexual practices. One man openly distributed a gay and lesbian newsletter with information on safe sexual practices, but admitted that most people who preferred same-sex partners nonetheless ended up married. The slogan 'the personal is political' did not have the resonance that it had found in the personal lives of some of the Western participants. The Chinese papers noted the role that men had played in Chinese history in promoting the cause of sexual equality. Most of the women were anxious not to be portrayed as man-haters. However, for many of us present, the position of women was not simply a social problem, but manifested itself in the acute difficulty of living alongside many of the masculinities we currently encounter.

The issue of difference has been at the forefront of feminist discourse during the last decade. Insistence on

the distinctiveness of women's experience was a response to the supposedly neutral category of the 'human', which rendered such distinctiveness invisible. Such a moment was, however, closely followed by the challenge of differences between women. The specificity of the many locations within which women are placed was felt to have been lost in descriptions of female experiences that suggested a homogeneity privileging white, Western, middle-class women. Our thinking about difference is fraught with pitfalls. The creation of categories of radical 'otherness' was a strategy of legitimation for relations of dominance, which enthusiastic endorsement of difference can serve to reinforce. We need to be able to speak about difference without reifying it into radical alterity, producing quite separate viewpoints, each distinct, internally homogeneous and *closed* to others. Encounters such as this conference, however, show the situation to be much messier, and the spatial metaphors of perspective or location to be potentially misleading. For if I am occupying one spatial location, or have one spatial perspective on the world, I cannot simultaneously occupy others, and to come to grasp alternative perspectives I need to move out of my own. But the frameworks and presuppositions I bring to understanding my experiences have materially and historically based elements common with those of others.

The process of understanding across difference is difficult to theorize. It is never complete, often unexpected, but rarely totally impossible. Recognition of shared experiences, values or political objectives can provide moments of commonality despite the specificity of very different political and social frameworks. Attention to specificity can lead to blank incomprehension, but also to critical and epistemologically progressive shifts in our patterns of theorizing. Quite apart from experiential commonalities that are discovered through discussion, women worldwide are linked in ways of which they are often not even aware, by such things as the increasing internationalization of trade and the global mobility of capital. A feminism which remains parochial stands ever less chance of understanding or confronting the forces that connect women who may be quite unaware of one another's existence and experience. The need for new forms of international understanding and for the transcending of merely localized perspectives is acute. The discussions of this symposium went some way towards meeting that need.

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