

Chinese Women's Search for Dignity and Identity in the International Community

by Ping-Chun Hsiung

Dans leur quête d'identité et de dignité à l'intérieur de la communauté internationale, les Chinoises font face à de grands défis. L'auteure de cet article explique comment la

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communauté internationale peut faciliter les échanges entre l'Est et l'Ouest. Afin que les féministes occidentales et autres groupes de femmes qui se penchent sur la situation des femmes en Chine et qui tentent d'établir de meilleures communications puissent prospérer, l'auteure identifie deux prémisses politiques essentiels.

It is important to remember that the experiences of Chinese women have been very different from those of women in North America. After World War II, whereas American women were forced to give up their jobs to returning veterans, Chinese women were pushed into the productive world after 1949. This was done in the name of "the great proletarian revolution." Female labour force participation, an acceptable measure of women's status in the West, has different implications for Chinese women. For more than 40 years, the government's official position has been that Chinese women and men were equal. Equality has meant that men and women were assumed to be substantially the same. As a result, biological differences between men and women were ignored, denied, and trivialized. This definition of equality places excessive demands on women. According to Li Xiaojiang, "Chinese women in many cases don't just hold up half of the sky. They hold up the entire sky."

Since 1949, conflicts between men and women have always been twisted into class struggles. This is especially apparent in literary writings and historiographic narratives. In Meng Yue's recent analysis of the popular story, "The White-Haired Girl," she convincingly illustrates that the relation of raper and raped is presented along the lines of class struggle. The story transforms gender oppression into class oppression. According to Meng Yue this desexualization has been especially apparent in

Yangbanxi (The Model Opera).¹ As a result, until very recently, the female character in stories often has had neither a gender identity (mother, wife, lover, etc.), nor a body, nor a gender-based perspective (Meng 135). The absence of gender as a meaningful category is significant not only when we analyze Chinese literature, but also in our understanding of Chinese women's search for identity.

Using these two analytical premises, one can easily understand why, after the economic reform, so many Chinese women start to put on make-up and be fashionable. We can also understand why many Chinese women today choose to either return to or remain in the home. According to Li Xiaojiang, these decisions should be understood in their historical context. After more than 40 years of "mental and physical exhaustion caused by the extraordinary stress of a double role" many women feel they deserve a break.

In a way, what we now see in China is a society in transition from a more monolithic and homogeneous approach to gender relations to a more heterogeneous state. Instead of imposing the concept of gender as it is defined in western feminism on China, I believe western feminists need to cultivate an ethnographic understanding in their approach to women's issues in China. That is, we need to employ an approach that doesn't treat the Chinese woman as the "Other."

Cultivate ethnographic understanding

It is really important for the international feminist community to give Chinese women enough room to define their own issues. For example, Chen Yiyun, a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, provides down to earth insights about divorce in China. Based on over ten years of work in the area of family-centered social work and women's issues, involving lots of counselling to women who are thinking about divorce, she concludes that the basic problem women encounter is not that they can't get a divorce approved by the court. Rather, the most pressing issue is the lack of separate housing units. Housing is assigned by work unit, leading to a housing shortage that makes it next to impossible for a divorcée to get separate housing. Even if she gets it, more often than not, a divorced wife will stay in the same housing compound as her ex-husband. So, many married women who are unhappy with their marriage may end up staying in the relationship, not because of inadequate legal codes, nor because of their lack of "consciousness," but due to practical concerns.

Give Chinese women enough room to define their own issues

More than 100 Chinese scholars and activists from various regions attended a four-day conference organized in November 1993 by Beijing University as a lead-up to the UN's World Conference on Women, to be held in that city in September 1995. I was really touched by the wide range of issues raised by Chinese participants, and by the way they raised them. I was also very disturbed by some of the attitudes and behaviour exhibited by a number of the international participants.

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At one session of the conference the participants were divided into small groups and asked to come up with issues they believed should be raised at the 1995 meeting. The discussion was very lively. One group proposed that all 56 of the minority groups in China should be represented at the '95 conference. Another group talked about representation and self-determination, and proposed that equal chance be given to women of different regions, various occupational backgrounds, and disparate social status to raise their voice. Among the topics the participants wanted to raise at the '95 Conference were the effects on women's health of pollution related to current industrial development, and the need for countries such as China and Thailand to achieve economic progress while avoiding the exploitation of women that has characterized economic development in Taiwan, Singapore, and Mexico throughout the '70s and '80s.

Chinese participants in various panel sessions also raised issues, challenged each other's points, and enthusiastically exchanged information and ideas. Issues raised included women's political participation after the economic reform, women's position and consciousness under planned and market economies, and the education of minority girls in the Northwest region.

What I found most exciting was the close ties between scholars, practitioners, and activists. For example, many projects are being undertaken in China by retired scholars who want to make a difference in the real world. In China, the age of mandatory retirement for female cadres² is 50, and for regular workers it is 45. Many women at the conference were retired and doing something they really cared about. For example, Wang Xinjuang, who used to work for the Women's Federation, was able to use the social resources she had accumulated over the years to establish the first women's hot line in Beijing in 1992.

Now there are similar organizations in three neighbouring cities. I feel that women of retirement age are going to make a significant contribution in years to come because they have insiders' experience, knowledge, and contacts. They know how the system functions and how to get around the system if necessary to get things done.

Some of my international colleagues made comments such as "there is no 'real feminist' in China," "all these topics are permissible topics. Nothing is really new here," "it's hard to do collaborative research with the Chinese because their training is poor." If we really want to open up dialogue between the East and West, it will be essential to combat and overcome the negative attitudes revealed by these comments.

Direct contact between the East and West

It has been disheartening for me to see that possible positive exchanges are often disrupted by misunderstanding, misconceptualization, and misbehaviour on the part of my international colleagues. It is very important that the women's groups who are going to raise women's rights issues at the 1995 UN World Conference on Women not perpetuate existing unequal power relationships between East and West or North and South.

At the November 1993 Conference at Beijing University representatives from the United Nations insisted on changes to the original program in order to accommodate their own presentation. Representatives from UN were originally invited to attend as observers, and to participate in discussion. After their arrival, however, they insisted that the conference devote the whole morning session of the second day to them. The Conference organizer complied and agreed to move the entire morning session to the afternoon. The UN people did provide some useful information. But they were intent on telling the Chinese what to do, rather than listening to what Chinese participants had to say. On the third day, a representative from International Women's Rights Action Watch insisted on changing the conference schedule yet again because she didn't like the fact that her session was delayed to the afternoon due to the changes of the previous day. She was also upset about the fact that she was scheduled to speak in the section on women and the law, rather than addressing the whole conference. She threatened to walk out unless she was given the chance to speak to all the conference participants, and the UN people said they would follow her if she walked out. This was ten minutes before the sessions were to start. I was called upon to mediate the conflict. The organizers from the Beijing University were naturally very annoyed by this, but as hosts, they felt they could not afford to offend the international representatives. Eventually, conference participants were called back from separate rooms to the Conference Hall for this woman's presentation.

The worst part for me was that I was approached to be her interpreter right before her presentation. I was very

reluctant at first because, in addition to my role as a conference participant, I had acted as interpreter three times within two days. During her presentation, she asked me three times on stage, in front of the whole audience, if I understood what she was talking about. I still remember vividly that my mind simply went blank when this happened. I managed to complete my role as interpreter because I didn't want to embarrass the organizers at Beijing University. Afterwards, I demanded an apology. I explained that "this is imperialism all over again. Unless people show some respect to Chinese women, there is no point to talk about global sisterhood." She never did apologize, however, claiming that I simply "misunderstood" her, and that it was not her intention to hurt my feelings.

It is important not jump to quick conclusions when there is disagreement. We must recognize, or at least be open to, the huge differences in socio-economic conditions and political systems between China and the West in order to minimize unnecessary misunderstandings.

In March 1993 some international delegates at a UN preparatory conference held in New York requested to stay with Chinese families during the Beijing Conference. When Chinese delegates responded by saying "it is practically impossible," some women's groups interpreted the answer as evidence that people in China have no freedom. When this incident was brought up at a local meeting I attended in April, I disagreed with the interpretation. I said that people who have not been to China don't know that most families in China do not have room to put extra beds in their houses. When I raised my point, I was asked if I am a representative of the Chinese government. I replied that this is not the issue. Besides, I asked, why is it that Westerners expect Chinese families to open up their private lives to the international community simply because the Conference is going to be held in China?

Let me provide another example from last November's Conference at Beijing University. In our small group discussion on what we would like to see happen at the '95 Beijing Conference, one feminist in our group who thought the Conference would be held at Beijing University, said that the police guards at Beijing University would have to be removed, that 24-hour meal services would have to be provided in on-campus restaurants, and that 24-hour hot water would have to be available at the guest house. Otherwise, she could easily imagine another Tiananmen event brought about by international delegates! I explained to her that the police guards were not placed by the University. I didn't have time to remind her that, in rural China, many families still don't have electricity, nor running water. Even in the cities, many ordinary families don't have private bathrooms.

The negative experiences I have described have a two-fold impact on Chinese women as they search for dignity and identity. First of all, they reinforce a nationalistic sentiment that can easily push Chinese women into holding on to anything that is perceived as Chinese,

including a cultural tradition that has not given women much respect and dignity. Secondly, such experiences make it very easy for the reactionaries or conservatives to label those Chinese women who are struggling to develop an identity that differs from the culturally and socially defined image of Chinese womanhood as "poisoned by Western imperialism." Instead, let's cultivate a healthy and mutually respectful atmosphere for international dialogue about women's rights.

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¹During the Chinese cultural revolution, all current movies, operas, and shows were denounced and abandoned in the name of bourgeois embers. Eight sets of *Yangbanxi* were put together by Jiang Qing as substitutes. They took the format of traditional Chinese opera. The underlying themes of these *Yangbanxi* were: promoting anti-imperialist sentiment, advocating courses of proletarian revolution, and mobilizing mass-movement.

²In China, the cadres are government employees (public servants), while regular workers work in state-owned commercial, service, or manufacturing sectors.

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