

## SPECIAL ISSUE: SOCIAL CHANGE AND CHINESE WOMEN

### Mainstream Discourse and the Construction of Public Understanding of Women's Employment\*

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1949年后在妇女就业知识上存在着三种主流话语。一是计划经济时代，妇女就业知识以“革命话语”来叙述，实现了对妇女参加公共领域劳动的动员；二是从计划经济向市场经济转型的过程，妇女就业知识是以“素质话语”被叙述的，其在力图将妇女推回家庭领域的过程中压低了女性劳动力的价格；三是市场化时代，妇女就业知识以“男性强势话语”被表述，显示了市场经济与父权制的有机结合。与此同时，有关妇女就业知识的女性主体性也在形成，它显示出女性自主意识及其对人权话语的使用。

**关键词：**革命话语 素质话语 男性强势话语

There have been three types of mainstream discourse relating to public understanding of women's employment since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The first was the "revolutionary discourse" that dominated the era of the planned economy. During this period, knowledge about women's employment was heavily influenced by revolutionary discourse, and women were mobilized to take up positions in virtually all areas of social life. The second occurred in the transition from a planned to a market economy. During this process, knowledge of women's employment was constructed by a so-called "quality discourse," which depressed women's wages in the course of driving them back into the home. The third important mode of discourse took place in the era of marketization, and saw knowledge about women's employment constructed by male-centered hegemonic discourse in an organic union between the market economy and the patriarchal system. Meanwhile, female subjectivity in regard to knowledge about women's employment is taking shape. At

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the same time, women's sense of autonomy in relation to understanding of employment has started to grow and exhibits self-awareness and use of the discourse of human rights.

**Keywords:** revolutionary discourse, quality discourse, male-centered hegemonic discourse

The progressive marketization of China's economy since reform and opening-up has had a profound impact on the social construction of knowledge about women's employment. Not a few researchers in women's studies have discussed the ways women deal with the work-family dilemma, seeing changes in this area as an adjustment and reaction to new trends marked by the separation of family and state and of private and public life. In this paper, we examine this general trend more closely by incorporating the changing role of the state into women's daily lives<sup>1</sup> in order to see how the retreat of the state and the arrival of the market gained legitimacy in terms of the construction of knowledge about women's employment. This requires systematic discourse and textual analysis of the way mainstream discourse creates new context and constructs public understanding of women's employment, forming a new hegemonic discourse in relation to working women. Some scholars have maintained that the state, the market and traditional Chinese culture are the three important ingredients in the formation of gender-based discourse. However, in the transition period gender-based discourse witnessed a dramatic shift from state-dominated to market-dominated discourse.<sup>2</sup> We stress that discourse involves a series of constructions of public understanding (knowledge) that ultimately exercise their power as ideology, with profound social consequences.

Since 1949, the mainstream discourses appearing in the Chinese media have provided a series of narratives about women and work. These provide us with important material for understanding mainstream discourse and knowledge about women and work and the gender power relations they express. We analyze the content of mainstream discourse and the ideologies it embodies as well as their consequences for society. Specifically, three important dimensions are discussed. First, from the historical perspective, what discourse content was reflected in the public understanding of women's employment at different historical periods? Second, what kind of power relations did the process of constructing such knowledge reflect, particularly in relation to the state, women's employers, the labor market and women themselves? Third, within the existing power structure of gender relationships, what are the future directions and space for the development of the theory and practice of feminism?

In terms of research methodology, we use textual and event analysis as the main threads to analyze the debates surrounding three major developments related to women's employment in three historical periods — the mobilization of women to work outside the home, the mobilization of women to go back to the home, and the debate on the retirement age for

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1 Zuo Jiping & Jiang Yongping, *Women's Work and Family in Towns and Cities in China's Transitional Period*.

2 Wu Xiaoying, "The Transition in Gender Discourse in the Context of Marketization."

women academics in some colleges, as well as the narrative of these events provided by mainstream discourses transmitted in the name of the government. The material used covers influential media including *The People's Daily*, award-winning films and speeches delivered by the leadership. In doing so, we attempt to apply the social research model of “discourse analysis” from the perspective of “discourse construction.”<sup>3</sup>

## **I. Mainstream Discourse and the Evolution of Public Understanding of Women's Employment Since 1949**

Public understanding or knowledge of women's employment is essentially a set of narratives related to women working outside the home and associated values as well as the main divisions of labor and the place to be occupied by the female subject. It is not just a form of discourse, but also a form of relationship. In studying the evolution of such understanding, we need to link it to the modern transformation of Chinese society, as this transformation relates women's role in China's modernization endeavor. Mainstream discourse was mainly constructed by the state, which constructed the knowledge on this subject using the discourse of modernism. Such discourse stressed liberation, progress and competition. However, the mainstream discourse of different periods tends to highlight different meanings of women's employment. The following paragraphs examine the knowledge about women's employment constructed by the mainstream discourse in the era of the planned economy, the transitional period between the planned and the market economy and the market economy.

### *1. Revolutionary discourse: women's move from the private to the public sphere through work*

The revolutionary narrative of women and work first gained legitimacy with the start of the New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century. This narrative linked women's participation in work outside the home — i.e. women's employment, with value ideas of women's liberation and equality between the sexes.

With the success of China's New Democratic Revolution in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) started to integrate women's liberation theory into its action plans by drawing on Marxist theory. The studies conducted by the Commission for Women of the Central Committee of CPC in 1943 and 1948 explicitly stated that economic independence was a necessary prerequisite for Chinese women's liberation. The women's movement had to adopt the viewpoint of “production as the centerpiece.” At least at the narrative level, the Party embarked on the process of redefining gender identity. As Deng Yingchao pointed out in *Current Work in the Chinese Women's Liberation Movement* at China's First Women's National Congress: “The CPC should explore all possible ways to mobilize and encourage Chinese women to work outside the home.... At the same time, it should give fullest consideration to women's special interests and purposefully work to eliminate any remnant

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3 Xie Lizhong, *Analysis of the Trend towards Multiple Discourses*.

feudal ideas and depraved customs left over from the old times that prevent women from participating in economic production and political and cultural activities as well as all kinds of social activities....so as to realize the goal of equality between the sexes and women's liberation." In 1954, the report delivered by China's Second Women's National Congress further pointed out that "mobilizing and encouraging Chinese women to participate in economic production is the linchpin of realizing women's liberation and equality between sexes. It should be a long-term, fundamental task." "The Party should not only encourage women to take part in industrial and agricultural production, but also encourage them to participate in education and public health as well as children's services." This was a slogan employed by the CPC to "organize and mobilize women to participate in social activities."<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, Chinese women's identity was redefined as that of "socialist workers." This new identity was once again provided with a comprehensive narrative during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, as in the lines "In this Great Leap Forward for China's socialist construction, the Chinese women's movement is also leaping into a new era. Due to the victory of China's socialist revolution and construction, and the creation of a series of public facilities like canteens, crèches, and kindergartens, many of the heavy household chores previously carried out by individual families have been turned into collective socialist tasks...the patriarchy left over from history has started to crumble. Women's thoroughgoing liberation and equality with men are becoming a solid reality."<sup>5</sup>

The narrative of this new gender identity had important symbolic meanings. "Revolutionary discourse" in the context of the construction of knowledge about working women had multiple aspects. First, seeing the oppression and exploitation of the Chinese women as part and parcel of the oppression of the whole Chinese people by feudalism and capitalism elevated women's participation in labor outside the home into a revolution against the shackles of feudalism and capitalism. Secondly, women's employment was part of "the liberation of the laboring people;" "labor" was the fundamental virtue of a socialist citizen, and to engage in labor was to occupy the most highly valued position in society. Women during this period did not enter the public sphere as women but as socialist workers. Thirdly, a series of laws and regulations and institutions spread the narrative of public understanding of women's work. On the eve of the establishment of the PRC, the constitutional document *The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* solemnly declared that "The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life." The media campaigns launched by the central government for the new *Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China* in 1953 provided a vivid portrayal of women's use of their new rights to throw off the control of the feudal system and male

4 Institute of Women's Studies of the All-China Women's Federation, ed., *Reference Materials for the Seminar on Fifty Years of Theoretical Studies on Chinese Women*.

5 "Fully Tapping into Women's Wisdom in Socialist Construction," p. 1.

dominance and be masters of their own fate. The constitutions approved by the National People's Congress in 1954, 1975, 1978 and 1982 explicitly stipulated that women should enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic and social life, with the latter two further stipulating equal pay for equal work. Fourthly, the government used effective comparisons to draw a demarcation line between revolution and backwardness, denouncing "enfettered," "feudal" and "bourgeois women's lifestyles." Its campaigns against "negative examples" employed a variety of effective media strategies for the revolutionary mobilization of women. As Deng Yingchao said, "The CPC should purposefully work to eliminate any remnant of feudal ideas and depraved customs left over from the old times that prevent women from participating in economic production and political and cultural activities as well as all kinds of social activities." Subsequently, a string of political movements made such discourse a touchstone of political commitment, and criticism of the "imagined" lifestyle of the bourgeois gentlewoman became an important part of the expression of revolutionary content during this period. Fifth, under the slogan "women hold up half the sky" the media raised the social value of working women through a constant parade of symbolic and formulaic images of socialist women workers: dashing young female soldiers, textile workers, model workers, trade union members, steelworkers, electricians, etc.

Revolutionary discourse produced "revolutionary" effects. Millions of Chinese women stepped out of their homes to participate in outside work. Statistics show that in 1949, the number of female workers working in enterprises owned by the whole people was only about 600,000. But by 1953, it had risen to 2.132 million. Thereafter, it increased each year, reaching 8.1 million by the end of 1958 and peaking at 10.087 million in 1960.<sup>6</sup> In terms of women's identity, women, especially those in urban areas, were identified as socialist workers instead of stay-at-home wives and mothers. Chinese women were socialized by the arrangements of their organizations. At the same time, women became economically independent and their earnings became an important source of family income.

## 2. *The discourse of quality: working women go back home and country girls go to the city*

The 1980s witnessed the transition from a planned to a market economy in Chinese society, a transition which led to an important re-alignment of interests. New narratives emerged for all kinds of knowledge, and the previous revolutionary discourse became "ultra-leftist." First, the reconstructed narrative of women's work presented the image of "a good woman" and "a good mother," which gained legitimacy by criticizing the previous construction of women as "socialist workers" rather than real "women." Such discourse as "Be a true woman" and "Rediscover woman" repositioned women within the family. "Women should go back home" followed naturally. In 1983, *Shanghai Economy* put forward the proposition that "women should go back home." In 1984, another Shanghai-based magazine, *Society*, initiated a debate over whether women should sacrifice their own careers for their husbands. Discussion shifted

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6 Institute of Women's Studies of All-China Women's Federation and Research Office of Shanxi Women's Federation, ed., *Statistics on Chinese Women*.

from the need for women to go out to work to the “division of labor” within the family, changing the issue from the public to the private domain, and from women’s liberation to “asserting each individual’s identity in a marriage.” Shortly after came the narrative of periodic employment of women, the central thesis of which was family harmony and the idea that arrangements for replacing female employees of child-bearing age would free up positions allowing more people to work. According to a study conducted in 1992, 72.87 percent of urban women believed that women should sacrifice their own careers for their husbands’. This finding strongly suggests that family carries much more weight for women in China than for men and that they devote much more time and energy to it.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, with the discourse of “efficiency,” “growth” and “raising the quality of the whole Chinese people,” people started to view the high rate of employment of women as a “problem.” The *People’s Daily* editorial on Women’s Day in 1997 claimed that “the competition between nations in today’s world is fundamentally a competition over the quality of the people of each nation. The quality of the women of a nation reflects the quality of the people of that nation.” Calls followed for “raising women’s quality comprehensively,” which was assumed to be low. From this perspective, even if women were working outside the home, their work was devalued because of their “low quality.”

Under the influence of the quality discourse narrative, a large number of women workers were laid off. At the same time, a steady stream of country girls flocked into the cities and provided cheap labor for China’s manufacturing industry. In the post-80s period, the total number of women in the workforce remained stable but the income gap between male and female employees widened. Statistics showed that the total number of female employees in the three northeastern provinces of China and the municipalities of Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai totaled 7.67 million, accounting for nearly 26 percent of China’s total female workforce. The vast majority of them were employed by state-owned enterprises (SOEs). By the year 2000, the total number of female employees in the six regions had fallen to 4.76 million, decreasing by nearly 40 percent. As a result, the proportion of female employees in these regions fell to 12.78 percent of the national total. Meanwhile, the number of female workers shot up in the southeast, due to the fact that privately-owned and overseas-funded enterprises in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong started to employ a vast number of female workers. By 1982, these four provinces boasted 8.3 million female workers, or about 28.1 percent of the national total. By the year 2000, this number had jumped to 18.17 million, or 48.8 percent of the total. In 1990, more than 28 million female workers were working in manufacturing, accounting for 80.34 percent of China’s total female workforce. Among them, 42.6 percent were registered as being from the countryside. By the year 2000, more than 31 million female workers were employed in manufacturing, taking up 85.7 percent of the total female workforce; 63.3 percent of this number had rural registration.<sup>8</sup> Over the same period,

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7 Xiong Jingming, “Chinese women’s family status in the 1990s,” p. 140.

8 Li Ruojuan, “Female Workers—A Reborn Social Class.”

the income gap between male and female employees continued to widen. A 1990 national survey of Chinese women's social position revealed that the income of female employees in China's cities and towns was only 77.4 percent of that of male employees.<sup>9</sup> The subsequent year 2000 national survey revealed that the income of female employees had fallen further, to 70.1 percent of that of male employees. This means that the disparity between the rates of pay for male and female employees had widened by 7.3 percentage points.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *The hegemonic discourse of male superiority: the debate over women's retirement age*

The establishment of the hegemonic discourse of male superiority was closely connected with males' advantaged positions. Such discourse was normally presented in policy language in formulas that could not be changed. Around the year 2000, the influence of such male-centered hegemonic discourse found its fullest expression in the discussion and debate on the retirement age of women academics and cadres. In 2006, Capital Normal University (CNU) released a document entitled *Guidelines on the Retirement of Faculty of Capital Normal University* which explicitly stipulated that "for CNU faculty, the retirement age is sixty for male faculty members and fifty-five for female faculty members." This implied the termination of the 16-year old policy under which all professional and technical personnel, regardless of sex, retired at sixty. Around this time, other colleges in Beijing followed suit. Women academics stood up against this biased policy; for example, the Capital Association of Women College Professors proposed to the Beijing Municipality Political Consultative Conference, and the Women and Children's Committee of Beijing Municipality Political Consultative Conference advanced a collective bill, both requiring that male and female faculty should retire at the same age.

Faced with this proposal and other forms of resistance, the leadership of the Beijing Human Resources and Social Security Bureau responded in an arrogant and unyielding manner: "You [the Women and Children's Committee of the Beijing Municipality Political Consultative Conference] should not propose any such bill hereafter. Policies of this sort are not determined by the Beijing municipal government; the *Guidelines* was issued jointly by the State Council and the Ministry of Social Security and Human Resources. According to the stipulations of the *Provisional Measures for the Treatment of Old, Weak, Invalid and Handicapped Cadres* published in 1978, the retirement age for male cadres of Party and government organs, mass organizations, enterprises and public institutions is sixty and the retirement age for female cadres is fifty-five. In 1983, the State Council released *Provisional Measures for the Retirement of Senior Experts*, which stated that the the retirement age for senior experts should in general conform to national standards. However, with the approval of the relevant government offices, the retirement age could be extended in a small number of cases if required by the job provided the cadre concerned was fit for normal work and

9 Tao Chunfang & Jiang Yongping, *Overview of Chinese Women's Social Status*, pp. 84-89.

10 All-China Women's Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics of China, "Statistics on Chinese Women's Social Status (No. 2)."

had agreed to the extension. Applications for reappointment of women who had passed the retirement ages should be reviewed and approved on a yearly basis.” A series of similar disputes received the same boilerplate responses. When their opponents deployed the writ of the central government, the women who raised these questions were powerless.

There were some important underlying principles behind the cut-off point of fifty-five years of age. The first concerned economic interests. As a male cadre once said: “I am perfectly aware of the fact that the substantial interests underlie the issue of retirement age. For example, if a senior female expert or cadre retires one year earlier, she will lose allowances ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 *yuan* a year. However, I am powerless to change that. It’s the policy.” Clearly, the logic of this argument was that no further explanation would be needed as long as this was government policy.<sup>11</sup> In fact, colleges located in Beijing but not funded by the Beijing municipal government were still implementing the 1990 *Notice on the Retirement Age of Senior Experts*, which stipulated a retirement age of sixty for senior female academics and cadres. But the faculty of CNU was quite a different matter. There, the majority of female faculty were back at the podium after their retirement as “extended appointments,” “return appointments” or “external appointments.” These imply that the talents of these women lecturers were needed by the universities, and the women themselves also needed to have their own teaching posts. Another important underlying rationale for this policy was raising the quality of teaching staff. Our survey shows that the decision to force female faculty to retire at the age of fifty-five was, to a very large extent, a response to the pressure of higher education evaluation by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of this evaluation was to rank China’s universities so that universities in different tiers received different amounts of funding. One of the most important prerequisites of the evaluation program was the percentage of PhDs in the faculty of each university. Since the CNU had a shortage of teaching vacancies, their only option was to ask female faculty members to retire, even at the cost of promising to maintain their full salary. Some of them were labeled as “low quality” because they did not have doctorates; ultimately, retirement was being used to force them out of their posts to create a vacancy. The third underlying rationale behind enforced retirement was the discourse of competition. In the face of male-centered hegemonic discourse, women professors who had the position and courage rose to defy the biased policy, but a male discourse of competition began to circulate underground: “Isn’t it wonderful to be retired at the age of fifty-five? You can enjoy your full salary and get another job, so you’ve got more time and more money than when you were in your post. Those who are competent keep quiet about this policy; those who are making a scene are those who are not.” Resistance became “making a scene”; those who resisted were incompetent. Such labeling defused the most eloquent discourse of the collective resistance. The result was that the policy requiring the female faculty to retire at fifty-five in universities and colleges funded by the Beijing municipal government was

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11 Cai Min, “CNU Ends the Same Retirement Age for Men and Women.”



implemented smoothly.

To sum up, the construction of knowledge about women's employment in the post-1949 era was diverse. At least three mainstream discourses existed. The first was in the era of the planned economy, when public understanding of women's employment was gained through "revolutionary discourse" whose central idea was that women should be mobilized to participate in work outside the house. The second mainstream discourse, the "discourse of quality" took place in the transition from the planned to the market economy. During this period, the public understanding of women's employment derived from the narrative of this "discourse of quality," the purpose of which was to send women back to their homes or drive down the value of their labor. The third mainstream discourse was expressed in the form of "male-centered hegemonic discourse," which displays the integration of the market economic system with the patriarchal system. In this phase, male hegemony no longer needed to conceal itself. The three forms of discourse sometimes overlap, but in each period one is dominant. Every narrative involving knowledge about women's employment is constructed on the basis of a key event relating to women's employment and involves important values and state-sanctioned ideological beliefs regarding such things as the role of women, the significance of women's employment and the relationship between women and the state.

## II. Subject, Knowledge and Power Relationships

There can be no doubt that discourse serves as more than a means of communication; it is also a tool or medium of power relationships. Discourse exhibits power relationships. It is through discourse that the balance of power between the groups to which the speaker belongs is revealed. This is because any utterance involves a complex ramification of historical power relationships between speakers invested with a certain social standing and listeners who accept that standing to a greater or lesser extent.

The postmodernist scholar Lyotard has pointed out that knowledge and power are two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what should be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government. In his view, the game of discourse has two principles. The first is that to speak is to fight and that speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics; the second, that the observable social bond is comprised of language "moves." The insignificant "self" or "individual" exists in a fabric of complex and mobile social relations. In Lyotard's words, "People are always located at 'nodal points'...through which various kinds of messages pass...No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the message that traverse and position him as sender, addressee or referent....Or more simply still, the question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game, the game of inquiry. It immediately positions the person who asks, as well as the addressee and the referent asked about: it is already the social bond."<sup>12</sup>

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12 Jean Francois Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, p. 14.

The most important question in comparing the discourse of revolution, the discourse of quality and male-centered hegemonic discourse is: who is the subject in each narrative? And how did the audience respond to these narratives? Women's subjectivity and objectivity have produced women's ever-changing working lives and enriched the significance of their participation in the public sphere.

*1. Revolutionary discourse liberated a generation of working women*

The author's interviews with a large number of old workers show the generation of working women who grew up amid revolutionary discourse feel that the social roles they had once played were the most important part of their lives. Their memories and narratives seldom mention the hardship of their lives, but focus on scenes for politicized life. A series of revolutionary discourses epitomized by women's liberation and gender equality molded a generation of women for whom work was a joy and their tasks an honor. The majority felt pride as they looked back at their working lives; they don't feel that they failed to be "good women," but rather feel satisfied with their work achievements. It was this revolutionary discourse and the series of new images of women it created that brought them, as socialist workers, a brand new type of working life that freed them from their traditional roles in the private domain.<sup>13</sup> Although women were not the major players in constructing this revolutionary discourse, participation in activities outside the home endowed their lives with a meaning utterly different from that of their mothers and provided a model for the next generation. Our study further found that they could derive a strong sense of pride from retelling their work history, and used it to cope with the pressures exerted by the "quality discourse" introduced since reform and opening up. This suggests that revolutionary discourse chimed in with the self-identity of this generation of working women even in today and became a force encouraging them to keep going.

*2. Discourse on "raising women's quality" highlights the dual function of gender and class*

The discourse narrative of "raising women's quality" not only reflects the expectations of women generated by mainstream discourse but is also a class discourse reflecting the arrogance of "high-quality" cultured people and their scorn for those who are "low-quality" and poorly educated. Under the impact of gender and class discrimination, laboring women have to bear the social consequences: they have to go out to work, and have to work for low wages. The subject or framer of this quality discourse is the state power that champions the logic of the market economy, the owners who operate market capital and even some women's groups. This discourse is founded on human capital theory; its seeming stress on raising the quality of women has a hidden agenda, that of driving down the cost of female labor and of all "low-quality" workers.

Faced with the logic of the market, the voice of the female subject rose in protest; but the women used the logic of modernity and emphasized respect for the rights of the individual.

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13 Tong Xin, *Alienation and Resistance—Studies on the History of the Work of Chinese Women Workers*.

They distilled the narrative of public understanding of women's employment into a single thought: whether women should go back to the home (whether they should work) should be up to women themselves, as one of the basic human rights women were entitled to enjoy.<sup>14</sup> The idea that some women "voluntarily chose to go back to home" was construed as "the fact that society has more space for choice is a breakthrough compared to the past model, in which women had no choice." Women were the subject or agent of choice and not the object.<sup>15</sup> "Individual rights and individual choice" thus became the choice of the female subject in combating mainstream discourse. The right of women to participate in the public domain that had been championed by revolutionary discourse had become a matter of women's right to choose freely between the public and the private domain. Among these voices of resistance, women as a whole were further divided into many sub-groups on the basis of individual difference: successful female professionals, white-collar women, country girls working in factories and laid-off women workers were all subjects with different interests and employment choices. Hence individual political orientations became increasingly diversified and complex as a result of the overlapping of gender and class identities.

*3. Open ascendancy of male rights: an interest contest among individuals, employing organizations and the state*

The Beijing municipal government's order that women academics should retire at fifty-five signified the emergence into the light of day of male-centered hegemonic discourse. The debate itself was quite confused. On the one hand, opponents of the order stressed the development of women's human capital resources and the fact that this waste of talent constituted a serious loss to the state. Some scholars even argued that the order had no legal validity. On the other hand, the argument that female academics and mid-level women cadres should be able to retire at the same age as their male counterparts was not widely accepted. Many critics argued that the opposition to the measure was actually the work of a small band of women fighting for their own interests, or that it would lead to interest divisions among women.<sup>16</sup>

*Chinese Women Daily* reported this event in the words of a woman professor at CNU:

Men and women invest the same amount in education. If women are required to retire five years earlier than men, this is a loss to the state and the individual. From the individual's perspective, wages before retirement are much higher than after retirement. In retiring five years earlier than men, women forgo any future wage rises so that the base wage on which their pension is calculated is lower than that of men in the same situation. Because their length of service is five years' shorter, the salary equivalent on which their pension is calculated is five percentage points lower than that of men in the same situation. If they live to eighty, it's

14 Li Yinhe, "My View on 'Letting Women Go Back Home'."

15 Tan Shen, "Who Makes the Choice?"

16 "Extending the Retirement Age—Pro or Con? Deputies Voice Their Concern"; Cai Dingjian, "Equal Retirement Age Is a Constitutional Right."

easy to see the extent of women's losses. From the standpoint of the government, which will be under pressure from old age and social security payments, the fact that women will stop contributing to and accumulating old age insurance and will get their pensions five years earlier mean that the great pressure of an aging population will put unprecedented pressure on pension funding. As women retire five years earlier than men, the employment costs for their employers and the state are higher than men's. At present, the average life expectancy in Beijing exceeds eighty years, and women live three years or more longer than men on average. If women join the workforce after they graduate from college or get a master's or PhD degree and then retire at fifty-five, this means that women can only work for between twenty-six and thirty-two years and will be retired and out of the workforce for twenty-seven years. In the long run, this has adverse effects on the training of talented women and on truly equal employment for men and women."<sup>17</sup>

The way this woman professor linked up women's individual interests with those of employers and the state provides a rationale for their resistance; it indicates that women's interests overlap with those of their employers and the state, forming an arena of discourse contest. In fact, it is precisely in this area between the employer and state interests that male power was openly expressed and gained legitimacy by virtue of employers' interests and state policy.

### III. Autonomous Discourse Generating New Knowledge about Women's Employment

In a situation where mainstream discourse on women's employment is increasingly characterized by male power, women's resistance has also become more overt and public. In particular, women's media targeted male mainstream discourse, endeavoring to create new forms of knowledge about women's employment. This implies that male-centered hegemonic discourse is creating its own antithesis: an autonomous discourse on women's employment. In today's globalized world, this is a completely different discourse. The following section of this paper addresses issues concerning the possibility of shifting from a male-centered hegemonic discourse system to a rights-based discourse system of equality between the sexes, as well as the driving mechanisms and possible problems in this process.

#### 1. *Women elites form the major group providing new knowledge about women's employment*

Women's Federations, some media outlets targeted on women's issues and women intellectuals, National People's Congress (NPC) deputies and Political Consultative Conference members have gradually converged as a major force speaking for women, drawing on the rights-based discourse of equality between the sexes to legitimate their arguments. This has made possible the creation of an autonomous discourse on knowledge about women's employment, but there are some potential problems.

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17 Cai Min, *op. cit.*

*Chinese Women Daily* is the main media organ presenting this autonomous discourse. On the one hand, it allows a group of extremely talented women including high-ranking cadres, scientists, entrepreneurs and managers to have their say. On the other hand, the Women's Federation organization's use of the power of the media to set the direction in relation to women's employment presents certain contradictions. On the one hand they support human rights and call for equality between the sexes, but on the other, under the pressures of marketization and male-centered hegemonic discourse, the narrative of women's employment is still controlled by market forces. For example, the current promotion of "home services" overemphasizes training and evaluation of qualifications, following a covert "quality discourse," but rarely mentions basic rights such as the minimum wage standard, occupational health and safety or labor insurance.<sup>18</sup>

The key issue here is sorting out the true nature of women's employment at the level of knowledge. Entering the workforce is women's first step into the public domain; that being so, women should have the universal principles and rights that belong to the public domain. To achieve this goal, women's elites and the relevant women's organizations should purposefully work together to construct a discourse on equal labor rights for both sexes, the right to equal pay for equal work and the right to basic social security. Within mainstream discourse, they should oppose any form of differential treatment.

## 2. *Highlighting women's interests in the context of competition between multiple discourses*

If we acknowledge the logic of the market economy and assert women's individual rights under this logic, then rights-based discourse will indubitably become an important discourse resource for women to protect their rights.

Marketization has unquestionably deepened divisions among women. Gender identity is no longer the main form of identity; other factors like social class, urban versus rural registration and age are now incorporated in gender identity. A system of multiple discourses has thus come into existence. The transmission of traditional mainstream discourse via mainstream media outlets has started to be challenged by a new medium—the Internet. As a result, a multitude of interest groups are making themselves heard in this way. In the competition between these discourses, one can observe the competition among the interests of the state, the employing organization, the family, men, and women's groups as well as individual women. Two basic interest types have been identified by economic sociology. The first is family interest. As the family is an economic unit, the construction of knowledge about women's employment should be linked to the connection between women's work and the state's input into childcare.<sup>19</sup> This links gender to family and state and forms an important aspect of the construction of knowledge about women's employment. The second type of interest is women's interest. When women enter the labor market, their consciousness of their

18 Huang Qingyi, "Taking Advantage of Opportunities, Promoting Home Services and Women's Employment."

19 Richard Swedberg, *Principles of Economic Sociology*, pp. 199-200.

individual interests keeps rising, enabling us to construct a discourse on women's independent economic rights independent of the knowledge system of the state, employers and family to which they are subject. This may facilitate dialogue among different systems of discourse and help provide a narrative of women's rights under the principle of "equality" for which women have been striving.

### 3. *Establishing broad consensus*

The rights-based discourse is not only adopted in the field of gender interests, but also in those of various interests deriving from the urban-rural divide and the rights and interests of labor, displaying the overlapping of the gender issue with social class, the urban and rural division, etc. In the context of rights-based discourse, not a few men are standing alongside women, forming a powerful alliance. Developing a consensus on human rights discourse and establishing a union to combat male-centered hegemonic discourse will be an effective action strategy.

### Notes on Contributor

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