

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THREE DECADES OF CHINESE WOMEN. STATE, FAMILY, WOMEN: COMMENTS ON THE LAST TWO DECADES OF WOMEN OR GENDER RELATED SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

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As China experienced a socialist revolution, the present hierarchy of research in the field of Chinese women studies cannot stray from concern with the state and the family. Nevertheless, the present popularity of this realm of study challenges traditional sociological understandings and, in a period of social transition, offers abundant new theoretical resources to understand the relationship between the state, the society and the individual in contemporary China. This article attempts to give a perspective of those resources and relies on findings reported in sociology-related publications on the Chinese mainland.

1. *Theoretical and Conceptual Construction to Understand State, Society and Women*

To set up a convention of analytical concepts is an important tool to expound on the production and reproduction of Chinese power relations between genders. As of now, the process implies theories and concepts that incorporate the following:

A. *Sexual Division of Labour – Public and Private Spheres – Sexual Identity: Breaking the Stalemate in Our Understanding of the Division*

The concepts of gender division of labour, public and private spheres and sexual identity are important analytical tools. They expose the gender ideology that conceals women's labour and maintains women in subordinate social status both at home and outside.

- Sexual Division of Labour and the Unbroken Hierarchical Order: Jin Yihong, who has studied the early stages of industrialization in villages, found that gender division of labour resulted in the best

employment opportunities for male workers. The process of development of township and village enterprises led to industrialization on the model of “leaving the earth without leaving the village”. Non agricultural employment opportunities, even though promoted under the slogan of “equality in the household”, were in fact distributed according to an inescapable traditional pattern, wherein “man comes first, woman comes second; elder comes first, younger comes second; relatives come first, outsiders come second”. Thus, males seized the overwhelming majority of non agricultural positions. The hierarchical order may be described as follows: males always occupy the best positions, females forever stepping behind. The evolution of gender division of labour, alongside changes in the economic structure, implies a readjustment of such distinctions. The gender-based division of labour imperceptibly regulates gender interests. Thus, males always enjoy greater advantages in this regard compared to females. This has become the norm in the gender division of labour (Jin Yihong, 1998).

- The Theory of the Market Using the Patriarchal System: With the evolution towards the capitalist mode of production, and with the division of work within the household and the gender distinction overlapping, the transformation of the Chinese market reveals a threefold pressure on females: pressure on the body, pressure within the household and pressure in the work system. Pun Ngai studied the case of the “Working Sister” Dagong mei. The use of the term “sister” reveals even more the sexual orientation of female labour under those peculiar circumstances: Women workers are recruited in factories not only because they are outsiders who have left the countryside, but also because of their gender, as females are said to cost less than males and to be easier to manage and to control. The body of a woman is generally fantasized as being more obedient, having more endurance and being more suitable for operating some plant machinery (Pun Ngai, 1999, 2005).
- A Gender Identification Bypassing the Public/Private Duality: Pu Yaxin uses litigation of women’s rights to illustrate an unceasing “privatization” of legal cases. This means the offender “strategically” uses the principle of private sphere with the “tacit agreement” of society. Because legal cases tend to become “personal” or “family affairs”, the nature of the offence evolves. The law is only used in the public realm. “Privatization” of disputes thus ejects “law” from its scope. The female identity in the private sphere then loses the binding force of the law. While “personal relations” are constructed in

different fields, females in the public realm find themselves in an isolated position where the law exists only nominally (Pu Yaxin, 2005). The problem is the same for land distribution. Even if the law guarantees gender equality in the distribution of the village property, the land distribution system fails to provide divorced women a fair share of the land (Zhu Ling, 2000). Because division of capital still uses the household as reference unit, the distribution of assets remains bound by gender discrimination (Li Xiaoyun, Dong Qiangdeng, 2006).

- The “Men Working, Women Farming” Theory or the Feminization of Agricultural Labour: With practically every family influenced by the speed of social change, the sexual division of labour has turned into “men working, women farming”. Women in villages have already become the main force of agricultural production. This is particularly true in the less developed areas where this new form of labour division not only echoes the traditional “man outside, woman inside” norm, but promotes the measure to shake off poverty through the adoption of the slogan “one family, two jobs”. The feminization of agricultural employment is based on the high degree of mutual dependence between husband and wife as well as on the influence of the traditional conception of shared duty (Zuo Jiping, Song Yiqing, 2002).

B. *The Pluralism of Relation Between State and Gender*

In studying the relations between state and gender, research on socialism and woman is the key focus.

- The Theory of “Desexualization”: This theory holds that the equality between men and women proposed by socialism is an equality of duty; therefore, women’s liberation remains instrumental. The Chinese women’s emancipation serves the liberation of the nation and of the classes and therefore also the practice of socialism. It is a top to bottom movement under the guidance of communist leaders. The purpose of women’s liberation lies in the attainment of rights for women who have been oppressed as a people and exploited as a class. It implies mutual obligation for women and the state to resist foreign imperialism and global capitalism. Equality between men and women and individual liberation of women are not only separate, but totally different from the western conception. When emancipation and sense of duty are considered to be compatible, woman’s liberation is the “national” norm for both men and women. The urban couple’s gender discrimination comes about through a double

standard: outside the home everybody is a “national”, within the family “man masters the outside, woman masters the inside”. Chinese women’s problem is to simultaneously perform both family and national obligation and responsibility. Thus, the burden of Chinese women is threefold: duty toward the nation, running one’s home and supporting a family. The contradiction between the nation and the family determines the boundaries of individual emancipation for both men and women. (Zuo Jiping, 2005)

- The Theory of the “Collectivization of the Soul”: This study focuses on socialism and women in the countryside using their experiences, feelings and memories of the process of collectivization. Women in the rural areas are an important target to be mobilized. Their participation symbolizes the specificity, meaning and degree of achievement of the Chinese revolution. Thus, rural women’s souls are “collectivized”. This part of history reappears through sickness, raising kids and food issues. Rural women receive the dominant ideology of “revolution – liberation”. In the process of being instrumentalized, they nevertheless have a feeling of “emancipation” stimulating their spirit. Hidden behind this is the dominating relation of symbolic power between state and society, including masculine domination. (Guo Yuhua, 2003; Gao Xiaoxian, 2005)
- Narratives and Discourse Theory: According to this theory, the policy of equality between men and women diffused by the Chinese political orthodoxy is mere propaganda. Nevertheless, because of this policy, women realized a change in their identity, from a history written by others to a self conscious feminine discourse. After three decades of national construction, the party and the nation acquired a totally new narrative of female gender identity. This assigned women a new role in a society of workers. Through the efforts of two generations, the new narrative of women’s independence has been written. They have become independent individual workers. (Tong Xin, 2003) The social mobilization planning period and the political meaning given to women’s employment provided a solid foundation for the development of urban women’s employment and the subsequent rise in their economic and social status. The traditional sexual division of labour, “man masters the outside, woman masters the inside”, is therefore imperceptibly evolving. The political legacy of Chinese government attempts to improve women’s employment and to promote sexual equality in a planned economy should therefore be recognized. (Jiang Yongping, 2003)

C. *The Complex Relationship Between Family and Women*

Family in the field of women/gender sociological studies holds a contradictory position. On the one hand, relations between women and matrimony/family show a great deal of collective and emotional values. But those values are neglected by society even if many academics summon the public to highly esteem them. On the other hand, ontologically, women only have to be freed from the “natural role” of breeding later generations to be able to escape from the last citadel of gender distinction. This role within the family indeed expels women outside of the public realm. Behind this contradiction we find several theoretical explorations.

- The Theory of the Asynchrony of Sexual Development: Zhang Lixi figures that gender relations in the family are complex. Women, being educated, inculcate thoughts of gender equality. When dealing with housework and marital relations they make an intense demand for equality. But the male half of the population conserves a strong bias for the husband’s authority. This constitutes one important element fracturing the relationship among couples in contemporary China (Zhang Lixi, 2006).
- The Theory of “Interests of the Family Conceals Gender Interests”: Chinese culture stresses the importance of family. Women in the household submit themselves to the division of labour in a spirit of self sacrifice, allowing the husband to expand his role. She contributes to the overall increase of the family’s social status and receives recognition from the husband. When the household becomes the fundamental unit to respond to social evolution, scarcity of resources and all sort of structural restrictions, it is the place where positive and creative strategies are developed and used. Those strategies give priority to family interests to the extent that gender considerations simply vanish. (Tong Xin, 2005)

2. *Individual Initiatives: On Women Experience*

When studying women’s experience, sociological concepts can be reconstructed as if the development of female career could be redefined as the increase of one’s resources in political, economical and social relations. No matter the formal status of those activities, women had already acquired a space for self development. (Tong Xin, Pu Yaxin,

2004) While state economic policies put direct or indirect pressure on women and families, responses of individuals and families may counteract those policies. (Zhou Yanling, Kai Seling, 2004)

Two Coexisting Development Paths: Alienation and Resistance

The road to socialist sexual equality brought complex influences on the Chinese woman: on the one side, state, market and family alienate women, and, on the other side, women also gain incentive and improvement. This is the picture of the history of working women since 1949 (Tong Xin, 2003).

In a market driven economy, while the work pressure on the white collar working field suppresses the consciousness of differences between genders, women can also get from their work a sense of achievement, the concept of independent striving, without the gender consciousness. What is perceived as the “desexualization” of the job market is the alienation of women in the process of capitalist labour. But at the same time it is at the very heart of their independence. (Zhu Jiangang, Tan Kai, 2001) The resistance of the “working sisters” is based on their experience as a class. “Working sisters” as a group still has to resist the eroding capacity of the state and the market. Those personal experiences request the concrete conscience of their own social status. Their social struggle is the worker’s resistance against institutions and capital. It is also how women challenge the patriarchal system. (Pun Ngai, 2005). Some scholars even assume that female workers possess all the features of a new social stratum (Li Ruojian, 2004).

Extension of the Female Experience

A study of 50 female administrators in villages, focusing on their personal experiences in the broader perspective of social evolution, shows that the women have several ways to “break through” from their original social status: the traditional way of “being an activist”, the “reciprocity of mutual help between relatives” and newer options like “success due to competences”, “extended family strategies”, “taking opportunities” and so on. The motivations behind their success lie in their willingness to “stand out” and by the “combativeness” in their direct personal experience of gender inequality. This means that even if the reform in Chinese rural area did not undermine neither the duality between public and private sphere, nor the existing hierarchy of the value system, it still did transform to a certain extent the division

between sexes. The influence of women in the village public realm is increasing (Jin Yihong, 2002).

Studies on the dual process of women accessing the internet and of internet entering the world of women show that the virtual characteristic of the net fulfilled the desire of women to get rid of the negative experiences of their sexual identity, to the point that it offers the possibility to construct a new psychological shelter. Internet as a social situation offers a new psychological space for gender identity construction. With internet, the gender hidden behind a screen, women are allowed to undertake reconstruction. This overthrow of sexual stereotypes and of the social structure of sexual attitudes leads to these women being obsessed by their websites. Those websites become safety belts between themselves and their social gender (Yang Yiyin, Wang Gan and alii, 2004).

3. *Methodological Contributions*

Roughly, we can call the period from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, the first phase of gender studies in post-reform-and-opening China. It led to the consideration of socially sensitive issues such as, female labour, matrimony or family. However, it did not reach the level of a “field of study”. The second phase runs approximately from 1994 to 2000, corresponding to the important moment of the opening of the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 which greatly fostered reflections in Chinese women studies. This was when female issues were theorized and gender perspectives increasingly gained prominence. This process of theorization borrows from basic concepts and theories of social sciences. From the turn of the century to the present day, ideas of social sexual distinction are extensively used and gender perspectives channel into every aspect of sociological studies. This phase of “sexualization” of sociological issues challenges the traditional positivist sociological methodology.

The main methodological novelties are: Firstly, a new focus is placed on the indigenization of Chinese sociology. The sexual equality promoted under socialist conditions is perceived as a new world standard that structures the theory and practice of women/gender studies. Secondly, the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women was a turning point when women/gender studies finally came to the limelight and passed from descriptive studies to theoretical and conceptual construction. The third point is emphasis on the fundamental importance of

facts and data and highlighting of the development of women's experiences. Since 1990, the All-China Women's Federation and the National Statistics Bureau launched a decennial "Chinese Woman Social Status Survey" laying the ground for accumulating data and material (All-China Women's Federation Research Institute Compilation of Studies, 2006). With a great amount of case studies and oral history materials as fundamental resources, the qualitative studies enhanced the theoretical space in the field of gender studies. Fourthly, researchers in this field of study are mostly women. Men, who usually occupy a dominant position in the sociological world, lack here of an overall knowledge to reflect on. The field of gender studies has several key issues:

First, it must challenge the standpoint of the "neutrality of values" and stress on the female/gender position in research. In 1994, Chinese sociologists used the journal *"Sociological Studies"* (*Shihuixue yanjiu*) which is a publication from the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to launch a controversy concerning "women returning home". It was the first time that male and female sociologists had a common discussion and carried on a methodological dialogue. The dialogue involved such questions as: should female/gender studies conform to "neutrality of value"? Or should it stay on the "female/sexual standpoint"? Should it be oriented toward "national interest" or toward "individual concern"? With modernization, economic growth and rise in efficiency as premises, the modernity of the gender discourse acquired legitimacy. Male academic elites assumed that national wealth and power can only be achieved through a continuous path of concrete improvement based on economic efficiency. Therefore, they constructed a sort of logic where women's emancipation and male/female equality could only bring about low efficiency (Sun Liping, 1994; Zheng Yefu, 1994). In the midst of the dialogue, the woman's standpoint stressing on the scope of modernity appeared like an incarnation of human rights. "Returning home or not" – meaning working or not – should be a woman's own decision. This is one of her fundamental human rights (Li Yinhe, 1994). The male side did not pursue the controversy and did not deepen the methodological reflection. Until then, at least two angles existed in researches. The first was the common "neutrality of values". The second was the female point of view. The former point stressed objectivity, with no value attached to the gender of the person carrying out the research; the latter focused on research carried out by females. And there are two attitudes toward the conceptual approach; one concentrates on peculiarity, the other on universality. Peculiarity makes women a distinctive group that

channels into the researcher's perspective. In other words, the main focus of the researcher is how women achieved gender singularity. It overlooks the cultural factor, the social background and the life experience to make she/they, or a single/group of female become a woman/women. The universal stance pays attention to the function and influence of social gender distinction/culture on the maturation of both sexes, focusing on feelings and personal experiences of women to engender thought and concepts and therefore values. The peculiar meaning of female being "woman" is gradually sliding into the universal significance of being "human" (Wang Jinling, 2000).

Second, gender studies must reflect on dualism and essentialism. In spite of the general denial of the gender distinction between the intrinsic powerful nature of man and the feebleness of woman, reflections stress on social structure and topics such as "iron ladies" and on the reproduction of "family violence". It illustrates how there is no such thing as "gender attributes" (Jin Yihong, 2006; Tong Xin, 2000), but that the social status of gender interactions in society is constructed by a given social environment and a peculiar cultural tradition.

Third: Reflection on Absolutism, Construction of a Pluralistic Approach. While adding concepts of social strata, urban and countryside or ethnic membership to research, gender perspective presents a form of unity. A group of studies on ethnic minority women reveals the insistence to make the researcher a central part of the research. (Zhou Huashan, 2001) In the development of a research, when sexual and ethnic identity are added as variable factors, women representations reveal great differences and sharp divisions of power under given historical and geographical conditions, thus allowing a great deal of challenges (Hu Yukun, 2004). The use of action research methodology to study the social supports of working women increases the competences of women by concluding on the very process of their realization and empowerment (Yuen-Tsang, 2002). In several projects dealing with poverty, women have made their voice loud and clear, attracting much attention to women's needs, building up patterns of healthcare and community development centered on women.

To sum up, within three decades, women and gender studies have accumulated a great deal of achievements. Like in a treasure house, attentive readers will encounter pleasant surprises and stimulating discoveries. Although some are factual descriptions, they do challenge traditional narratives.

Translated by David Bartel