



The Clouded 'Half Sky' of China - Women, Work and Liberation

Speaker: Dr. Usha Chandran

9 March, 2014

Institute of Chinese Studies

Delhi.

This presentation attempts to look at the creation of ideas of 'women as a gender' in China. Divided in three sections, the discussions spread over three themes of gender studies in China. The first section dealt with the theoretical framework of the project: asking the innate questions of gender, in terms of difference and equality of sexes and the influence of culture over nature. Division of labour in terms of sexual differences did not exist in primitive societies. However, essentialising the role of the woman to her reproductive capacities assumed that the process not only requires a protection, but also subordination to the man. According to the naturalist and pioneer of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, women in primitive societies were already subordinate to men. However, other studies have shown how sexual cultures in primitive societies were distinctly different from the point in history when women were transformed into property. The sociologist Levi Strauss states that women became commodities for exchange, first as form of trade. In terms of collection of goods, women came as individuated private property. In this sense, his position was opposed to Engel's argument, which assumed the concept of private property to have prefigured women being treated as property.

The fundamental question being asked here is how and when men started suppressing women to the point that women's rights seemed to be an oxymoron. Studies have cited many differences in physiology which could be ascribed to the two bodies. Testosterone, the dominant male hormone is accredited with producing effects of self-assertion, seeking higher positions of power. Should these psycho-physiological differences be totally discarded? Should these binaries be allowed to work together with the complex influence of societal conditions? These questions also point to the universal pervasiveness to women's subordinated positions of women globally. The vulnerability ascribed to the reproductive process takes us

back to the nature/culture binary in ways we equate women to nature and men to culture. Further studies are needed to examine the assumptions behind this binary analytically and historically, and present ethnographic evidence to show that the dichotomy between nature and culture, and its association with a contrast between the sexes, is a particularity of western thought. Such projects can become commentaries on the way anthropologists working within the western tradition have projected their own ideas on to the thought systems of other peoples. Such a take would also complicate the nexus of patriarchy and ownership of property and implicate capitalism within this nexus.

The second section of the talk focused on the women's position in social labour in China. There is a contradiction at play in the Chinese state, in the way the modern state required women to be meek. Even as social status of citizens became increasingly attached to the work that he did, this kind of economic liberation did not seem to affect women's position in social labour. Women were in subordinate positions in work spaces and were discriminated against in their work. In this context, the choices of labour for women are not as real as they are perceived. The early twentieth century saw a spurt in discussions around women's rights in the quest for modernization. The Chinese state required women to play crucial roles, as mothers and wives, in furthering this impulse, in ways that were orchestrated by the party. In this sense, the women's liberation tried to produce better circumstances for 'active social labour' in the name of productive labour. Other forms and meanings of this kind of labour were criticized. The impact that the May Fourth movement had on women's emancipation can be contextualized in this argument. During the Cultural Revolution, however, there are more increasing instances of women engaging in labour in heavy industries. These instances were simultaneous to the fact that the traditional Chinese family was still intact in most respects, particularly in the countryside. Household work was still mainly women's work. Thus, women worked the "double shift" familiar to working women all over the world—doing the cooking, cleaning, shopping, sewing clothes and child-rearing. Responsibility for household work was a major impediment to the full participation of women in political life and to their development as leaders in their workplaces, neighborhoods and in society as a whole. Having said this, it is also important to state that, with its egalitarian thrust and emphasis on the role of ideology, the Cultural Revolution provided favorable conditions for challenges to male supremacy in all areas of society. The early upsurges of the Cultural Revolution drew women, especially young women, into political life in unprecedented ways: freed from family control, young women Red Guards moved across the landscape more widely and in greater numbers than at any time in

Chinese history. Like their male counterparts, they were encouraged to challenge parents, teachers and officials, and to act with a confidence and enthusiasm probably never before permitted adolescent women in China. These young women's activism was supported by official policy, especially two oft-cited statements by Mao: "Women hold up half the sky" and "Times have changed, and today men and women are equal. Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too". The concept of being youth - "qingnian" as opposed to "funu," or women— enabled young women to work and act without being defined and limited by their gender. These developments were also contrasted to the growing incidence of health problems of women in hard labour, and therefore, most formed part of the reserve labour pool.

The third section of the talk focused on the dialogue between Chinese scholars and their counterparts in the western departments of gender studies, especially in the post-Mao era. The reforms of this period were not only orchestrating the opening of the labour market, but also sparked the reverse move of demanding that women stay at home. Thus, more women were retrenched from the formal markets and reemployed in the informal sector. It was from the technical and managerial levels, that this pattern started to manifest. Even as more policies were being formulated for equality at workspaces, the skewed representation of gendered labour ensured a lessening number of women entering the employment sectors. Thus, the theoretical framework for studying women in China has mostly been influenced by labour, though the lens has changed over the years. Li Xiaojiang is often credited as the founder of women's studies in China. Her 1983 essay "Progress of Mankind and Women's Liberation" (*Renlei jinbu yu funu jiefang*) was the first women's studies publication in China; the Association of Women's Studies was founded two years later. Several Chinese scholars, like Xiaojiang and since her work, have worked at translating key concepts of the discipline from the Western discourse and have struggled with finding synonyms in the language. Western academics, on the other hand, have often interrogated how a rights-based discourse can be used in China, given its societal workings. Since there is no space for a women's rights movement in China, they therefore believe that there is no scope for feminism in China. This reasoning also occurs as part of the larger debate of whether feminism can be accorded a status within the Marxist theorization, as anything above a bourgeois ideology. This position was stated most clearly in the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, at Beijing in 1995. Their Chinese counterparts, however, believe that the debate is far more nuanced. The official term to denote feminism, interestingly, is still under debate, and the attempt is to steer clear of words that denote a certain

orientation, like anti-men womenism. The two terms - *nüxingzhuyi* and *nüquanzhuyi* - differ in their connotations and fail to encapsulate the definition of the word as it is said in English. Thus, the current understanding of the discipline is that women's liberation theory is growing in China, with unique Chinese characteristics.

In the discussion that followed, the idea of class struggle and employment scenarios emerged as major themes. Even as employment is seen as a factor of equality between men and women, the job market is, in fact, skewed against women. If the Cultural Revolution invisibilised the difference between men and women, then the period of reforms pushed the women back into their mould of femininity. The market economy worked in such a way that the domestic roles overwhelmed the women's participation in employed labour. Thus, this goes to show that employment in a formal or an informal sector cannot be the only condition of liberation, nor is it the sole guarantee towards independence. Given this context, when a woman chooses to work or not work, does the choice really entail economic freedom? Is the choice of opting to stay at home not heavily loaded with compulsions? Thus, scholars in women studies in China have shown this choice to be a trap and a regression in the movement for women's liberation. In other words, Chinese women have seen two extremes of the discourse played out: if in the past, they were to suppress their femininity to be accepted within the rational folds of the party, in the globalised order after 1979, their roles in the national economy began to be essentialised on the lines of a gendered understanding of difference in labour. The slippage between social reproduction and labour, for women, was complete. This kind of an easy slippage makes it easier for the employer to enforce equality measures in the workplace. This is because the employer is no longer entrusted with the dual responsibility of ensuring liberation of his women employees along with maintaining high levels of productivity within the labour. Women became signifiers of social reproduction in ways that made their presence at the workplace expendable.

Disclaimer *The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by renowned scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists as also younger emerging researchers from all over the world. These talks are the independent views of the speakers. We produce this summary or recording of the presentation only for purposes of dissemination and for generating discussion. All views, positions, and conclusions expressed here should be understood to be those of the author(s) and not necessarily of the ICS.*