

The Legacies of Premodern Governance: A Story about Feminism in China, with Some Questions for Taiwan

前現代治理的遺緒： 一段中國女性主義的故事，兼論若干台灣問題

Dušica Ristivojević

Kone Bold Initiatives Researcher, University of Helsinki, Finland

dusica.ristivojevic@helsinki.fi

本文將中國女性主義運動的發展回溯自中國晚清以降的歷史脈絡加以檢視，一方面與西方中心的女性主義觀點做出區別，另一方面也期望藉此能更好地理解中國女性以及中國帝國、國家與黨之間的交織關係。本文首先聚焦戊戌變法時期的女性主義運動，以檢視女性在此社會變動時期所扮演的主體與客體角色。接著討論中國在現代化過程中出現的新興女性主義運動如何與父權結構、國家政黨體制進行協商，展現女性在打造社會空間中自主與獨立之主體性所面臨的挑戰與可能性。文章最後將討論延伸至台灣晚近的女性主義運動，作為思考性別議題的參照對象。本文透過長時段的歷史觀點與後殖民批判精神，將中國女性主義（以及相關的台灣女性主義議題）發展加以脈絡化，不只呈現實證研究的社會資料，也期望建立理論化上述女性主義議題的知識基礎。

How did we get here? I often ask. How far in the past to go? Jo Guldi and David Armitage try to answer in their book *The History Manifesto* (2014).

This concise book, one of the too rare wake-up calls for historians, asks us to confront our fundamental limitations brought by the demands of the present-day disciplinary education. We know "more and more about less and less" (2014: 49), and in doing so, we are unable to grasp the complex ways in which the past and present relate. Especially when it comes to the issues related to inequalities, because, as the authors emphasize, the understanding of the re/producing mechanisms of inequalities require a *longue duree* historical observation.

Gender is a core category for detecting, analyzing and combating a myriad of intersecting power inequalities. Not only because it uncovers historically changing yet unwavering ways in which selected biological differences between dualistically classified male and female bodies get detected, interpreted and politicized. But also because a rigorous intersectional analysis which places gender at the center of inquiry discloses how gender/ed binary and its situationally changing but persistently unequal power relations inform and are informed by multiple intersecting power inequalities. In other words, gender is a critical part of mutually embedded and replicating mechanisms of the asymmetric power relations which form and inform sociopolitical, economic, and symbolic worlds we inhabit.

Yet, contemporary feminism and its history - as intellectual and creative investments and activist engagements which take gender as a point of departure for structural transformations of intersecting inequalities - are not decontextual political developments immune to national/ist and neo/imperial politics of epistemological, conceptual and theoretical frameworks of academic inquiry. In other words, being a part of the parcel of observing China, from within or from the outside of China's national and cultural, geo-political, and epistemological boundaries, the observation of feminism in China asks for ardent post/decolonial intervention into the narration of its historical and present dynamic.

In his protests against the research strategies that assume that European – and, one may add for feminism, North American developments are the norm and the paradigm of history and socio-historical change, Roy Bin Wong (1997) proposes to decipher China's own historical trajectories and historical formations without imposing Euro-centric expectations. Instead, Bin Wong asks for a historiographical approach that is at the same time aware of the problematic outcomes of using the current social theory in historical inquiries of China and that contributes to the creation of a “broader and richer menu of empirically informed theoretical options than either extreme [of. Europocentrism and sinocentrism] makes available” (Wong, 2003: 13). Importantly, addressing specifically writing about Chinese women, Li Xiaojiang stresses that, instead of starting from the theories based on the Western experiences, Chinese women's studies need to take a history and reality of Chinese women as meaningful points of departure (Li, 2002).

What would that mean for a *longue duree* historical vision and re/reading of the emergence and the ensuing dynamics of feminisms in China?

This short essay wants to propose a possible line of inquiry to be pursued in more

systematic, nuanced and historicized future writing. It understands modern Chinese women's and feminist organizing as a phenomenon which had emerged from and continued to evolve in a specific socio-cultural and political context of China's governance of both its "inner" and "outer" affairs and domains. I want to argue that to understand contemporary situation when it comes to women's and feminist organizing in non-Western European and non-North American geopolitical and cultural areas in general, and in China and the Sinosphere in particular, a research may need both broadening of the time span of our observation and the analysis of "China" as being located at the intersection of the interacting conditions and patterns of inner and global governance.

This essay is concerned with the issue of "independence" of women's and feminist social organizing in relation to the Empire/State/Party in modern China. The issue of autonomy or the lack of it in the formation and operation of civil society in general, and of women's and feminist activism in particular is, as I would argue, has been one of the main points of departures in the Western-centric academic and media discussions on social organizing and engagement in modern China. What follows should be read as an initial step in approaching the genealogy of the interactions and interconnections between "women" as recognized socio-political collectivity and various instances of centralized governing power, which, as I believe, reveal that the premodern imaginations and institutionalizations of the state-society relations may continue to influence the relations between women's and feminists organizing in modern China on the one hand, and the Chinese Empire/State/Party and its national and global governance on the other.

In conducting a *longue duree* observation as proposed by Guldi and Armitage; following the call for a kind of context-specific feminist analysis put forward by Li and Wong; and aligning with critical post/decolonial theoretical and empirical (feminist) scholarly work, this essay will start with a brief discussion of the 1898 Reform movement period, which, as my previous research has discussed, represents a historical point when gender emerged as a sociopolitical category to be included in and to actively contribute to the organization of both "inner" and "outer" domains of China's governance. It will then move to the contemporary situation of feminist and women's organizing in China; and wrap up by putting forward some suggestions for further examination of Taiwan's women's and feminist activism situations.

This kind of temporal circling – from late-Qing to the present – is, as I also argue, necessary for our understanding of the historical and contemporary dynamics, opportunities

and limitations which women's and feminist organizing in China had been facing due to its firm embedding in China's state-society relations. As my argument further goes, state-society relations in present-day China did go and are still going through a series of transformations during - in terms of history of China's governance - pretty brief period of a century and a half of transitioning from the Empire to the State at the "inner" level, and from the *tianxia* world system to the international *guojia* world order at the "outer" level. Nonetheless, as I plan to empirically support and demonstrate in more detailed and nuanced ways in my future publications, modification of premodern state-society relations and modes of governance did enable "women" as a recognized socio-political collectivity to engage with local and global center/s which accumulate and distribute political, economic and symbolic power. But, as I also maintain, a specific context of China's modernization continue to influence the understandings of the ways in which "women" as a recognized socio-political group may and may not, should or should not position themselves toward and within the state and/or the party.

Gender and the 1898 Reforms: Women and Their Collective Engagement with the Late-Qing Empire

The One Hundred Days Reform period has been, in my view, a crucial historical moment pertinent for the scholarly observations of transformative processes through which China's ideas about and the institutions of governing of both "inner" and "outer" domains have been evolving from the imperial to the present times. Particularly important for this short essay is the emergence of a profoundly transnational and intercultural socially engaged space in which multiple actors - Chinese and foreigners, men and women - came together in their efforts to change China. Resulting from and feeding into this newly-formed communicative socially-concerned space was historically unprecedented emergence of legitimate, recognized socio-political collectivity of "Chinese women." No matter that there was a long history of gentry women's education about, as well as of their interest and intellectual engagement with the "big" imperial politics, the 1898 reforms were the historical turning point when "Chinese women" participated in the efforts to transform late-Qing China. They did so as a collectivity; as a legitimate socio-political constituent of the politics of the Empire; and as both subjects and objects of the imperial governance.

How did this happen?

Immediately after the Sino-Japanese War, the network of foreign and Chinese socially-concerned elite was created around the idea that China needed to be empowered through broader understanding and application of the Western learning, institutions, and modes of government. The establishment of public educational institutions for Chinese girls and women, as well as women's direct engagement in social and political life through media production and through political association occupied a significant place in the reformists' plans. The envisaged new organization and content of female learning, as well as historically unprecedented venues of its employment, asked for the engagement of the foreigners who had already had the experience with the proposed social innovations. Initially, a group of male supporters of women-oriented reformist enterprises was created, and it included Chinese and foreign educators, officials, missionaries, diplomats, industrialist and entrepreneurs, as well as the famous men from the publishing world. However, since the norms of neo/Confucian propriety did not sanction men's unlimited access to women, Chinese male reformers asked their male foreign collaborators to provide, as contemporary chronicler Margaret E. Burton noted, "a list of the foreign ladies in Shanghai who would be particularly interested in the [reformist] plan." (Burton, 1911: 105). The "foreign ladies" were indeed introduced to a group of educated female relatives and acquaintances of the Chinese reformers, and the transnational network of women that was formed stood at the base of the three reformist ventures: the association *The Society for Women's Learning* (*Nüxue hui*), the journal *Chinese Girls' Progress* (*Nüxue bao*) and the *Girls' School* (*Nüxue tang*).

Pan Xuan, an active contributor to the *Nüxue bao* journal, explained the relation between *Nüxue hui*, *Nüxue tang* and *Nüxue bao* in the following way:

Nüxue hui, *Nüxue tang* and *Nüxue bao* are like a fruit tree: the society is its root, the school its fruit, and the journal its leaves and blossoms. If people want to see what kind of tree it is - whether it is promising, and what kind of fruit it may breed - shouldn't they first observe its leaves and blossoms? All the matters of the society and the school will be published in the journal, [and these news will be] just like green leaves and red blossoms hanging from the tree. Looking at them, wouldn't passersby's eyes feel pleasure, and their minds feel freshness? (Pan, 1898)

We do need further research to fully understand the operation of the school, association and the journal during and after the end of the One Hundred Days reforms. Currently available sources do suggest that even though the foreign collaborators of the Wuxu reformers tried to

keep the projects going, the violent end of the Reform period in the fall of 1898 was also the beginning of the end of Chinese-led women-oriented reform projects. Nonetheless, notwithstanding their short-lived operation, the establishment of *Nüxue hui*, *Nüxue tang* and *Nüxue bao* represent a groundbreaking socially-transformative moment for a number of layers of modern China's and Chinese women's history.

A point about gender, governance, and the 1898 reformist projects which I find exceptionally important for better understanding and more nuanced analysis of a *longue duree* and contextually-specific dynamics of women's and feminist organizing in modern China is related to the ways in which women's interpellation into the socio-political life of modern/izing China happened in the context of the ideas about China's government in the imperial times. That is, various modes of women's activities in the context of Late-Qing China were embedded in the wider framework of the state-society relations in Imperial China. As R. Bin Wong explains:

Europe's public sphere was an arena in which politically engaged populations could express their claims against states. Processes of formal and informal bargaining took place to create government policies and political practices that social groups found acceptable. Within the social space of the public sphere, groups with shared interests could establish an identity and pursue their claims against the government...In late imperial China, claims were far less important than commitments. Officials and elites were connected not by competing claims but by common commitments to the principles and strategies formulated to construct social order (Wong, 1997: 126)

Modern/izing women and their inclusion into the public sphere did not challenge the relation between socially concerned elites and the center of political power and cultural authority: they enthusiastically enacted the position of a socio-political group which was to contribute to the common good, wherein a ruling dynasty and operating cultural authorities continued to be the focal points of the loyalties. This essay is too short to present chronological reading of the relation between women as a recognized collectivity in the socio-political life of modern China throughout the twentieth century. Nonetheless, even a very long jump to the conditions in the present-day China and to the position and operation of the All-China Women's Federation within the system of state-society governing mechanisms imply the persistence of premodern understandings in which non-confrontational engagement of the concerned elite may and should be pointed to the common good recognized by both the

“public” and by the state. The following part will move to the discussion of a present-day China and women’s and feminist organizing,

Two Main Streams of Politics of Gender Politics in Contemporary China: The All-China Women’s Federation and Non-State Sponsored Feminists

The All-China Women’s Federation is state-sponsored women’s organization which acts as the official representative of Chinese women’s movement at both national and international levels. This Chinese Communist Party-related mass organization was established in 1949, and, ever since its founding, the Federation has been enthusiastically fostering national and transnational women’s and feminist exchanges.

The Federation has been operating at all levels of state administration, and it parallels the governing layers from the village, town/townships and county levels to the prefectural, provincial and national levels. Each level of the ACWF’s organization has been under direct supervision of the relevant Chinese Communist Party’s committee, and certain parts of its membership have been on the governmental payroll. Nevertheless, its relation to the party, as well as the actual space for action and intervention into the national politics has been, as critical analytical work of Wang Zheng (Wang, 2005, 2006, 2017) and Cecilia Milwertz (2002) have pointed out, very complex, very changeable, and, perhaps most importantly, very seldom made readily available for the outsiders’ observation and interpretation.

When it comes to the international aspect of its engagements and activities, the All-China Women’s Federation enunciates a complex positionality with simultaneous dis/loyalties to particular segments of the global women’s and feminists movements on the one hand, and dis/affiliations with the Party on the other. One example of apparent navigations between its national and the international affiliations is a period between 1989 and 1995.

A moment of June 4th 1989 when the Chinese government violently shut down pro-democratic protest of the students gathered at the Beijing’s Tiananmen Square came to be - and still is - an iconic moment and a main reference point in the political, scholarly, and activists debates about the situation of the human rights in China. The suppression of the students’ protests was sharply criticized globally, resulting in a significant tarnishing of China’s

international "face", in the reduction of assistance programs directed to China by the international bodies, and in shrinking diplomatic communication between foreign and China's governments in the following decade. Yet, it was within this kind of unfolding national and international context that the All-China Women's Federation got registered as the non-governmental organization and had acted as a host of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The NGO status of the ACWF is still contested in the analyses of the academics, activists, and the media. Nevertheless, the NGO-ization of Chinese women's movement which was (at least nominally) opened up by the ACWF in 1995 - together with an enormous role played by the local and diasporic community of Chinese feminist scholars, activists, and their transnational connections and with the proliferation of the social media and smart phones - may be understood as opening up the space for new venues and forms of women's and feminist organizing. These newly developing feminist formations came to the full view in the 2010s with the bloom of what has been often addressed as a new generation of independent Chinese feminism.

A number of art projects and internet-based campaigns; the Bloody Brides performance against domestic violence staged on the streets of Beijing; the Occupy the Men's Toilets actions organized in Beijing and Guangzhou – these are just some of the activities which introduced a new politics of visibility and a new relation between feminism and the state/party in China. Young feminists who have been acting from without a state-apparatus became a main marker and a main constituent of “independent” civil society, and there are at least two consequences of this development. First, “independent” feminist movement started to be an object of stronger distrust and stricter restrictions of the Chinese government. In contrast, the ways in which young feminists relate to the Chinese government make them much more relatable for the observers who are approaching Chinese feminism – and, for that matter, all the other streams of Chinese social activism - with well-formed epistemological and analytical apparatuses based on the Western educational tradition and its particular understandings of the notions of the public, the autonomy, and the direct democracy. This observation demands much more nuanced contextualization and theorethization, but, as I want to suggest here, it may serve as a very productive point of departure for a careful analysis of the Feminist Five case of the 2015. In the following, closing section of this short essay, I will briefly address this case, and use it as a lead to connect the issues previously discussed here and some questions I will suggest for the future research.

Concluding Remarks

In March 2015 a group of Chinese feminists was taken for questioning about their planned activities against sexual harassment on public transportation. During and after their five-week detention, the imprisoned feminists received a truly remarkable attention and support from a number of exceptionally and globally influential social actors: from the international feminists, prodemocracy and *weiquan* Chinese social activists, to the post-Tiananmen socially-engaged Chinese diaspora, foreign political and popular culture figures, and international governments and NGOs. Anglophone media reports further accelerated what came to be coined as Free Chinese Feminists cause. Tellingly, in doing so, the media reports created a clear-cut antagonistic binary between the All-China Women's Federation and the detained *independent* activists.

The “independence” and “autonomy” as discussed in this essay invite more careful unpacking of discourses which put these terms at the center of inquiries *and* conclusions about social activism. My reading of feminisms in China is informed by the *longue duree* observation of its emergence and particular historical evolvments specific for the case of China. My special interest here was the transformed yet persistent collaborative, common-good oriented relationality between the socio-political women's sphere and power generating and power allocating governing structures in modern/izing China. Recent emergence of “young” Chinese feminism will certainly continue to bring an interesting dynamics into the over-spanning state-society relations in China.

Taiwan has complex relations with socio-political traditions of premodern and modern China, and it may undoubtedly be a very meaningful location for both gathering new empirical data on women's direct participation in socio-political life, and for production of theoretical insights relevant to local and global conversations on feminism, social activism and Sinosphere. After careful contextualization of the Taiwanese experience, a similar set of important questions to the ones briefly discussed in this essay may be raised: When and how did “women” as a political category come into being within modern/izing institutions and imaginaries of Taiwan's intra- and inter-national governance? What has been the relation of the “women” and the centers of political power and cultural authority throughout the period of Taiwan's modernization and globalization? What is the situation of contemporary relations between women's groups and the state/party on the one hand, and *among* women's groups in

Taiwan on the other, and how it may or may not relate to the historical legacies of pre-modern times?

An exciting time of exploration is right ahead of us.

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