

Gender Knowledge: Power and the change of power constellation in feminism in post-socialist China

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Abstract

This article studies the historical rise of Women's Studies in China in mid-1980s. It examines how this feminist movement originated from outside the official ideological and organizational orbit, postulated an alternative explanation for the so-called 'women's problem', instituted a novel body of gender knowledge, carved out a "space of their own" and hence seriously challenged the state monopoly on gender issues. Drawing on the concept of "knowledge" and "power", the article proposes a four dimensioned theoretic framework to illuminate the knowledge power of the Women's Studies.

Keywords: *feminism, China, Women's Studies movement, gender knowledge, power*

1. Introduction

China in the 1980s witnessed the arrival of a new wave of women's movement. From mid-1980s, women's studies groups and saloons began to emerge at a number of universities and many of them further developed into Women's Studies centers. The first such Centre was established at Zhengzhou University in 1987, with Professor Li Xiaojiang as the initiator and leader (Du, 2001). Followed was three centers at Hangzhou University (1989), Peking University (1990) and Tianjin Normal University respectively (1993) (Du, 2001:238). By December 1999, "thirty-six of more than one thousand universities and colleges in China had established (or were in the process of establishing) centres for women's studies" (Du, 2001:237).

This article studies the knowledge power of women's studies. It examines how women's studies establish new gender knowledge, gains a foothold in the academia, spread to the general public, and hence challenges the state monopoly on women's issues and the once

“undisputable” authority of the state in interpreting women’s issues. The focus will be on Li Xiaojiang, a literature professor who founded China’s first Women’s Studies Centre and remained a charismatic leading figure in women’s studies for more than a decade. In a recent ground-breaking book on Chinese feminism by the high-profiled American China-scholar Tani Barlow, Li Xiaojiang was rendered remarkable historical niche in the genealogy of Chinese feminism (Barlow, 2004).

The following analysis unpacks the power of Women’s Studies in four different dimensions: the knowledge body itself, the knowledge producer, institutional infrastructure, and the audience.

The Knowledge body	the knowledge producer
Institutional infrastructure	The audience

2. Women’s Studies as a new body of gender knowledge: the Scientific Claim

The core of Li Xiaojiang’s Women’s Studies lies in the theorization of women’s “bodiliness” (Barlow, 1997:508). The embodiment of this bodiliness is *nüren* (the female person). In contrast to the state-endorsed ‘Marxist theory of women’ (Min, 2005:282), which views women as part of the Proletarian class, women’s liberation as a part of the Proletarian revolution and labor participation as the way to end women’s subordination, Li’s emphasizes the ‘organic and scientifically apprehendable....., material, sexual and reproductive body of women’ (Barlow, 1997:509) and all the essential differences this body has invoked. For Li Xiaojiang, women as a “sexual being” are fundamentally different from men by nature. In her writings, Li dwelled upon X and Y chromosomes and how a female body evolves through childhood, youth, maturity, transition and menopause (Li, 1988; Barlow, 1997: 527). She also “writes of her own experiences”, of how “she did not come into full knowledge of herself as a woman until the birth of her first child” (Tuft, 2010:3).

How can such essentialist view of women’s bodiliness, neither new nor unique, acquire a scientific outlook and legitimize itself as a valid body of gender knowledge? To answer this question, we must situate Li Xiaojiang’s theorization of women in the broad cultural and political context of mid 1980s. China at that time was at a crossroad between a socialist past and a more free but unknown future. The first half of the 1980s saw the rise of a

lively intellectual critique of the Cultural Revolution and a return to Western humanism manifested by ‘massive translation projects of western works’ (Xu, 2009:198) and fervent cultural debates known as the “Culture Fever” (Barlow, 2004; Wang, 1997). Within this particular political and cultural context, Li Xiaojiang’s naturalized *nüren* is “a domestically generated and specifically academic critique of Maoist class-based politics” (Xu, 2009:199). By asserting the ontology of women’s body and the naturalness women’s body, Li “pioneered what rapidly became a cliché: the accusation that revolutionary modernity, particularly the Maoist cultural revolution, had denaturalized women’s bodies” (Barlow, 2004:254).

More importantly, Li Xiaojiang’s sexualized *nüren* invokes a strong sense of separation and independence from the state. For Li Xiaojiang, the definition of woman and her roles must derive from her nature as a sexualized human being and all the implications this femaleness could possibly render to her in her life cycle, nothing else. Thus, by claiming the ontology of female bodiliness, Li Xiaojiang anchors the theorization of women on a completely new fundament and advocates for ‘an independent women/nüren consciousness’ (Xu, 2009:199). Such consciousness, according to Li Xiaojiang, “involves a series of ‘separations’”, -the separation of the ‘women subject’ from ‘class identities’, from ‘any abstract and gender-neutral human subject’, and the theory of women’s oppression from ‘the orthodox Chinese Marxist explanation’ (ibid.). This theoretic stand resonate two emerging trends in mid 1980s. One is the tide of ‘thought liberation’ crying for de-politicization of knowledge and a return to universal ‘humanism’ and one is the emergence of independent organizations including various women NGOs.

But the scientific gravity of Li Xiaojiang’s sexualized *nüren* has directly to do with Li Xiaojiang’s ambitious venture into *xueke jianshe* (discipline building) (Li and Zhang, 1994; Min, 1999; Xu, 2009). *Xueke jianshe* (discipline building) consists of two correlated projects. One is academic publication on the subject of women and one is course/curriculum development at universities. Li Xiaojiang, for instance, organized the first ‘multi-disciplinary conference on women’s studies in 1987’ (Angeloff and Lieber, 2012:23), and she also launched the Women’s Studies Series, an ambitious book project ‘consisted of 20-30 volumes of research’ on the subject of women in social sciences and humanities (Min, 1999:219). At Zhengzhou University (where she was at that time), Li Xiaojiang began to offer women’s studies courses to undergraduate students, later on also to graduate students, making women’s studies an established university curriculum (Li and Li, 1989; Min, 1999). Li ‘promotes university-based knowledge’ (Xu, 2009:210) and emphasizes the importance of scientific

methods. For her, 'knowledge is abstract and generalizable, and can only be produced through scientific methods' (ibid.).

In her writing and speeches about women, Li Xiaojiang often makes reference to two feminist classics, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. These works had been translated to Chinese in mid 1980s and were widely circulated among intellectual women. Although Li does not see western feminism as a model for Chinese women and western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir as her precursors (Min, 2005:281), she makes strategic reference to them as she finds their 'female standpoint' and 'attitude of self-reflexivity' both interesting and important (Min, 2005:282). Moreover, to endorse these western feminist works also helps Li Xiaojiang to legitimize her own theory and lends Li Xiaojiang's Women Studies an international and universal outlook.

3. Li Xiaojiang and her confederates: the knowledge producer

The rise of women's studies in 1980s China "grew out of an attempt by a few liberal women leaders in governmental women's organizations as well as some intellectuals, both male and female, to re-observe, rethink, and redefine the liberation of Chinese women" (Li and Zhang, 1994:140). The forerunners of women's studies like Li Xiaojiang herself and many of her confederates fall into the category of "women intellectuals". The term, according to Li and Zhang, refers to "women of higher education who work as professionals-professors, doctors, researchers, writers, artists, and so forth" (Li and Zhang, 1994:141). Their rise to academic prominence through the path of women's studies is unprecedented in contemporary Chinese history, for never before had women intellectuals as a group won the status of knowledge producers.

As Xu points out, "any discussion of the political economy of knowledge production in China has to start with the changes and continuities in the relationship between the Communist Party-State and 'intellectuals'" (Xu, 2009:198). In Confucian tradition intellectuals represent the good conscience and were supposed to speak up against mismanagement and abuse of power. But critical intellectuals were not always welcomed and blessed by power holders. Starting with the anti-rightist campaign in 1957, Chinese intellectuals had been suppressed politically and relegated socially for their critical stance and their 'non-proletarian' social origin. While a number of social science disciplines, such as political science, sociology and anthropology were abolished, waves of 'thought reform' campaigns were launched to indoctrinate and reform the mind of intellectuals. The same fate

fell upon women intellectuals as well. As early as back to the Yan'an period in the 1940s, female writers like Ding Ling were singled out as a target of the rectification campaign for the 'bourgeois feminist tendency' in her literary work. During the Cultural Revolution, which was often regarded as the zenith of women's liberation in China, women intellectuals suffered from both a systematic political discrimination and career setback. The intellectual-hostile policies of the party-state seriously undermined the role of intellectuals as legitimate and trustworthy knowledge producers.

The beginning of the reform period brought the long-longed spring back to China's intellectuals. Not only were they rehabilitated, but also designated as the locomotive of China's modernization and hence the 'agents of China's historical development' (Xu, 2009:198). While their profession is now much better respected and remunerated, their professional work/knowledge is also highly valued and appreciated (Xu, 2009) and "intellectuals have more space for expression today than was the case a generation ago" (Li and John, 2005:1594). The historical change of the relationship between the Party and the intellectuals lends women intellectuals a unique vantage point in the development of Women's Studies. As university professors, degree holders and academic experts, Li Xiaojiang and her confederates are able to think and reflect women's life experience and transcend these experiences into philosophical abstract and theoretical generalizations. They have the qualification to assume the role of knowledge producer and they also 'saw a niche for themselves as 'gender experts'" (Xu, 2009:201).

Before women intellectuals mounted on the national scene of women's studies in mid 1980s, the production of gender knowledge was under the auspice of the Party's propaganda authority with the All-China Women's Federation, the national umbrella organization for women, as the Party's extended arm among the female masses and the Party's mouthpiece on women's liberation (Min, 1999). To firmly establish women's studies as the new and authoritative body of gender knowledge, Li Xiaojiang strives to draw a line between her and the ACWF by discrediting the latter's monopoly on women's issues. As Barlow notes in her book, Li Xiaojiang has rather an agonistic relationship with, amongst others, the ACWF (Barlow, 2004: 295), and the antagonism is mutual.

For Li Xiaojiang, women's studies are and must remain an indigenous, national project growing out of the Chinese cultural soil. Although she personally was inspired by Western feminism and feminist writings (Li, 2012:7) and has become good friends with a large number of western feminist scholars as well as Chinese feminist Diaspora (Li, 2012), Li

has constantly watched the danger of being ‘overshadowed’. This brought her into, again, an agonistic relationship with overseas feminists. She openly challenges them; often blankly denying the relevance and importance of western feminist theories/concepts to Chinese women. She insists that the gender knowledge she and her confederates have produced ‘is abstract, scientific and universal’ (Xu, 2009:208), therefore she saw no need for ‘importing’ and indigenizing western feminist theories.

But Li Xiaojiang’s women’s studies force is not a women-only club. Male intellectuals do get involved and among them one can find highly deemed history professors, well-established law scholars and high profiled sex researchers. Li Xiaojiang’s Women’s Studies Book Series includes twelve males among the total twenty authors and these men ‘are rather prominent scholars’ (Li and Li, 1989:460). It looks like a strategically wise move to have some distinguished male scholars on board, for the fame of these men helps to prove/or even boost the scientific value and academic quality of the women’s studies, and a close female-male collaboration also helps to refute the prejudice that “women’s studies advocate adversarial relations between men and women and causes women to become dislocated from the realities of social development’ (Some, 2000:63).

4. Institutional Infrastructure

At the time when Li Xiaojiang and her confederates embarked on women’s studies they did it as a side occupation on voluntary basis. She herself was an assistant professor at the Chinese Department of Zhengzhou University, and the initial people she gathered around were likewise professional academics. Being obliged to their ‘normal’ teaching and research responsibilities, women’s studies were something they have to ‘moonlight’. Embedded in the general optimistic and liberal ‘thought liberation’ atmosphere of mid 1980s, Chinese universities were ‘liberal’ enough to allow academics to venture into new research frontiers and explore new research possibilities, but financial and institutional support was fundamentally lacking.

Thus, even though the involved scholars kept a high spirit and their home institutions, such as Li Xiaojiang’s Zhengzhou University, were reasonably supportive, women’s studies in the initial stage existed only in paper and individual activities. This propelled Li Xiaojiang and her associates to labor for solid institutional infrastructure. The first step went to the setting up of a Center for Women's Studies at Zhengzhou University in May 1987 (Li and Li, 1989), which was the first formally established academic institution for women’s studies in

China. In the following years, women's studies centre 'proliferated in universities', spreading to cities like Beijing, Tianjin, Changsha, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Jilin and Shanghai (Angeloff and Lieber, 2012:23).

These centers provided an institutional basis for the development of women's studies. Although some of them often suffered from 'lack of funding and resources' (Min, 1999:218) and to some extent also personnel shortage, these centers have succeeded in providing a much needed forum for research and scholarly exchange and in carving out a space of existence in the academia for women's studies.

The survival and further development of these women's studies centers owes largely to the diplomatic skills of their leaders, for "the key for a women's research center to acquire legitimacy, and to be able to operate normally, lies in its external relationships" (Du, 2001:242). This could involve "relationship with upper-level office within the center's parent institution and with individuals in powerful administrative positions" (ibid.). An ideal situation for a center, as Du points out, would be for form "both formal and informal relationships with people in power" (ibid.).

In the case of Li Xiaojiang, her success in operating the center can be attributed to the breadth of her network and her extraordinary ability to utilize her network. Even though she herself was not embedded within the formal power structure of her university, she enjoyed an advantageous position by being from 'a prominent local family -her father is the former president of Zhengzhou University' (Rofel, 1999:120). With this prominent family background in luggage, Li is able to not only knit a wide net of support and sponsorship for her women's studies center but also navigate her center through the jungle of myriad power relations.

In late 1980s, Li Xiaojiang embarked on an even bolder project to create two independent women's studies institutions. One is the International Women's College in Zhengzhou and one is the Women's Museum. This journey, as difficult and turbulent as one can imagine, represented Li Xiaojiang's valiant move towards institution building outside the state educational and cultural system. The International Women's College, set up in 1993 but dissolved in 1995, was in fact a fruit of cooperation between Li Xiaojiang and the Women's Federation's cadre school in Henan. The Women's Museum, located in Zhengzhou in the beginning, was later on moved to Xi'an and was taken over by the Shaanxi Normal University due to some political complications that unfolded around Li Xiaojiang and her employment. The museum exhibits women's life experience and is "a political tool for women to challenge

state feminism as well as the new forms of devaluing women ushered in with the economic reform” (Rofel, 1999:126).

5. The Audience

Li Xiaojiang’s women’s studies emerged in a time when women began to encounter series of problems in the economic reform (Zhang, 1995), and yet the Party’s orthodoxy Marxist women’s liberation theory provides little explanation or answers to the problems. Li Xiaojiang’s women’s studies filled in this ‘vacuum’. Generally speaking, Li Xiaojiang’s women’s studies ‘targets two different audiences’ (Xu, 2009:210). One is ‘elite academics like herself who are able to pursue the scientific knowledge’ and the other is ‘ordinary women called to emancipate themselves by cultivating their own consciousness as women’ (ibid.).

For female academics like Li Xiaojiang herself, the post-Mao economic reform not only shattered the illusion of gender equality they always believed but also diluted the explaining power of the Marxian women’s theory. They seek a new theorizing of women and Li Xiaojiang’s women’s studies addressed timely to this demand. On the one hand, women’s studies opened a completely new research terrain in the academia where ‘women’ for the first time become a subject of scholarly inquiry so that many women intellectuals found a new career path in studying their own gender. On the other hand, Li Xiaojiang’s theorization of ‘sexual difference’ provided a novel perspective for the analysis of women. Such perspective enables women intellectuals to discern the danger of ‘a political or ideological discourse’ that ‘had rendered women invisible, suppressed their gender and denied them difference from men’ (Min, 2005:284).

Women’s Studies have also a strong appeal among the general female population. From mid 1980s and early 1990s, ordinary women suddenly found themselves being caught in a whirlwind socioeconomic change with rather negative consequences. Urban working women began to encounter unemployment and ‘a lowering of their work positions’ (Yang, 1999:52), while female graduates began to face obstacles and difficulties on the job market. In rural China, land was allocated to individual families and traditional form of sex division of labour with men working in the field and women at home has revived. Followed was the wide-spread son preference in child birth and education and ‘trafficking’ of women.

Li Xiaojiang wrote a number of popular articles and books on the subject of women (Huo, 2000). In these writings Li Xiaojiang talked as a woman, talked to women, and also talked from women’s perspectives. She shows a deep concern over the problems many

women face and calls for a strong self-consciousness so that women would be able to make a better choice and have a better control of their own life (ibid). In this respect, Li Xiaojiang has won a great respect from the women populace. As an engaged debater, she is eloquent, shrewd and vivid in rhetoric, but also highly skilful in translating abstract academic thinking into common sense and everyday language. The soaring popularity of Li Xiaojiang's women's studies, however, would not do without the tireless effort of a woman named Liang Jun, a former Women's Federation cadre and one of Li Xiaojiang's most loyal lieutenants. She toured the country, giving lectures and talks to big rallies or small groups in factories and countryside where she spread the message of self-consciousness to thousands and thousands of women. Liang Jun's passionate, vigorous and hearty talks quickly won the heart of the audience, and it is through these talks that she helped Li Xiaojiang to reach out to the country's vast female population, making women's studies directly relevant to the life of millions ordinary women.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the historical rise of women's studies under the banner of Li Xiaojiang and its' success in establishing a legitimate body of gender knowledge. The power of Li Xiaojiang's women's studies rests on four pillars. First, theorization of women as scientific and university-based gender knowledge. Second, the agency of women intellectuals (including some men), in knowledge production and dissemination. Third, institutional building and development. Finally, strong appeal to the women audience. The paper shows how and under what circumstances knowledge can be established, gain recognition and yields a powerful influence in a rapidly changing society like China.

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