

From Men-Women Equality to Gender Equality: The Zigzag Road of Women's Political Participation in China

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Abstract

Men and women's equality as a focus of Marxist women's theory has become the theoretical basis for the socialist women's emancipation movement since the founding of the New China in 1949. However, the scene of equality in China has changed tremendously since the 1980s. This paper aims at facilitating a specific historical understanding of the issue of women's political participation in China and asks questions such as why the theory of men and women's equality during the 1980s appeared to be questioned? What were the key challenges before this theory and practice? Why was there a theoretical shift during the 1990s? Taking the issue of women's political participation in China as an example, we can see that the road of women's liberation has been a zigzag one and the theories and practice of gender equality have been ambiguous. My argument is that we should look for something beyond numbers and percentages when, for example, analyzing the issues of women's political participation.

Key words: Men-women's equality, gender equality, women' political participation, Chinese women, socialism, globalization

Introduction

Men and women's equality, as a part of the Marxist women's theoretical basis, has been significant for the socialist women's emancipation movement since the founding of the New China in 1949. However, the Economic Reform and open door policy

during the 1980s brought about tremendous changes in society and people's lives, leading to women's initial awakening or self-consciousness and questions about Marxist women's theory. Consequently, the discourse on men-women equality shifted towards gender equality during the 1990s. This paper aims at facilitating a specific historical understanding of the issue of women's political participation in China. Now, perhaps, is an appropriate occasion to reflect and evaluate a number of concerns deriving from this period, such as why the theory of men-women equality during the 1980s appeared to be questioned? What were the key challenges to its theory and practice? Why was there such a theoretical shift during the 1990s? It is these questions that bring us to our present understanding of issues of women's political participation that are relevant to both a socialist and civil society today.

Men and women's equality after the founding of the New China till the late 1970s

After 1949, with the success of the socialist revolutionary movement, unprecedented social change occurred in the lives of Chinese women, including the introduction of equality in law and policy. The 1954 Constitution states that "Women in the People's Republic of China have equal rights with men in all spheres of life including the political, economic, culture, social and family spheres" (All China Women's Association, 1979: 185). So far the Constitution had provided the basic legal and political guarantee for Chinese women to improve their situation. Mao's well known saying, 'What men can do, women can do,' encapsulated the ideology of gender equality from the 1950s to the 1970s and gender inequalities were eliminated to a great extent in public institutions and ideology. Progress in women's political participation has achieved much since 1949. Chinese women entered local leadership through various economic and political movements during the 1950s.

Women first took part in agricultural and industrial production on a large scale as of the 1950s and thus 70 percent of the villages in rural China had at least one woman head or director during the 1950s (Wang, 1999:19). Further, women's political participation progressed with the setting up of the new political system during 1950s.

For example, the national election in 1953, which not only aroused women's democratic consciousness, but also offered them opportunities to them to enter all levels of governance. According to some analysts, this also created a critical mass of women and brought them into political institutions. In 1953, for instance, 980,000 women were elected as representatives in the People's Congress in the entire country, accounting for 17.3 percent of the total number elected (Han, 1998: 49).

On the basis of local women's political participation, the representation of women in the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultant Conference (CPPCC) increased during this time. There were 147 female representatives in the first NPC (1954), accounting for 12 percent of the total number. In the third NPC (1964), their numbers went up to 542, accounting for 17.9 percent. In the first CPPCC (1954) there were 12 female representatives, accounting for 6.06 percent. In the third CPPCC (1964) their numbers went up further to 87, accounting for 8.12 percent (Ma and Jia, 2008). There was a one female vice president, and 20 women in positions at or above the vice ministerial level, accounting for 4 percent of the total. Women's political participation reached its peak during the 1970s. In the Fourth NPC (1975), women representatives accounted for 22.6 percent of the total and one in four Standing Committee members were female (Zheng et al., 2009).

However, there are two sides to every question. On the one hand, legislation included clear provisions for the protection of the rights and interests of women. Apparently, there was not only a nationwide upsurge of women who stepped out of their homes to take part in social production, but the policy of affirmative action between the 1950s and 1970s also led to a most remarkable era for women's political participation in contemporary China. On the other hand, as the theory and practice of gender equality took man as the measure, it implied that unless Chinese society did not achieve a democratic system for citizens' rights, both male and female equalities were fundamentally limited. An extreme manifestation of this situation was that in some cases women, like men, had been punished and persecuted for political reasons during the Cultural Revolution.

Thus, the paradox of Chinese women's political participation, as Wang Qi points out, was that the incorporation of women in basic-level leadership positions, through local political development, meant that women's participation remained dependent on state-imposed structures. Therefore, when these structures were removed, women's political representation was seriously affected (Wang, 1999) and with the end of the Cultural Revolution, a 'dark age' emerged for women's political participation.

Questioning about men-women equality in the 1980s

The post-1978 Economic Reforms had two parallel processes: the significant retreat by the state and the rapid expansion of the market economy. This had two basic outcomes for Chinese women during the 1980s. First, these reforms brought about a socioeconomic transformation, with China shifting from state-socialism to market-socialism; but this occurred in a way that dismantled some of the policy arrangements that ensured equality for women. Consequently, Chinese women became more vulnerable in the newly emerging labor market. They were turned into sexual objects more frequently and were exploited and discriminated against in employment contexts. However, as we shall see, it was the increasing recognition of gender differences and inequalities that was crucial for the setting up of women's studies in China.

Second, these reforms also opened up opportunities for women's self-awareness and self-organization to grow in autonomous spheres outside the state's control. What is crucial here is that it was the 'movement towards the liberation of thought' after the Cultural Revolution that helped encourage women's self-awareness. The impact of this first became apparent in the late 1970s in the work of young female writers. Clearly, many of the women's problems discussed in these writings also occurred in the lives of women intellectuals, which encouraged the women scholars to examine gender issues in their own various fields of learning. 'Men-Women equality,' as a traditional socialist women's ideology, was for the first time questioned and challenged.

The questions that emerged at this juncture were as follows: the interpretation of equality took men's behavior as the standard and left the low degree of self-awareness of Chinese women intact (Min, 1997). Furthermore, Chinese women achieved entry into the domain of production, but not into the creation of public discourse, which was the reserve of the state. Although state discourse granted women a central position, but the language used to do so undermined their self-identity and gender consciousness (Yang, 1999) and there was a massive contradiction in its approach to gender equality. While the communist regime succeeded in integrating women into the new economic and social fabric, it also reinforced the political dependence of women on the state. After all, Chinese society did not achieve a democratic system for individual rights, be they male, female or for women's liberation and, therefore, all social liberation was fundamentally limited (Lin, 1997; Wang, 1999).

In the process of developing a new theory for women's studies in China, the first task undertaken was that of the 'deconstruction' of traditional 'Marxist women's theory,' which argued that women are a revolutionary force; women's liberation is a condition of proletarian revolution; and productive labour is the basic condition of women's liberation and is progressive (Barlow, 1994: 345). However, like all other aspects of the Party rhetoric, during the period of reform, the former was challenged for viewing the subject of 'women' as an unchanging historical essence and many of its assumptions and ideas were shown to be false.

Even though the dominant tradition in China continued to be Marxist during the eighties and early nineties, the Women's Federation shifted its theoretical position, but in a rather ambiguous way. Marxist scholars in China commonly take production as the primary material basis of women's liberation. This assumption that there is a positive correlation between economic growth and the advancement of women is, therefore, accepted largely without critical examination. As a consequence, the 'central task' of the women's movement, as argued by some leading theorists, was still seen to be to develop social production and seek liberation by pushing forward general social and economic development. Even those who acknowledge that material and technological progress cannot automatically liberate women do not doubt that the

ultimate solution to women's subordination lies in economic modernization (Lin et al., 1998).

As support waned for the orthodox Marxist position of treating the women's question entirely under the heading of class, the ACWF was unable to challenge the prevalent reform policy and had to shift its focus. Therefore, 'self-improvement,' rather than 'equality,' became the basis of ACWF policy as it viewed the 'low quality' of women's lives. Thus, at its Fifth Congress, in 1983, the ACWF adopted the slogan of women's 'Four Selves' (*Sizi*) -- self-respect, self-love, self-possession and self-improvement; and at its Sixth Congress in 1989 the 'Four Selves' were changed to self-respect, self-reliance, self-confidence and self-improvement. Congress debates and emerging policies proposed that instead of relying on the protection of society and government in a market economy, women had to become more independent and rely only on themselves. From that point onwards, liberal feminist thought has pushed the idea of socialist equality of men and women to the bottom shelf of priorities.

About the same time, elections, which had been discontinued during the Cultural Revolution, were restarted. New electoral methods were re-introduced at the beginning of the 1980s. One significant adjustment made in the voting procedure was to have more candidates than elected positions, thereby allowing voters to exclude some candidates. This seems to have made women cadres particularly vulnerable, because to some extent, some voters have simply followed the tradition of electing men rather than women (Wang, 1999). In this situation, we witnessed a drastic decline in women's political participation after the Cultural Revolution. The proportion of female NPC representatives had decreased sharply from the end of the seventies and the lowest point was reached in 1983. The proportion of females in the Standing Committee stood at 9 percent, compared with 25.1 percent in 1975, reflecting a drop of 16 percentage points. During the same years, there was a decline in women's participation in the leadership of the ruling party. Female members in the Central Committee of the CCP accounted for 12.9 percent in the 1970s, but dropped to 4.1 percent in 1982 (Ding, 2006).

The social, political and economic background of women's political participation in China differed considerably between the 1950s and 1980s. The core aspects, in my view, relate to the fact that equality of men and women gave way to gender differences during the process of economic reform that was taking place towards the end of the 1970s. Questioning and deconstructing the theory of equality of men and women was a core task of Marxist women's theory in the 1980s. The result of this was that Chinese society might require *reconstructing* the binary of gender, rather than its *deconstruction*.

Equality of men and women shifted to gender equality

As elsewhere, women's political participation in China has been largely shaped by the socio-political context. After 1989, the changing political climate in China presented enormous problems for social movement and intellectual developments. Particularly after the Tiananmen Square episode, great care had to be taken in theorizing on women's political issues. Without liberation of thought, re-conceptualizing the world and using a new conceptual language were difficult if not impossible tasks. In order to get past the shadow of the Tiananmen Square events, in early 1992, China's paramount leader at the time, Deng Xiaoping, made a series of political pronouncements designed to reinvigorate the process of economic reform. The 14th Party Congress later in the year backed Deng's renewed push for market reforms, stating that China's key task in the 1990s was to create a "socialist market economy." The ten-year development plan for the 1990s stressed continuity in the political system with bolder reform in the economic system.

However, the shift from the state socialist system to a market economy has caused a series of social problems. The market competition mechanism not only speeded up the flow of resources from urban and rural areas, but also accelerated the diversification of the main interests and class differentiation. We have witnessed growing levels of social stratification and increasing gaps between rich and poor. Furthermore, this new class inequality combined with gender stratification. There were major gaps among women from different classes, with respect to education,

wages, social status, social security, and so on, although gender differences continued to exist at various social levels. Women continue to be excluded from the main trends and in the name of progress and modernization, a highly gendered society has emerged. Clearly, this rejects the socialist past and welcomes the marketized present.

At the same time, as China speeds ahead in the globalization process, it has gradually opened the door to the gender theory of the international community, wherein gender has become part of a well-known discourse. The term gender travelled to China via the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995. At the official level, positive attitudes towards gender represented an important political trend in China in the 1990s. After government officials from all over the world signed the *Platform for Action* at the FWCW, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was quick to use the pledge made by the Chinese government. It launched a nationwide campaign to implement the *Platform for Action* and the *Beijing Declaration*, the two documents that “voice the aspiration of women all over the world,” as the Chinese media proclaimed. Even though this campaign was helping to create legitimacy for the Chinese women's movement in terms of *Jie Gui* (“connecting with the international track”), the ACWF had to work out how to combine the term “gender” with traditional Marxist women's theory and adapt it with the concept of the NGO, in place of their old organizational structure.

In November 1996, the president of the ACWF, Chen Muhua, produced a new exposition of the Marxist women's theory. She emphasized that “Marxist women's theory is concerned to analyze women's issues from a gender (*xingbie*) perspective, and its core is the equality of women and men” (Yiyang and Yihong 1998). The intent of the ACWF was to incorporate these new ideas into the old theories so as to keep abreast of political and economic changes and to connect with the international community. This statement was an official encouragement as well as an indication that gender was becoming a popular concept in official discourse. Gradually, the term “men-women equality” became “gender equality” as in the discourse of the Women's Federation and academic circles.

The word “gender” was useful to the ACWF. In a context of rapid socioeconomic

transformation it had to deal with conflict between traditional Marxist women's theory and the widespread recognition of discrimination in practice. The ACWF leadership consequently needed a new language with which to address gender issues within the framework of Marxist women's theory. It seemed that the concept of gender provided a means to do so, one that helped it to resolve this problem. Although the official ACWF emphasized that gender consciousness and equality between the two sexes were precisely the same thing, the difference was that gender consciousness requires an a priori recognition of the existence of inequality between women and men as a starting point, while traditional Marxist women's theory had a blind spot regarding gender.

Now, it appears that there is a need to build a new analysis of gender equality, based on the deconstruction of sexual equality. Deconstruction of the Marxist women's theory regarding emancipation was the beginning of women's studies, which was a challenge in itself to theory and practice. So, the introduction of the "gender" theory seemed to match this demand in Chinese society in the mid-nineties. However, after the ACWF and the circle of gender studies came under the influence of the international trend, the focus was no longer initiated from women's interests and needs at the grassroots level, but rather from the government and international organizations. Thus, a 'global gender equality regime' (Kardam, 2011) has emerged in China.

In order to respond to the international community in and following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in the 1995, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) put in place various policies and instituted affirmative action. These program initiatives go beyond the vague recognition of the principle of gender equality, and focus more on action and implementation (Zheng et al., 2009). For example, in 1995, *Programme for Women Development in China (1995-2000)* was published, which was the first gender equality program. In 2000, its second version, *Program on Deepening the Reform of Cadre and Personal System from 2001 to 2010*, was developed. Also, the Central Organization Department (COD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made several decisions about training and selecting women

cadres. Promoted by the ACWF, women's participation has become an index used in evaluating officials' performances. Combining the multi-candidate election with mandatory quotas played a crucial role in increasing the proportion of females in the party-state. Thereby, women's political participation also benefited from the various policies and institutional factors introduced.

We saw a steady increase in the proportions of women representatives in the NPC and those entering positions in Party-state since the mid-1990s. For example, there were 626 women representatives at the Eighth NPC in 1993, accounting for 21.03 percent of the total, and 19 female Standing Committee members, making up 12.3 percent. At the ninth NPC in 1998, female representatives accounted for 21.81 percent of the total. In 1991, the proportion of female government officials across the country accounted for 33.3 percent. This rose to 36.2 percent in 2000 and 37.4 percent in 2002 (Ding, 2006). Women were also recruited to senior official positions. In 1994, the State Council had one female vice premier and one female state councilor, 16 female ministers and deputy ministers, more than 300 female mayors and deputy mayors (Zheng et al., 2009). In 2000, the numbers of female mayors and deputy mayors increased to 463 in a total of 667 cities across China (Ding, 2006). In 2007, the NPC officially adopted the regulation that the percentage of women must reach no less than 22 percent of the total number of representatives in the 11th NPC in 2008. A formal quota system was introduced in China in 2008 as well. These were the first explicit regulations on women's participation since the Reform was introduced in 1978 (Zheng, et al., 2009).

It is important to note, however, that the force of pushing the new wave of women's political participation in China came mainly from the 'global gender equality regime' and government but not from the grass-roots. Consequently, a new feature has been brought into the picture regarding the weaker women's political participation at the grass-roots level. The movement of building local self-governing village councils has been going on for more than 20 years in China. Although there are various laws and policies to support rural women to participate in these institutions, the progress is very limited and slow. Till 2008, the female

representatives in village councils accounted for 21.7 percent. In 2009, only 2.7 percent of village councils were headed by women (All China Women's Association, 2009). The proportion of female heads in villages is far smaller than what it was in the 1950s-1960s (70 percent-80 percent). Then, without the foundation of local women's political participation, how can we expect to strengthen the argument for women's political participation ?

After a long wait, however, the quotas for rural women in the local self-governing bodies were constitutionally mandated by the 17th meeting of eleventh NPC in 2010. Following the new policy, one-third seats will be reserved for women in general in each village representative committee.

xTaking the issue of women's political participation in China as an example, we see that the road of women's liberation has been a zigzag one and the theories and practice of gender equality have been ambiguous. The point is that while efforts are being made to reverse the decline in woman's political participation, a number of factors in the changing state-society relationship were and are still pulling women away from politics. As Wang Qi has noted, this was the fundamental dilemma for women in China, during the 1990s and still exists today (Wang, 1999). Perhaps, we should look for something beyond numbers and percentages when analyzing these changes and in the following pages I discuss some issues relating to this.

Rethinking the legacy of women's political participation of socialism

For sixty years, both the achievement and the problems of gender equality comprised the socialist legacy in China. Therefore, rethinking this socialist heritage is a very important task for us during this 'de-revolution' time. I take the women representatives in the NCP as an example to examine trends in political participation. The period 1954 to 1975 saw the fastest growth in the proportion of females in the NPC, which increased by ten points during these 20 years. After the Economic Reform in 1978, the proportion of females in the NPC sharply declined. After the period, 1978 to 1998, the proportion of females in the NPC stood at about 21 percent.

Although affirmative action policies for women’s political participation were adopted in the end of 1990, the proportion of females in the NPC had still dropped to 20 percent in 2003. This trend tells us that when the state provided political, structural and ideological support, the proportion of women in the NPC increased rapidly, after the founding of the PRC in 1949. It is clear that the socialist state was the major force at the time that encouraged women’s political participation.

After the political transition following the Cultural Revolution, socialist political, structural and ideological support were replaced by the single-point agenda focused on economic growth. Women were then treated as a labor force or economic burden but not as a political asset and, therefore, the foundation of women’s political participation was seriously damaged. As a consequence, Chinese women have been looking elsewhere to find new support and means of political participation. It is no surprise then that the terms ‘gender,’ ‘NGO,’ and ‘women’s organizing’ have become part of the new discourse for women’s political participation as of the 1990s. Certainly, a much better lesson to be learned is from the forgotten history of socialist women’s political participation in China.

Table

Women representatives in the NCP and its standing committee (%)

year	1954	1959	1964	1975	1978	1983	1988	1993	1998
Women representatives	12	12.3	17.8	22.6	21.2	21.1	21.3	21.0	21.8
Women in Standing Committee	5	6.3	17.4	25.1	21	9	11.9	12.3	12.7

Source: Zheng, Guo & Zhao (2009).

The new issue of gender equality and women’s stratification

The new issues for gender equality are linked with women’s stratification in the fast changing society of China. The question then is, if the new class inequality has

combined with gender stratification, does it still make sense to analyze Chinese “women” as a whole? That is, the goal of the struggle for equality between men and women encountered new problems and other kinds of inequality in both theory and practice. The last 30 years of the Economic Reform have clarified the often-conflicting interests of women from different classes and sectors in Chinese society. Women’s stratification is inevitable because of the sharp changes in Chinese society. Discussion on gender equality, with the particular concern for women’s stratification, is imperative but not easy in this situation. However, the CCP and the ACWF do not take these divisions seriously and still regard all women as having basically the same interests. Although women’s participation in politics has improved, whose interests it will serve is the question that needs to be addressed. If the quota systems do not take account of the stratification of women and the electoral systems that are in place, women’s political participation will tend to be only symbolic. In China, it is not the voters but the party and state that decide who gets elected. It is the CCP that controls which candidates will be elected. Consequently, it also has the power to change the under-representation of women.

Women’s political participation leaves us with some very important questions: What yardstick can be used to measure gender equality? Who is going to develop a yardstick of measurement? Which women are included in gender equality? Which women are excluded? How do we achieve such equality? These questions, however, imply further questions, for example, why should we focus specifically on gender, if gender intersects with other categories? How can we make gender more meaningful in a time when a narrow focus on gender alone is no longer adequate? In this case, the question may be asked in another way and whether attention to class, religion, ethnicity and generation should also be focused upon in studies on gender. In other words, we may need to think about gender as an intersectional category and one that is more engaged with the categories of class, religion, ethnicity and generation when thinking about gender equality. So far, none of these theoretical issues have been debated thoroughly in women/gender studies circles in China.

A matter for a civil society?

One of the significant developments in Chinese society in the past decades has been the emergence of discussion regarding civil society, which in turn has led to debate on the means of enhancing women's roles and rights. We are aware that civil society should have space in society that is separate from state and government action, with scope for frequent and intense exchange among individuals, groups and organizations regarding political vision. One of the crucial features of civil society is the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Thus, since the end of the 1990s the discourse on 'women's political participation' has been shifting to 'women organizing.'ⁱ

After the 1990s, NGOs have been emerging and playing an increasingly important part in some areas in China, especially in the sphere of the women/gender studies and movement. For instance, over 200 NGOs set up their offices in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, a number that exceeded those in Beijing (Chen, 2007). With international projects flowing into Yunnan, a number of scholars and activists have been involved in projects on women/gender and development after the 1990s. Gradually, the Women's Federation in Yunnan also became involved in many projects that were supported by international NGOs. These institutions have become tangible outlets for services for poor people, minority groups and women. The outcomes not only show that an index of women's political participation has ranked China in fourth place (Ma and Jia, 2008), but has also developed a network of scholars, activists, NGOs and government.ⁱⁱⁱ

We have noted that many of the organizations, projects, ideas and funding come from abroad in the name of the 'international community.' However, we are mostly in the dark or are reluctant to question what role the terms 'gender,' 'development' and 'NGO' play in the neo-liberal development agenda and how this discourse has insured 'gender' a place in the international social movement. This has

ⁱ However, another side of this wonderful story is that there is a price to pay: one was the decline of School for Women Cadres which was the part of system of the Women's Federation. I was witness to this process during my long period of research on a project in Yunnan.

happened because development regimes target women for special consideration (Barlow, 2006). I feel we need to reconsider the dichotomies whereby we usually understand global/local and center/periphery. One of the important reasons for this rethink is that we cannot talk about issues of gender, women, development, etc. only within the context of China in this era of globalization and, therefore, the issue of women's political participation must be an addition to this list.

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*This research has been supported by "The Third 211 Project of Shanghai University: The Cultural Ecology of Transition in China".

Resume:

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ⁱ The titles of several books and articles have shown this trend. For example, Ping-chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.) (2001) *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*; Cecilia Milwertz (2002) *Beijing Women Organizing for Change*.

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