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Women's Rights and Organising in China in the Conjunction of COVID-19 and Beijing+25

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2020 was an unusual year for everyone. For Chinese women, there were two events that were particularly important. The first was the COVID-19 pandemic that posed tremendous challenges and called upon the immediate and effective response from governments, intergovernmental institutions, business sectors, science and research communities and societies at large. In China, like everywhere else in the world, women were undoubtedly fighting at the forefront and their contributions and essential roles were never made so vivid and visible as during the pandemic. According to official sources, by March 8th 2020, women made up two-thirds of the 42,000 medical workers who travelled to Wuhan and its surrounding province, Hubei.¹ China would not have been able to achieve the results in epidemic prevention and control without the participation and contribution of women as health workers, social workers, caregivers, volunteers, scientists and researchers, journalists, service providers, in the family, community and every aspect of society. The second event was the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995 (Beijing+25). Although many forums and events originally planned to commemorate Beijing+25 at global, regional, and national levels had to be cancelled or postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, several events on Beijing+25 did take place,

1- <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/gwylfkjz48/index.htm>

including conferences organised by international organisations, government, women's NGOs, and research institutes. Government policy brief, research papers and media reports on Beijing+25, women and development, and women's human rights provided new momentums for the refocusing and repositioning of women's development and gender equality agenda in mainstream media and the political agenda in China. This is best manifested in Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the high-level meeting at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly held on October 1st, 2020, which marked the 25th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. Xi reaffirmed that equality between women as a basic state policy in China and committed to working towards building a world in which women are free from discrimination as well as a society of inclusive development. He called for actions to address the special needs of women and deliver on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which included: (1) minimise the impact of COVID-19 on women; (2) strive for genuine gender equality; (3) ensure that women advance at the forefront of our times; and (4) enhance global cooperation in advancing women's development.

There is no better time than now, in the conjuncture of COVID-19 and Beijing+25, to reflect on the status of Chinese women's movements and organisations and prospects for the future.

Understand Chinese women's organising in the context of local-global connections

There is a large volume of excellent literature indicating that women are organising in China in the context of larger processes of social change. Women and women's issues featured significantly in most of the major initiatives and movements since the early twentieth century; from feminist advocacy for suffrage within the Chinese Nationalist Party in the 1920s to the activist agenda on women's rights, especially on equality in marriage and political participation, in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s governing areas in the early 1930s, to the establishment of a legal framework on the protection of women's rights to land, participation in public life, equal payment and free

from the violence since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During the last 100 years, the women's movement in China has been intrinsically connected with and subordinate to gender-inclusive movements for national liberation and socialist revolution led by the CCP. The result has been an uneasy fusion in which some discernible gains have been made through a state-supported women's movement, but with evident compromises. Meanwhile, since the 1980s, policy reform and openness gave rise to a resurgence of women organising both within and beyond the established framework of the official Women's Federations which is the large group of women under the leadership of the CCP.

We should not see the Chinese women's movement and organisations in isolation of the global women's movement. Rather, on the contrary, it has always been the linkages between them when we look at the historic trajectory of women's struggle for rights and equality around the world. For example, this is portrayed in two movies on the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century. The Chinese film depicted Madam Tang Qunying, as a great feminist and the leading figure of the Chinese suffrage movement in the early 20th century. She was best known for leading a female detachment storming parliament and publicly slapping the face of a male politician Song Jiaoren, the leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party, when women were not given equal rights to vote. We may not be able to clearly identify the organisational connections between the Chinese and British suffrage movement, however, the spiritual connection is clear since the suffrage movement and story of suffragettes inspired Chinese feminist pioneers at that time.



Suffragette
(2015)

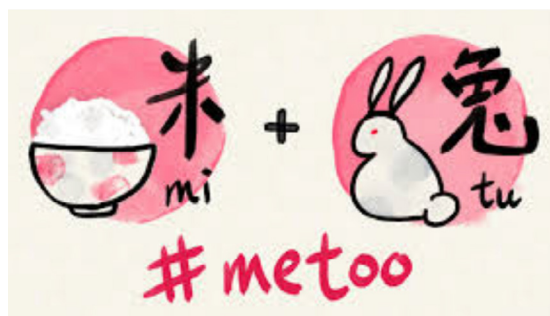


A great Feminist
Pioneer (2019)

The UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 played a pivotal role in catalysing the organisation of the Chinese women's movement to engage in the global feminist movement. Many Chinese women who participated at the Beijing Conference and NGO Forum recall how they were inspired by the enthusiasm and commitment of the feminist activists who came from all over the world, as well as the new concepts, ideas, issues and strategies that were introduced into China, such as gender mainstreaming, NGOs, sexual and reproductive health and rights, domestic violence, women's human rights, LGBT, etc. Many of these women are first generation leaders of Chinese women's NGOs who continue to remain active up to now. If we look at the current Chinese women's groups, we can easily identify the explicit and implicit linkage between the Chinese women's movement and global feminist movement, in terms of issues prioritised and strategies applied. The photo of the young Chinese feminists below portrays the street mob "Blood-stained Wedding Gowns" on Valentine's Day 2012 and highlights the recognition of intimate partnership violence and domestic violence. This protest was inspired both by the V-day Campaign catalysed by US feminist writer Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues", as well as a photo of street action by Turkish feminist activism on the same theme. Similarly, the logo of the #MeToo movement in China suggests the courage, innovation, and creativity of Chinese feminists' whose action did not merely echo the global #MeToo movement but made a unique contribution in a very challenging political environment.



Blood-stained Wedding Gowns – Chinese Young Feminists Took to the Streets for the First Time on Valentine's Day 2012.



Logo of Chinese #MeToo movement

This intrinsic connection between the Chinese and global women's movements makes the Chinese women's movement an integral part of the global feminist movement, as both participants as well as contributors. This all happened despite the differing priority issues, strategies, tactics, and sometimes compromises with the authorities and the general public whilst promoting women's rights and gender equality in the context of a patriarchal and authoritarian society.

25 years after the 1995 Beijing conference – Chinese women's organising at the crossroad of opportunities and challenges

The awards ceremony of the inaugural "Her Story", an essay contest to commemorate Beijing+25, was intentionally scheduled for September 4th, 2020, the date that the UN Conference on Women was held in Beijing 25 years ago. I was invited to moderate a panel on "Women and Work". This was the first offline event that I participated in since the outbreak in China in January 2020 of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus, the event had a maximum number of 50 participants meeting face to face, however there were more than thirty-five thousand viewers who watched via livestream. "Her Story" was initiated by several media partners in China calling on women to write stories (fiction and non-fiction) on their experiences, reflections, visions about women's lives, dreams, achievements, and daily struggles against gender-based violence and discrimination. Within 6 months the organisers received more than 7,000 essays from all over the country from the time it was launched in December 2019 to the end of May 2020. These essays covered various topics ranging from gender stereotypes, domestic violence and intimate partner violence, social security, sexual harassment and assault, unpaid care and domestic work, sexual and reproductive health and rights, discrimination in work place, economic empowerment, early and forced marriage, girls' right to education, LGBT rights, gender paid gap, inheritance right, women's participation in decision-making, technology and digital divide, land right, just to name a few. It was a little disheartening how these essays written by young Chinese women today echo the spirit of the conference held 25 years

ago, given that none of the authors attended that conference and some of them were not even born at the time. It shows that despite some progress having been made, there has been increasing inequality, disastrous climate and ecological crises, setbacks in human rights commitments, the rise of corporate power and authoritarian regime, as well as broken social contracts and multilateralism. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder that reveals crises, we have long endured – inequality, patriarchy, violence and discrimination, crisis of care, democratic and governance deficits, ecological unsustainability and more. If discrimination, inequality and injustice continue to overshadow women and girls to attain their full potential in life, the Beijing Platform for Action will never lose its relevance and feminist politics that underscores that agenda will never fade.

Chinese women's organisations continue to face many challenges. Firstly, women form very diverse groups and should never be treated as a homogeneity. Their different needs, concerns and priorities should be addressed in diversified strategies and approaches taking into consideration their own capacities, access to resources, forms of participation, although these sometimes mean the possible conflict of interest among different women's groups and cause heated debates within the women's movement and amongst advocates. Secondly, NGOs and civil societies operate in a challenging political, economic, and socio-cultural climate, including shrinking political spaces and funding sources (especially for NGOs whose work primarily focus on policy advocacy). There is also a revival and backlash of conservative patriarchal cultural norms, gender bias and stereotypes. For example, an increasing number of the younger generation, both men and women, believe that staying-home mothers and housewives are the better choice and destiny for women, rather than pursuing a women's own career or working outside the home. This is very much opposed to the legacy of socialist ideology which states that there should be equality between women and men and emphasises that the means of achieving equality is for women to participate in the labour force and to obtain economic independence. Thirdly, dominant commodification and a consumerism narrative in society is targeting women, especially young women, and manipulating feminist identity for profitmaking by creating illusory images in the media and purporting

that “women have rights to decide how to live and what they want to be”. Being a good mother is one example of this kind of narrative -- If you do not prioritise your children and family, you are a bad and selfish mother and wife. Meanwhile women are encouraged to “lean in” to be successful in their career. This narrative exerts pressure on young women, many of whom are struggling in multi-dimensional, multi-layered intersectional cultural pressures between the socialist ideology for women’s liberation, discriminatory and misogynistic attitudes, and a corporate power dominated consumerist society. Finally, the development of science and technology has greatly changed the lives of women and has a far-reaching impact on gender equality. Gender stereotypes and bias are reinforced by the algorithm. Application of reproductive technologies, such as artificial insemination and surrogacy, demands feminist researchers and women’s organisations to redefine women’s reproductive rights and bodily integrity. While the platform economy provides new opportunities for women’s economic participation, it also exacerbates women’s time poverty, because they continue to perform the dual labour of production and reproduction at home and in society. Furthermore, in the era of digital and platform economy, how to protect women’s labour rights, how to hold corporations accountable are just some of the more critical issues that feminists and women’s organisations need to investigate and respond to.

Re-strategise Chinese women’s organising – build the synergy and disrupt the power

First and foremost, Chinese women’s organisations apply a human rights framework to claim the political space and affirm the rights-based approach to development by advocating for the implementation of international conventions including Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), ILO conventions, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as the policy framework, from the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) at the Beijing Conference in 1995, Program of Action in International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 and the 2030 Development Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These efforts aim to hold government accountable for their commitments on

promoting women's rights and gender equality at international and national level and domesticate its commitments and incorporate them into national laws and policies. China's Anti Domestic Law promulgated in 2005 is one example of the outcome of this endeavour, although compromise is inevitable its content and law enforcement is yet to be strengthened, however, the implementation continues to face problems. For instance, after four decades of the ratification of CEDAW, there is still a lack of a legal definition for discrimination in Chinese law.

Secondly, Chinese women's organisations applies the bottom-up approach with the focus on community mobilisation, awareness raising and capacity building. Mobilising the community is the most important and effective strategy, especially for the most marginalised, disadvantaged, and disenfranchised communities, such as people with disabilities, LGBT groups, people living with HIV, rural and poor communities, migrants etc. Raising awareness to remove deeply imbedded patriarchal culture has never been easy, as demonstrated by the following initiatives in attempts to amend or revise village regulations that discriminate against women in rural China. According to the Organic Law of Village Committees of the People's Republic of China Article 2, "the villagers committee is the primary organisation of self-government, in which the villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves and serve their own needs and in which elections are conducted, decisions adopted, administration maintained, and supervision exercised by democratic means". As a self-governed entity, the villagers committee can make decisions and regulations on how to distribute the resources, who is an ineligible member of the community and entitled to the benefits, etc. These decisions are often based on prevailing gender biases and cultural norms and deprive the equal rights of women to land and resources, which contradict the constitutional principle of equality between women and men. Due to the collaboration of feminist scholars, women NGOs and local government agencies, some pilot projects conducted in villages of Henan and Anhui provinces repealed the gender discriminatory village regulations and grant women equal tenure land rights and the full benefit as community members. This thus negates the mindset for a son. It also contributes to the transformation of cultural norms that underlie violence against women, although this kind of fundamental and transformative

change happens not at the pace and scale that we would like to see, however it is a crucial step to move towards an equal and just society.

Alliance building within women's movements and across media, academia, other social movements (labour rights, children's rights, environmental movement, LGBT movement, etc.) and social groups (rural, migrant, LGBT, disabled, among other groups) experience various forms of discrimination against them, thus playing an important role in policy advocacy for example, the process of advocating for anti-domestic violence law in China. The law is supposed to protect everyone who co-habits in the so-called family, not only those in a heterosexual intimate relationship or those that are married. It should also be recognised that not only women suffer from domestic violence, but also the elderly, people with disabilities, people with different sexual orientation and gender identities. The latter are even more vulnerable because of multiple discriminations that they are exposed to. Groups working on women's, children's, elderly people, and LGBT rights all came together in aiming for inclusive legislation on anti-domestic violence law. The Chinese feminist movement and women's organisations moved towards inclusivity and intersectionality, although there is still long way to go. Women comprise the majority of the victims of domestic violence, however, without looking at the most vulnerable, marginalised, subaltern groups in society, feminist movements can never construct the holistic and effective agenda to address the issue of domestic violence.

Despite the censorship and tight control over media by the State authority, Chinese women's rights advocates innovatively utilise various media platforms and advocacy tools, such as "*weibo*" (Chinese blog), vlog, among others and whatever other media tools are available to them.

In the past couple of months, I attended several conferences and forums on Beijing+25 which brought together feminists and women's rights advocates from different generations for sharing, learning, and inspiring each other. The most impressive and empowering was to see the younger generation who are leading the China #MeToo movement and the pioneering feminists who attended the Beijing conference converse

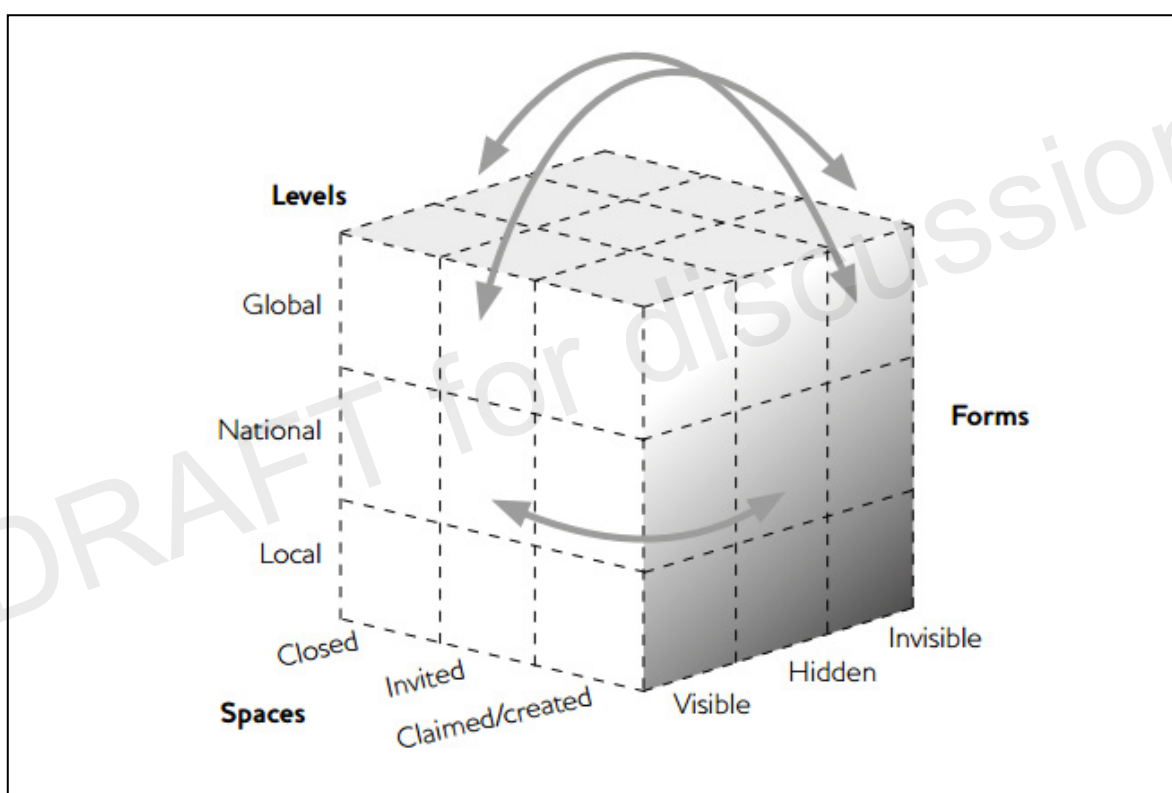
at panels to exchange their experiences, opinions, even the frustrations, and where they all envision the future of women's organisations and activism. The importance of intergenerational dialogue is critical to sustain the feminist activism and movement. To make that happen, the power dynamics needs to be recognised with honesty and sincerity as to how different generations perceive each other's work and the respective environments that their activism are situated in. For example, the younger generation expressed their jealousy about the political space and resources that the older generation had access to twenty years ago which is no longer available to them. What they may not be aware of is that twenty years back, terms like "human rights," and "domestic violence" were sensitive and considered taboo by the mass media. There was no alternative media space like social media and online mobilising like #MeToo which was unimaginable back then. Meanwhile, the younger generation may also need be patient and wait for the older generation to catch up on the use of new innovative technologies. The barrier introduced by misunderstanding, miscommunication and romanticising amongst the two generations must be removed to move women's rights and the gender equality agenda forward in China. A lot of progress has been made but it is for the younger generation to carry this on and to explore new horizons.

The following "Power Cube" framework² can help us comprehend where and how Chinese women's organisations could work to disrupt the seemingly deeply embedded and inextricable power structure. The Power Cube is a framework for analysing the levels, spaces and forms of power, and their inter-relationships. It is useful in letting us explore various aspects of power and how they interact with each other and help us to identify the spaces social mobilising and organising can break down and dismantle power. There is no better way to disrupt this seemingly impenetrable powerful patriarchal institution and social construction than to build this synergy. This means no matter where you are from (local, national, global), what issues you are focusing on; if you can identify your entry point to contribute, you can always collaborate with others who may

2- <https://www.powercube.net>

be with you on this front or in other spaces to make the maximum possible progress. If an organisation was to be invited for a consultation in a policy making process, would it be able to speak to the reality of a grassroots organisation who were not invited? Would those advocates working at the global level be able to link the global commitments with women's experience on the ground? The first step to disrupt the oppressive power is to share the power you have with others.

Power Cube



www.powercube.net

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Beijing+25 platform create a new momentum for China to put gender equality and women's rights onto the political agenda, especially as part of its foreign policy and development cooperation, as stated in President Xi's speech on October 1st, 2020. Would it be possible for Chinese women's organisations to seize this opportunity to advance women's rights and gender equality at the national

level? It could be a space for Chinese women's organisations to engage in China's proactive and constructive role on issues of gender equality and women's empowerment at the global level? As the global feminist movement and activism play a vital role in advancing women's rights and gender equality and holding governments accountable nationally and globally, the collaboration with women NGOs and feminist organisations, especially from the global South will be essential for China's positive impact as it claims to commit on global governance in the changing context of geopolitics.

DRAFT for discussion

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