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## Youth Feminist Activism in China

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### *An Ethnographic Analysis of an Innovative Action-oriented Feminism*

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**ABSTRACT:** In the spring of 2015, five young feminist activists were arrested by the Chinese police for allegedly ‘causing trouble’, which resulted in global attention aimed at this new wave of feminist movement. Youth feminist activism have made their voice heard in China through numerous actions for gender equality since 2012. Not much is known about the new feminist movements and the limited work that exists uses few specific feminist theories and limited historical context to interpret this movement. I decided to try to expand the knowledge of the youth feminist activism through the use of engaged ethnography. I conducted an engaged fieldwork with a group of young feminist activists, all under the age of 30, over the course of 4 months in 2014. I try to understand this new wave through the use of an historical overview of the Chinese feminist movement and feminist academic works, especially focusing on the theories about subjectivity and body. Topics such as conditions for new activism, different forms of activism, subjectivity building process, generational differences between feminists, bodily resistance against gender discrimination and violence are addressed. The autonomous, civil-society styled and action-oriented feature of young feminists’ struggle is illustrated. **KEY WORDS:** Youth Feminist Activism; Chinese Feminist Movement; Radicalism; Action-oriented Feminism

## FOREWORD

This thesis is written to complete my master's program Social Studies of Gender in the department of Gender Studies in Lund University, Sweden. Inspired and also encouraged by young activists' innovative struggle and commitment for the Chinese feminist movement, my study aims to give insights to this new wave of the feminist movement with the engaged ethnographic fieldwork in China in 2014. I thank my participants for sharing thoughts and experience with me.

During the writing process of this thesis, many persons contributed with suggestions, critical thoughts and peer reading. I take this chance to thank individuals that helped me during the writing. These individuals are my supervisor Giulia Garofalo, my English writing support teacher Ladaea Rylander, Swedish State Church priest Jan Kjellström, Professor Wei Kaiqiong, and all my family members and friends who helped me with the topic and encouraged me in the writing process. Special thanks to Fredric Falk and Shao Bowei, who had shared my happiness and pain in my two years' stay in Europe. And finally thanks to the Swedish Institute Scholarship, which had offered me the excellent chance to study in Lund University in 2013-2015.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

After a group of young activists launched performance street arts and other visible activities on gender equality in 2012, the word “feminism” as a label as well as a social discourse, a school of thoughts and a series of practices, has experienced a shift from the margins to the main stage of public debates in mainland China (Wei Wei, 2014). When young feminist activists initiated their first public actions in 2012 spring, I was in a leading feminist NGO in Beijing. I was therefore witness to the rise of youth feminist activism from the very beginning. Ever since then, I was deeply attracted to the movement and kept following and reading about their activism in the media for 2 years. In the autumn of 2014, I again interned in the same NGO for my engaged ethnographic fieldwork with young feminist activists. This time I was able to participate in and, through that, more closely observe the activism.

However, soon after I returned to my university to write this thesis, an unpredicted incident happened in China. On March 6 2015, two days before the international women’s day, five young feminist activists were arrested from three separate cities in China. I learned from personal social media that police broke into their homes in the night, arrested them without showing any valid documents and soon transported them to the same jail in Beijing. The activists were planning a demonstration against sexual harassment on public transportation and were arrested by the police for allegedly ‘causing trouble’, which could bring a sentence up to five years under Chinese law. I met all five of the detained during different occasions and three of them were my interviewees when I conducted my fieldwork. For those I see as peers and friends, I was in such a nervous tension, constantly following all the information update through personal contact with activists at home and spreading the call for help.

Like most public human rights cases, this news was kept silent on Chinese mainstream media. However this information was widely spread on social media by feminist volunteers as well as in influential international media, such as BBC and CNN news. With the increasing number of reports, the detained activists and their activism became known in the world. A mass online campaign *Free the Five* was launched

immediately by various international human rights defending organizations and feminist organizations, demanding the Chinese government to release detained feminists. Participants in the campaign included the most influential human rights and women's rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and International Women's Rights Action, as well as prominent scholars such as cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin and influential politicians such as Hilary Clinton. With massive internal and international support, the five activists were released on a bail pending trial after 37 days of arrest.

While celebrating the victory of this successful international rescue, I, together with a lot of Chinese feminists, am deeply concerned about the future for feminist activism in China in light of this incident. Some Chinese feminist scholars, such as Wang Zheng and Li Yinhe, pointed out that the arrest of young feminist activists showed an unfriendly stance of the Chinese government to women's rights advocacy as well as the development of civil-society, which appeared to be a reverse on the promise of gender equality that China made in the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing. However, this incident also inspired me to carry on my research on Chinese youth feminist activism, aiming to provide a feminist interpretation that situates this new wave of feminist movement in its specific context.

As a worldwide phenomenon, activism led by the young generations has brought extensive attention to their potential power for radical social changes. The high visibility of the 'feminist' label within some of these movements is celebrated by some, as well as questioned by others. However, it is certain that the young global generation that is involved with the feminist struggle are making their mark on the world. Gender issues in youth led social movements, such as the Arab Spring, and specific social movements and protests for gender equality, such as the "international slut walk" in April 2011, nude protests of FEMEN against the exploitation of the sex industry during the Euro Cup in Ukraine in 2012, the 'He For She' movement launched by Hollywood star Emma Watson in 2014, and the recent collective protest and campaign against sexual violence on campuses in the US known as "carrying that weight" have caught attention from not only mass media but also feminist scholars.

As Taiwanese sociologist Yin-zu Chen's research on the young feminist generation in Mexico City showed, young women are growing up in a different context which is shaped by individualism, neo-liberalism and institutionalized feminism with gender education and feminist NGOs (Chen, 2014). While the specific contexts differ for each case there are some new general features that appear in this new generation of feminists, for example the high level of online participation (Schuster, 2013), to strategically organized under the 'youth identity' and a general resistance to their marginalized situation towards males and older generation counterparts (Hunt, 2013), the use of body performance as an instrument of protest (Chen, 2014). With these features, the generation is marking out a place for themselves in the history of the feminist movements.

Studying the young feminist generation can be an interesting way to access the history of women's movement, as well as to understand the interaction between feminist knowledge and practice. Looking into the discursive context where young feminist activism emerges, we can possibly understand transmission and production of knowledge from older generations to the younger ones, as well as understand the concrete historical particularity of certain regions and peoples that are involved. This approach allows investigation into the impact of theories into practice and the feedback from practice to theories, that is, to link feminist practices and theories together. In this paper I will apply feminist theories, both from Chinese scholars and international feminist academia, using theories on body, feminist agency and neo-liberalism to understand the practice of the young feminist generation. The relationship between the global and the local, as well as academia and social reality therefore might be revealed. A better understanding of the relationship between theories and feminist movements has the potential to provide better strategies for activism as well as improve theories to interpret social phenomena.

This research develops an analytical discussion on the new rising youth feminist activism in China. By looking into when and where the movement emerged, the relationship between this new wave of activism and its historical context within the Chinese feminist movement, institutionalized feminism, neo-liberalism and the local

context of Chinese society will be discussed. The aim of the research therefor translates into two research goals:

- 1) To theorize the context of the Chinese feminist movement with a historical overview. This will be addressed through the following research questions: What is the context of Chinese feminist movement? What has been made as the new starting point for the young generation through earlier feminist struggle, especially the institutionalization of feminism under the influence of international feminism and the Beijing conference? What was achieved and what might be missing in the process? How was agency, if at all, reflected during the process?
- 2) To analyze how new forms of youth feminist activism in China are constituted from, and in turn constitute, contemporary feminist theories on power and bodily resistance. This will be addressed through the following research questions: What is new about the youth feminist activism, in terms of their struggle strategy and forms of resistance? What kind of agency was embedded in this new activism, and what is the relation between the new generation and earlier feminist struggle in China? How does the new generation response to challenges that they are facing? What potentials lie in their more radical and visible resistance in a context of discursive power relations in contemporary China?

This research will discuss these questions with a qualitative approach based on historical overview and content analysis of participatory observation, in depth interviews with young feminist activists. I argues that through active advocacy for gender equality advocacy and against gender discrimination, youth feminist activism indicates that the Chinese feminist movement is moving to a new stage. The rise of youth feminist activism presents a new subject for the Chinese feminist movement, not united in a biological sex category of women but mobilized with a collective identity as feminists. Discussion on multiple gender issues and queer participation highlights the movement in this stage. This change allows a broader range of feminist topics to be addressed, especially topics of body and sexuality that link systematic gender discrimination and women's bodily experience together. My research shows the relation between youth feminist activism with their pioneers' effort in Chinese feminist

movement. By firmly asserting a feminist agenda, the young feminist generation shows potential to break through a grand narrative that always set women's emancipation as merely a part of a greater goal through history. In their struggle, feminism and women's rights is no longer a secondary question, neither an abashed movement that has to be covered under mainstream discourse of the Party-State. Through creatively reading gender theories and practicing their resistant strategies, young feminists are creating an independent feminist discourse that responds to the unequal gender social relations in contemporary China.

A few terms need to be addressed here for a general understanding of the Chinese context. Although there are conflicts on the translation of feminism as well as the fragmented identity of Chinese feminists (Spakowski, 2011), in English academic literature on China and gender, both 'Chinese women's movement' and 'Chinese feminist movement' have been used to refer to the movement. I will refer to the struggle for gender equality in Chinese society since the late Qing dynasty as the Chinese feminist movement because I believe that feminism is about movements and ideologies to fight unequal social gender relations and to bring equal rights to all genders (Hooks, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that 'feminism' as an imported word translated to Chinese, has had quite different meanings and implications at different points of time. Feminism was translated both as *nvquan zhuyi* 女权主义 (women's rights or power-ism) and *nvxing zhuyi* 女性主义 (female or-feminine-ism). While the former refers to an interest on power and rights, and therefore carries a more threatening implication, the latter is much softer, which might only imply a female biological and psychological identity (Ko and Wang, 2006). In the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, the legal term for the movement is neither 女权主义 nor 女性主义 but rather the 'Chinese women's emancipation movement', specifically not mentioning 'feminism' at all. The word 'feminism' has long been a negative word in the PRC, qualified with adjectives like 'bourgeois' and 'western' (Wang, 1999). The CCP's term implies the leadership of the communist party in women's emancipation from evil feudalism and capitalism by contrasting the 'failure'

of western feminism and the success of CCP's liberation of women. The propaganda such as "men and women are the same", "women can do the same as men" implied a de-sexualization of genders.

The end of the Maoist era and new social economic and political reformation brought the discussion of women's problem into the public eye. Both 女权主义 (women's rights or power-ism) and 女性主义 (female or-feminine-ism) are back into discussion. A strong resistance to the Maoist gender policy led some scholars to claim their position on female or-feminine-ism. Key scholars, such as Li Xiaojiang, claimed that CCP's gender policy has harmed women by ordering them to act like men and ignoring their particular need as women (Wang, 2013). At the same time, the growing market economy has made a profit in emphasizing the female identity and female beauty. Female or-feminine-ism is then widely used in academic setting in various disciplines such as literature studies, history and various social studies. However, the other translation of feminism which might be closer to the English term, 女权主义 (women's rights or power-ism), is deemed threatening. In an article titled *Another Women's day, let's discuss about feminists that do not bite* in Beijing News Review Weekly, the danger of the term is exemplified by the small story of an academic meeting in 1997. When the famous Chinese film scholar Dai Jinhua claimed she was a '不咬人的女权主义者' ( a pro- rights/power feminist that does not bite ), the silent expressions of other participants showed that they disapproved of this term back then<sup>1</sup>. Li Xiaojiang, who built the first women's studies center in China, wouldn't call herself a nvquan zhuyi zhe (women's rights-ist) because she deeded the word feminist imposed a post-colonial position based on Western experience instead of Chinese experience, as well as a hostile stance towards men. Even today, scholars who claim they are feminists still face the danger of isolation and misunderstanding. Feminism as a radical label is still frequently stigmatized in mass media (Yang, 2014). Comparing to the state discourse of 'equality between men and women', feminism as a concept has much

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<sup>1</sup> 又一个妇女节，聊聊“不咬人的女权主义”

lower acceptance in the society, either causing unpleasant association with the Maoist radical sameness or a distorted image of men-hating women.

The rise of youth feminist activism from 2012 has pushed the term 女权主义 (women's rights or power-ism) into public discourse. Those who called themselves feminists without hesitation and named their activities "feminist activism" have brought the movement to a new stage in terms of public awareness.

## 2 AN ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY

When working with the question of the new development of feminist movement, it is easy to fall into two traps that could mislead the research. One celebrates it and describes the development in a linear historical narrative, while the other takes a hostile stance to the “radicalism” of the young generation’s actions. I have been constantly concerned by both these traps in my research for youth feminist activism.

On the one hand, my personal experience, as a former student who studied in an official state owned women’s college, has the potential of leading me to make an unfair judgment of the older feminist generation. I graduated from the first women’s studies program in China. The program is part of an institutionalized feminism under the influence of spreading of gender theories and the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (which I will mention as the Beijing Conference later). While knowledge gained in gender studies led my interest to women’s life experience, their suffering under various discrimination and my eagerness to know about their resistance the sometimes frustrating experience with the institution used to leave me dissatisfied.

During my upbringing in China I could easily see the problems around me. Belonging to a generation which is marked by the one-child-policy, I heard a lot of brutal stories from my female relatives. One might be discriminated by her husband because one gave birth to a girl and therefore wasted the only legal chance to give birth to a son that can carry on the family bloodline. Those who lives in rural place could be made to endure forced abortions during rigid time of the policy. Forced gynecological examination was applied to female employees regularly to check if they were pregnant, no matter how humiliated they felt from the forced check. Those stories sparked an interest in me to the relationship between state and women, especially about the state violence towards women during the policy implementation. I was eager to find out what happened to women, and how it happened when I started my higher education. However, this as a research proposal was rejected immediately by my program because of the sensitivity of the topic. I was told by my advisor that this was for my own good and the department just wanted to make sure that I wouldn’t get into trouble for my

research. This experience was a certain frustrating and disappointing time for my younger self. When I found very little research had been done by feminist institutions to address violence against women during the one-child-policy, as well as the passive attitude to gender equality I got from my interviews with local All China Women's Federation members, I questioned the ability of institutionalized feminism to address certain problems that are considered radical, sensitive or simply differing from the CCP's narrative on women's issues. I felt there might be a gap between me and the older feminist generation, who mostly would call themselves as workers or researchers on women and gender issues, rather than feminists.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the youth feminist activism caught my attention immediately, through their relatively radical and outspoken position. I was doing an internship in a leading advocating feminist NGO in the spring of 2012, coincidentally witnessed those who call themselves youth feminist activists launch their first few protests and creative performance street arts and gaining influence through new media. This unpredicted encounter with feminist activism brought me new understanding of how to do feminism that sharply contradicted the mild feminist academic environment that I was used to. For two years, I followed media reports on their activism and kept my connection with the NGO, and eventually I conducted a fieldwork for 4 months to get involved with their work. The friendships that I've build with activists, as well as life stories, gains, pains and frustrations that I've shared with them, formed a certain impulse for me to tell their story.

At the same time, I am widely aware of how 'feminism' was portrayed by mainstream discourse in China. Youth feminists with their activism were put into public queries from media and social discourse ever since the beginning. Topics of their actions, such as 'Occupying Men's Bathroom' 'My Vagina says', 'Nude Pictures Protest against Domestic Violence' were deemed provoking in many debates. Is youth feminist activism a simple counterfeit of Western radical feminism that does not fit the Chinese context? Are activists merely agents that work for foreign powers with ulterior motivation, like the accusation of 'causing trouble' from the police? I even questioned myself from time to time, is their activism too radical for Chinese society, therefore

might provoke public objection and hostility to feminism? And further more, do I choose to present the young generation's struggle because it fits better with a Western understanding of feminist movement?

As a student from a non-Western developing country, my studying experience in an international environment in Sweden, a country that is famous for advanced gender equality, does help me to reflect on my own position in feminist academia. Due to the fact that I am writing a thesis in the dominant language in feminist knowledge production and aiming at readers in an international environment, I have to be more careful about the knowledge that I am presenting. Writing from a different cultural background should neither be as a show for the western audience, nor a simple translation of an exotic experience of the cultural/ethnic other.

As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2000) pointed out, embodying 'the other' in feminist research could be really problematic. When research is done by Western white feminists who consider themselves as subjects of knowledge and take third world women as objects of knowledge, the knowledge of 'the other' will be distorted into a linear narrative that relates the other's experience to the 'pre-history' of liberation of feminism and modernity, which serves a post-colonial fantasy that fixes the other in a knowledge that is detached from its context, as well as keep a distance from the other to avoid any real close encounter (Ahmed, 2000). Similarly, in her discussion of western feminist understanding of Chinese women, Chinese scholar Xiufen Xu also criticized a kind of cross-cultural studies that represent the cultural "others" based on particular stereotypes and biases. This kind of research leads to ignorance towards other women's experience and interprets their stories in a fixed simplified time and space which omits their cultural and historical specificity. For example, through exploration to the interpretation for the custom of foot-binding, she showed that how two popular perceptions on the cause of foot-binding, namely the Confucianism and male eroticism, are logically incompatible and lack of historical evidence. This misperception leaves no room to discuss of women's experience and feelings through this custom, as well as reinforces a post-colonial imagination on the passive victimized image of Chinese women (Lu, 2005).

The criticism of black feminists and third world feminists had brought feminist scholarship to reflect upon essentialism and western-centered universalization of women's experience as well as feminist struggle all over the world (Hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 2003; Mahmood, 2005) As Saba Mahmood unveiled, even the understanding of freedom and agency could differ very much between cultures, and to impose a universal western liberal understanding of freedom and agency could undermine the efforts of the other, as well as potentially serve for various political agendas which aim to reinforce hegemonic power (Mahmood, 2011). Here I share Mohanty's concerns on the politics of difference and solidarity, decolonizing and democratizing feminist practice, the crossing of borders, and the relation of feminist knowledge and scholarship to social movements. Similar argument was made by Chinese feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang, she argues Chinese women's studies have to depart from the history and reality that lies for Chinese women instead of departing from Western theories that are based on Western experience. The thirty years of egalitarian practice that socialist China brought for Chinese women is something we can't neglect when using imported theories to explain Chinese women's experience (Li, 2002). These insights encouraged me to dig into the understanding of radicalism of young feminist generation, to explore their specific context and their position towards the so called Western influence. I would like to bring the discussion towards contemporary Chinese feminist movement, aiming at a better understanding and recognition between Chinese and Western feminists.

For this purpose I found two existing approaches very helpful. One is made by feminist historian Joan Scott (2009) who emphasizes the alternative narrative of history, to unveil a broader picture of women's lives in different times and places. In this approach she challenged the mainstream linear logic of history as well as developed a deeper understanding of culture and agency which differs from the West liberalist tradition on human emancipation. For this approach, there has been studying about Chinese feminist movements which brought traditional culture, colonial and discursive complex political background together, for example the empirical study about women in Chinese enlightenment of Chinese feminist historian Wang Zheng(2005). With

various oral and text history, she unveiled the long neglected women's agency which was hidden in an anti-colonial nationalist discourse of this period. This paper shares the concern of the embodiment of agency in youth feminist activism within the Chinese context.

Another inspiring approach is the engaged ethnography which not only try to understand women's status and also actively try to make a difference by linking academic work with social movements. For the Chinese experience, there is a notable work made by Pun Ngai who conducted ethnographical project towards female manufacturing workers in southern China. Through a near 8 months fieldwork, she worked and lived with female workers in a Hong Kong-invested factory and eventually brought her observation and insight of the existence status for Chinese female workers in neo economy. This work is part of her long lasting activism for gender equality advocacy and worker's rights in China, in which she unveiled the triple oppression from state socialism, international capitalism and family patriarchy towards female workers as well as showed their resistance within harsh environment (Ngai, 2005). Bearing reflection to "strange encounters" in mind, those two approaches gave me to practical inspiration to carry out my own research with an engaged ethnographical approach.

In the fall of 2014, I completed a 4 months internship in Feminist Power, a leading feminist media NGO in Beijing. I worked as an intern editor for this organization. My daily work involves maintaining website of the organization, translating and writing, as well as attending related conferences and activities. During these activities I managed to establish a connection to leading young activists. While most of the fieldwork was centered in Beijing, I paid visit to two other major cities, namely Hangzhou and Guangzhou, to interview activists, participate in their feminist events and to observe their organizations. My chosen target group was those who consider themselves to be 'youth feminist activists' that initiate feminist activism and actively participate in gender equality promoting activities. All of the ones I contacted for my fieldwork were under the age of 30 and most of them are the only child of an urban family with university or higher level education, a particular identity intersection which I will

analyze in the following of the thesis. The participants work in different fields. While half of them are professional NGO workers, others might work as journalists, freelance artists, doctors, or students in different majors. In total I have been in personal contact with around 20-30 young feminist activists. In addition, my research involved connection with activists from older generation who usually play the role of advisor and organizer.

As part of the ethnography, I conducted 8 formal interviews with 8 young activists. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, lasting from 40 minutes to 2 hours. The interviews were conducted in Beijing, Hangzhou and Guangzhou. I transcribed the interviews and translated the relevant quotes for this thesis. Other than the interviews I conducted, I also used published interviews of activists as supporting material, especially for those who weren't able to participate directly in my study. In addition, my empirical material includes published articles and comments on various media, as well as my fieldwork notes that were taken during and after participant observation in various activities, such as academic conferences, press conferences, training courses, brainstorm meetings for activism, and advocacy events. The name of the interviewees and the relevant NGOs are changed.

In the interviews, I discussed several topics with my interviewees, including their personal experience of joining feminist activism, their reflection on activism as well as their perception on feminist theories and practice. We also talked about their understanding of feminism in contemporary Chinese context within globalization. I was also exposed to their feelings and emotions through my participation in private gathering, theater practice, personal posts on social media, etc. From these different materials I tried to figure out what led them into feminist activism, what factors facilitated their choice and what kind of agency existed in their new form of feminist struggle.

Although my target group is limited to real life organisers, I see feminist activism in a broader definition. Some of my interviewees refused to count online feminist participation as part of activism because "participation without bodily engagement can only reach very limited results (Xinyi)". While I understand that they emphasize on the

direct feminist actions that could address gender problems immediately and reach actual results, I believe that various online support does count as part of activism, at least as a beginning stage of active participation. The effect of massive online participation is also a significant process for feminist conscious raising, providing a larger base group for further feminist movement.

In order to analyze my material I have used qualitative ethnographic content analysis. The aim of this method is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid (Altheide, 1987) (Hsien; Shannon, 2005). In the research process I coded data according to different topics that emerge from the interviews and other documents.

Being a new phenomenon, there has been little research on youth feminist activism in China, but some such as Chinese socialist Wei Wei's study "Street, Behavior, Art: Advocating Gender Rights and the Innovation of a Social Movement Repertoire" (2014) do exist. Existing research mostly deals with a social movement approach that provides interpretation of Chinese political environment in terms of civil society development, which usually will integrate feminist resistant activism into a social movement in a broad sense of this term, for example a civil-society movement or human rights movement. Here with civil-society and human rights I refer to any forms of activism that aims at promoting democratization and fully realization of fundamental human rights in China. In their approach, these authors focus on the dialogue and struggle between civil-society and the state, which brings a close reading of the political context in contemporary China. Although I appreciate this social movement approach as an important way of understanding feminist movement, I choose to interpret youth feminist activism with works from feminist theorists, aiming at situating youth feminist activism in a transnational setting with interaction with international feminist scholarship.

My research shows that the aims of feminist movement do not always coincide with a broader human rights movement or civil-society movements in the contemporary Chinese context. The gender perspective is far from being integrated into Chinese society in all aspects. Different individuals and organizations within civil society movements can still hold an ignorant or even hostile stance to feminism, which

means feminist agency and vision might sometimes collide with the patriarchal reality in the general civil society movement. Feminist agency and struggle is still at risk of being coerced into a grand narrative that interprets gender equality as merely a “women’s problem” and a minor issue. I observed this frustration in my fieldwork when feminist activists frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with male dominance and sexism in related NGOs. Therefore I choose feminist literature to interpret my research result, aiming at bridging the local Chinese feminist movement with its international academic references, as well as marking its own value in the global history of feminist endeavor.

This research is limited by what can be seen as the paradox of ethnographic fieldwork. On one hand, if researchers don’t engage themselves enough in the field, they might carry superficial ideas about the culture which will produce a false image to the audiences. On the other hand, if they immerse themselves too much in the field and “go native”, they risk the possibility to lose their professionalism (Robben and Sluka, 2012). I was not at risk for the first limitation, but rather for the second because my fieldwork with young feminist activists was influenced by my experience as well as by my self-identification with the activists. To compensate for this shortcoming, I kept a reflective learning process to understand their work and circumstance, which involved my reading into the history of Chinese feminist movement and observation to the young activists’ interaction with local and international feminism. At the same time, compassionate empathy allows me and my interviewees to share a subjective space, implicating us in each other’s lives and in the production of ethnographic knowledge. This collective knowledge production process is part of my feminist practice to break the power relation between researcher and participants.

As far as more standard ethnical concerns, I followed the informed-consent rules, by informing all activists about my research and by gaining permission from participants to use the fieldwork data for the research. However, due to the political sensibility caused by the arrest of five activists during my writing process, I chose to withhold information that was related to the police investigation to avoid political risk for my participants.

### 3 FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN CHINA: THE POST-BEIJING CONFERENCE ERA

Before I start to analyze the content of my fieldwork, in this section I introduce the context of the Chinese feminist movement. I first introduce the local trend of women's studies that emerged in the 80s in the economic reformation era in China. Women's studies, at this time criticized the Maoist ideology on gender and women as well as questioned women's subjectivity in Chinese women's liberation. After this, I discuss the spread of gender theory and the significant influence of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. I address the complex relation that the Chinese feminist movement has always had with the dominant social discourse in its time, either nationalism, Maoist-socialism or sometimes both. After this, historical overview is set and the complex context of youth feminist activism within contemporary Chinese society will be presented.

Feminist movements in China have been colored by the CCP'S gender discourse 'equality of men and women'. The CCP, which was built in the Chinese Enlightenment period during the 1920s, claimed to have an egalitarian attitude to women's rights and to be a supporter of women's liberation all through its history. As part of this discourse, the CCP claimed credits for granting women equal rights as men, such as the right to vote, a right for which their Western sisters had to struggle for. However, the credit is misplaced. New Zealand scholar Louise Edwards' studies on women's suffrage in China shows that there was a discursive but constant women's suffrage effort from 1900 till 1949 when the CCP took the country, during which she argues that "women developed a clear feminist agenda that cut across party, nation or class loyalties as they invoked their collective identity as women and moreover sustained this through several decades of activism" (Edwards, 2008:9).

However, the official discourse of the PRC dismissed women's suffrage campaign as a marginal bourgeois movement. The CCP's has succeeded in spreading their version of the story. The popular perception was that Chinese women didn't struggle to win their rights to vote. Instead, it was the enlightened government of the CCP who granted rights to women. In the CCP's narrative, there is no such need for an

independent women's movement because the CCP has the All China Women's Federation (which I will refer as the Women's Federation from now on) to represent women's concerns. In terms of constraining women's activism within the broad party agenda, the federation serves to afford women powerful negotiating positions at the cost of constraining women's activism within the broad party stage agenda. The story that 'the CCP knows the best' on women's issues includes the teleological narrative as:

*Before 1949, in the feudal past, Chinese women were abject slaves suffering under the cruel and harsh Confucian family and clan structures; after 1949, the CCP legislated and educated the masses to halt these oppressive practices (Edwards, 2008:16)*

The CCP's goal to liberate women, in many aspects, did improve women's social status. The patriarchal oppression of women, especially the traditional role women have in their families, was seen as an obstacle for women to participate in collective production. The leaders of the CCP, for instance Mao Zedong, believed that women would be liberated from feudal customs and oppressions if they were mobilized out of private family life and participated in paid work (Leung, 2003). This ideology of state feminism was expressed as "whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too"(Mao Zedong). In the Cultural Revolution, this ideology developed into a notion of "radical sameness" for men and women, which in practice was an overall desexualisation of both men and women (Evans, 1995). It called women to behave according to a male standard and emphasized a communist masculinity, which was not just to participate in political revolution actively, but also to put the collective interest beyond the narrow individual interest of family and kinship that women were traditionally bound to (Leung, 2003).

As American historian Tani Barlow has pointed out in her research on the question of women in Chinese feminism, women as a category and revolutionary subject was a historically constructed concept by modernist and nationalist discourse in the Chinese context. In the legal communist discourse in Maoist era, women were

put into a state-defined category in which masculinized women, “iron girls”, were liberated by the saviour CCP (Barlow, 1994). Within this context, ‘Chinese women are liberated’ was as a fact beyond question in many Chinese people’s minds until China ended the Cultural Revolution and started the social and economic reformation in the 80s.

The reformation embraced a neo-liberal ideology and had effects on gender construction and on women’s status in China. Gender discrimination in employment increased as well as discriminative laws, which appeared to protect women but actually excluded women from higher positions and certain categories of jobs. For example, the Labour Insurance Regulations in 1984 declared that women are entitled to five years of early retirement if they are employed in high-risk professions. This so called ‘women-protection’ law resulted in women losing their high positions and receiving lower payment after retirement. With the one-child-policy, discrimination and violence towards women increased due to the son-preference, as well as sex selective abortion. Problems such as women returning home, female workers losing their benefits, young girls dropping out schools and the reappearance of prostitution and concubinage and so on, caused attention from both academia and the Party-State (Wang, 1997).

As a response to the growing ‘new women’s issues (in comparison to the thirty-years of liberation)’, women’s studies emerged in China in the early 1980s, both within the Party-State system and in grassroots organizations. Academic research on women’s issues from the 80s to 90s, represented by the works of key scholar Li Xiaojiang, draw from humanist theory and argue against the “radical sameness” between men and women which was promoted in Maoist time. Li Xiaojiang is regarded as pioneer in the field of women’s studies in China. She built the first Women’s Studies Center in Zhengzhou University and her works and passion for women’s enterprise has inspired countless people to think about women’s status and future.

She argued that the top-down women’s liberation was problematic because of the message that was put forth by the powerful Party-State discourse, “Time has changed, men and women are the same”. While the CCP’s liberation practice in this stage did magnificently improve Chinese women’s social status in the sense of participation in

society and official equal rights in many aspects, it neglected the sexual and psychological difference between men and women, which also caused women to suffer in their practice to follow the example of men. Li Xiaojiang deemed that “sex difference was not human-made, nor is it a gap that can be bridged by human effort”, which explains the problem with women being told to assimilate into a male world where women use male standards to judge themselves. Li argued that “to push for principles of egalitarian distribution and structural liberation for women from an undeveloped economic base restricts not only social development but women’s own development as well”. She claimed that Chinese women’s consciousness is especially weak because they received the CCP’s help to gain their equal status with men, instead of having a constant feminist movement like women in Western societies have done. Therefore Li believed that the hope for Chinese women’s liberation lies in the collective awakening of female subjectivity, as well as the recognition of women’s specific experience that was neglected through history (Li, 1994).

In this way women’s studies focus on the biological and psychological difference between men and women with a stress on self-awareness and subjectivity of “the woman”, calling attention to women’s specific need that was neglected and sacrificed in Maoist time. This trend was criticized for essentialism and soon taken over by new enthusiasm for gender studies that was brought back by scholars who studied in the US in the 80s, such as Wang Zheng.

Wang Zheng is a professor in history at Michigan University, a key scholar who links American feminist academia with Chinese feminist scholars. She has initiated workshops and doctoral courses with local scholars on Chinese women and development since 1993. With the concept of gender as a socially constructed reality as opposed to biological sex was brought to China. It was not until after the Beijing Conference that gender gained its importance in mainstream discourse in both the Chinese government and women’s institutions. Indeed, gender as a theoretical frame was gradually spread into the society through the UN slogan and approach ‘gender mainstreaming’, which slowly replaced the focus on “women”.

Other than the upsurge to study about women, autonomous activism started to

emerge in the 80s. Scholars and women intellectuals in different occupations started to organize themselves within and outside the Party-State system, focusing on various women's issues such as employment, marriage and domestic violence. In her ground-breaking research on women's activist organizations in Beijing in the 90s, Danish feminist sociologist Cecelia Milwertz studied three popular women's organizations in Beijing, tracing their development within the specific political context of China. She claimed that there was a new women's movement trend which turned the CCP's "move women movement" to an authentic women's movement (Milwertz, 2002). International communication with the West, especially the information boost from the Beijing conference was a crucial factor in this development.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, Beijing, as journalist and scholar Li Sipan reviewed in her article 'Twenty Years after the Beijing Conference', was a wonderful time for many Chinese feminists to realize there were so many people in the world, facing, caring and thinking about the problems that they faced, and devoting their lives to solving these problems (Li, 2015). This conference was the largest conference on women ever in the world with 189 countries and over 31,000 participants. As quoted in Li's article, a feminist lawyer described her experience poetically: 'people of different skin colors, they hugged each other and they were full of vitality! My blood was boiling, we had deep communication from the soul. They discussed what I was thinking everyday...In this wonderland, I found my family and friends all of a sudden!'.

As this reflection implies, the Conference was a unique chance for Chinese women to build their relation with international feminism. The demonstrations and debates during the conference pointed to another way to reach gender equality to its Chinese participants: other than celebrating the CCP's top-down social policies on gender equality, they offered the possibility for women to organize themselves together to make a change from the grass-roots level. This is reflected in Milwertz's fieldwork with women activists. Her interviewees shared similar stories of becoming aware of and reinterpreting patterns in women's lives during the Beijing conference. In the conference, especially the NGO forum, Chinese feminist activists gained knowledge of

the gender concept and developed a gender perspective to understand gendered stereotypes, roles and discrimination. In order to understand this change within Chinese feminism, Milwertz talks about knowledge transformation and uses the concept of 'cognitive praxis' to indicate the process which helped Chinese feminists to form new kinds of social identities for collective feminist political actions (Milwertz, 2002).

This excitement and gains from the Beijing Conference, however, were met with the complex political context which was a different reality for Chinese feminists. Chinese scholar Wang Zheng, who played an important role in bringing gender theories to China during the 90s, wrote about this complex process in her article *Maoism, feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's studies research in contemporary China*. The Beijing Conference was a chance for China to get back into the international society after years of political isolation since the mass social movements in 1989. The CCP leaders still believed that China had a higher level of women's liberation than that of women in the west, and therefore were eager to use the conference as a political show to present their achievement on gender equality.

This point of view was reflected in mass domestic propaganda on gender equality before the conference. However, some scholars who were already involved with women's studies found this political attention from the Party-State to become a burden for their struggle. As Wang Zheng pointed out, the state's interest in presenting a glorified image of Chinese women interfered with women's scholars and activists' effort to identify and study women's problems in contemporary society (Wang, 1997, 143). Indeed, while on the one hand the importance of women's issues was nationally recognized and the work of the All China Women's Federation (the Women's Federation) was promoted by the CCP, on the other hand, the very fact that women's issues came to be part of the official government agenda, meant that any research or intervention in this field became an object of potential repression (Wang, 1997).

As Wang Zheng argues, another crucial element to understand the role played by the Beijing Conference has to do with the relationship of distrust between the CCP and the international feminist movement. Having been protested by human rights organizations during some international conferences, the Chinese government leaders

began to see the political risk of the conference and finally decided to move the NGO forum for the Beijing Conference to Huairou, a satellite town of Beijing, in order to prevent possible political demonstration against the Chinese government in the capital city. This attempt caused a mass international feminist protest via faxes and internet, which again tensed the nerve of the CCP (Levenstein, 2014). The Party-State then censored all the preparation for the 47 NGO panels that were organized by Chinese women to make sure that they could only display women's achievement instead of discussing problems. The space for feminist activism was then severely threatened and scholars de-politicized their research from sensitive topics, for example violation of fundamental human rights such as violence to women in one-child-policy.

The conference was successfully held and the CCP didn't get the protests they had been worried about. Instead, the anti-hegemonism stance of some foreign feminists in the conference impressed the CCP with their political protest against American imperialism. This in return desensitized the CCP to civil-society to some extent. Since women's NGOs could be used as civil force to compete with the West, the control for local NGO development loosened ( Wu Zhicheng, 2006 ).

After the Beijing Conference, various gender/women's studies centers were established in China, and courses on gender and feminist theories started to appear more in universities. The UN-based international feminism was implemented into various institutions in both the Party-State system and NGOs. At the same time, scholars from universities, media and the Women's Federation found NGO work to be a chance to engage themselves in practical work for gender equality. With the passing of "Beijing Platform for Action" and the promotion of gender mainstreaming, the Beijing conference not only inspired Chinese women activists to initiate grass-roots NGOs but also brought massive resource to NGOs that focus on gender issues, such as financial support from major foundations, training programs on gender theories and NGO management.

This work took many forms, including empowerment and social development programs for rural women and legislation efforts against domestic violence. Some

scholars even started activism on more radical topics, for example the Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*, which was initiated by the Domestic Violence Network, was practiced in Guangzhou. A research conducted by Cecelia Milwertz and Chinese sociologist Bu Wei on non-governmental Chinese feminist activism focused on this practice. They argued that feminist knowledge production of activists and their audiences lied at the core of the movement and this pattern of practice democratized the communication between academia and volunteers, urban privileged women and rural women. They passionately predicted that those participatory processes might “lead to the widespread generation of emancipatory knowledge that challenges the dominant, inequitable gender order” (Milwertz & Bu, 2009:230). I would argue that this prediction is becoming the truth. Various transitional efforts and innovations made by the older generation opened up the road for youth feminist activism and created a broader wave of feminist conscious rising and practice.

Although there was already transitional feminist practice by some organizations and individuals, radical practice of feminist projects, however, still appeared to be rare before the emergence of youth feminist activism. A more general way of NGO practice has been to advocate to the Party-State system with NGO leaders’ personal influence and to cooperate closely with local Women’s Federation to improve women’s status in certain communities. NGO leaders usually have a dual role as both public employees and social practitioners that allow them to use resources from both the Party-State system and international assistance. While a lot of NGO work proved to be effective, the limitation of this approach has attracted attention both from activists and scholars.

Since the Women’s Federation is the biggest women’s organization and it has the largest and most well-developed hierarchical structure, it remains the major pathway to grass-roots work for rural women. As mentioned before, the function of the Women’s Federation was shut down during the Cultural Revolution. It was since the reformation from 1979 that the Women’s Federation gradually started to function. The official role of the Women’s Federation was as an organ of the CCP, and therefore their work mainly involves campaigning on the CCP’s gender policy and conveying women’s need to the CCP. While it’s officially described as a mass

organization that represents interests of women, the Women's Federation was still considered as part of the CCP's political system, based on the fact that the leaders of the Women's Federation are appointed by the CCP and the main system is funded by the government (Lu Yang, 2009). In preparation for the Beijing Conference, in order to meet the need of an NGO forum, the Women's Federation claimed itself suddenly to be the biggest Chinese NGO. The major role of the Women's Federation, however, is still as a for CCP's ideological propaganda, especially at the local level. These so called "work that concerns women" would take the main focus of women's federation.

For example, in the key speech to leaders of the Women's Federation in 2013, Xi Jinping, the current CCP leader, emphasized that the leadership of the party should be the top principle for all "work that concerns women", and to realize the party's goal to "achieve the great revival of Chinese state" should be the theme of the contemporary Chinese women's movement. He also emphasized the women's role in maintaining Chinese traditional virtues within the family<sup>2</sup>. These requirements are well reflected in the working plan of the Women's Federation. For instance, "to learn and implement Xi's speech is the priority among priorities" in their work plan for 2014<sup>3</sup>. To work with the Women's Federation means to stay in a benign interaction with the local government and Party-State power. Therefore problems addressed are limited to those that are not too sensitive, such as propaganda against son-preference and encouraging grass-roots women's political participation within the Party-State frame. There are even discourses that go against gender equality, for instance the widely held local selections of the "best daughter-in-law" to promote traditional virtue and role of women<sup>4</sup>, as well as discourse in the Women's Federation's official newspaper to label unmarried women over 27 years old as "left-over" women and to push them into marriage (Fincher, 2014).

On the other hand, for many grass-roots NGO leaders, individual reputation and personal social network plays a huge part when it comes to getting funding, so

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<sup>2</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/31/c\\_117956150\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/31/c_117956150_2.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.zzdjw.com/n/2014/0213/c178402-24346411.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://the Women's Federation.people.com.cn/n/2012/1220/c99013-19961302.html>

resources are assigned to a few specific people. As Milwertz found out in her fieldwork on the 90s women's movement in China, due to the limited political space for autonomous activism, feminists had to move carefully between the Party-State power and their own projects. In order to continue working for women's rights, they had to keep a close cooperation with Party-State institutions and their official discourse on gender equality for legitimacy (Milwertz, 2002). The close relation to the Party-State power also reflects the hierarchal power relations within the NGOs (Huang Cui, 2011). Because resources are very much controlled by individuals, there might be much less effort on the democracy-building process and more personal influence in decision making. As leaders of the current generation are getting older, the high dependence on personal influence and resources within the Party-State system points to an unstable future. (Shen Guoqin, 2013)

In the same time, there was also concern for the dominance of gender discourse raising from the academia. The UN based international feminism discourse on gender mainstreaming legitimated gender discourse and led to prosperity and development of NGOs, however, local feminism such as Li Xiaojiang's approach and position was marginalized during this process. In addition, left feminist scholars such as Song Shaopeng pointed out that there is a lack of reflection in academia on the complex relation between introduction of gender theory and neo-liberal economy. The mainstream gender discourse does not provide a powerful critique on the inequality of economic distribution and cultural discrimination, therefore the discourse on gender and development, she argued, has an ambiguous complicit relation with the neo-liberal economy (Song Shaopeng, 2012).

In a word, after the Beijing conference, the slogan of "gender mainstream" and commitment on CWD<sup>5</sup> resulted in courses on gender studies in universities and various NGOs that focus on gender equality and women's rights. Although academics conducted research and the media sometimes criticized gender inequality, direct protests and advocacy to gender discrimination were still rare, until 2012 when a group

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<sup>5</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, United Nations

of people who call themselves youth feminist activists started to attract public attention. In the following part I will discuss the emergence of this youth feminist activism in China as well as provide a feminist interpretation of its emergence. I would argue that youth feminist activism indicates an important new development for Chinese feminist movement, in terms of forming their collective subject as outspoken feminists based on feminist consciousness and their effort to expand the range of feminist topics to include radical projects with an independent feminist agenda separated from dominant social discourse.

## 4 THE EMERGENCE OF YOUTH FEMINIST ACTIVISM

### 4.1 Feminist Awareness Raising in the Post Beijing Conference Era

The younger feminist generation lives in a post-Beijing Conference era in which a large body of feminist literature and women/gender studies courses are available in universities, and NGOs that focus on gender equality are able to provide training courses. A generally more open environment allows for more students to join international exchange programs to broaden their horizons. The development of Internet and Communication Technology (ICT), especially the popularization of social media and smart phones has allowed frequent and timely information exchange. All these factors have facilitated the young generation to frame their own experience and reflection into feminist awareness.

#### 4.1.1 The Development of ICT as a Booster

The development of ICT, especially the popularization of smart phones and different kinds of social networks has facilitated instant communication. Lanlan, who was a few years older than other interviewees, described the changes in universities brought by the development in international communication, student associations and ICT:

*Universities has changed a lot. When I was doing my bachelor study, there weren't so many exchange programs that allowed you to experience what being an international citizen was like. There weren't as many student societies either, I mean real student societies that were formulated by genuine interest instead of half-official societies that were organized by the Party. Now students are able to start their groups autonomously. Personal computers and smart phones allow everyone to keep in touch with the information they are interested in. We use TEDx speeches and social media to*

*spread feminist knowledge to university students. Those tools are really helpful. (Interview Lanlan, Beijing, November 2014)*

The development of so called *we media*, a term which refers to the proliferation of grassroots internet journalists (bloggers), has made news in real-time and through multiple perspectives available to an ever increasing audience (Gillmore, 2004). With the Internet, today's news is no longer fully controlled by big media corporations. In the Chinese context, the mass application of Internet communication indicates that one can possibly sneak away of strict political censorship and break through the CCP's information blockage in media. Therefore the ICT development brought new space for political participation. The benefit of ICT development was clearly reflected when the five young activists were detained in March 2015. Although this information was blocked in domestic mainstream media, it was spread to the world by social media and networks. Through instant communication, local feminist volunteers as well as international feminist communities displayed a successful rescue of the five detained young feminists, which was commented by prominent journalist Chang Ping as the most successful human rights rescue for years in China<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 Encounter with Feminist Literature and Gender/Women Studies Academia

All my interviewees started to read feminist literature during their college years. These literature corresponded to their experience of gender discrimination and became a crucial way to approach feminist awareness. The first encounter with feminist theories was typically described as “interesting and exciting”. For example, Xinyi learned about feminist literary criticism in her bachelor program in literature. Although it was only in the form of a short lecture, she felt immediately attracted to the word ‘nvquanzhuyi’ (women’s rights-ism) and started to read about feminist theories. Wanting to know more about this field, she completed a master’s program in gender studies in Hong Kong. The experience of witnessing the LGBT rights movement in Hong Kong helped her to gain a better understanding of civil society

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<sup>6</sup> [https://twitter.com/chang\\_ping/status/587686667026305024](https://twitter.com/chang_ping/status/587686667026305024)

and social movements. Aiming to do something to change the society, she made up her mind to be a NGO worker on gender equality.

However, for most people the stimulation of gender and feminist theory at school was just the first step to become a feminist. Feminist theories learnt at school were not sufficient to create feminist action, especially since the academic environment does not encourage taking actions. Lanlan finished her master's degree in sociology and described her experience of approaching feminism:

*I wasn't a feminist when I did my master program. Although I studied gender and was interested in feminist theories, gender to me was just a perspective that I used for analysis. I was learning feminist theory with a pragmatic attitude because I wanted to write a good thesis. I never used "nvquan zhuyi" (women's rights/power-ism) when I studied. I said I was studying about "nvxing zhuyi" (women-ist) theory, and to me that is just a gender perspective, an analytic framework. But nvquan zhuyi (women's rights/power-ism) indicates action. It is not easy to be a nvquan zhuyi zhe (women's rights/power-ist). I started to know feminism from academia, but real reflection on feminism, especially to share and to produce feminist knowledge in practice is not something that you can learn from academia. Academia can only prepare you with theories and frameworks and help you to reflect upon actions. (Interview Lanlan, Beijing, November 2014)*

Some of my interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with academic feminism further. "To be honest, I didn't like the academic environment when I studied in my university" said Yanzi, who was upset about the elitism and inaction of academic environment when she studied sociology: "So many people study social science and later end up doing market research for companies. People claim their research is neutral, rational and objective. I don't see myself interested in doing research like that. So many people sit in libraries for years and do little to change the society. I have to do something for real."

#### 4.1.3 NGO Training as a Platform to Initiate Action

While young people's urge to "do something real" collided with the political apathetic attitude in the academic environment, some grassroots NGOs that work on women's rights noticed this urge and started to provide training and support to them since 2009. As mentioned above, the limitations of traditional NGOs and academic institutions has led some NGO workers to think about new strategies to struggle for gender equality. These NGOs can be seen as a typical instance of 'civil-society', and indeed the very concept of civil-society is spread among activists, a concept which emphasizes the autonomous agency and ability of citizens to organize collectively to solve various social problems. Activists, as a number of democracy theorists, think of civil-society as a social force that differs from state power, and plays a crucial role in modern society to fill up the gap between the private sphere and public sphere and to supervise the government. Therefore, active participation in public issues makes civil-society a necessary segment of democracy-building process(Zhu Jiangang ,2004) (Yu Jianxing & Zhou Jun, 2006 ) .

The NGO *Feminist Power* that I was working with from August to December 2014 was formed right after the Beijing Conference in 1995. Its initial name mentioned nothing about "feminism" (nvquan zhuyi) and its purpose was to function as a media watch dog to echo the calling for eliminating gender discrimination in media, which was one of the central topics in the Beijing Conference. The coordinator of *Feminist Power*, Lv Pin used to work for an official newspaper ACWF. She noticed that the threshold for people to work in many women's NGOs was usually high and it was quite hard for young people to participate in NGO work even as volunteers.

*"(During my work) I noticed that there are quite a lot of young people online... They already have some feminist awareness and they are ready to do something, but they haven't been contacted by any women's organizations... they are seeking for ideological resources, seeking for a chance to do something" (Quote from Li Sipan "Chinese Feminism: from Initiation to Consciousness", 2015 March, Blog Weekly).*

Later she quit her job in the Party-State system and changed the name of the NGO to *Feminist Power*, and positioned the organization to function as a think tank for the contemporary Chinese feminist movement (ibid). Other than Lv Pin, all the other members of *Feminist Power* were aged under thirty at the time of my fieldwork within the NGO. They worked as journalists, editors and activists and played a central role in many debates on feminist/gender issues since 2009. At the same time, they actively cultivated a volunteer community for offline advocacy. They produce material to introduce feminism and gender knowledge to other NGOs, aiming at initiating local feminist practice all over the state.

*Better Equality for Everyone*, is another NGO that helped to facilitate youth feminist activism. This organization is the first NGO in China focusing on so called ‘right-defending case advocacy’, and gained its reputation in civil-society advocacy by succeeding in an influential case advocacy against systematic discrimination of people affected by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). Instead of using personal influence in Party-State institutions and working on solving individual problems, the strategy of right-defending case advocacy is to provide legal training to those whose rights are violated, so that they can organize their own communities and become subjects to defend their rights by themselves. This is different compared to traditional legal assistance that only give individuals financial and lawyer support. The strategy of ‘case advocacy’ is to address certain social problems and hold accountability to the state, then eventually aiming at changing or implementing state law and policy. *Better Equality for Everyone* succeeded in changing discriminative policies in educational and employment rights of people affected by HBV, and it also raised public awareness by initiating numerous influential case advocacies against discrimination, involving, among others, disabled people, sexual minorities, and students that are influenced by regional discrimination in educational rights. They started the *Gender Equality Group* within the organization in 2011, which became an independent feminist advocacy NGO in 2014.

The *Gender Equality Group* and *Feminist Power*, together with experts from academic institutions, law firms, and journalism, were responsible for initiating gender

equality training programs for young people. The training took various forms, such as gender literature reading groups, theater groups and short-term training camps in major cities. During my internship in Beijing, I participated in two feminist community activities that were initiated by *Feminist Power*. One was a conscious raising training group called *Feminist School*, the other one was a theater group named *B-come*, which I will elaborate on later. Young people who were attracted and gathered in these courses soon created a network of support with each other. Together they read feminist literature, talked about various gender issues in China, related their individual experience to social gender relations and learned strategies for advocacy from the NGO training. These trainings courses would differ from the traditional gender conference of scholars and experts in the way that they were action-oriented: instead of top-down approach of policy advocacy, these trainings were oriented to initiate direct actions led by the participants. This immediate relation to action appears to be a crucial point in the new practices of feminism in China, and I will return to it in Chapter 5.

#### 4.1.4 A Generation Marked by Urban One-Child-Policy

In the process of carrying out this research, I found out that girls born in one-child households form the majority of youth feminist activist group members. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the one-child policy was implemented in the nation almost at the same time when China started its reform and opening-up policy in 1979 and was aimed at controlling and adapting a rapidly growing population to what were perceived as the limited resources of China. While certainly personal and unique experiences of gender discrimination in the life of my participants may be key factors leading them to become pro-feminism, it is important to consider how their conscious raising process has been influenced by this particular social context in which they grew up. Indeed, due to the implementation of the one-child policy, certain forms of gender discrimination became more visible.

In particular, women who give birth to girls might be discriminated against by their families, and gender-based abortion became popular since those families who

could only have one child do not want to “waste” their only chance on a girl, which lead to an abnormally high male to female birth ratio (Qiao Xiaochun , 2004). The policy is also applied differently to different groups. For instance, families with a rural household registration<sup>7</sup> are allowed to have one more child if their first child is a girl. Vice versa, restrictions are much more stringent for families with an urban household registration, especially for people who work in public sectors, who tend to be more educated. In turn, this means that only daughters from urban families are likely to have more educated parents, better family economic status and in general more resources during their upbringing, as well as no competition from brothers who would otherwise usually be the focus of family attentions and take the majority of the family resources. This assured urban girls in the only-child generation much more privilege on education and material status than their mothers’ generation.

Along with the one-child policy, another factor that facilitates broader space for urban only-child girls to develop themselves has certainly been the rapid economic and social development in China,, as more families, especially the new rising urban middle class families, can afford higher education for their daughters. This makes the urban only-child girls’ lives differ from that of their peers in rural areas. While rural girls might drop out of school and move to urban places to work from an early age due to economic woes at home, or the pressure to support their male siblings, this kind of experience is far from the target group of my research.

As Lv Pin, the coordinator of NGO *Feminist Power* pointed out in an interview in October 13, 2014 with Lookingfor\_UUU, an NGO-oriented online media outlet:

*A great change in China is the growth of the new generation of only daughters. They were urban-born and have little tolerance for inequality, because they grow up with an environment telling them that they worth invested and valued by their families. When they get*

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<sup>7</sup> In mainland China a household registration record officially identifies a person as a resident of rural or urban area, including identifying information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth. The urban and rural household registration includes more than 60 different treatment in social welfare system, therefore serves as one cause of systematic inequality between rural and urban residences in contemporary China.

*to know the real world, they will think gender inequality is problematic and they won't compromise to it. Some of them will turn against inequality. In this process she will turn pro-feminism, and this group is growing. This is a by-product of one-child policy, a new potential group to bring changes.*

Activists are themselves quite aware of the particular role intersectional privilege formations played in their feminist consciousness. Five of the eight interviewed activists graduated from top national universities. Six of them said that personally they didn't experience gender discrimination in their families when they grew up. For example Jing, who is a young documentary director said:

*"I do get support from my family when I'm working on my feminist film projects. My family sees their support as a worthy investment on me...When I grew up, I never thought I was anything less than a boy, I mean, I run faster and I was braver than all of them..."*. (Jing, October 2014, Beijing)

As the activists themselves realized during meetings and online conversations, the privileged environment of urban one-child household encourages them to develop their potential and to participate actively in social competition. However, their identity as women presents them with obstacles such as gender discrimination and violence that prevent women from pursuing self-realization. The class and urban regional privilege as well as high sense of confidence then form a sharp contrast with the shared negative experience of being discriminated as a woman. Therefore, if on the one hand one-child policy constructed an environment where gender based-discrimination and violence became visible, through practices of selective abortion and discrimination against mothers of girls, on the other hand one may say that the policy had an unpredicted by-product, because it created a new generation of urban young women who are more likely to be able to oppose the very gender inequality that the policy reinforced.

As discussed above, the ICT development, the establishment of feminist academia, the training and network provide by NGOs, all these conditions have

helped to facilitate the young generation to develop a new collective feminist subjectivity that is both progressive and reflective. The NGO training specifically has been instrumental in this change towards a more action-oriented movement and more radical feminist projects in the youth feminist activism, which I will now turn to analyze.

## 4.2 Youth Feminist Activism: an Action-oriented Way to Feminist Struggle

Contemporary youth feminist activism in China appears to be characterized by specific forms of action, in particular street art performances, online campaigns, case advocacy and volunteer community building. Many of these struggle forms overlap with civil-society movement, therefore can be interpreted with social movement theories, political science and media studies. However, a discussion of youth feminist activism using feminist conceptual tools can be uniquely useful to fully make sense of contemporary feminist struggles and distinguish it from other forms of civil society movements in contemporary China. I will give some examples to illustrate how youth feminist activism work. In particular, I will do this in the following by analyzing the building of this newly emerging feminist community through a focus on bodily experience and collective knowledge production, which in this context contributed to enhanced feminist agency and expand the feminist agenda to include what can be considered, and certainly have been considered by many commentators in China, as ‘radical’ feminist projects.

### 4.2.1 Street Performance Art: Taking Feminist Actions in Public Space

The first ‘coming out’ of the youth feminist activism that I have been researching can be identified with the street performance art called *Injured Brides*, which was a demonstration against violence within romantic relationships. On February 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, three girls in fake blood-covered wedding dresses appeared in a busy street in downtown Beijing, carrying slogans and shouting “violence is not love”. This action was reported in several mainstream media to raise public attention on violence within

romantic relationships, which had until then very rarely been a topic of public discussion.. The demonstration echoed the over 20 years of political work which was carried by gender experts from the Beijing-conference generation in order to obtain legislation on domestic abuse. The legislation was produced and was about to succeed in 2015 two years after the action. While they had in mind the same goal to combat gender-based violence as the older feminist generation, young feminists used a completely new visualized dramatic form to make their voice heard.

A few days later, some volunteers started the *Occupying Men's Bathroom* street art performance. This time their demonstration pointed out the unreasonable design of public bathrooms: while the average time for women to use the bathroom is twice that for men, the public bathrooms ratio for women and men was mostly 1:1. It was a common phenomenon in public spaces that the men's bathrooms were almost empty while women stood in a long queue. To advocate for a reasonable bathroom ratio of 2:1 for women and men, volunteers carried slogans "if you do love her, don't let her wait" and handed out flyers to explain their purpose. This demonstration was later successfully carried out in a few cities, widely reported and eventually rated as one of the "Ten Top News on Gender Equality in 2012" in China Women's News Daily. It got response from local government in a few cities and universities with decisions on constructing and reconstructing existing public toilets in a more gender equal way.

This kind of street art performance is by its eye-catching nature very efficient when it comes to spreading information. Especially in the case of the *Occupying Men's Bathroom* action in which women's specific bodily needs were addressed in a way that challenged a shameful topic that is related to the female body. This demonstration addressed the male focused design of public spaces which ignored women specific needs. This kind of gender-blind planning of public spaces that everyone has to use could be traced back to the idea of the "radical sameness" between the sexes espoused by the Chinese government in Maoist times. In the Maoist time there were policies implemented on gender equality in the public sphere through the authority of CCP leadership, but in the private sphere, especially with regards to the materiality of women's bodies, gender prejudice and discrimination remained largely unchallenged

(Evans, 1997). The standard of equality developed in those time, which is measured and normalized through an ideal male and able body and through grand narratives of socialist ideology, appears to be clearly rejected by youth feminist activism which sends out a clear appeal for gender equality that acknowledges and respects difference in its flash and materiality.

#### 4.2.2 Holding the Government Accountable: Spreading an Independent Feminist Discourse

A further very distinctive aspect of youth feminist activist, compared to the feminists of the previous generations, has to do with specific relation vis-à-vis the State and its apparatus. While the feminists of the old generation tended to take a cooperative stance to the Party-State system and official gender discourse, young feminists appear to have the conditions and also courage to resist the temptation of the Party ideology and to create an independent feminist discourse. Rather than using the discourse from the Party-State to claim legitimacy, like the older generation, young feminist activists are more confident in their effort to create independent discourse that addresses feminist concerns. They take direct actions and sometimes use a confronting stance to the Party-State power. In particular, most activists I talked to demonstrated a very high awareness of the risks linked to the possibility of deceptive cooptation from the party-run politics as well as betrayal from what they identify as ‘grand politics’. Interestingly this ‘grand politics’ consists for them of state discourse but also of human-rights discourse, for activists are worried that both could blur the feminist agenda that they are pursuing.

One of the most impressive forms of actions of this movement vis-à-vis the Party-State system has been initiated by one of my research participant, Sile, who is an activist and a journalist. In early April in 2015, Sile filed an application for information disclosure in 31 provinces. The application requested information on gender distribution and the living status of detainees in the so called ‘education system’. The detaining education system was started in China in 1993, and aims at punishing prostitution and “educating” people who are involved in commercial sex practices. This

system allows the police to detain prostitutes and buyers for a period from 6 months to 2 years without any formal investigation or trial. As researchers and activists have been progressively denounced, the arbitrariness of this system made it a hotbed for corruption. While detained suspects may pay a rather high fine to get out, the usually bad economic situation and stigmatized reputation makes it so that the prostitutes are unlikely to have the money themselves or call their families for support. On the other hand, due to the difference in economic class, the buyers are usually able to pay their way out of trouble and the stigma attached to buying sex is not as harsh as selling. The detained people may be forced to do unpaid labor during the period, and are subjected to forced moral and legal education to make them “correct the bad habit”<sup>8</sup>. In practice, the detained people usually have to pay living expenses and other extra expense on medical treatment in these camps, which undoubtedly worsen their already bad economic status. (Ren, 1995; Liu & Finckenauer, 2010)

As Yuval-Davis (1993) pointed out, even when there is a formal equality of women in their political rights as citizens, other modes of exclusion in the political, social and civil spheres continue to operate. In the case of detaining camps, the state discourse blames sex workers for moral breach and contributes to create a violent and misogynist culture that covers the unequal gender power relations that creates prostitution. An aspect that is particularly upsetting for the young feminist activists is that the *All China Women’s Federation* appears to be partly involved in this system, as the Federation works at the local level with police stations and detaining camps to “educate prostitutes to be aware of their errors and to save them from the wrong path”<sup>9</sup>.

This abusive ‘education system’ was widely questioned by a group of law scholars in 2014. Inspired by this trend, Sile immediately started her 320 personal applications for information disclosure of the system all over the country. The response rate was very low, consisting of 58 replies. Guangdong Province has most camps among these provinces that replied, however the Guangdong Provincial Public Security Department refused to disclose the details of these camps for “police work secret”.

<sup>8</sup> 收容教育维基百科 <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%94%B6%E5%AE%B9%E6%95%99%E8%82%B2>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.zhuzhou.gov.cn/sitepublish/site1/jcgz/qunt/fl/content\\_119140.html](http://www.zhuzhou.gov.cn/sitepublish/site1/jcgz/qunt/fl/content_119140.html)

Sile then initiated an administrative proceeding to this department in September 2015.

This litigation was aimed at bringing public attention to a system that seriously violated personal rights and freedom, as well as challenging the state discourse on prostitution as a breach of morality as well as holding the state accountability to address the social oppressing and violence towards women in prostitution. The court hearing took place in October 2014 in Guangzhou, while I was not able to attend to the court, I obtained the final statement that Sile made, in which she said:

*Our society has never offered a friendly living environment to women from lower class, how can we blame on their moral for engaging in sex work when they don't have better choices? Isn't the punishment just for taking money from them? What they need is an equal society and social welfare, but the detain camps only offer exploitation and oppression.<sup>10</sup>*

Beyond the academic advice to abolish this system, Sile took this direct action to hold the state accountable and raised a clear feminist critique. There were numerous actions using similar strategies to put the government and state sectors into accountability, before and after the one promoted by Sile. Another example, which I will refer to later on, was the such as the protest against the Chinese Ministry of Education for its inaction towards severe gender discrimination in university admissions in 2013. Although gender discrimination is forbidden in the official rule for university admission, young activists found that female students were asked to have much higher grades to be admitted to some programs. The Ministry of Education kept silence when activists addressed their inquiry through mails and the media, which lead to the activists start an online campaign to draw attention on this issue. According to my participants, this move aimed not only to push the government into dialogue but also to initiate public discussions on gender discrimination and violence as well as to spread feminist discourse.

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<sup>10</sup>问责收容教育第一案：90后女生赵思乐庭上最后陈述

#### 4.2.3 Cultivating Feminist Activist Community: Sharing Experience, Producing Feminist Knowledge and Resistant Bodily Performance

In addition to initiating feminist advocacies, the training provided by *Feminist Power* which I observed and participated in the Summer 2014 was aiming at cultivating community for feminist activists. *B-come* theater group is an interesting example of an activist group that emerged from this kind of training, and in which I myself participated as a volunteer in Beijing, for two of their performances, in December 2014. The group was inspired by the feminist play *Vagina Monologue* by Eve Ensler (2007) and aimed at re-writing and playing *Our Vaginas, Our Selves* as a local *Vagina Monologue*, retelling the contextual experience of Chinese women on body and sexuality with a feminist anti-violence stance. The idea behind the show was to allow members to share and make sense of their own bodily experience and confusion in a safe environment and to produce the screen scripts together.

Rui was among the first a few volunteers in B-come group, and I interviewed her in November 2014. During the interview, she focused on the “virgin complex”, and the ways in which it is still influential in Chinese culture. Rui talked about how she found the discussion of gender construction in feminist literature helped explain her experience of tension between virgin complex and dignity:

*I grew up with princess dreams and romantic expectation of heterosexual relationship. I used to have a strong virgin complex and also a strong sense of dignity as a human. These two things got in to conflict when I had my first relationship. When I told my boyfriend that I was a virgin, he refused to have sex with me because he was scared of the responsibility to take a girl's virginity. I was furious and started to question of the virgin complex. What did my boyfriend think of me? A sealed good? But why I also had virgin complex in my own mind? There were so many people preaching about the importance of the “first night” which “should be given to the*

*husband”<sup>11</sup>, or the girl won’t be loved anymore because nobody want a used woman. Later I by chance read *The Second Sex* and suddenly understood the problem: gender is socially constructed. We are socially constructed as man and women with different rules. Virginity complex is an oppressive sexual norm to my body. (Interview Rui, Beijing, November 2014)*

In her case, the cultural and socially constructed “virgin complex” collided with her high sense of dignity. She questioned the social mainstream “virgin complex” and realized how it represents an oppression to women’s dignity and autonomy. It was then that she started to question her dream for heterosexual romantic love, and eventually decided to perform a special “ritual”:

*It took me long time to digest my experience with my boyfriend. Eventually I decided to find a random guy to end my virginity. I did it with determination. I won the game. When I did it, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I knew I had to do it. It was a rite. The second day I woke up and found everything different. I was reborn, I saw the other side of the world. I was looking for my specific world view and then I found feminism. Feminism is like something that grows out of my mind, an original choice after I reflected upon my experience. My frustration is not caused by myself but by gender inequality. After my first night, feminist consciousness started to emerge from my mind, I found the reason for my frustration: the world is unequal and it is not my fault. I can’t solve this frustration now, but I learnt that to fight inequality is the way to go. It was a feeling like resuming my lost territory. (Interview Rui, Beijing, November 2014)*

This poetic description of Rui’s bodily experience showed a kind of feminist awareness process that was not made visible in the history of Chinese feminist

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movement due to its very public focus. The lost territory, which in Rui's story is her body and her bodily autonomy, was reclaimed through her resistance to the virginity complex culture that she lives in. Rui broke the myth of importance of first night through a sexual experience, announcing that her body and sexuality belong to herself. She realized that the treasured virginity was just vain shackles that the patriarchal society put on women. The heterosexual romantic love is sometimes an illusion of patriarchy when it tells women to limit themselves, occupy a subordinate position and give up their dignity.

Rui later wrote this story into a chapter named "First Night" in their drama *Our Vaginas, Our Selves*, in which she made her personal experience into a collective consciousness raising story.

Rui's story is just one of the many different sharing and writing sections that *B-come* group had. In this way volunteers gathered representative bodily experience of Chinese women and made them into 9 new chapters, such as "Period", "First Night" and "In the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics". These stories revealed bodily experiences that were not seen, recognized and remembered. The intention of the group was to break the taboo of talking about the bodily experience, social stigma to women's sexuality, cultural oppression to women's body and power plays in sexual violence various women's experience and the oppression power behind were faced and addressed. This theater group successfully performed in more than 15 public shows in 2 years, all made possible through voluntary work.

As talked above, all these forms of activism clearly carried similar appeal on gender justice from the older feminist generation, however young feminist activists took a more radical and provoking stance that differs from their pioneers. In the next chapter I will offer some conceptual discussion into youth feminist activism to situate it in Chinese feminist movement as well as in dialogue with the influence of international feminism.

## 5 A CONCEPTUAL FEMINIST DISCUSSION ON YOUTH FEMINIST ACTIVISM

In previous chapters I've talked about the conditions for the emergence of youth feminist activism, as well as their different forms of feminist advocacy and struggle. In this chapter I take a deeper discussion into activists' motivation perception and positioning in regard to their experience of being in the one-child generation and their reflection on intersectionality. I also present the relationship between the young feminist activists with feminist academia, their response on the accusation of radicalism. In the end I bring feminist theories to illustrate the importance the young generation's struggle with bodily resistance.

### 5.1 Motivations and Positioning of Young Feminist Activists

#### 5.1.1 Privilege vs Discrimination: Competing Experience of Girls in the One-Child Generation

The advantage of living as a privileged generation turns out to be a lens for young girls to observe and question gender inequality in their lives. Most of my participants started to feel gender inequality from observing the different gender roles within their families. For example, my interviewee Lanlan, who worked in a publication firm and lead a feminist theater group in her spare time, expressed her frustration:

*I am treated well in the family, but I can't ignore my mom's suffering. Years of domestic violence in my family led me to think about the gender relation with rage: why can men beat women at home without problem? What gives them power to do it? (Interview Lanlan, November 2014, Beijing)*

Similarly, interviewee Xinyi questioned "why my mom has to do all the housework and still be controlled by my father? Just because she earned less than him?"

The frustration from gender violence and discrimination might first lead them to an elitist and individualist solution. As Xinyi described, her earlier goal was to be a "strong woman" who will be independent, rich and powerful, and through this she

could escape from the fate of her mother. However, a strong egalitarian attitude, which most of them called “sense of justice” lead them to question the gender order itself. In my research, this sense of justice manifested as “I feel mad when tragic things happen to women” (Jing) and “I am an ardent person. When I see people’s rights are seriously violated, I will advocate and protest furiously” (Yingying). The ambition to challenge social inequality was another common drive for them to join the feminist movement. While many of young activists I have been in contact with graduated from top universities and could find better paid occupations, they decided to pursue something they see as more challenging and meaningful to society.

This feminist motivation which combines privileged personal experience with the low tolerance to injustice was reflected through Yanzi’s experience, who became a feminist NGO worker after volunteering in a lesbian activist group. She answered passionately to my question “why did you become a feminist activist”:

*People always ask me, did you become a feminist because you are so hurt by men, so discriminated as a girl ?I say no. Collective experience of discrimination is shared by women, however I suffer less than a lot of people. My family treated me very good and I was always the best among my peers, I got good grades in school, I was healthy and pretty and popular. But things are different when you go out into the world. There are so many forms of discrimination and violence to women, like in university admissions, in employment sexual violence in campus. I sometimes got sexually harassed on the street. Of course I’m angry about gender inequality. You don’t have to experience everything to know the world is fucked up by gender discrimination, because you are not blind to what happens to women around you. I started my studying in university with a dream to be rich. I volunteered in a lesbian group because I wanted to make my CV look better when I apply for universities abroad. But I end up learning that to fight against equality is the*

*way to solve the frustration. My motivation for feminist activism is not because that I was treated unfairly as an individual. I can say proudly that I become an activist because I hate to see people suffering. (Interview Yanzi, Guangzhou, December 2014)*

The sense of justice and intolerance to inequality against women provoked in Yanzi, as well as most of my other participants, what they described as an “urge to resist”. As Sile, a journalist and activist working in *Feminist Power*, after the five activists were arrested, argued in an online article:

*“Everyone is a victim of patriarchy. A feminist is not someone who is hurt by patriarchy, but someone who becomes conscious and resists the harm. If she/he actively resists this harm, then she/he achieves the awareness of being a feminist activist...”<sup>12</sup>.*

For the question “who is the subject of Chinese feminist movement”, Tani Barlow found the emancipative subject for Chinese feminist movement was either the “new woman” that was constructed by colonial modernity in the Chinese Enlightenment or the “working class revolutionary women” that was promoted by the socialist discourse during Maoist time (Barlow, 2004). Li Xiaojiang suggested the biological and psychological “woman” as the subject for emancipation. However, Sile’s this widely shared article has pointed out the answer from young activists: this emerging subject by definition has to be feminist, a collective identity that is mobilized by feminist conscious and resistance. It indicates that the feminist movement is not just about identifying gender discrimination and violence but also active resistance.

### 5.1.2 High Queer Participation in the Youth Feminist Activism

Another fundamental aspect that I found in my empirical research was the high queer participation in youth feminist activism, which was not part of feminist activism in the 90s that Milwertz(2002) investigated. In her study at the *Jinglun Family Center*, a popular women’s consulting organization working on problems about marriage and

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<sup>12</sup> <http://xgmyd.com/archives/15628> 苦味江湖：干杯！愿我们终身都做女权行动派

domestic violence in the 90s (indicate in which city), Milwertz found that the members of this organization thought that homosexuality was not acceptable unless it was biologically determined rather than a lifestyle people chose for themselves (Milwertz, 2002:73). Media coverage on homosexuality in China mostly addresses how it is damaging to families. Although there have been queer women's organizations since 90s, homosexuality has largely been perceived as a deviant and marginalized lifestyle that was more or less irrelevant to the feminist movement.

On the contrary, the youth feminist activism which came out to public life in 2012 shows a distinctive diversification of gender and sexual-orientation. I experienced this personally during my college years in China: whereas being gay was still be seen as a problem that caused questions to be asked by my school coordinator at that time, I instead found a queer friendly environment among young activists. A powerful example of this changing attitude is that it was three queer activists who carried out the first public performance art advocacy of youth feminist activism insert here what it was and when. Interestingly, grounded on such a strong component of queer women, the movement has evolved, later on straight women came to form the majority of young activists, and it became inclusive of straight men and queer men who share the similar ideas about the feminist struggle for equality.

In the recent article "Young activists, new movements: Contemporary Chinese queer feminism and transnational genealogies", the role of queer feminism in contemporary Chinese feminist movement has been discussed by three young Chinese queer feminists who are currently scholars in the US (Liu, Huang, Ma, 2015). The authors argue that queer feminist activists in China are making a breakthrough both to the gay male dominated LGBT movement and to the feminist movement, by drawing on theoretical support from intersectionality and critiques of identity politics and homonormativity developed by American feminism and LGBT movements,. They situate the discussion within transnational feminist politics and argue that "while many straight feminists currently focus on street politics, local appeal, and media promotion of women's rights, many queer women activists strive more to radicalize the movement and to constantly reflect upon the still-becoming identity politics" (ibid: 16).

Interestingly, four out of eight activists that I interviewed had participated in queer movements before getting involved in the feminist movement. As an example of shifting from the queer movement to the feminist movement, Lily, who was a NGO worker before starting her PhD studying social policies at that time, said:

*I started activism in a queer group, and later I took part in a training program on advocacy for gender equality. Then I started to focus on the feminist advocacy. In the beginning of feminist activism there was quite a lot of queer participation. Now we have more straight people participating as well. Lesbians face discrimination both because of their gender and sexuality. The less one is favored by the patriarchal society, the more revolutionary one will be. That might be the reason for queer participation in feminist activism. (Interview Lily, Hangzhou, November 2014)*

This experience of double discrimination also was reflected in Yanzi's experience. The lesbian group that Yanzi mentioned was split from a gay rights NGO based in Guangzhou. During their voluntary work, Yanzi and her friends realized that lesbians were excluded from resources within the organization as well as discriminated and neglected by their male leaders, and therefore decided to form their own lesbian activist group. Her initial purpose was to create a voice for her lesbian friends, but later she found herself doing feminist advocacy "because so many topics are intersected between the queer movement and the feminist movement".

While the intersection of the queer movement with the feminist movement is seen by young activists as a progress in the sense that they can support each other, at the same time this intersection is experienced by my participants as a risk in that it could result in negative public opinion on movements that are already misunderstood, stigmatized and marginalized. My participant Yue, who is an NGO project coordinator, shared her experience in that respect in a blog (CoChina, March 9, 2015). In her reflection on queer identity and the relationship between individual and identity politics in the feminist movement, she wrote about her changing identity over time: when she

was encouraged by friends to come out, she perceived “lesbian” as an important political identity for her; when she realized the gender construction of T (the masculine lesbian) and P (the feminine lesbian) within the lesbian group, she started to call herself a “feminine T” and changed her tomboy look by having long hair; finally, when she noticed the high visibility of queer feminists in youth feminist activism, she started to introduce herself as a straight feminist to release the peer pressure for other straight feminists who participate in activism. She concluded that:

*Political identity is floating, a singular identity can't represent my true self. I can shift among multiple identities and use them reflectively... To escape from singular identity is a practice of queer theory. By refusing a singular identity, you can have more possibility and understand more experience beyond yours(ibid).*

Yue's experience showed a common strategy used by the young feminist activists I met. They realize the limitation of identity politics, which was relevant to the feminist movement that was based on the subject of a universal women's identity. Their way to challenge norms of gender and sexual identities is not to give away identity politics all together, but by performing identity politics in a reflective way.

I would argue that this kind of practice parallels Judith Butler's argument that it is important to trace “the moment where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be markable and transformable” (Butler, 2004:216). This strategy may also present an attempt to overcome the shortage of identity politics which is explored by Nancy Fraser. She points out the political risk of identity politics for recognition, that is any certain politics based on collective identities might fall into the trap of enforcing separatism and intolerance while leaving an institutional inequality in distribution of power and material unchallenged (Fraser, 2000). A floating identity is a radical feminist subject in the sense that it opens the possibility to see the experience of others, accordingly to reflect upon intersectionality of different social dimensions that situate people in an unequal world.

### 5.1.3 Reflection on Class Inequality and Neo-Liberal Economy

Throughout my research, I found that the activists' reflections on intersectionality were not limited to invest gender and sexuality, but instead appeared to invest broader structural inequality, which extended far beyond the economic privilege actually experienced by most activists, and were developed through a politics of strong alliances with other groups of women. Indeed, through my fieldwork I have found close relationship between youth feminist activists with domestic workers, migrant female workers and landless rural women. For example, young feminists shared their experience of activism through performance art to land less rural women and helped their protests against gender discriminative village regulations in Zhejiang on December 12, 2013. Although effort has been made by the older intellectual feminist generation in behalf of rural women and migrant workers through NGOs and development programs, the younger generation shows reflection on structural inequality and has a clearer critical stance towards neo-liberal globalization.

This is exemplary in Yanzi's experience. Yanzi grew up in Guangzhou, which is a central industrial city in China that plays an important role in the economic miracle of the world factory. However, she viewed this mode of neo-liberal development as a poisonous path. She realized that gender was only one of the many dimensions of systemic inequality and "feminist topics are scattered in a grand social structure so that we can't only talk about gender inequality but ignoring the authoritarian state and hegemonic capitalism".

Similar to Yanzi's reflection on 'the many dimensions of systemic inequality', my participants showed a high degree of reflection on the intersectionality of different power dynamics that create inequality. Intersectionality is an important feminist concept that links social oppression and discrimination in different social dimensions together, such as in gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It provides a framework to analysis systemic inequality, the

experiences of exclusion and subordination brought by multiple identities (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2014). Many young activists learnt about ‘intersectionality’ through their feminist readings and sharing on social network, then actively joined resistance of working class.

Back to Yanzi’s example, as a student journalist, Yanzi supported and covered a local strike in Guangzhou, in which the participants were mostly women cleaners who were forced laid off by their company. Yanzi observed their suffering and expressed her feeling:

*The principle of performance and fairness of our time is ironic. It is basically saying that some suffering of some people is not important. Their suffering is just the labor pains in the reformation and the world will get better soon. Personally I hate neo-liberalism because it enlarged inequality between countries and classes. We had policy and ideology saying we should allow some people to get rich first, and hoping they will help the rest. But in the end, the most disadvantaged group will be left out from the benefit of development, because they don’t have power and nobody cares about them. I don’t agree with the development mode that allows some elite women to lean-in in Top companies because there are some other women suffering and doing the dirty work. (Interview Yanzi, Guangzhou, December 2014)*

The problem that Yanzi points to in this interview is the enlarged gap among Chinese women. The dramatic economic growth in China is part of the expansion of neo-liberal globalization. The newly built so called ‘world factory’ followed the neo-liberal development path which created and enlarged gendered division in labor market and the feminization of employment. The current mode of globalization has reinforced geographically uneven patterns of development, as well as unequal distribution of wealth within genders and classes (Perrons, 2004). The expansion of new economy has reduced welfare state programs and restored non-responsibility of

cooperation and governments (Acker, 2004). This change resulted in female workers in previous state-owned enterprise becoming the largest part of the laid-off generation (Liu, 2007), while at the same time, the rising ‘world factory’ provided low-paid and unsecured jobs to rural migrants. Millions of rural girls moved to coastal cities and became factory workers with an expectation for modern city life and independence (Chang, 2009). Their labor participation created an economic miracle in China, however as a group they face exploitation in employment, gender based-discrimination and violence, the pressure of her patriarchal family expectations as well as the government repression on worker’s movements (Ngai, 2005 ;Lee, 1998; Jacka, 2005)

Feminist critiques of neo-liberalism have identified how some of features of the neo-liberal governing have come to inform gender relations and feminism itself. For example, following a Foucauldian analytic perspective, Elisabeth Prugl points out that feminism is neo-liberalized in the way that the governance on gender relations draws a new rationality on individual freedom, choice and empowerment. In this sense individuals are entrepreneurs of the self and responsible to conduct themselves to market principles (Prugl, 2014). While capacity building and empowerment of women are served as solution to gender inequality, structural oppression and unequal power relations for different groups are left behind. Along this line of analysis, Chinese feminist scholar Song Shaopeng (2013) analyzed the historical intersection of the neo-liberal economy and the importing of gender theories in China. By pushing the social reproduction back to the family, the new economy created cheap labor and pushed women in a structurally disadvantaged situation. However, Song and other feminist materialist theorists, have shown how mainstream gender theories fail to critique the unfair economic distribution and cultural subordination of women (Song Shaopeng, 2013).

Given this context, the solidarity that youth feminist activists built with various women’s groups, such as women factory workers, domestic workers and landless rural women may be read as a resistant response to neo-liberalism. not only did Young feminist activists recognize the inequality within women but also they stood in

solidarity with their disadvantaged sisters. Their efforts indicate a broader emancipation project that responded to Lynne Segal's answer to 'why we still need feminism in today's world', because "its most radical goal, both personal and collective, has yet to be realized: a world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women' (Segal, 1999, p. 232)", which is certainly indispensable to confront global capitalism. It is worth mentioning that the alliance between young feminist activists and women workers resulted in solidarity when the five activists were detained. Taking political risks, female workers organizations were among the first to take part in the online campaign that demands the police to release young feminists.

## 5.2 The Position of Youth Feminist Activism within the Chinese Feminist Movement

### 5.2.1 The Relation between Youth Feminist Activism and Feminist Academia

As it should be clear from the previous chapter, the theories and inspiration from feminist academia are a great resource for today's young generation of feminists in China. However, obstacles remain when feminist activists tried to approach both Western and Chinese feminist academia. The debate of gender construction vs. gender difference may represent a good example of the challenges of using feminist theories in the Chinese context.

The first influential intervention in that sense in the Chinese feminist context was made by theorist Li Xiaojiang in the 1980s. Within the frame of a humanist approach she emphasized the importance of recognizing the identity of woman through recognizing and respecting gender difference. The use of singular here is intentional, referring to the humanist task of "woman", indicating that women's liberation should not focus on collective but personal revolution, the awakening of self-awareness. The central task in this revolution then was to realize and act the self of a woman. Back to its time, this was a resistance to the "radical sameness" of Maoist gender equality

which denies gender difference and expect women to behave like men, not only in the way of challenging social expectation and standards that were made by male leaders but also in the feminist agency to define and fight for women's own need (Li Xiaojiang, 1999). However, this trend of local feminism was confronted by imported gender theories and soon criticized as essentialism which to my understanding neglected the specific social reality for Chinese feminist movement. Although institutionalized feminism promoted gender mainstreaming, the difference-blind "radical sameness" view of gender equality did not lose its influence in China. Many still use the misunderstanding that "equality means the same" "feminists are women who want to become men" to attack feminism. There is also the common argument that the biological differences between the sexes makes any talk of equality a moot point since it is seen as impractical illusions and wishful thinking "You can't go against nature."

Later on during late 90s, debates and conflicts within gender theories taking place in the West, especially the dominant third wave feminism, brought new confusion for Chinese readers. How could gender theories deconstruct the subject for emancipation but at the same time claim an endeavor for equality? How can the woman emancipate herself when the subjectivity of the woman is proved to be a socially constructed illusion, especially for the Chinese context, in which the woman as a subject is yet to be liberated from her submerged Maoist past? These confusion lead some local feminists to take a nationalist stance and blame Western gender theory for bringing trouble to Chinese women's movement. For example, Li noticed the lacking of discussions about female body and biological sex in institutionalized feminism in China and attribute this problem to the popularization of mistranslation of western gender theories (Li Xiaojiang, 2002).

Some of the difficulties of applying Western gender theories to direct Chinese practice was addressed as the "development gap" by my interviewee Yingying. Yingying referred especially to the feminist literature embracing post-modernist theories since the 1990s. Yingying thought post-modernist theories were advanced but they could not guide their practical work. She said,

*When I encountered feminist scholars from Nordic countries in some conferences, I always wanted to know more about their history to approach gender equality. They have achieved much more in gender equality and their theories are advanced to care about the rights of more marginalized groups. Their theories are good but not connected to our reality. We are still working on basic human rights, like advocating for policies and laws to insure women equal rights on education and employment, to protect them from gender based-violence and harassment. Sometimes the public doesn't have a basic understanding of gender equality or human rights. For example, when sexual crimes happened in primary schools, we want the public to blame the criminals instead of blaming those little girls' sexual morality. That's the reality we are dealing with. (Interview Yingying, Hangzhou, December 2014)*

Within this context, youth feminist activism, for instance the *Occupying Men's Bathroom* action, represented a critical inquiry on gender difference, which carried on the task of local feminist struggle on recognizing difference as well as applying gender theories to explain inequality. The emphasis on women and difference represents what can be thought of as a kind of localizing practice that bridges local experience with gender mainstreaming, which it is associated with what has come to be called the Beijing-conference generation (Du Fangqin, 2002). Indeed, these practices may remind of the 'realistic approach' which Sue Glegg (2006) analyses in her discussion of feminist agency. In her critique to the realist approach, Glegg argues that to clarify terms of 'woman' and 'difference' is "central to any politics which desires the emancipation of women from the binaries which trap women into having to be a woman, and thus positioned as always sexed, and yet does not permit her a universalizing voice that could allow her to speak as a human being without having to deny her sex" (Glegg, 2006:311).

I argue that through these practice-based inquiries into identity and difference,

youth feminist activism is breaking down the barrier between feminist academia and practice. This barrier has been discussed in the former section when activists expressed their frustration with feminist institutions and academia, and fundamentally consists of (half-sentence to remind us). Confronted to the reality of what my participant NAME called the “developing gap”, activists showed a flexible strategy to use gender theories in the Chinese context. The example of Yue comes to mind again here. By consciously adopting different and changing sexual and gender identities, Yue identified herself with post-modernist queer theories and with the practice of floating identities. However, she viewed her practical work as still being about “modernity”, that “we are still working on the basic thing: to stand for that women’s rights are human rights”. Young feminist activists then presented their reflective reading on gender theories pointing out that the emphasis on the social construction in gender theories does not mean that gender differences do not exist. Their activism then, takes a stand against discrimination based on gender differences but at the same time they maintain that there are differences that need to be recognized and respected.

Political risk is another obstacle for feminist activism to approach academia. Yingying shared an experience to show the difficulty to approach academia due to the political sensibility of university administrators. Her NGO made an art performance protest against a gender-based violence trial, and two students from a university participated as volunteers in the protest. This protest was later investigated by the state security police and the students’ university was informed. The board of university got very upset and put Yingying on the university blacklist, forbidding her to approach students for any activities like that. She felt depressed about the fact that the student volunteers were punished by the university, “they all knew that they might be punished for joining activities, but they all made up their mind to do the correct thing (the protest). But it was too much punishment for them to take. Later some teachers from the university talked to me, saying that they also feel absurd that the academia publicize good concepts but do not encourage students to practice them”.

However, , my participants’ action-oriented effort has remarkably changed feminist projects in China, in a way that allows them to take more risks than the

previous generation, and to take distance from a more cautious academic feminism. Compared to the older generation's top-down way of policy advocacy and expert way of feminist struggle, the way they organize outside mainstream Party-State power system make youth feminist activism relatively more independent from the system and accordingly it may be harder to be incorporated into the state institutions' force, which in turn is seen by the activists as constituting greater freedom and flexibility for activism. Volunteers were loosely organized with a stress on individual initiative. The flexible way of getting funding, planning and organization facilitated them to initiate creative activism with less concern about the limitation from institutionalized feminism.

For example, my participant Rui completed her "feminist walk against sexual assaults in campus" with self-raised donation online. She joined feminist activism during her college time and then became a freelance artist after graduation. The aim of the walk was to raise public awareness of the severe situation of sexual assaults in primary and secondary schools that had increasing reports in media. During her nine months walking from Beijing to Guangzhou, she sent advocate letters to local governments that she walked by and collected signatures supporting her advocacy. Volunteers followed her online update, joining and leaving her journey. When talking about this unique experience, Rui said something surprising to me. She said that she had learnt the concept of social movement during her exchange semester in Taiwan, however, "I didn't realize what I was doing was exactly about social movement, even in my feminist walk". This was a common experience of my participants, which reflected a dilution to organization and centers in social movement. Instead, the individual agency was much stressed. Many of the activists don't belong to any organizations. They are called on by feminist information online and peers. Although feminist NGOs plays an important role in providing ideas and support for activists, most activists form loose social networks based on their personal interests on feminism instead of becoming official members of organizations.

The decentralization of the movement allows young activists to set an independent feminist agenda from dominant social discourse. As scholars has point

out, feminist struggles in China has always faced the risk of being enticed into a grander discourse. In the Chinese enlightenment in the 1920s, through construction of nationalist and eugenic discourse, women's rights were widely discussed (Barlow, 2004). However, as Wang Zheng points out in her study of feminist struggle in this period, although the Chinese feminist movement "emerged as a result of including women in men's pursuit of a 'Chinese Enlightenment'" (Wang, 1999), a pursuit that was marked by the urge for modernity and independence of the state, the real problematic issue of men's representations of women in this period is the fact that male intellectual leaders "viewed women's emancipation as serving larger purpose rather than being an end in itself" (Wang, 1999:63). Using a nationalist and modernist discourse helped to expand women's movement and to highlight women's rights, however, as Wang Zheng discovered in the oral histories she recorded from feminist pioneers in revolution era, "the altruistic nature of Chinese women's emancipation eventually made some women feel more used than liberated (ibid)" With the increasing power of the CCP's Maoist and Leninist discourse, women's problems were simplified as part of class problems and were soon obscured by class struggle. Although women participated in social revolutions, the feminist agenda for equality were frequently rejected in practice.

My participant Sile wrote the story of feminist pioneer Tang Qunying's in her blog as an example to warn the risk of pursuing feminist agenda within dominant discourses. Tang(1871-1937) was an outstanding feminist politician in the nationalist revolution, who fought for women's rights for vote all her life. However, her request for women's rights was turned down by the revolution leaders once the revolutionaries took the country. Sile commented on this as:

*As a feminist revolutionary, she and her dream were both betrayed by the revolution—this is not uncommon in social revolutions all over time and other countries. Today's feminists should never forget the fact that if you see women's rights as a*

*secondary problem, then no one will pay attention to it.*<sup>13</sup>

Comparing to their pioneers who had to take a more cooperative stance to the Party-State system and official gender discourse, as beneficiaries of today's environment, young feminists appear to have the conditions and also courage to resist the enticement and to create an independent feminist discourse. Other than using the discourse from the Party-State to claim legislation as their pioneers, young feminist activists are more confident to create independent discourse that addresses on feminist concerns.

### 5.2.2 Activists' Perception on the Accusation of Radicalism

Autonomous, spontaneous and direct action against gender discrimination and violence was identified by my participants as the key strategy to feminist activism, as they realize the power of direct action in practice. Xinyi talked about the difference of online participation and taking direct action:

*Online participation could give people an unrealistic sense of participation, but direct action is always more effective. For example, when the discriminative blind-date commercial<sup>14</sup> came out on TV, everyone condemns the company online but nothing happened until we went to its headquarter for protest. They immediately promised to take down the commercial. That is the power of action. (Xinyi, November 2013, Beijing)*

Similarly, both my participants Lily and Lanlan emphasized that the way to become an activist is to “engage in bodily participation in direct actions”.

For example, Lanlan pointed out that although both the generations aim to change

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.on.cc/cn/bkn/cnt/commentary/20150502/bkncn-20150502000312573-0502\\_05411\\_001\\_cn.html](http://www.on.cc/cn/bkn/cnt/commentary/20150502/bkncn-20150502000312573-0502_05411_001_cn.html)  
被背叛的民国女界领袖唐群英

<sup>14</sup> The Chinese dating company Baihe widely aired a commercial with the theme “Because of love, do not wait” which showed an elderly grandmother persistently nagging her daughter to get married. The perception of being held hostage by their families to get married enraged many netizens who viewed this practice as backwards <http://www.chinasmack.com/2014/videos/chinese-dating-site-tv-ad-promotes-being-forced-into-marriage.html>

social policies, the younger generation focused much more on direct action in which they provoked public awareness on gender issues. She said,

*Gender equality advocacy means to take action, and to take whatever action in our society means you will be labelled “radical” anyway. Radicalness is the rent we have to pay for living in this patriarchal society. Therefore we are not afraid of the label. It is not a choice that we can make, because you can only take action to make your voice heard, and action means radicalism in this society.*  
(Lanlan, November 2014, Beijing)

Lanlan illustrated the relation between action and radicalism in the Chinese context.

The notion of radicalism is worth of attention, because as Edwards pointed out in her study of Chinese women’s suffrage, “perceptions of ‘radicalism’ clearly were determined by cultural norms”, therefore the significance of some actions “would probably escape detection in a survey of radical feminist activism internationally (Edwards, 2008: 22)”. Although young feminists are frequently accused of radicalism, some of them viewed their effort as “not radical at all! Everything is about realizing basic human-rights for women” and others embraced the tag of radicalism, saying “what’s wrong with radicalism? It’s good when we can make people listen to the problems”. In the Chinese setting, radicalism is deemed more related to the form of social movement and resistance, which for young feminists means direct action. Through various individual and collective practices, radical activism has pushed the feminist movement further. My participants Xinyi summarized her response to the accusation on radicalism as:

*Radicalism is not a bad thing. In practice we did challenged people’s opinion, even the opinion of other women’s organizations. The question is, our voice are not heard yet. Radicalism is the way*

*to make our voice heard. Radical actions open new space for feminist struggle. More people know our existence ever, the existence of feminists in this country. Causing dispute is better than nothing, or women's rights will keep being neglected. We are not afraid of being tagged "radicalism", because we know that the further we move forward, larger space we open for feminism. (Xinyi, November 2013, Beijing)*

This cognition of radicalism has encouraged young feminists not only to take direct action towards gender violence and inequality but also to expand their activism to cover more sensitive, less touched feminist topics. In the following part I mainly illustrate their radical practice to address body autonomy and sexuality with feminist literature, so to bring a clearer picture on why this development is important for the Chinese feminist movement.

### 5.2.3 Addressing Body and Sexuality: A Breakthrough in the Chinese Feminist Movement

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, young feminists activists intensively address through the action and analyses, the topics of body and sexuality. It is important to notice that when situated in the Chinese context, these actions shed light on a field of Chinese feminist movement which was neglected since the CCP took power in China. Indeed, sexual difference, women's bodily experience and sexuality had been common addressed topics by female writers in the enlightenment literature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, previous the Maoist times. Eugenic sexology influenced by the theory of Evolution was used to claim legitimacy for women's rights to marriage freedom (Barlow, 2004). However, the spread of Maoist ideology since 1949 emphasized a puritanical silence on sexuality and deemed the interest on sexuality as "either shamefully illicit or as a manifestation of bourgeois individualism thus detrimental to collective welfare" (Evans, 1995:357). In her research on the construction of sexuality in the PRC, historian Harriet Evans found that although there was rigid taboo on sexuality during Maoist time, the official 'scientific' discourse on sexuality never stopped emphasizing

the ‘scientific’ difference between active male sexuality and passive female sexuality, at the same time stigmatizing women’s sexuality and assuming women were responsible for keeping the boundary of acceptable sexual behavior (Evans, 1997). In a way, discourse on sexuality didn’t disappear but developed into a more clear double-standard for men and women, and blamed women’s sexuality.

It was after the Reformation era in the 1990s that female writing on body and sexuality proliferated again. A number of academic feminist authors have thereafter analyzed this new emergence of female body writing as a form of resistance to male-dominated writing and the male gaze in literature (Xiang Rong, 2003) (Xie Yu’e, 2008). Although feminist literature criticism is already a well developed academic field, the discussion on body and sexuality was not fully addressed in institutionalized feminism as represented by the All China Women’s Federation. The commonly addressed topics about female body from Women’s Federation were in general about female health and birth control which were related to one-child policy.

At the same time, the capitalist consumeristic economy in China encourages women to perform femininity and emphasizes female beauty. Body and sexuality were no longer taboos when women’s bodies were massively showed and presented in commercials and popular cultures in a sexual provoking way (Zhang Liming, 2001). As the feminist sexologist Li Yinhe suggests, a silent revolution on sexuality has been taking place in China, but the social stigma attached to sexuality, especially to women’s sexuality is still a norm (Li, 1996; 2004). On one hand, it is common that women’s bodies are presented in the way favored by the patriarchal market and the male gaze. On the other hand, the bodily and sexual autonomy of women remains a provoking topic.

This reality was well reflected in my fieldwork when a group female university students in Beijing started an online campaign “My Vagina Says” as an action that was encouraged by *B-come* group’s theater practice. However, shortly after some media outlets posted pictures of them holding boards saying “the first night is nothing” “I want respect” “You need to be invited to get in”, those students were the targets of

extensive online threats and insults. Some of the students were even influenced by this in the offline world.<sup>15</sup>

Aware of the low public tolerance on women's bodily autonomy, young feminist activists choose a more radical strategy to address these topics, aiming at desensitize the public of women's bodily autonomy. This strategy resulted in several protests that combined bodily resistance with traditional feminist appeals. For example, in the "bald head protest against the Chinese Ministry of Education" activists put the Chinese Ministry of Education into accountability for its inaction towards severe gender discrimination in university admissions. Volunteers shaved their hair and post bald pictures online, using the "unfeminine" bald image of 0 referring to zero response from the Ministry of Education. In another online action, "nude pictures campaign against domestic violence", volunteers posted pictures of their bodies on which they wrote slogans against violence in red, such as "the body is not guilty, violence is" to collect signatures for legislation against domestic violence.

Those protests and advocacies provoked public debates such as "should women be respected if they present themselves in such as slutty way". Some people wrote online that they support appeals that are anti-violence and anti-discrimination, but they "could not get the point of using bald or nude pictures in advocacy", some even charged that the radical stance of youth feminist activism was turning the public against from feminist movement.<sup>16</sup> These accusations were also a great concern for me as a researcher, how would activists view these accusations and explain their effort?

As response to this question, Rui expressed these efforts as "a test to the tolerance of Chinese cyber space", "we want to know how much can the internet accept about the female body". She said the "nude picture campaign against domestic violence" was inspired by American artist Babara Kruger's work, the "your body is the battleground" billboard. She decided to combine a traditional feminist topic "anti-domestic violence" with a radical form which present their slogans on nude bodies, claiming that the

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.china-gad.org/Infor/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=23360> 我的阴道说错了什么

<sup>16</sup> <http://sxdsb.voc.com.cn/article/201301/201301271058596605.html>

湖南女孩裸体反家暴，被骂“这么不要脸”

injured female body is a battlefield for feminist struggle that “we have to take back”.

Another participant Xinyi answered my question regarding using body image for feminist resistance with the following strong reaction:

*What’s wrong with nude pictures? The people who condemned “nude pictures campaign” are the same people who enjoy women’s nude image in their everyday life. If women’s bodies are used for their pleasure, there is no problem. Whenever women decide to present their bodies in their own way and own reasons, the same group of people act like insulted and call these women bitches.*  
(Interview Xinyi, November 2014, Beijing)

Yue pointed out that “the use of bodily resistance challenged traditional concepts and transcended people’s imagination: they can’t even imagine women can decide to use their bodies in an autonomous way”.

The conversation and the actions conducted by young activists parallels with a long line of feminist discussion of body and sexuality which has been engaging with Foucault’s deconstruction of modernity. In his discussion of sexuality and power, Foucault illustrated that in the modern society, rather than using actual violence or threat, the society makes individuals to govern themselves by constructing them as subjects. This self-governed/ self-censored subject is discursively constructed with various discourse, disciplines and training. Therefore power is not obtained and manipulated by any individual, but rather it is fluid and flowing through social relations that are constructed and tested. As Foucault put it

*To analyse the political investment of the body and the microphysics of power presupposes, therefore, that one abandons--where power is concerned--the violence-ideology opposition, the metaphor of property, the model of the contract or of conquest... One would be concerned with the ‘body politic’, as a set*

*of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge (Foucault, 1997:28)*

The body is not just a physical existence but also where power relations are manifested in their most concrete form, a historically and culturally specific entity. Because of this bodily resistance to social norms has its radical meaning. This body of theory challenges the notion of an autonomous rational being that was established since the Western enlightenment and inspired feminists to understand women subordination as a result of various discourse that distorts, stigmatizes, marginalize and silenced women's experience, and consequently silenced violence towards the body.

In my interviews, the participants repeatedly brought out the issue of silences and silencing. Lanlan, as an example, reflected on her experience in "Our Body, Our Selves" that:

*If the bodily experience cannot be told, then it won't be remembered and become knowledge. The mostly tabooed topic around the body is about sexuality, which nourishes most hidden violence towards women. That's why we have to talk about the body. (Interview Lanlan, November 2014, Beijing)*

However, feminist scholars had also criticized Foucault's body as a gender-neutral and docile body. For example in her reading of Foucault, feminist scholar Lois McNay pointed out that Foucault's understanding of body is problematic because it excludes individual experience, especially women's experience. By addressing the body, young activists paralleled Lois McNay's response to the feminist critiques of Foucault's deconstruction on subject. Specifically this includes answering the question: how could progressive politics happen if the emancipation project, the subjects are merely bodies constructed by power relations that they cannot escape from?

Nevertheless McNay also pointed out how the later work of Foucault focused very much on concept the self, which performs agency with autonomous action.

Foucault in his later works defined technologies of the self “as a certain number of practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion their own identities” (McNay, 1992:3), which indicated an emancipation politics in reclaiming the active agency of the self. McNay then suggested the importance of self for feminist theory as it has potential to overcome the fragmentation of subject positions that are brought by post –structuralism (McNay, 1992).

Bringing together this body of feminist theories, and my empirical material, it is possible to say that young feminists have been contributing to bridging the tensions between feminism and post-structuralism by their radical practices, that is to perform agency through their bodily resistance and actions. The post-structuralism deconstruction of the emancipation subject remains largely a philosophical discussion, however, feminism is about collective politics in everyday life. As McNay assumed, feminism rests on “the fundamental assumption that the inequality between the sexes is indefensible and unjust (McNay, 1992:196)”, therefore the recognition of sexual difference and difference within women should not be an obstacle for collective struggle that aims at progressive social change.

The young activists’ protests and advocacies contributed to create a breakthrough of Chinese feminist struggle in the post Beijing conference era and their actions extended the feminist battlefield from academic work and policy advocacy to the concrete women’s bodies. The body and sexuality no longer exist only in academia and consumerist culture, instead it takes form in a radical feminist presentation that resists and transforms the gender norms and social stigma against women’s bodily and sexual autonomy.

## 6 CONCLUSION

My main research question was how to situate youth feminist activism within the Chinese feminist movement. In an attempt to answer this question I carried out this research which gave good insights to the historical context of the emergence of youth feminist activism. This included first of all an overview of its historical context of feminist movements in China, and the specific relation between the post-Beijing conference feminist generation and the feminist academia. Moreover, I have explored activist's motivations feminist engagement, their intersectional social positionings in terms of class and generation, their reflection on intersectionality of multiple inequality as well as their perception on their position within the Chinese feminist movement.

When asked about their view on the position of youth feminist activism within the Chinese feminist movement, many of my participants deemed that the radical difference their generation came about due to the fact that their activism is civil-society styled and action-oriented, aiming to initiate bottom-up social movement. While one could see their effort as a continuing of feminist activism from the 90s that made a top-bottom "move-women movement" to a women's movement which was bottom-initiated, the younger generation deployed the phrase "direct action" to mark their difference with the older generation and embraced the tag of radicalism. Those direct actions are shifted into focus by their taking on the issues of bodily and sexual autonomy of women, which was not as widely addressed by the earlier feminist generation. For this very reason, in order to explore some of the innovative aspects of the youth feminist activism, I have drawn on feminist theories on body and agency to illustrate the importance of the bodily resistance of young activists within the Chinese context.

Certainly, contemporary young feminism in China is characterized by a more autonomous and critical stance towards the State, including independent sources of funding, often based on grassroots funding, as well as actions that are led by one or a few activists, and make radical use of civil rights tools, such as laws on transparency

for public administration, well illustrated by the case of Detention Education Centres for women who engage in prostitution. Therefore, it can be affirmed that both the tools of action, and the spectrum of the political, have expanded in new directions, with new and unexpected results compared both to the Maoist generations and to the Beijing generation.

As I reach these conclusions, I realize that, in spite of my awareness not to do so, I might have engaged in some kind of linear or progressive account of Chinese feminism, which tends to see the young Chinese movement as better than the older forms of feminism.

As feminist theorist Alison Jagger (1989) has illustrated, feminist emotions are central to the feminist stories that we tell and the way we tell them, and clearly my personal engagement in the new generation of feminist may have had an impact in that sense. A number of historians of feminism have stressed the risks of a linear development narrative, that could easily erase the contributions of some while praising those of others. For example, as Clare Hemmings has interestingly demonstrated (2009) an oversimplified history of feminism in the 70s may blame its essentialism and white-singularity while overlooking the rich discussions on race, class and sexuality in that decade. A linear narrative of history could also fix the contribution of black and third world feminism as an in-between stage of feminist awareness of difference, therefore fixed their role as a simulating progress in a fixed time and space, while post-structuralism may be easily celebrated as the present ongoing profound progress of feminism. This reflexive feminist work warns me about the limits of my own narrative of the transcendence of youth activism. My instinct was, and to some extent still is, to focus on the transcendent potentials of youth activism, therefore the story I tell about generational development might involve a certain kind of bias, with omissions to certain aspects as well as stress on others. The question then comes as, how can I produce accountable feminist knowledge with this risk of bias? Is it even possible to eliminate bias? Again, I agree with Hemmings that the point is not to fix a correct history but to avoid simplifying and generalizing the discursive and consistent feminist endeavor. Her suggestion to “advocate an approach stressing the links rather

than the discontinuities between different theoretical frameworks, as a way of challenging the linear “displacement’ of one approach by another” made sense in this case (Hemmings, 2009:131). In that respect, I think I avoided giving a simplified linear reading of the Chinese feminist movement. I hope I did not produce any accusation of “bad feminism” aimed at any certain generation, and instead was able to give justice to the very different historical and intellectual context that each generation has been placed in. Moreover, I tried to show that, even though theories certainly play an important role, at the same time new feminism ways of doing politics could not be read as a simple application and celebration of post-modernism, or a deconstruction of the mainstreamed gender theory and practice. Neither should the dispute and tension between different generations be read as conflicts between different feminist theoretical approaches. Instead, my attempt has been to work on the historical linkages between youth feminist activism and previous feminist movement as well as the changing settings of economic, political and academic context, as to draw a more fair relation between the generations.

In fact, my understanding of the emergence and development of youth feminist activism has experienced changes over time. Far from the sharp divide that I imagined between different generations, what I found is by no means a linear progressive path that credits the younger while blaming the older. Stories as well as individuals that crossed the already fuzzy boundary of different generations have informed me about the possibility of cooperation and inheritance, so that I could take a more constructive approach. The radical forms of struggle that I have analyzed in this research may be seen as finding their roots in certain forms of western radical feminism, but also in the very localized activism in Chinese women’s movement since the 19th century, because both have had the body and sexuality as a central concern. Meanwhile, new forms of struggle are not really that new when one reads back to the transitional practice and innovation that was made by the older generation. In the sense that feminist movement always marches towards better recognition of equal rights and full respect to women as human beings, the new arisen activism could be read as part of a discursive accumulation of various struggles for gender equality without a linear definition in its

superiority.

The arrest of five activists during in March 2015, which took place towards the end of my research project, certainly shed new light on this movement, in particular on the uncertain attitude from the state towards youth feminist activism. However, from the perspective of the present analysis, which has focused on the feminist movement and its different generational forms, this event also speaks about something else. Indeed, the event developed into the successful rescue of the detained activists, which were eventually released in April 2015. This successful mobilisation showed a new level of cooperation between the young and older generation, the students and workers, as well as the local and the international feminist community, which can be read as a positive signal for further feminist struggle.

Young feminist activists are facing a more complex and divided world that is shaped by the long tradition of socialist practice on gender equality and the backlash brought on by a neo-liberal gender regime. However, young feminists do enjoy the advantages of economic development and information communication, as well as knowledge and training offered by feminist academia and NGOs. At the same time, youth feminist activism shows a strong commitment to queer participation and a critical perspective and action towards neo-liberalism. When tracing back the feminist agency that emerged and performed in a changed context, the youth feminist activism appears to be an important and inseparable part of the Chinese feminist movement, which echoes the commitment of its pioneers for gender equality and justice.

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## APPENDIX

This list includes organizations and groups treated in this thesis and is therefore not a comprehensive list of organizations and individuals that have been involved with youth feminist activism in mainland China.

Better Equality for Everyone, founded in Beijing ,2006

B-come Theater Group, founded in Beijing, 2012

Feminist Power, founded in Beijing, 1996

Feminist School , founded in Beijing, 2013

Gender Equality Group, founded in Beijing, 2011

Women's Initiatives, founded in Hangzhou, 2014

