

Comparison and Analysis of Feminism in China and the West: A Case Study of the 1950s

Xiaopei Wang

*The National University of Singapore
History Department
Xiaopeiwang20@126.com*

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Abstract: 1950 is a very special period for the development of feminism in both China and the West. The People's Republic of China was just established and the West was experiencing the second wave of feminist. However, the feminism in these two areas developed in different ways, that Chinese feminism is the "state feminism" while the West is "liberal feminism". This kind of difference results from the different social environment, especially the political policy in China and the West. The Communist Party of China took feminism as a tool to consolidate socialist construction, so it launched the feminist movement from top to bottom. The second feminism in the West is a bottom-up movement for women to fight for their own rights and interests, and they use magazines and other mass media as a means of struggle. By comparing the difference of the feminism in China and the West, the flaws of these two kinds of development of feminism could also be shown.

1. Introduction

Feminism has always been an important topic in sociology. According to the theory of social constructionism by Burr [1], when people are born into a world, the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the people in the culture have already exist, every individual person in the world would be shaped by these frameworks and categories. Women in each era are constructed by the society of the time. Women are influenced by various factors in society at the time, and they are built to be what the time wants them to be. Therefore, feminism in different times and different regions also presents various trends and priorities. The 1950s is a very typical period, because during this period, due to the influence of political factors, feminism in China and the West developed rapidly, but the development mode and expression form of feminism in these two regions are completely different. This is because China and the West had different levels of social development and social environment, such as the aspects of politics, economy and culture. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) focused on the built the equality between male and female, which is the important part of the development of the socialist. Under this situation, the feminism, in other words, the built of equal right of women, becomes a tool of consolidating the new regime. Since the leader of China at that time was MAO Zedong, this era is also known as MAO Era. In MAO Era, feminism was closely

combined with the construction of state power. This kind of feminism is called state feminism. At almost the same time, in 1960s, feminism in the West was also developing rapidly. Many regions, such as America, experiencing the “second wave” feminist movement. Different with the state feminism in China, feminism in the West during that period, divided into two different factions, they were the socialist feminism and the radical feminism. From the beginning of the 20th century to the 1960s, all kinds of contradictions were lined up again since the world suffered from the two world wars and the collapse of the colonial system. During this period of great turbulence, feminism also rose and rose. Socialist feminism focuses on the equality between women and men in terms of economy and class struggle, and demands the material status of women. Radical feminism, or the liberal feminism, on the other hand, call for women's "liberation" in terms of sex. They were challenging the whole of male society, the "sexual class" system.

Obviously, feminism of China and the West are completely different from various aspects around 1950s. This is because the social environment of these two regions has its own characteristics. In this paper, we introduce the different content of the feminist movement between China and the West during 1950s, and analyze these differences with the social factors, such as politics and economics, and we conclude that the difference between the feminism of China and the West, results from the different social environment.

2. Literature Review

Joan Wallach Scott [2] in his book points out that gender is a useful category of historical analysis, and she also provided her own definition of gender, and divides it into two parts. In one hand, gender is not only the perceived differences between the sexes, but is also a way of signifying power differentials. On the other hand, gender's definition is, according to William Sewell [3] “important and contentious”, which makes a claim for the important role gender plays in all areas of history. Her paper argued about the social and political construction of gender, which provides the basic theory of this paper. This paper focus on the influence of social environment especially the political factors on the feminism in China and the West.

Wang Zheng [4] in her paper points out that feminism of MAO Era in China, is a kind of “state feminism”. In her paper, she analyses activities the Shanghai Women's Federation's (SWF), which build many grassroots organization in the countries, and explores how the SWF participated in early Chinese socialist state building, as well as the policies on gender during the socialist building. And she concludes that in the early 1950s, even though earlier feminist discourse combined with Engle's theory of women's liberation provided leverage of communist women to maneuver for gender equality, communist women's fight for women's equality still coexisted with the real danger of stabs from behind for that very fight, since women in the CCP were nevertheless, constrained by history of the CCP's suppression of “bourgeois feminism”. Tina [5] in her paper mentioned that Chinese Communist Party(CCP), a proletarian-based socialist female reconstructed gender and social relations through the female model worker. In the Maoist China, setting up typical female model worker is the most important and special means to publicize state feminism.

This is in great contrast to the western feminism propaganda. Journals, magazines and also advertisements, the correction of these kind of mass media, are the most important way to develop feminism in the second wave of feminist movement in the West. Christina Catalano [6] suggests that feminists identify the 1950s as the peak of gender inequality, since the mass media, especially advertising in women's magazines, tend to show the disrespect to women. They believed that these advertisements described women as a characteristic of stupid, submissive, purely domestic creatures. Based on the main aim of the second-wave feminist movement, to improve the personal and political status of women, correcting the mass media, became the important way to fight for women's rights.

To analyze feminism, we cannot ignore the history of “male institution”, which is raised by Dyan Elliott [7]. He mentioned that gender is the useful way of looking at the history of “male institutions”. Therefore, most literatures focus on analyzing feminism from the perspective that women are dominated by the patriarchal society, such as how women fight against the male institutions. There are different methodologies between studies on women and socialist states, just like China and studies on feminism in capitalist democratic states, just like the western countries. Thus, there is few research that compares the difference of feminism between China and the West. Most of the paper existing now focus on analyzing the development of feminism of just one region, or comparing the feminism of this region during different times or Eras. In this paper, we try to remedy this deficiency. We also used the perspective of how women fight against the male institutions, but based on the previous literature, we compared Chinese and Western feminism during 1960s, so as not only to summarize and analyze previous studies, but also to more intuitively show the differences between Chinese and Western societies in this period.

3. Differences Between the Feminism of China and the West

3.1. Different Forms of Feminism: State Feminism vs. Liberal Feminism

Based on the literature review, we found that the feminism during 1950s in China and the West, is completely different from content and develop means. We think that this kind of differences are resulting from the different social environment of these two regions, especially the political environment. 1950s is a very special and typical time for development of the feminism in both China and the West. Since the People’s Republic of China was just established at that time, the status of women was eventually changed because of various of social reasons. And the West is experiencing the second wave of feminism during that time, so that 1950s is a very good choice to compare the development of feminism between China and the West.

First of all, the forms of feminism in the two regions are different. The different form of the feminism results from the different reason of feminist development. China is developing state feminism, while the West is developing radical or liberal feminism. There are differences in the content of these two forms of feminism. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, in order to better build a new socialist country, the Communist Party of China has made eliminating gender differences and fighting for women's rights one of its important work contents. This purpose of developing feminism in China has become the fundamental reason for the formation of state feminism. In the contract, feminism in the West developed due to the end of the Word War II. After the war, men who were sent to the war returned to the country and get back their jobs. During the war, these jobs were once occupied by women. Now they need to go back to home and take care of their family. And besides, with the development of the advanced industrialization and the beginnings of suburbs, the social environment of men and women in were further separated from each other. At the same time, the Cold War lets the family unity become the defense against communism, which made the role of women as wives and mothers crucial to the preservation of the West and democratic ideals. Due to the above political and social reasons, western women were more eager to fight for their political status and voice in their country, thus forming the second wave of feminism.

3.2. Different Means of Feminism Development: Typical Model vs. The Mass Media

Different forms of the feminism lead to different contents of feminism, and different contents determine different means of development. China's national feminism, developed in order to consolidate the state power, was formed from the top down, so it had a strong political purpose. Therefore, women's organizations under the leadership of the Communist Party of China were

established throughout the country, and female model workers were set up as role models throughout the country to achieve the purpose of promoting feminism. Women's organizations established by the state are often ambiguous because they lie in the middle ground between the consolidation of state power and the fight for real rights for women. Thus, in essence, there is still the possibility that such organizations will be dominated by men (since most of the ruling people in China were men). Western feminism in this period, on the other hand, was spontaneously formed from the bottom up. It was women's initiative to fight for their own social rights. Deborah and Judith in the *Feminist Review* suggest that *Newsweek* has played an important role in the second wave of feminism in the West. However, they also point out that *Newsweek* and other journalistic stories actually distorted 'various subtle- ties' of their research. They take the mass media as their main means to penetrate the feminist thought into all aspects of the society.

4. Unavoidable Flaws.

The development of feminism in both regions has its own flaws. China's national feminism, guided by the political party, has become the consolidation of socialism, setting up female model workers as social role models, and promoting the idea of "gender equality", which makes women masculine and does not safeguard women's social status from the perspective of women's rights. Wang Zheng [8] in her paper concludes that in the early 1950s, even though the earlier feminist discourse as well as Engle's theory of women's liberation provided a standard for communist women to fight against gender inequality, communist women's fight for women's equality still coexisted with the real danger of stabs from behind for that very fight, since women in the CCP were nevertheless, constrained by history of the CCP's suppression of "bourgeois feminism". Western liberal feminism is dominated by women, so it has the problem of being too radical. In addition, the second women's movement impacted the traditional concept of marriage, resulting in a high divorce rate in the West and a decrease in social happiness.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we compare the differences between Chinese and Western feminism in the 1950s based on social constructivism. We find that the causes and forms of the development of feminism in the two regions are different, and these differences are due to the different social environment in the two regions. China's state feminism, promoted by the ruling party, is a tool to consolidate the new regime and develop socialism. Western liberal feminism is a means spontaneously created by women to safeguard their own rights due to the change of social gender composition after World War II. This contrast reflects the construction of women in different social environments. We believe that this paper makes up for some deficiencies of previous studies, such as the lack of feminist comparison between different regions in the same period. At the same time, this paper only focuses on the influence of political factors on the development of feminism, and ignores the influence of other social factors such as economy and culture, which is also the direction to be paid attention to in subsequent studies.

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