CHINA AS AN ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL SUPERPOWER

Global China from a Gender Lens

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Illustrator: Sr. García

In the context of globalization and China “rising”, the past two decades witnessed the increasing research interest on the emerging field of “Global China”. Global China studies is an interdisciplinary research field that studies China’s multifaceted global engagements and impacts. It expands China Studies beyond China’s territorial boundaries and looks into the role of China in the global stage, its profound influence on global governance, trade, aid, investment, financing for development, technology, militarization and peace, environment, geopolitics, human rights, etc. The considerable amount of studies, initiatives and media coverages focus on the monitoring of China’s global footprint, overseas investment—especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—its environment, social and human rights implications, its influence on geopolitics and regional dynamics [1].

However, not much attention has been given to the gender aspect of “Global China”, yet, and the issue of gender and sexuality has been largely ignored [2]. Given China’s increased commitments on gender equality and women’s development in the global level in the recent years and the fact that gender has been highly politicized in the current geopolitics, becoming another contested ground, more in-depth intellectual inquiries on these subjects are urgently needed.

Gender matters in Global China

The current literature on the theme of Global China and gender predominantly explore cross-cultural relations between China and Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America (including labor and marriage migration, sex work, family life, cultural alienation and integration). It delves into the implication of a wide array of issues —Chinese investment, trade, development cooperation, agricultural and mining activities— on local women's livelihood and business opportunities, among others [3].

Several projects and initiatives that inquire on the theme of Global China and gender are particularly worth mentioning here. In particular the project "China in the Global South: The Central Role of Gender and Sexuality", conducted by The Center for Emerging Worlds at University of California, Santa Cruz between 2016 and 2020 [4]. This project brings together a group of scholars and NGOs from China, US, Latin America, and Africa to a dynamic intellectual dialogue addressing the impact of China's presence in the Global South on women's lives and gender relations. It does so through research, workshops, cultural commentary series, and international forums. The project emphasizes the importance of shifting the research focus beyond "impacts" of China's policies, investment and advocacies, and it places gender and sexuality at the center of the analyses to understand how Chinese policies and practices are established, accepted or challenged in China and elsewhere. For instance, China's image in other countries is often linked with the way sexuality is defined in those countries, which affects China's transnational relations. The latest case is intertwined with anti-gender, anti-communism, anti-China rhetoric and sentiment in Brazi [5], which further intensifies due to the COVID-19 pandemic and stimulates the fierce reaction from China.

From this point of departure, the project critically reflects on the current methodology in the Global China studies and points out that it is important to avoid the assumption of gender and sexuality as stable identities and norms and not to see China and other Southern countries as an unhistorical and monolithic entity. Instead, it intends to explore the complex and sophisticated connections and produce the nuanced analyses on China and Global South drawing on histories of colonialism and reality of changing global context through a collective intellectual endeavor.

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Another interesting effort is the series initiatives by Sexuality Policy Watch. Since 2012,

Sexuality Policy Watch aimed at examining the intersections between geopolitical trends —emergence of Global South, especially Brazil, China, India and South Africa— and the politics of sexuality and human rights, as well as to developing a critical mapping of trends and shifts in the various realms of sexual politics at large in the early 21st century. These projects produced a series of working papers and videos that assess the tensions and dynamics in global sexual politics [6]. Chinese scholars participated in these discussions and contributed to the analyses. The engagement in this global project incentivizes Chinese researchers to reposition and contextualize Chinese gender and sexuality politics in a broader global analyses and debates. The byproduct of this engagement is the formation of network of scholars who show enthusiasm in the future collaboration to research on intersection of Global China and gender and sexuality. These scholars come from different regions with diverse academic background and conduct interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research, which undoubtfully will enrich the theories and methodologies that inquiring Global China from gender and sexuality perspective would require.

Why gender matters even more right now?

To examine gender issues in China's global engagement serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it will fill the knowledge gaps and open the new possible questions and approaches in academic inquiry. On the other hand, it will contribute to identify the entry points and strategies for advocacy both inside and outside of China on related matters. Now all these tasks seem more imperative than ever before. Why so?

Changing gender politics in China

In the last two decades, rapid transformations of sexual identities, norms, and practices have emerged, and creative activities organized by young feminists, LGBTQ+ groups, and sexuality educators have also increased the social visibility of sexuality and gender issues in China [7]. Moreover, in the conjuncture of COVID-19 pandemic and Beijing+25 [8], women's development, gender equality, and other related issues enter the public discourse and policy domain. This visibility and legitimacy of gender issues provide the new momentum and space for women's movements and gender equality advocacy in China and globally [9]. Feminist groups all around the world have been working collaboratively to ensure that a gender perspective is integrated in the COVID-19 response and recovery policies and plans.

Developing a feminist agenda calls for the social, political, economic transformation [10]. In China, women's participation and contribution in the prevention and control of epidemics, as health workers, social workers, caregivers, volunteers, scientists and researchers, journalists, service providers, in family, community, and every aspect of the society, are well acknowledged and highly appreciated. President Xi Jinping in his speech at the UN event on Beijing+25 called for actions to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on women, and to place the protection of women's and girls' rights and interests high on agenda of both public health and economic reopening, as well as make efforts to enhance benefits for women, address their concerns, and deliver results for their well-being [11].

In China, the changing gender and sexuality politics also manifests in the shifts in policy and legislations related to gender equality and women's rights, including the sexual and reproductive health and rights. For example, in 2016, the government suspended the 35-years-old one-child family planning policy and opened it up for the second child [12]. On 31 May 2021, the government launched the new policy that allows married couples to have a third child, as well as a set of incentives for increasing fertility rate, such as elimination of the discrimination against women in employment, provision of the subsidy and public facility for childcare, among others [13]. Although the intention of these policies may lie in the rationale of solving the problem of declining fertility and aging population, they will undoubtedly have an impact on gender equality and women's development in China.

The other notable related legislative changes include the adoption of a landmark Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2015 and establishment of a 30-day cooling-off period for couples who want to dissolve their marriage in the 2021 civil code. The paradoxical legislative changes, as well as the heated debates on sexuality education, revived Confucian value and cultural conservatism represented by "anti-sex aunties" [14], juxtaposed with top-level commitment on gender equality and activism by LGBT and young feminist groups in the society, which compose the complicated landscape of gender politics in China.

China's global commitments on gender equality and women's development

In addition to all this complexity, there is China's increasing global commitment on gender quality and women's development in various international forums and through its international cooperation programs. Chinese leadership reaffirms the reform and opening up policies and commits to open its economy despite of the trade war with the US, disputes with western countries on human rights issues, and the global economic crisis induced by COVID-19 pandemic that push China for self-reliance. The same strategic adjustment can be observed in the BRI to meet the challenges imposed by "the profound changes unseen in a century", with the emphasis on solidary and people-to-people exchange. In this context, gender issues have been given more prominence and attention in China's foreign policy and international cooperation in recent years.

For example, at the high-level meetings China co-hosted with UN Women on the occasion of Beijing+20 (2015) and Beijing+25 (2020), President Xi Jinping reiterated gender equality as state policy and committed financial support to UN Women and developing countries to accelerate the implementation of BPfA and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality and women's empowerment. The report "Equality, Development and Sharing: Progress of Women's Cause in 70 Years Since New China's Founding" enumerates the achievements of China's participation and cooperation in promoting women's development and gender equality at the global level [1].

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As a defender of multilateralism, China has become the second biggest contributor to UN regular budget (contributes 12%) after the US (22%) since 2019 and the second biggest contributor to UN peacekeeping operation expenses since 2016 [16]. Therefore, China is anticipated to play a more proactive role in the practice of "Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda" at national and global levels [17]. Most importantly, in the government policy paper "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" launched recently, for the first time, gender equality is outlined as one of the priority areas for China's future international development cooperation. This policy priority is echoed in the official statement of Chinese government representatives at the UN, for instance at the high-level meeting on Beijing+25 at Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2020, and various forums that China hosts on international cooperation, which often incorporate the sessions on gender equality and women's development in the agenda.

Gender in Global China: Area of collaboration or field of contestation?

While in China gender issues increasingly gain ground in terms of visibility, legitimacy, and priority in political agenda; gender has become a fierce battlefield with the emergence of global "anti-gender" movement across Europe, the US and Latin America. It was initiated by the hard-right Catholic religious groups to oppose the progress made on gender equality and women's rights since 1990s through transnational feminist movement and advocacy, especially those associated with abortion and sexual rights. It takes different forms and utilizes various strategies to exert influence on public opinion, national politics and global governance [18].

In China, gender issues are usually not regarded as politically sensitive and controversial, in contrast to the issues of human rights, national sovereignty, and peace and security in the global arena. However, this situation may change given the complexity and ambiguity of the concept of gender and global gender politics. In Chinese language, gender equality is often used interchangeably with equality between men and women indicating the tendency of binary reinterpretation. In practice, gender equality can be reduced to women's equal participation in development (poverty alleviation, education, economic participation, maternal health, etc.) to avoid intentionally the use of the term rights. Substituting the language of rights with that of development reflects the longstanding ideological controversy on "right to development vs. human rights" between China and some western countries.

In a nutshell, how will China position itself on global gender politics and negotiations? What approaches will China apply to conduct the international cooperation programs that promote gender equality and women's development in developing countries? These would

be some interesting questions to inquire about Global China.

In addition to the conceptual confusion on terminology of gender and ideological dispute over language of rights, the issue about women's organizations and feminist movements is also concerning researchers and activists. Would Chinese NGOs and their counterparts from other countries be able to meaningfully participate in implementation and monitoring of China's international cooperation agenda, given the shrinking civil space in China and globally [19] On the other hand, China is skeptical and vigilant about gender issues and women's rights being manipulated by US and its allies as another weapon to demonize against China in the global stage [20].

Conclusió

Overall, gender has been highly politicized in the current circumstances and became another contested ground where it could potentially generate and escalate anti-China sentiment/Sinophobia in the specific political context, intersecting with anti-communism, anti-abortion, anti-gender, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, anti-globalization, nationalist propaganda, xenophobia, protectionism, etc. Having said that, we do not suggest that China should minimize its commitments on gender equality and women's development. Instead, it should investigate and analyze comprehensively on the current gender politics and develop the concrete work plan to put resources to walk the talk.

There are much more to be done to bring gender perspective into Global China. It stimulates new questions beyond "what China does or should do, what the implications are, how the rest of the world responds, and how China react and adjust, so on and so forth". It does not necessarily focus on China and see it as an unhistorical and monolithic entity and emerging power. Instead, it interrogates the conjunctures where China and the world encounter in a particular way in the specific space and time; and how these encounters manifest and reveal themselves in various forms synchronously —collaboration, contestation, transformation— and how these dynamics contribute to shape and reshape China and the world.

This change in focus requires the methodology that can bring the voice and experience of all affected people and communities at the center of the analyses, women, man, LGBTQ+, migrants, workers, farmers, indigenous people, sex workers, investors, brokers, street vendors, and others, to understand how they are related to one another in the reconfiguration. It urges researchers to reassess those seemingly convenient standard tropes and concepts on China (such as communism, state capitalism, undemocratic, super-power, hegemonic power, and so on), and to search for the new analytical tools. What are the life stories of Chinese workers who build the infrastructure in Africa leaving behind their families? How do their stories resonate with those of Chinese workers who built the railway in America more than a hundred years ago? How do the African women perceive their jobs at the Nairobi-Mombasa line, the Chinese railway megaproject, and other Chinese companies? What do they have to say about how to improve corporate social responsibility (CSR) guidelines and regulations of Chinese investment? What could Chinese

CSOs learn from indigenous communities and human rights organizations in Latin America on human rights and right to development through a collaboration and partnership to hold Chinese mining company accountable? Maybe these can be some steps to begin with in the long rocky road.

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