

# Women's Studies in China — Just the Beginning

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Although Chinese women gained their "liberation" in 1949, the same issue of women's social standing has been raised again in recent years. One of the new developments brought about by this renewed interest is the subject of women's studies. Advocated by the All-China Women's Federation, more than twenty women's studies groups have appeared in different parts of China since 1985, a typical case we could describe as "mushrooming after a spring rain." They form the "official part" of women's studies in China.

The other part of the subject came into being in the following year: China's intellectuals began to respond to the new situation and took immediate action. In 1986, dozens of women scholars from different disciplines met in Zhengzhou, a city in central China, to found the unofficial, academic women's studies. This group worked voluntarily to establish women's studies in China's academic field and soon took the lead in many aspects. In July 1987, another academic conference was held again in Zhengzhou. About forty scholars including men attended the conference, exchanging information and ideas about women's studies in China and abroad. Another item discussed at the conference was the publication of a series of books on Chinese women. This series of 20 to 25 books will deal with various subjects such as the law and gender, marriage and women, women and ethics, women and the modernization of China and so on. In many ways, this conference is a landmark in Chinese women's history and its influence will hopefully be felt far and wide in the future.

However, it is still naive to believe that the subject of women's studies in China is well on its way. There are obstacles that could stangle the newborn in the cradle or prevent it from further healthy development. Some of these obstacles are the by-products of the superficial liberation which Chinese women were given in 1949. It is a fact that the stated "Equality" and women's participation in the labour market has concealed deeply rooted sexism everywhere in this country. As the status quo has been recently questioned, sexism in all its forms has been exposed.

We can easily find sexism in the Chinese academy. For example, when we talk about women's literature and women's studies, some scholarly people laugh at this and ask if we should have men's literature or men's studies to "keep the balance." On the whole, the most advanced group in China just turns its eyes away from half of the population, believing there are other things more worthwhile to do. Under such a situation, it is not surprising that, to this day, the country has only had four women's studies programs in its universities.

We must also look to the Chinese government. To say that it is sexist may be a little unfair. It is true that, since 1949, women have been visible in almost every field of this country. However, the government has dwelled on the "liberation" it has given to Chinese women and overlooked their continued low status in society. As a result, we cannot feel surprised that the State Statistics Department has gathered hardly any statistical data on women and that, so far, the government has given very scant encouragement to women's studies. This is very unfortunate for Chinese women, whose government can exercise such a considerable influence on their lives and society in general.

When discussing the government's neglect of women's studies, we can observe the overbearing impact of politics. The various brands of Marxist dogma in China has resulted in turmoils in the past few decades and today still affect our way of thinking and acting.

In the construction of women's studies, there has been the slogan "To build a Marxist women's studies with Chinese characteristics." This is the principle of the All-China Women's Federation. Sticking to the old attitude, official women's studies rejects different ideas by simply labeling them "bourgeois." It has stood at the same point since 1985 and hardly achieved anything in its "research" although, as the agent of the government and the supposed centre of Chinese women, it has been supported by the government. Given this situation, we have good reason to doubt the future of this official branch of women's studies.

The frequent change of "political wind" in China has also turned out to hinder the development of women's studies. One example is the campaign against "Bourgeois Liberalism" at the beginning of 1987, which has affected women's studies in several ways. First, the official women's studies has become even more conservative in order not to

offend the "four cardinal principles."<sup>1</sup> Second, there has been a cutback in publication and two publishing projects of women's studies were just scattered to the wind. Third, more control has been put on organizations and conferences. The summer conference of the academic women's studies was very nearly cancelled and only reprieved at the last minute. Under the government's present policy, it would be very difficult to set up a formal national network of women's studies.

Politics dominates everything else. This has trapped not only women's studies but the Chinese academy in a difficult corner. Women's studies has a double task to fulfill: while it is trying to survive and develop in the uncertainty of the political climate, it has to deal with the overall sexism in the country. How it will forge its way ahead depends on many factors. Up to now, it is just the beginning.

#### NOTE

1. The four cardinal principles are the Party's fundamental policy. They are as follows: (1) to persist in the leadership of the Communist Party; (2) to persist in Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought; (3) to persist in the socialist route, and (4) to persist in the proletarian dictatorship.