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EDITORIAL

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Feminism in China Today: What We Have Achieved and What Lies Ahead

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Abstract

In this editorial, we will review the social history of gender-based labor division in ancient and contemporary China and present a few questions this thematic issue attempts to explore, namely, how to interpret and evaluate the progress feminism has achieved in China, and what to do next. We then introduce the five articles selected to be part of this thematic issue and briefly discuss their findings. Finally, we share our belief that, whereas more opportunities are being granted to contemporary Chinese women, there has not been a corresponding decline in traditional gender roles. Although women are presented with the prospect of a more active role and new responsibilities within the family realm and society, we should not settle on momentary feelings of accomplishment, but remain aware that the fight for a social structure that truly supports gender equality continues.

Keywords

Chinese women; feminism; gender equality; gender role

1. Introduction

The academic editors of this thematic issue are Liu Liu and Xuemeng Li, two Chinese female sociologists who have worked closely with each other during the past ten years. Having written extensively on different Chinese females' life experiences (e.g., L. Liu & Li, 2021; L. Liu et al., 2025), we noticed that ongoing discussions about feminism in China were often based on international social movements and Western feminist theories (e.g., M. Liu, 2023; F. Xu, 2009). To respond to some questions that Western societies have raised on this topic (e.g., Spakowski, 2011), we decided to put together this insightful collection of academic articles in the hope

that it will shed light on the real-life experiences of contemporary Chinese women. All five articles selected for this thematic issue used fieldwork in mainland China, and the data were analyzed from the perspectives of gender and feminism.

Chinese mythical stories set the tone for gendered labor division in Chinese society. Pangu, a god, supposedly a male, separated the sky from the earth and created the world. Meanwhile, Nv Wa, a goddess, supposedly a female, created humans and mended the sky. Throughout thousands of years of Chinese history, women lagged behind men, reproducing and nurturing, while men were "out there" in the world, making a "real" difference. Admittedly, patriarchy is not unique to Chinese history and societies; however, the fatalistic nature inherent in the feminist movement in modern and contemporary China is due to these mythical stories and patriarchal traditions. Indeed, since the late Qing Dynasty and the beginning of Chinese society's modernization, the roles women play in the family realm and in society have been subject to tremendous change (see Yin, 2021). But what about our "fates"? Has the "Chinese woman's responsibility" to society changed with the independence, modernization, and the Reform and Opening Up of "new China"?

We often hear the term "feminist movement" mentioned in the same context as "liberation" in modern China, especially when the stories and narratives are situated in the same historical context of fighting against imperialism and colonialism in the early 1900s (Zheng, 2005). Gender equality was proposed as a part of the revolution and rebuilding of the social structure (He et al., 2025). To mobilize and utilize women in the labor market, "gender roles" became the most discussed topic during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Wedeman, 2017). Thanks to the historical "iron girls" who proved women could do anything men do and better, doors began to open for women. The potentials of Chinese women as the labor force in both the professional world and the public sphere have been thoroughly explored (e.g., M. Zhang & Liu, 2015). But a "gender-blind" approach often undermines the biological differences between women and men, which has caused harmful consequences to women (Jin, 2006).

In contemporary China, especially in urban areas, women often hold college degrees and have full-time jobs in most professional fields (C. Li et al., 2025). Unlike the Maoist "iron girls" who had short hair and the same outfit as their male counterparts, now clothes showing female body features are usually seen on TV and out in the streets. Pop culture and fashion design, especially through the younger generations, often celebrate femininity and feminine traits, in what is now understood as a celebration of feminism. Feminism has now moved beyond discussions of gender roles and delved further into issues related to sex and sexuality, specifically, the biological features of female bodies, dating culture, and the sex life of Chinese couples. Chinese feminists are sensitive and cautious about the changed standards of beauty, identifying the influence of the male gaze (M. Li & Li, 2025), as well as the symbolic meaning of practices attached to the biological features of female bodies (Yang, 2016; H. Zhang & Xi, 2025). Not long ago, the quality of female hygiene products was a heated discussion topic on Chinese social media, which can be seen as bold and innovative in a patriarchal society like China (Ewe, 2024; Wang, 2024).

While research on women and partner-seeking strategies (Bu, 2025), family–career balance (Shi et al., 2025), and entrepreneurship and leadership in business (H. Hu et al., 2024) is more commonly discussed in Chinese academic journals, this thematic issue is guided by several interrelated questions directly related to feminism in China. What is the social status of women in contemporary China, and how does it inform both opportunities and constraints in their lives? How is "gender equality" interpreted in different historical, political, and cultural

contexts in China? How is feminism understood, expressed, and practiced in China today, and to what extent does it converge with or diverge from global feminist discourses?

2. The Featured Articles

To explore these questions, we brought together five insightful works that concern Chinese women's experiences in getting formal education, working in male-dominated professions, and fulfilling parenting roles in both rural and urban China.

In rural China, thanks to the Internet and smartphones, rural women today are able to create and maintain fast and direct connections to the world. Some of them became influencers on social platforms and are well-liked by their fanbase. Bai and Ventura (2025) present an audience engagement study, introducing us to rural women influencers on Douyin (the Chinese TikTok): They are described as embodiments of a relaxing lifestyle and educators of practical knowledge. The knowledge with which rural women face their daily lives, including household chores, cooking, and taking care of their crops, together with their new social media skills, not only granted them the attention and love of their audience online but also a newfound voice at home. Instead of "attaching" to their husbands, these women challenge gender roles and gender-based labor division in domestic affairs, now making decisions for their family and sometimes their family businesses. Audiences, especially those who have relocated from rural to urban areas, feel empowered by these rural female influencers and look up to them as they reconstruct their own lives in a new environment. The generally positive feedback these rural women influencers receive on the content they create and post indicates that they are someone to be celebrated and deserving of appreciation.

Through 17 in-depth interviews, Zhou and Han (2025) present a dilemma many Chinese female college students face: Girls from younger generations are allowed and, in some cases, encouraged to enter STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, yet career paths are not paved for them. Respondents worked very hard during their secondary education, scored extremely high on the college entrance exams, and were admitted to STEM majors in college. After graduating with high marks, however, most of them soon found themselves in male-dominated workspaces, as STEM is, traditionally, a male-dominated field of study and occupations. Just like how first-generation immigrants have to integrate into their hosting societies through fighting discrimination and gathering resources to make a living, female engineers in Zhou and Han's research felt the obstacles and strategically created networks for female engineers to help each other and fight what they call "technical elite masculinity."

In another article, Chen (2025) documented how femininity is celebrated and utilized in workspaces. By observing their workstations, the author shows how female employees feel comfortable expressing their femininity, reflecting a significant change in contemporary Chinese workplaces: particularly, that there is a growing acceptance of women and the symbols they carry, especially for females with white-collar jobs. Through the theoretical framework of gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990), Chen observes that such "celebrations" can be reactions to disciplinary power and the workspace order created and maintained by males, but this too is a two-edged sword: On the one hand, white-collar female employees self-present as "harmless" by decorating their workstations with colorful, feminine objects. On the other hand, the carefully chosen slogans on these objects are a form of resistance to established powers and allowed arrangements in the workspace.

Back to the domestic sphere, it is more common now for new moms in China to be assisted by their parents and/or in-laws in taking care of their newborns. As an unintended consequence of the one-child policy, the so-called "intergenerational support system" described by C. Xu and Wang (2025) has been found effective in sending new moms back to work quickly after giving birth and continuing to focus on advancing their careers. This seems to suggest that women in China are being encouraged to work, but truly, it reflects a labor shortage in the larger structure and the updated social expectation that women should provide for families alongside their husbands. Meanwhile, the pressure of motherhood on women remains. Often, it is the female figure of those available to assist the new mom at home, i.e., a grandmother rather than the grandfather, who ends up providing most of the necessary care with the newborn. As for the new mom, rather than feeling accomplished by their contribution to the family income, many suffer with the guilt of not mothering their own child.

Wu et al. (2025) used obfuscated data collected from a Chinese female prison and explored the "myth of the sewing women." Among all vocational training programs provided in Chinese prisons, sewing is almost exclusively found in all-female facilities, an arrangement that seems to mirror the gendered labor division in China (Ma & Jacobs, 2010) and Chinese communities overseas (Chin, 2005). Learning how to sew is expected to make sense for female prisoners on the assumption that it will help them find a job upon being discharged. Yet, the effectiveness of the sewing program on Chinese female prisoners, both in the job market and in adaptation to imprisonment, remains unknown. In fact, the results of Wu et al.'s research show that participating in the sewing program does not significantly contribute to prisoners' adaptation to imprisonment. The psychological well-being of female residents in prison, i.e., mental health score, is found to be the strongest factor. For most female prisoners, sewing is neither a comforting activity nor is it where their future lies.

3. Concluding Thoughts

We want this thematic issue to contribute to current discussions of feminism in China by presenting empirical evidence for what we, as a society, have achieved, critically reflecting on this evidence, and revealing what lies ahead. With changes in women's social status within both the family and society, along with a rising percentage of women now employed in professional fields, women, femininity, and even feminism itself are becoming increasingly visible in public spaces. These are very important achievements. However, many other areas of the feminist struggle remain underexplored and warrant closer attention if true equality is to be achieved. For instance, issues of sex, gender, and sexuality are not discussed with the same openness and level of importance in contemporary China as, e.g., the situation of women in the workplace. Sexuality at large has not yet become a topic open for public debate in China (Z. Yu, 2015; J. Yu et al., 2022), and one can argue that this is tightly related to how political participation remains limited among women, with few choosing to take up leadership positions in either government or grassroots organizations (see Zeng, 2014).

As we critically reflect on the achievements we've made so far, it's important to keep in mind that women's value and accomplishments are often assessed through the "male gaze," judged by masculine standards, and approved (or not) by patriarchal expectations. Take the case of highly educated women in the dating and marriage scenes as an example. While the notion of "leftover women" highlights persistent patriarchal expectations and constraints on women, women with college or postgraduate degrees and professional skills are increasingly valued as a financial asset and their ability to share household expenses with their husbands (Lake, 2018). However, economic contribution does not necessarily lessen women's domestic

responsibilities. Even when employed, many women are still expected to fulfill traditional female roles in the house (Tu et al., 2025).

In conclusion, while granted new opportunities, contemporary Chinese women often find themselves carrying additional responsibilities in both public and private spheres. It is also hard to hope for a corresponding reduction in traditional obligations as Chinese women are still socially designated life-long caregivers: a dutiful daughter-in-law caring for elderly in-laws, a supportive wife attending to her husband, a devoted mother responsible for childcare and household management, and now, a grandma who volunteers to take care of their grandchildren after retirement. Even though the law tries to protect women of childbearing age on the job market, women who are married, pregnant, and lactating are facing persistent discrimination (Q. Li & Xiao, 2025), while the number of depressed new moms has also been increasing (C. Li et al., 2021). These facts make the achievements of feminism in China inherently a reproduction of male dominance, new empirical evidence for "women existing for men" (Gao, 2003), and a function instead of a dysfunction for the social structure today (Whyke et al., 2024). Because of what we have achieved, we, Chinese women, need to keep on thinking, talking, and acting for what lies ahead.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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