

The three kinds of female discourse system in China and three correspondent constructions of museum

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Summary: Focusing on the present Chinese public discourse space from the gender perspective, there are at least three kinds of female discourse system. Each of them belongs to different area, is controlled by different group, and announces herself through different cultural carriers. The complexity of their definitions makes their relationship more and more complicated. They are as follows. (1), "half the sky" discourse. It has changed the traditional Chinese gender stereotypes (men go out and women stay in house), which dominated for thousands of years, and firstly release female from private space to public space in large-scale. However, it still presents the patriarchal discourse in mainstream ideology. (2), "feminist" discourse. This is the only independent female voice, but it is influenced a lot by the Western Feminism, and is easy to manufacture the new center/ edge structure (the Western/ Chinese, the elite/ mass). (3), "modern lady" discourse. As the product of modern market, it essentially belongs to the patriarchal discourse. But in some level it balances and deconstructs the two discourses former.

Key words: "half the sky", feminist, "modern lady"

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1. "Half the sky"

The word "half the sky" was first presented by Mao Zedong, in his "Highest order" in 1968. "Highest order" is a kind of official documents which were always published by official media, so we cannot exactly say when and where Mao said this word. However, there indeed were many documents showing that in some unofficial situations, Mao used this word "half the sky" many times to describe women.^① In modern China, when the word "half the sky" is used,

^① Hou Bo, a Chinese female photographer, said that in 1949, Hou and her husband took the photo with Mao Zedong. She and her husband were separately standing behind Mao, but Mao said, "No, women are half the sky, so you please, stand in middle of us." And then Mao stood at her left. ("Hou Bo, a Female Photographer Who Has Taken Photos for Mao Zedong for 12 Years," *Modern Paper*, Jan. 21st 2008.) Another example is that in 1953, when Mao Zedong was granted an interview to one of the first National Model Workers, Shen Jilan, he said, "Good, you are the leader of countrywomen. Women are 'half the sky'. You are a good leader." ("Shen Jilan, the leader of countrywomen, is the successor of Labor Spirit", *People's Daily*

it not only means “women”, but also women’s capability.

“Half the sky” discourse has appeared since 1949. It shows a new woman image from the building of People’s Republic China, which is based on the Marxism social liberation theory and includes many meanings, such as independence, liberation and equality. This word was started from Yan’an period^① and very popular during Cultural Revolution. Since 1980s, the most frequent words mentioned when people talk about “half the sky” are “four-self”: self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement.

“Half the sky” is the mainstream discourse, whose carrier is the largest women group in the world—All-China Women’s Federation. There are 32 provinces, more than 2,000 countries, and around 40,000 towns in Mainland China. All of these official governments have Women’s Federation. Every village has the director of women, so it means that there are 69,000 official directors of women in China. In other words, this kind of female discourse has the most carriers all around the world. During last half century, this mainstream female discourse got unprecedented supports from males. And female image got an amazing change from the old-fashioned lady who was always insulted and injured to new Chinese woman who is full of indomitable spirit. Nowadays, this kind of discourse is still the most classic and progressive way in our media.

“Half the sky” discourse changed the traditional Chinese gender stereotypes (men go out and women stay in house), and firstly release female from private space to public space in large-scale. It has the same target with the western classic feminist discourse. Both of them are trying to change women’s living condition and prove the harmonious relationship between male and female. In the last half century, “half the sky” discourse has changed Chinese women’s living conditions a lot, from social class to inner life. However, on the other hand, this kind of mainstream discourse could not totally become women’s voice. In some level, “women liberation” (women is the subject struggling for liberation) became “women liberated” (women is the object who is liberated by men). The meaning of “man and woman are same” became that “woman is same as MAN” (man is still the centre). Someone is kidding: the meaning of “half the sky” is not that “man has half the sky while woman has the other”, but that “man has the whole sky while woman has the half.” “Half the sky” discourse usually goes with mainstream male discourse together, thus, in some level, it is relatively arbitrary. For example, the “four-self” (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement) is gradually becoming a kind of *entrusted authority*, by which all women should be abided. At this point, “half the sky” discourse is opposite with its original purpose that question and resist the “male hegemony” discourse, and falling into the trap of essentialism.

The Chinese Museum Of Women and Children^② is the only national women museum in

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① Yan’an period is referring to the 13 years which the Central Committee of Communist Party of China spent in northern Shaanxi. The exact date is from October 1935 to March 1948.

② Official web: <http://ccwm.china.com.cn/>.

China. It was built and is organized directly by All-China Women's Federation. This museum was opened on Jan 10th, 2010, having about 35000 square meters onstruction area and over 6000 square meters exhibition area. Exhibition includes ancient, modern, contemporary and international branch. The ancient branch shows women's living condition, histroy and destiny during over 5,000 years. The modern branch, from Opium War to the building of P.R. China, shows women's effort, contribution, sacrifice and achievement. And the contemporary branch shows the changes of women's social class and living condition during last half centry.

It's not hard to see that the orientation of this museum is mainstream dicourse. The Chinese Museum Of Women and Children has its popourse of collecting, exhibiting and studying cultural relic about women and children, trying to show historical events such as national war and revolution. The target of this museum is to build a monument for praising Chinese women's great historical achievements, a milepost for the great development of women and children in the construciton of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and education base for carrying forward the excellent woman culture.

The Chinese Museum Of Women and Children is a national women museum in China, tyically reflecting the idology. It is built by nation, organized by government, and managed by speicalized agency. It is the fruit of comprehensive actions administrated among Chinese economy, politics and culture. The collections, construcitons and funds are support by national governemnt, thus this kind of museum always have advanced facilities and standardized management system.

Besides the Chinese Museum Of Women and Children, many personal memorial museum and thematic museum, such as Liu Hulan Memorial Museum, Song Qingling Memorial Museum (there are five Song Qingling Memorial Museum around China), Mizhi Poyi Museum and Femal Red Army Museum, also belong to this kind of dicourse.

2, "Feminist"

The second voice could be called "feminist" discourse. It is originated from the Western feminist which is based on "human's natural right". To be exactlly, it is the fruit of *second wave* of Western feminist. Because the first wave of Western feminist was focusing on women's political right, it is comixed with national liberation when it first came into China at the beginning of 20th centry, and then comixed with the "half the sky" discourse. The second wave of Western feminist (Neo-Western feminist) was stated at 1960s, used post-modernism theories to deconstruct the patricarchal system. The central concept is *gender*, which focus on the edge of the crowd including women, and understand gender/ sex as a kind of political discourse.

It was the middle of 1980s for China to comprehensively introduce Neo-Western feminist theories, that was seen as the continuation and update of women's voice which was started with "Five-Four" democratic movement and interrupted for ten years. The 4th Women's Conference which was hold in Beijing in 1955, accelerated the spread of Feminist. Nowadays,

there are over 100 universities which have institutes named by “gender study”, “feminist study” or “women study”. “Feminism” even becomes a course set in university, and gets master/ doctor study. It is worth noting that most of these institutes are “three-none” organization (having no office, no staff and no pay), except Lady Beatrice's, courses about feminism in normal universities are just selective courses. We can see the enthusiasm among intellectuals and the edge condition of feminist study. From 1980s, especially after the middle of 1980s, feminism has become more and more important in literatures and arts. There are many subversive works in novels, movies and paintings. However, except literatures and arts, there is little feminism in popular culture.

Women Culture Museum of Shaanxi Normal University^① is the first comprehensive museum in China. It was built at June 2002, having 1000 square meters exhibition area and 2,000 cultural relics, including five thematic branches named “Her story”, “Jiangyong women's characters”, “Fertility culture”, “Needleworks”, and “Chinese Bottom Drawer”.

Women Culture Museum of Shaanxi Normal University is orientated to show the non-mainstream feminist voice, by digging, exhibiting, studying women culture, expressing women's individual feeling and experience, recording common women's meaning and worth. The key point of our museum is not historical female group but individual. This museum is free for ticket as a public welfare organization. It is supported by the special funds of Shaanxi Normal University. There are just a few of staff, some work-study students and volunteers for daily administration and management. The functions of this museum include teaching, studying and social service. It is supposed to be a living book for gender education.

Art galleries also belong to this kind of museum. However, galleries are always small in scale, low-tone in location, thus the influence is limited.

Collection of Women Studies is edited by the institute of Women Studies of All-China Women's Federation. It is also the most influential public journal in China. The double identity and the change of the mainkey of this journal may clearly explain the difference and connection between “half the sky” discourse and “feminist” discourse. On the one hand, as a journal charged by All-China Women's Federation, it must be a part of “half the sky” discourse; on the other hand, since edited by the institute of Chinese Women Studies, it indeed is the academic frontier of Chinese feminist study. At the very beginning, this journal was very ideological. “The Theory of Marxist Women Revolution” once was the most important part. Nowadays, *Collection of Women Studies* is improved and updated a lot, no matter on academic perspective, objectivity, and openness. It is not only popular with intellectuals in universities and institutes, but also some women cadre school. And its function will be more and more obvious in the future.

The biggest difference between “half the sky” discourse and “feminist” discourse is that “feminist” discourse make women themselves as the subject, and make women liberation as

① Official web: <http://wcm.snnu.edu.cn/>.

the purpose of actions (not as a part of social liberation any more). Besides, scholars always try to focus on different disciplines by feminism, and keep distance from mainstream ideology.

The complexity of feminist discourse is that, because its central theories are based on western post-modern philosophy, it is so hard to understand by common women that there are many misunderstandings. Even many female intellectuals avoid the topic of feminism, and some scholars, who even study on gender, regard feminism which has many different backgrounds and branches as “Western radical feminism”. It needs more efforts to correct these misunderstandings. But it also shows the distance and insulation between female scholars and common women, which could form another centre/ edge opposite, besides male/ female opposite. Moreover, this discourse has very strong color of western culture, so it is easy to form another misunderstanding, by ignoring localization. It could be Chinese/ the West opposite.

It needs more explanation that there is a tendency of the mix of “half the sky” discourse and “feminist” discourse. Reasons could be concluded as follows. (1), At the very beginning of Chinese women studies, the main participants were comprised by women in cadre school and universities. It is a kind of tradition of Chinese women studies. (2), With the development of Chinese reform-and-open, the staff of women federation is changed from countrywomen to female intellectuals. They are familiar with western feminism and could use it in their work. (3), More and more national or overseas foundation support women studies. It changed the ways and styles of women studies. More and more female scholars focus on fieldwork and pay their attentions on conversations with western theories. (4), Since the World Women Conference in 1995, Chinese government has gotten more open and positive attitudes on women studies, and supported the women development which is led by the United Nations. Moreover, on the one hand, the actions of U.N., could connect with “half the sky” discourse at the part of women development and gender studies; on the other hand, the centre of world women movement is human right, which is essentially familiar with Chinese “Feminism”. Thus, the 95’ World Women Conference promoted the connection of that two discourses.

3. “Modern lady”

The third discourse could be named as “modern lady” for the moment. Its carriers are market economy. Since 1980s, it appears a lot of female white-collars. They are well educated and well paid. On the one hand, they realize the “four-self” of “half the sky” discourse, on the other hand, they lost the traditional protect for women, and had to work hard and cruelly. The whole society, including female white-collars, re-estimates women in “half the sky” discourse as old-fashioned, rough, masculine and womenless women; while they also avoid western feminist discourse, because they think women in this discourse are radical, stubborn, and even crazy. Female white-collars self-estimate themselves by patriarchal culture, and think women should be beautiful, elegant, graceful, and sweet.

There is no government support behind “modern lady” discourse, so it is not legitimate;

and there is no education or research funds support either, so its carriers are not elite but commercial culture. For example, there are so many beautiful showgirls, TV presenters, sales and their gossips in mass media. These female images are always beautiful, pretty, smart, and elegant. In literature and arts, all the topics about these ladies, are connected with “private”, “body” and “desire”.

We can easily give lots of example about “modern lady” by the names of magazine, such as job market—*Women Work Happily*, *Women Born for Earning Money*, *More shopping More Money*, *Happiness is not Nature but Plan*, training temperament—*Taste Means Everything*, *Women should be Beautiful*, *How to Become a Fashion Lady*, *1% Difference 100% Attract*, choosing mate—*Break Man’s Code*, *Marry Right Man Choose Right Life*, *Love Machiavellism*, *100 Details to Recognize Good Man*, and defending marriage—*Flatter Your Husband*, *Women’s Truth and Lie*, *Calculated Women Live Happily*.

“Modern lady” always uses “half the sky” tactfully. Women’s topics and columns in newspapers, broadcasts, and TV shows claims that they are encourage women’s subjectivity and independence. They often advocate new fashion dress and hairstyle; even sales promote cosmetic and Breast augmentation surgery in the topic of new modern women.

Sometimes, the boundary of “modern lady” discourse and “feminist” discourse becomes vague. That is because “individual” and “private” are also used a lot by western feminism as “edge” and “non-mainstream” to resist “centre” and “mainstream”. In many works, authors think they are writing for feminism. The misunderstanding is coming from different situations. In the west, theories of capital market and feminism are mature. Feminism and modern lady are different ideology, belonging to different groups. For example, Hélène Cixous said, “You cannot restrain your writing desire, just like that we always masturbate sneakily.” In the western context, no one will doubt its seriousness. But in Chinese context, it needs more explanations for political reading, because in China, on the one hand, as business selling points, female discourse cannot be serious literature without any explanation; on the other hand, most Chinese cannot be conditioned to understand “private”, “body” and “desire” as feminist or academic concepts. They are more easily to believe that “body” and “desire” are connected with sexual liberation or promiscuity, while “private” is suiting for peeping.

“Modern lady” is different from inflexible “half the sky” and determined “feminist” discourse. It is multiple and flexible in this post-modern world. It teaches women to be independent in workplace, subordinate in marriage, in other words, be wise and strong in life, be foolish and weak behind men.

No matter what forms and expressions, “modern lady” is a kind of discourse cultured by market, a part of patriarchal system. That is because: (1), the development of “modern lady” is growing with the development of “market” which is also the mainstream ideology today. At this sense, it is opposed with feminist discourse which is always be edge and non-mainstream. (2), Ladies, who is struggling in market, make their beauty as a kind of commodity. When ladies are enjoying their modern jobs and leading the fashion styles, they also become the objects and

OTHERS which are enjoyed, tasted, and estimated by MAN.

Certainly, “Modern lady” could not be the subject of museum directly, but it indeed gets an indirect and roundabout way. Since 2000s, tourism is growing rapidly among all around China, no matter city or country. Many historical sites are rebuilt, or even recast. It is worth noting that many famous ancient women are revived during these recasting. The hometowns of Wang Zhaojun, Xishi, Yang Yuhuan, Yuji, Meng Jiangnu and Wang Baochuan are rebuilt. Taking the hometown of Xishi as an example, there is a set of buildings *in the style of ancient*, covering 6521 square meters, as a museum of famous ancient women. It chose over 100 ancient women to show women’s virtue, such as truth, beauty and good. However, the Four Beauties in Chinese history are the main part of this museum. This kind of show advocates the value of “beauty” which is determined by patriarchal culture, abandoned by “half the sky” discourse and “feminist” discourse, and revived by market ideology.

Nevertheless, each of these three discourses has its double faces. And at the same time, there are very complicated relationships among them. “Half the sky”, as an official discourse supported by government, may need no hard efforts like western feminism. And its legitimacy could restrict the negative part of commercial female discourse, but it is also easy to be old-fashioned and conservative. “Feminist” discourse strongly resists the patriarchal culture. However, if Chinese women use feminism without localization, it may become bookish. If it ignored to have a dialogue with “half the sky” discourse and always opposite with mainstream ideology, it may be go in a dead angle. “Modern lady” discourse has its positive meaning of deconstructing the hegemony of mainstream, but it is essentially subordinate to patriarchal system. In some level, it is a kind of backwards.

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