The Stigmatization of Feminism in China

Jia He*

Shanghai Thomas School, Shanghai, China

*liujiakun@thomasschools.org

Abstract. This essay delves into the intricate issue of the stigmatization of feminism in China, with a particular emphasis on the historical influence of Confucianism and the evolving political ideology. While dominant explanations are mainly about the development of social media, this study shows a strong correlation between the cultural and political factors and the feminism stigma. The results of this study indicate that the traditional framework often views feminism as a challenge to established social hierarchies and the status quo. Furthermore, the consequences of this stigma extend beyond individual rights, affecting the overall social fabric of the nation. By analyzing how these two factors have contributed to the stigma based on social stigma theory as well as indicating the impact on Chinese society, further studies can focus on the possible solutions and directions to improve this issue.

Keywords: Feminism; China; Stigmatization; Confucianism.

1. Introduction

The development of feminism in China can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when Chinese society was undergoing great changes. In the late Qing Dynasty, China was entrenched in "feudal" customs, and women held a deeply disadvantaged position in society. The New Culture Movement marked a pivotal moment when certain scholars and reformers started advocating for the principles of equal rights and women's education, establishing the groundwork for the feminist movement. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the administration advocated for gender equality as an integral component of its communist ideology. For instance, the 1950 Marriage Law extended equal rights to women in matters of marriage, divorce, and property ownership, while also actively encouraging women's involvement in both the workforce and political activities. However, the effective execution of these policies often varied, leading to persistent gender inequalities in practice. During the Reform and Opening up period, there was increased exposure to international ideas that facilitated discussions on gender equality. Nevertheless, the government offered limited support to the feminist movement. The popularization of feminism accelerated in the twenty-first century as the rapid development of the internet provided digital platforms for feminist discussions. In recent years, feminism has become a word with a negative meaning in the Chinese context. "Feminism" is usually translated as "female power" instead of "female rights". At the same time, some voices from radical feminists appeared on various platforms, saying that feminism means that females should have power over males. This has led to great misconceptions and some stigmatized words related to feminism, including "Chinese rural feminism" and "female fists".

Previous studies about the stigmatization of feminism have investigated how feminism was stigmatized on social media and its impact on the female community in China [1,2]. Ample evidence exists to support that Confucianism and nationalism impede the development of feminism [3-5]. Whilst a considerable body of research has been carried out on the influence of media on feminism stigma, much less is known about the historical, cultural, and political factors. This study aims to find out the causes of the stigmatization based on the theory of stigma, showing how feminism experiences the process of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. This essay will state that the stigmatization of feminism in China is a complex phenomenon that intricately connects with the nation's historical culture of Confucianism as well as political and ideological context. Moreover, this study will indicate the negative impact on the whole Chinese society and give some possible solutions to the problems.

2. The Causes of Stigmatization of Feminism

2.1. The Theory of Stigmatization

The theory of stigmatization, also known as social stigma theory, originated in the field of sociology and was further expanded upon by researchers in various disciplines such as psychology and anthropology. The concept of stigmatization was proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman, who introduced the term "stigma" in 1963. It is the first time that the concept of stigma has been sociologically studied. Goffman's definition of stigma refers to a characteristic that causes others to view an individual negatively and treat them with discrimination [6]. Over time, other definitions of stigma came up as certain traits, characteristics, or conditions, such as physical disabilities, mental illnesses, or membership in marginalized groups, are often stigmatized because they deviate from society's norms. Later, an influential definition was created by Jones et al, which was built upon the observation of Goffman about stigma being a connection between “attribute and stereotype”. They define stigma as a “mark” (attribute) that associates an individual with undesirable traits (stereotypes) [7]. In 2001, Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan proposed that the process of stigmatization includes labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination [8]. The theory emphasizes that societal stereotypes are integral to the process of stigmatization.

2.2. Traditional Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes in Confucianism

Traditional gender roles are deeply rooted in Chinese society. China possesses a rich historical legacy of Confucianism, an influential philosophical system that underscores the importance of hierarchical associations and prescribed gender expectations. Within this context, customary beliefs accord primacy to male dominance and female compliance, thereby perpetuating the idea that women ought to prioritize domestic duties over the pursuit of societal conventions. The fundamental beliefs of Confucianism regarding gender, such as the ideals of being a “virtuous wife” and a “good mother”, as well as valuing males over females, were used to evaluate a woman’s behavior and goals, as well as her status relative to men [3]. The societal expectation for women was to be completely submissive to men, with their most valued trait being selflessness, as they were expected to put the needs of men above their own [9]. This perception leads to the marginalization and unequal treatment of women in the social, economic, and political fields. Feminism challenges this traditional concept, emphasizing that women should have the right to pursue their dreams and goals, appealing to the idea that marriage and family are personal choices rather than inevitable life goals. However, this concept is regarded as a departure from family values under the traditional concept, so feminists are labeled as “not filial”, “not virtuous”, “not family-oriented” and other stigmas.

The yin-yang binary is one of the most crucial concepts in Confucian gender roles. Etymologically, “yin” has the meaning of the shady side of the mountain, and “yang” means the sunny side [10]. In Confucianism, yin-yang correlative cosmology refers to the idea that the universe is composed of complementary forces, known as yin and yang, which interact and maintain harmony. The combination of Confucianism and Taoist cosmology by Dong Zhongshu during the Han dynasty resulted in the division of genders, where men were associated with yang (active, powerful, accentuated), while women were connected with yin (passive, weak, diminished). At that time, the yin-yang binary became a gender-based concept. In Han cosmology, the yin-yang binary was correlated with a hierarchical scheme where “heaven/yang/man” is superior, while “earth/yin/woman” is inferior [11]. Feminism questions traditional ideas about gender roles and promotes the removal of stereotypes and discrimination based on gender. However, these ideas are typically seen as being associated with masculinity or not aligned with traditional femininity. Therefore, feminism was labeled as “unfeminine”.

Chinese society has been a feudal society for thousands of years, which emphasizes hierarchy and regime. The concept of harmony has played a central role in shaping social conduct in the Chinese world order's philosophy. In Confucian ideology, individuals have a moral responsibility to prioritize social institutions like the family and the state [3]. Feminism challenges this hierarchy and order,

emphasizing the equality and rights of individuals. However, this concept is regarded as "undermining social stability" and "radical" under the traditional concept, and feminists are therefore stigmatized.

2.3. Political Factors and Ideology

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the ideology altered from feudal-patriarchal to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist. Although Mao's policies focused on women's emancipation, the gender discourse was still under a patriarchal system and the traditional views of gender roles were not eradicated. Women were encouraged to make a positive impact on society by focusing on their husbands' well-being and fostering a harmonious household [12]. During Deng Xiaoping's era, the slogan "Maintaining stability is of top priority" became the prevailing ideology, a sentiment that has persisted to this day. Therefore, anything that has the potential to incite "social unrest" or pose a challenge to the government's credibility is meticulously controlled [13]. In this context, feminist activities are regarded as politically sensitive topics, which causes public misunderstanding and prejudice against feminism.

In the past, Chinese society attributed considerable importance to the reproductive role of women, primarily influenced by the cultural preference for male descendants and the notable significance assigned to the preservation of familial ancestry. The implementation of the family planning policies in China intensified these gendered expectations, compelling women to bear offspring as a means of safeguarding the future of their respective families. Women who were single and over the age of thirty were seen as societal burdens or anomalous in terms of their sexuality [14]. Within Chinese communities, there exists a societal expectation for individuals to enter into marriage with a partner of the opposite sex and accomplish their duty of giving birth to children [15]. However, due to the collectivist nature of Chinese culture, deviating from these expectations can result in feminists being subject to prejudice.

The resistance to feminism originates from a misconception of feminism, which some perceive as a form of "feminist Orientalism" from the West [5]. The Chinese government has always attached great importance to patriotic education and nationalism. Strong nationalistic sentiments can foster a sense of "others." With the great cultural difference between China and the West, when people possess a strong attachment to their own culture or nation, they might view outsiders as a threat to their identity, leading to xenophobic attitudes towards feminism. Moreover, there is a prevalent portrayal of "positive feminists," frequently associated with white, middle-class feminists in Western settings [16]. Therefore, many people believe that feminism is a "Western value" that does not fit China's national conditions and cultural traditions, thereby devaluing and stigmatizing it as "not patriotic" or even "foreign terrifying forces".

3. The Impact of the Stigmatization of Feminism on Chinese Society

3.1. Silencing of Women's Voices and Reinforcement of Gender Issues

The stigmatization of feminism in Chinese society has a significant impact, shaping people's attitudes, behaviors, and overall gender dynamics. The stigmatization of feminism causes the isolation and marginalization of feminists. Social isolation is the act of stigmatizing a connection, involving the widespread focus on the negative perception of a person or entity to generalize, label, and alienate, and further intensify to a deliberate act of isolation, rejection, and attacks [1]. The hostility towards feminists in China can lead to discrimination and bias, and ultimately tarnish the reputation and damage the social status of feminists. As a result, females will be discouraged from openly discussing their rights and concerns, instilling a fear of backlash or judgment, as they believe their social position is low. It can create social pressure for women to conform to societal expectations and dampen efforts to challenge gender-based discrimination.

However, the feminist movement typically champions principles of inclusion, egalitarianism, and diversity, all of which serve as catalysts for societal advancement. The stigmatization of feminism

has the potential to impede the propagation and integration of these constructive principles, thereby constituting a challenge to the forward momentum of society and the advancement of gender equality. When the promotion of women's rights is labeled excessively radical or unsuitable, it leads to a diminished societal focus on matters pertaining to gender equality, thereby impeding the formulation of policies and the realization of social changes.

3.2. Barriers to the Dissemination of Feminism

Stigmatization often leads to misconceptions about feminism, potentially causing individuals to possess a distorted perception of its objectives and principles. This perspective might lead them to equate feminism with the disparagement of males or extreme radicalism. As a consequence, this misrepresentation hinders the effective dissemination and comprehension of accurate information. The stigmatization of feminists as a subjective and illogical group contributes to the accelerated dissemination of stigmatized designations and preconceived notions, surpassing the fundamental essence of feminism. This phenomenon distorts and prejudices the tenets of feminism, thereby making the process of individuals adopting genuine feminist perspectives more difficult [2].

Given the government's increased control over civil society groups and on-the-ground activism, social media has emerged as a crucial digital space for expressing and promoting women's empowerment [17]. However, the stigmatization of feminism also leads to censorship or suppression of feminist content on various platforms. The government controls and filters information on the Internet through strict online censorship and restrictions, thus impeding the dissemination and discussion of feminist ideas in society. The online police forces have greatly influenced the way Chinese internet users share personal viewpoints. This has resulted in a tendency for individuals to practice self-censorship in their daily use of digital communication tools [17]. Media outlets, social media platforms, and even educational institutions might avoid discussing or promoting feminist ideas to avoid controversies.

4. Possible Solutions

Eliminating the stigmatization of feminism in China is essential for advancing human rights as well as creating a more just, inclusive, and successful society overall. There are some possible ways to improve the status quo. First, the concept of feminism and its principles should be included in formal education in China during the nine-year compulsory education period. This can help the younger generation realize and focus more on gender equality, thereby dispelling the notion of feminism as inherently “radical” and changing misconceptions and derogatory feminism stereotypes.

Furthermore, the media should use a positive and fair reporting approach when promoting feminism in order to demonstrate its benefits. Media communication can influence society's perception of gender roles and equality, which can eliminate some biases and misconceptions about feminists. A favorable portrayal of feminists can be boosted in the media by highlighting their diversity and accomplishments. By influencing public opinion, the media can serve as a forum for promoting the social acceptance of feminist ideas. It can promote debate and introspection and inspire society to react favorably to feminist problems. As a result, females might no longer hesitate or feel ashamed to identify themselves as feminists, and males will also realize that feminism is not equated to gender antagonism.

5. Summary

In summary, the societal stigmatization of feminism within the context of China is a multifaceted matter deeply entrenched in historical cultural mores and political doctrines. The enduring influence of Confucianism, characterized by its conventional gender roles and societal expectations, has significantly hindered the widespread acceptance of feminist principles within Chinese society. Furthermore, the political environment in China has played a role in perpetuating the negative

connotations associated with feminism. Although early communist ideologies espoused gender equality, the government's official discourse has gradually shifted over time to depict feminism as a disruptive element.

The adverse impact of the stigma associated with feminism in Chinese society is profound. This stigma acts as a significant impediment to advancing gender equality, perpetuates discriminatory practices, and suppresses the voices of advocates for women's rights. To effectively address the stigmatization of feminism, it is imperative to carefully consider the interplay of cultural and political variables, along with the broader implications for society as a whole. Such considerations are vital for the purpose of reshaping cultural attitudes and fostering productive engagement within the political landscape. Ultimately, the acceptance of feminism in China transcends the realm of women's rights, representing a pivotal stride toward establishing a more equitable and inclusive society.

References

[1] Shi Qishan. An overview of the effects of feminist stigmatization on Chinese online platforms: From the media and women's perspectives. Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023, 8: 779-785

[2] Wei Zi. Discourse Research on Feminist We-Media. MA diss., Guangxi Normal University.

[3] Leung Alicia S.M. Feminism in Transition: Chinese Culture, Ideology and the Development of the Women's Movement in China. Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 2003, 20(3): 359-374.

[4] Rosenlee Li-Hsiang L. Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation. SUNY Series in Chinese philosophy and culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

[5] Liu Zhaohui and Robin Dahling. The Quieter Side of Chinese Feminism: The Feminist Phenomenology of Li Yu's Films. Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 2016, 22(1): 2-15.

[6] Edward E. Jones, Amerigo Farina, Albert H. Hastorf, et al. Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships. New York: Freeman, 1984.

[7] Goffman, Erving. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.

[8] Jo C. Phelan and Bruce G. Link. Annual Review of Sociology. Palo Alto, 2001, 27(1): 363-385.

[9] Morgan Diane. The best guide to eastern philosophy and religion. New York: Renaissance Books, 2001.

[10] Rubin Vitaly A. The concepts of wu-hsing and ying-yang. Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 1982, 9: 131-157.

[11] Rosenlee Li-Hsiang L. Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation. SUNY Series in Chinese philosophy and culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

[12] Davin Delia. Women, Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.

[13] Zeng Jing. # MeToo as Connective Action: A Study of the Anti-Sexual Violence and Anti-Sexual Harassment Campaign on Chinese Social Media in 2018. Journalism Practice, 2020, 14 (2): 171-190.

[14] Yang Mayfair Mei-hui. Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

[15] Monica Das Gupta, Jiang Zhenghua, Xie Zhenming, Li Bohua, et al. Why is son preference so persistent in east and South Asia? A cross-country study of China, India and the Republic of Korea. The Journal of Development Studies, 2003, 40(2): 153-187.

[16] Akane Kanai. Between the perfect and the problematic: everyday femininities, popular feminism, and the negotiation of intersectionality. Cultural Studies, 2020, 34(1): 25-48.

[17] Peng Altman Yuzhu. A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere. Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot Cham, 2020.