

Challenges Of Extreme Feminism: Impacts on The Feminist Movement in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract. In modern society, both legal systems and various theories are oriented toward freedom and equality. Throughout history, however, women have often faced discrimination and unequal treatment due to inherent gender differences or the identity of being female. For a period, the status of women in society and family was, to some extent, subordinate to that of men. In the development of Chinese society, the women's movement is a clear indicator of social progress. However, in recent years, the development of the feminist movement in China has fallen into a dilemma. Particularly, the phenomenon of garden-style feminism, an extreme form of feminism that has emerged in the Chinese social context, has greatly affected the implementation and development of the feminist movement in China. With the development of Chinese society, population growth, and the influence of the internet, the ideas of extreme feminism have gained broader dissemination, distorting women's understanding of feminism and leading to a gradual loss of social support for the feminist movement. This has exacerbated existing gender issues within Chinese society, casting a shadow over the feminist movement in China.

Keywords: Extreme feminism, China, feminism, patriarchy.

1. Introduction

As society has progressed and human thought has been liberated, the call for gender equality has grown louder. This gave rise to the feminist movement, which aims to elevate the social status of women, both politically and literarily. The emergence of the feminist movement has significantly advanced the elimination of stereotypes against women and has provided women with equal educational and job opportunities. However, in recent years, controversies surrounding the feminist movement have never ceased. Is the feminist movement seeking rights or power for women. Equality or privilege. Has feminism become a form of gender terror. Such discussions have emerged throughout society. The essence of feminism diverges greatly from what is being discussed. When there is such a significant discrepancy between the essence of feminism and the issues being debated, it can be said that the feminist movement in contemporary Chinese society has lost a clear definition of itself and may even be in a state of stagnation. This paper aims to explore how the existence of extreme feminism in contemporary Chinese society has affected the advancement of feminist work domestically.

2. Extreme Feminism in Chinese Society

When discussing extreme feminism, the first question to address is how to define it. It is essential to introduce the concept of true feminism versus false feminism. True feminism generally advocates for equal employment, shared responsibilities, mutual obligations, and shared rights [1]. True feminism emphasizes individual capability and the pursuit of the same rights as men, demonstrating through personal effort that women's abilities are not inferior to those of men, and in some areas, women may even excel. In conjunction with neoliberalism, by the late 1970s, second-wave feminists began to focus more on differences, particularly the disparities between genders, and emphasized expressing the complexity and diversity of women, stressing the evaluation of women's abilities and development on an individual basis. These ideas align with neoliberal thought and have permeated social life alongside global political and economic changes [2]. True feminism does not overlook the

male demographic; rather, it highlights the discrimination women face in the workplace, the lack of societal recognition for the value created by housewives, and also addresses the disadvantages men face in relationships, such as being bound by consumerist pressures.

In contrast, false feminism is characterized by a core principle of equal rights without equal responsibilities. This notion is manifest in the context of Chinese society as garden-style feminism. If we view the rise and development of the feminist movement in the West from the 17th to the 19th century as a form of humanistic and ethical progress—opposing gender oppression, breaking traditional male-centric norms, and advocating for gender equality, then a specific segment of the female population in 21st-century China has taken feminism to an extreme, surpassing the struggle for gender equality and positioning themselves above men [3]. From the perspective of garden-style feminism, men are required to bear significant obligations, such as working outside, providing substantial dowries, and owning cars and houses. Additionally, garden-style feminism imposes extra demands on men, such as purchasing gifts for women, including luxury items, and granting women naming rights for their offspring while exempting themselves from working outside or covering living expenses.

Garden-style feminism deviates from the responsibilities expected of women, such as maintaining the household, caring for children, engaging in productive labor, and serving in the military. Compared to true feminism, garden-style feminism resembles a demand for excessive rights, akin to a pursuit of privilege as an extreme ideology. It promotes a form of animosity and superiority toward the opposite gender, creating an artificial binary opposition. This is often reflected in the man-hating and misandrist tendencies of garden-style feminists, viewing their existence in a hierarchical relationship with men, where men serve women. Extreme feminism narrowly perceives that women gain rights through the oppression of men, elevating their social status above men while opposing all male rights. In contrast to feminism, their understanding of complex gender issues neglects the inclusiveness and diversity that feminism should embody. Garden-style feminists not only harbor animosity toward men but also disdain women who marry men or those who adopt a more moderate approach to feminism, labeling such individuals as toys of men or tagging them as male-pleasers.

Moreover, in garden-style feminism, women are perceived as commodities, with men maintaining these relationships through gifts, dowries, and financial provisions, akin to men "buying" women. Additionally, garden-style feminism often creates conflicts surrounding reproductive rights, as they seek complete control over such rights. Discussions about garden-style feminism on platforms like Zhihu often depict reproduction as a tool for women to coerce, extort, or tame men. In the dynamics between men and women, the issue of reproduction cannot be overlooked. Garden-style feminists oppose the objectification of women, yet they still engage in social activities from an extreme feminist perspective by objectifying themselves, using reproduction as a means to extract contributions from men. Under this mindset, reproduction becomes a medium of exchange, with extreme feminism leveraging women's biological attributes to gain capital positioned against men, thereby achieving the social goal of subjugating men.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, garden-style feminism also deviates from certain responsibilities as outlined in Confucianism. In Confucian thought, women are guided by the Three Obedience and Four Virtues, which are obedience to the father, obedience to the husband, obedience to the son the Three Obedience and chastity, cleanliness, diligence, and respectfulness he Four Virtues. Obedience to the father means women must follow their father's arrangements and teachings within the family; "obedience to the husband" indicates that after marriage, women should heed their husbands' opinions and directives; "obedience to the son" signifies that after the husband's death, women should comply with their sons' arrangements and care.

In contrast to garden-style feminism, the obligations of maintaining the household and educating children are traditionally expected of women. Although the influence of feudal society has led to group oppression of women, such as foot-binding and being dominated by men in households, the essential concept of mutual harmony between genders cannot be overlooked. In Confucianism, women and men, as yin and yang, are equally important, resembling the two poles of a battery.

However, Confucian thought generally considers that men have greater social responsibilities while women bear more familial responsibilities. Concepts like the husband is the guide for the wife do not imply that husbands dominate their wives but rather that husbands should serve as role models for their wives [4]. Yet, garden-style feminism rejects this harmony, creating the gender antagonism mentioned above, thereby positioning itself against "the harmony of yin and yang." Furthermore, it abandons women's familial responsibilities while expecting men to shoulder heavier social and familial obligations.

Thus, from both modern and traditional cultural perspectives, garden-style feminism, as an extreme form of feminism in China, can be summarized by two characteristics: first, it supports gender opposition, establishing barriers between men and women as well as among women themselves; second, it refuses to acknowledge its obligations in society and the family while simultaneously enjoying equal or greater rights compared to men, adhering to a double standard.

3. Extreme Feminism Alters the Concept of Feminism

The rise and spread of extreme feminism, particularly garden-style feminism, in Chinese society has had a profound impact on the concept of feminism. As discussed earlier, extreme feminism deviates from the core tenets of feminism, promoting gender opposition and a notion of equality without responsibility. The extreme expressions and combative rhetoric of extreme feminism can skew public perceptions of feminism. Feminism is fundamentally a political tool for changing one's oppressed status, and it cannot be separated from social movements, which are inherently rooted in the masses. Currently, the fastest way for the general populace to access information, news, and knowledge is through the internet. As of June 2024, the number of internet users in China has reached nearly 1.1 billion 1.09967 billion, an increase of 7.42 million since December 2023, with an internet penetration rate of 78.0% [5]. This indicates a substantial online population in Chinese society, which continues to grow. The high penetration rate of the internet leads to greater information exposure, meaning that the same information will be viewed more frequently. This increases the likelihood of extreme feminist rhetoric and social activities being exposed and disseminated.

Moreover, the presence of big data systems exacerbates this issue. Social networks like Sina Weibo and WeChat generate vast amounts of text, images, and audiovisual data centered around users. Processing this data in bulk allows for social network analysis, revealing hidden relationships among individuals or existing communities, recommending friends or related topics, and enhancing user experience [6]. A crucial aspect of this process is the recommendation of friends or related topics to enhance user experience. On the internet, obtaining information is akin to reading comprehension, and big data tends to push related topics to readers. While this is intended to improve user experience, it poses a problem when dealing with content related to extreme feminism. Big data may direct such information to users who have previously engaged with similar content, thereby increasing their exposure to extreme feminist ideas. For readers who are unfamiliar with feminism, prolonged immersion in similar content can distort their understanding of feminism itself. As a result, if the majority of what they encounter revolves around extreme feminism, they may conflate feminism with extreme feminism in their minds. Furthermore, the big data recommendation mechanism continually pushes content related to extreme feminism to readers, creating an information bubble that reduces their chances of encountering non-extreme feminist information and knowledge, further solidifying their misconceptions about feminism.

However, solely interpreting the alteration of feminism's concept through big data recommendations is insufficient. We also need to introduce a new concept: "assimilation effect." The assimilation effect refers to individuals' tendency to gravitate toward information and extreme content. This effect can lead disparate groups to converge on a consensus. However, forming a consensus is often a challenging process, especially regarding social issues with a broad audience, making consensus almost impossible [7]. Feminism itself is a social issue with a wide audience, and the presence of the assimilation effect directly expands individuals' misconceptions about feminism to

the public sphere. With the increase in internet users, the number of people holding erroneous views about feminism is likely to rise steadily.

Ultimately, many individuals who should oppose extreme feminism find themselves opposing feminism, with some men even developing anti-feminist sentiments. The public equates equality without responsibility and the creation of gender opposition seen in garden-style feminism with the core of feminism, thereby overlooking the significant differences and even antagonistic relationships between the two. The direct result of this conceptual conflation is the rise of online misogyny within the Chinese internet. We can observe numerous memes that mock women on video platforms, such as those found on Bilibili, or derogatory terms like women's restroom being used on Weibo. It can be argued that the alteration of feminism's concept by extreme feminism is not solely a self-perpetuating process; rather, it is driven by cognitive biases among individuals and the information gap created by advanced networks and big data recommendations, pushing the public to conflate feminism with extreme feminism.

4. Chinese Feminism in a Predicament

Why does extreme feminism lead to difficulties for feminism in China? First, as the number of people equating extreme feminism with feminism rises, promoting the feminist movement becomes challenging. Feminism is a social movement that requires a mass base to implement its principles and demands. If a social movement is perceived by the public as unreasonable or even extreme, it will undoubtedly face opposition. This loss of grassroots support poses a significant threat to the advancement of feminism.

Moreover, from a demographic perspective, there are approximately 720.32 million men and 689.35 million women in China, resulting in a gender ratio of 104.49, with women as 100 [8]. China has an imbalanced gender ratio and a long-standing patriarchal history, creating inherent barriers for feminism. Chinese societal preferences lean toward patriarchy, and families often prefer sons. This preference stems from structural arrangements rooted in patriarchy, including patrilocal marriage customs, male inheritance of surnames and property, and a societal framework that favors boys. Such gender biases are deep-seated social issues intertwined with customs, resource allocation within families, and government policies [9].

Given this context, the patriarchal system in China is deeply entrenched, making it difficult to promote feminism, especially since feminism challenges the foundations of patriarchy. Furthermore, after China's reform and opening up, the populace began to engage with new ideas later than many other countries. Nonetheless, feminism has made strides in China, particularly since the late 1970s when people began to liberate their thoughts and focus more on individual value. Women's and gender theories have gradually detached from state-centric socialist women's movements, evolving toward independence, specialization, and academic rigor [2].

On March 7, 1990, Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the Communist Party, delivered an important speech titled "The Whole Party and Society Must Establish a Marxist View of Women" at the 80th anniversary of International Women's Day. He articulated the core principles of a Marxist view of women, emphasizing its dialectical and historical materialist analysis of women's social status, roles, rights, and paths to liberation [10]. These achievements in promoting gender equality in China are the result of joint efforts between the government and the people, enabling women to attain long-awaited liberation on various social issues.

However, the extreme behaviors of extreme feminists, characterized by "turning the tables" or "biting back," have shackled China's feminist movement and led to regression. If a Chinese man learns of the extreme behaviors associated with extreme feminism, it may reinforce his stereotypes about feminism. He might, due to cognitive biases, believe that women have already gained their rightful rights through various women's movements since the establishment of the People's Republic, overlooking ongoing issues faced by women in China. He might see the current feminist movement as a disjointed group of people who are not striving for meaningful change.

Additionally, the contradictions inherent in extreme feminism—pursuing absolute equality while demanding privileges for women—further complicate matters. On one hand, extreme feminists advocate for women to engage in activism to achieve equality; on the other, they exploit men, demanding material and emotional support. This infringes on men's rights to independent thought and consumption, leading to discontent among men and hindering women's legitimate pursuits for rights and respect [11]. In a country where men make up such a large proportion of the population, these issues exacerbate the divide between genders and intensify conflict.

More seriously, feminists must confront internal contradictions within their movement. Instead of focusing solely on societal discrimination and injustice against women, they now must also justify the legitimacy of their advocacy for gender equality, contending with the radical elements of extreme feminism. Those who adhere to extreme feminist views could have been part of the women's equality movement, providing a united front. Their lack of understanding of true feminism, however, has made them a divisive force. Now, feminists must confront this unyielding group, which diminishes solidarity and creates inefficiency in their operations.

Ultimately, under the triple pressures of extreme feminism, public opinion, and a conservative male demographic, feminism struggles to address its fundamental issues effectively. The conflation of feminism with extreme feminism leads to misconceptions that hinder progress in advocating for women's rights.

5. Negative Impact of Extreme Feminism

5.1. What Are the Essential Demands of Feminism

Before addressing the issue of the expansion of extreme feminism, we must first understand the essential demands of feminism. The core demand of feminism is to ensure that women obtain equal rights and social status as men. In this context, I believe that liberal feminism embodies the essence of feminist demands very well. Liberal feminism emphasizes that all individuals, regardless of gender, are born equal, and women should have equal rights in elections, education, and employment. These ideas have not only become slogans for women's liberation, but they have also driven the rapid development of the women's liberation movement. Moreover, liberal feminism, as the starting point of feminist thought, has become the subject of inheritance, criticism, and transformation by various feminist schools of thought [12]. Feminism is concerned not only with women's rights but also with promoting a societal re-examination of women's roles and gender expectations. It is evident that the essential demand of feminism is not to impose gender terror or double standards to oppress men; rather, it is to secure equal opportunities for women, aiming to promote societal change towards fairness and inclusivity. This is a legitimate social movement and a liberation of human thought.

5.2. How to Avoid the Negative Impact of Extreme Feminism on the Feminist Movement

To avoid the expansion of extreme feminism, I believe we need to start with internet regulation. In today's society, the internet has become the largest platform for the public to access diverse information and knowledge. However, as previously discussed, the push of big data has not been effectively managed. This lack of effective management leads to highly targeted and biased content delivery, which can harm society by deepening the assimilation effect and creating information cocoons. The most direct impact on feminism is that the correct concepts and claims of feminism cannot be maximally expressed, while reasonable demands become irrationalized. The push model of big data aids in the radical propagation of extreme feminism, leading to widespread misunderstandings of feminism among the public and further deepening biases against it. The internet is a double-edged sword; the key lies in how we correctly utilize this powerful platform. The internet age presents both opportunities and severe challenges for the feminist movement. It is essential to ensure that women's consciousness-raising occurs within a sound environment and mechanism, providing women with equal opportunities to participate in economic activities, which forms the foundational social basis for promoting feminism [13].

Thus, a crucial focus of feminism in the internet age should be to construct a rational and healthy modern female ideology. On the internet, we need to take control of content related to women's consciousness-raising, optimizing the preference issues of big data pushes. Content containing extreme views or misleading narratives should be flagged and eliminated, effectively eradicating the dissemination of rural feminism and extreme feminism from the roots. Additionally, it is essential to promote high-quality content in the realm of gender equality, giving readers who are unfamiliar with the core of the feminist movement greater access to such material. This will help disseminate healthy and positive ideas to the public, allowing them to understand the necessity and rationality of feminism. By fostering a larger grassroots base for feminism, we can promote its development across Chinese society, enabling people to recognize and address unresolved issues related to gender equality. This, in turn, will contribute to social progress and development.

6. Summary

In today's societal development, the issue of gender equality is one that cannot be overlooked. In this article, we explored the definitions of feminism and extreme feminism from the perspective of Chinese society, clearly distinguishing between the two. Extreme feminism is manifested in China through the notion of "equal rights without equal responsibility," which adheres to double standards and stands in opposition to feminism, particularly in the form of rural feminism. We identified the illegitimacy of rural feminism. In the third section, we emphasized that the greatest enemy facing the Chinese feminist movement is the subtle infiltration of extreme feminist concepts into the public's understanding of feminism. The fourth section discussed the challenges faced by the Chinese feminist movement and their underlying causes, which include the conceptual substitution by extreme feminism and the impacts of gender ratio imbalances and patriarchy within Chinese society.

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