

Women organising towards Cyberfeminism in mainland China and Hong Kong¹

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Until recently, the viewpoint that women in contemporary mainland China and Hong Kong have not achieved equal status with men in many societal aspects has been increasingly acknowledged (Croll 1995; Edwards 2000; Tang, et al. 2000). Though the number of female users has been constantly growing since the introduction of the Internet to China according to semi-annual surveys of the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the disadvantaged status of Chinese women has extended to the cyberspace wherein voices from male users are still well dominant (Bu 2002, 42). As relatively little has been known so far on women's use of the Internet in the case of China (McLaren 2003), a close look at the current approaches at the level of popular women's groups will be necessary for a better understanding of the development of cyber culture in China with a gender perspective.

The start of the twenty-first century has seen Chinese women organising to make a change both in the reality and the virtual world through establishing their own websites. However, before celebrating the possibilities of bringing women into the mainstream of finding solutions on social problems via information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Harfkin and Taggart 2001, 6), we need to firstly examine how far they can go, or how far they have gone on the way of solving women's problems via technology.

By looking at ten websites of women organising in different regions such as Beijing, Shaanxi and Hong Kong in this paper, we will explore the extent to which these women organising have forwarded towards cyberfeminism in China's context. These ten websites are all established by women organising that include gender equality and/or furthering or protecting women's interests as an explicit

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part of their objectives. Among them, three are from Hong Kong, six are from Beijing and one is from Shaanxi province. Websites with similar objectives but founded by state-run or sponsored groups and academic-oriented groups are not considered in this study.

In the following sections, an overview of Chinese women's use of the Internet, and the status of women organising in Hong Kong and mainland China will be summarised to clarify the emergence of these women's organising websites. Also, a comparison of their cyber practices in terms of feminism will be provided to look into the barriers in their current approaches.

The term women "organising" is adopted in this study instead of women "organisation", or as most of the women groups in China claim, non-governmental organisation or non-profit organisation, mainly for the reason of avoiding the debate over "structural features of organisation" (Jaschok, et al. 2001, 6). We will therefore merely focus on the process of organising itself and "the shifting and dynamic character of women's organising activities that aim to create social change" (Jaschok, et al. 2001, 6-7).

Women's use of the Internet in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shaanxi

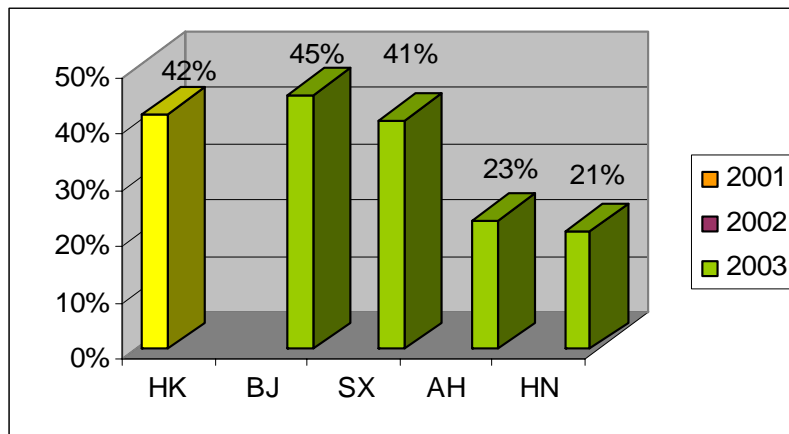
Before moving on to women's organising cyber practice, we shall sketch out the use of the Internet respectively in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shaanxi province. Statistics indicate that with the Internet users of around 67% of the whole population in 2003, Hong Kong has been among the most developed areas in the world in terms of digitalisation (see Table 1 below). The number of the Internet users has also been growing very fast in mainland China, especially in big cities such as Beijing. With an annual growth rate of more than 200%, the number of Internet users in Beijing only, is expected to level with that of Hong Kong very soon. However, the use of the Internet in the mainland as a whole is still under-developed, especially in more remote areas like Shaanxi province with Internet users of less than 6% of the provincial population. While the 'digital divide' on the base of regions cannot be ignored, an investigation in websites based on distinct areas as such will give light on an attempt to explore women's involvement in information and communication technologies (ICTs) in China.

Table 1: Overall use of the Internet in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shaanxi in 2003

Prov.	Population	Users	Date	Percentage of Population	Sample Age	Source
HK	6.8M	4.6M	Feb-04	67.50 %	10 and above	Nielsen/NetRatings
BJ	14.2M	3.98M	Feb-04	28 %	above 6	CNNIC
SX	36.4M	1.97M	Feb-04	5.40 %	above 6	CNNIC

The gap based on gender is not as significant as that on region, at least in the three selected provinces in this study, if we take the percentage of female Internet users into consideration (see chart 1 below). In 2001, women comprised 42 per cent of all Internet users in Hong Kong. Figures show that female users in Beijing and Shaanxi respectively consisted of 45 per cent and 41 per cent of all provincial Internet users in 2003. These ratios are almost comparable with the 40 per cent of female Internet users in the developed countries (Slevin 2000). However, overall women users are still the main sufferers of information disparity even in the most developed areas like Hong Kong, not mention those developing regions such as Anhui and Hainan with female users merely consisting of about a quarter of the provincial users. Statistics indicate that there has been no exception in any province of China that female users comprise half of the provincial users (CNNIC 2004). The boost in economy and the political openness do not guarantee that women would benefit equally as men from the new technology.

Chart 1: Percentage of female users in the Internet users



Women Organising and Digitalisation

We shall map out the development of women organising in women's movement respectively in contemporary Hong Kong and mainland China as a basis for measuring their current digitalisation. Diverse in nature, feminism can be defined as "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes" (Lai, et al. 1997, 269). It can also be identified as "organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" (Gove 1981). According to Delmar (Delmar 1986), "consciousness-raising groups and the women's movement" are seen as the most typical activities of modern feminism.

Though deeply rooted in the Chinese patriarchal values, the women's movement in Hong Kong has long resembled that of the feminist movement in the West (Tang, et al. 2000, 201). Especially in 80's,

many educated women initiated women's groups "to raise women's awareness and to promote the fight for rights of women", and then spread "the idea and action to women at the grassroots level" (Lai, et al. 1997, 301). Despite great improvements in various social fields, the persistence of gender discrimination at work, and gender disparity in wages suggest that "Hong Kong women continue to occupy a disadvantaged position in society" (Tang, et al. 2000, 204). Currently over 200 women's groups have been working with specific focus of concerns in Hong Kong.

Arguably the women organising in mainland China are more or less repeating those of Hong Kong in its 1980s. Inspired largely by 1995's Women's Conference in Beijing, the 1990s saw educated women encouraged to organise various groups, to write articles for media, and to promote women's consciousness at the grassroots level in order to raise the awareness of the public. The role of non-governmental forms of women organising and women's movement activists has been considered as "forming a regulative power for the monitoring of women's status" (Tan 1995). Also, in the case of the mainland, where the need for food, education and freedom from physical violence are still very basic, women's organising activity has in fact allied with the rise of civil participation in public issues (Young 2001, 9).

Though active in various fields, women organising in mainland China are not only short of number, their organisational construction are also delayed compared to their counterparts in Hong Kong. Even now, many women organising in the mainland are still up a gum tree because very few of them is registered as social organisation (see Table 2 below). Some have registered as corporate bodies to avoid the strict regulations on the restriction of social organisations. Many of them are still affiliated to the universities or the All China Women's Federation's (ACWF) branches. For instance, the Centre of Woman's Legal Aid, the establisher of Woman's Legal Aid website, is affiliated to the Law School of Beijing University, and has set up a board since 2002 with the help of foreign funding groups; however, the Centre is actually not in a very legal status and is calling for online public debate over seeking solutions on legalising women organising on their website.

Table 2: The establishment of women organising and their websites

Province	Name	Org.	Corporate body	Website
Hong Kong	AAF	1984	registered	2000
	Nu Xing Wang	1984	registered	2003
	Gutsy Women	1997	registered	2003
Beijing	Maple	1988	registered	2004
	Genderwatchina	1996	no/affiliated	2003

	Woman-legalaid	1992	no/affiliated	2002
	Stop DV	2000	no/affiliated	2003
	Rural Women	1993	registered (2001)	2004
	GAD	1999	no	2000
Shaanxi	West Women	1986	registered (1999)	2003

Despite the overall “digital divide” among different areas, women organising in mainland China are not left behind in the new wave of digitalisation. The establishing time of all the ten websites selected in this study indicates that digitalisation of women organising in different regions has all happened very recently from the start of the twenty-first century (see Table 2 above). With the growth in numbers of cyber women organising and users, a greater diversity of approaches to solving women’s problems emerged.

Diverse Approaches in the Cyber Space

To bring feminism, and more lately gender perspectives, into cyber-reality means different things for different women organising. However, like the activist component of all feminist theories and philosophies, cyberfeminism includes active efforts to change gender inequality via technology (Handy 2001). Although it is still arguable if a women’s movement exists in China or not, there is little doubt that a trend of women studies especially influenced by global gender perspectives is developing strongly. As a result, women’s concern groups in different regions have now supplemented and enhanced their organising through web pages as their counterparts around the world. For example, except the self-helped Gutsy Women in Hong Kong, all the other websites have been building network by offering links to relative websites such as other women organising and international sponsors (see Table 3 below). While facing globalisation in women’s movement, 80 per cent of the websites provide versions, articles, introductions and/or acceptance of users’ participation in English. The majority of these cyber women organising also use their websites as new, cheap media and resource centre by putting up news update and collections of public release published in traditional media. Furthermore, 60 per cent of the websites have started organising their training sessions with the help of the ICTs through providing session information, material, online registration and immediate feedback. Simultaneously, message board or bulletin board system enables users to communicate with each other publicly on women’s issues. From the above instances, we can conclude that there is not too much difference among these websites in terms of basic functions ICTs provide.

Table 3: Some popular websites adopted in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shaanxi by the end of June 2004

Websites	Links	Search	English	News	Public relations	Training	Message board
AAF	32	1	version	1	release	info	
Nu Xing Wang	8	1					BBS
Gutsy Women		1	users		release	material	BBS
Maple	27		introduction	1		info	
Genderwatchina	6	2	intro/article	1	collection	info	MB
Woman-legalaid	8		article		collection		MB
Stop DV	40	2	article	1	collect/kits		
Rural Women	19	1	intro				MB
GAD	6	2		1		material	
West Women	19	2	version	1	release	form	MB

Why Embracing Cyber Space?

Women organising move towards cyber space can be considered as a direct result of international sponsors' support (see Table 4 below). The Ford Foundation and Oxfam Hong Kong have been playing a determining and guiding role in this process of digitalisation in mainland China since they fund all the seven women organising in Beijing and Shaanxi. Among them, at least five acknowledge the two sponsors' direct funding in the establishment of the websites. It is thus not a surprise as Rural Women (Nong jia nu) claims clearly that its objectives of establishing the website include "to propagate the organisation's concept, activities and previous work", "to let more commonweals and charities understand the organisation's advantages, needs, achievements, work scales and plans through the website, and to seek more cooperation opportunities and funding".

Table 4: Major sponsors of women organising and their websites in June 2004

Website	Donator			
AAF	HK/ International			
Nu Xing Wang	<i>Astraea Lesbian Action Foundation</i>			
Gutsy Women				
Maple	Ford Foundation		Starr Foundation	Individual (International)
Genderwatchina		<i>Oxfam HK</i>		
Woman-legalaid	<i>Ford Foundation</i>		Spangenberg	
Stop DV	<i>Ford Foundation</i>	<i>Oxfam NL</i>	<i>Sida Sweden</i>	<i>Uni OSLO</i>
Rural Women	Ford Foundation	Oxfam HK	others (China)	others (International)
GAD		<i>Oxfam HK</i>	Individual (China)	
West Women	<i>Ford Foundation</i>	Oxfam HK	Asia Foundation	others (International)

Note: Sponsors italicized in Table 4 directly support the establishment of the websites.

The Internet's increasing popularity and potential as communication platform are also asserted by several women organising as the reasons for their logging online. The Women's Legal Aid states that it is aiming at "fulfilling the interaction between the website and uses via diverse contents"; "answering legal questions and provide legal aid for women"; and "offering a convenient and rapid platform of communication and discussion for the aim of legal aid via the high technology and digitalisation". Nu Xing Wang points out that "the interactivity of the Internet can benefit people from diverse social groups from having a communication platform in the virtual space" while "online population in HK is increasing everyday".

Writing on the Net

On the strength of the basic ICT functions, writing on the net is probably the first step of initiating a women's problem in cyberspace and calling for further action, which has been the most common practice applied by almost all cyber women organising despite their different emphases. This process of writing individually or collaboratively, not only produces material for the websites, but also brings women's issues into a broader, male-dominant society. For example, the owner group of Women Watch China has set up a column called Media Watch jointly with the ACWF's newspaper China Women's News since 2003. Column articles about the under-representation or misrepresentation of women's image in the media, no matter written by the members or other authors have been putting up on both websites. Last year, Women Watch China and China New's Women managed to force an estate company to remove its advertising from Beijing's street by critically writing it out. The advertising asked "Do you have second house? (Niyou diertao fang ma?)" but was manipulated to "Do you have second wife? (Niyou erfang ma?)" in visual effect in Chinese. The newspaper and websites worked together to combat the market force in this case.

Another instance is how women organising in Hong Kong advocating freedom of discovering women's body and sexuality. Members of both Nu Xing Wang and Gutsy women not only write articles about women's sexual experience by themselves, but also call for users' contribution. Based on users' comments in Gutsy Women's BBS, the stories in their special section of Women's Ardour Stories attracted diverse users' viewpoints from both sexes. Female user *YY* expresses her expectation on having more such novels written for "almost all pornographies in the market now are for men but yours sexual stories provide another angle" (21/02/2004). Male user *a thinker* asks two questions accordingly: "First, is there any difference between pornography and sexuality? If yes, please clarify their definitions respectively. Second, how stories are identified into different categories as merely for men or for women? Please explain according to your definitions" (23/02/2004). Female user *a woman who likes women* answers his question this way:

Hah, the difference is great. Generally pornographies in the market are all male-dominant with emphasis on merely men's strength or otherwise women's endurance. The viewpoints are all from men's side to determine women's attraction, for example, mostly describing women's appearance but seldom mentioning their feelings.

(23/02/2004)

However, male user *Li* does not agree to her explanation, "I have read some stories in *Penthouse* and *Playboy*. Compared to the articles here there is not much difference between them" (24/02/2004). By the end of June 2004, 18 users have attended the discussion on this topic and 270 users read their replies. Of course, personal attacks also come out here in some replies as what often happens in other online discussions.

Online Training

In addition to writing on the net as approaching cyberfeminism, online training is another method of empowering women in/outside of women organising through the Internet. On the website West Women, individuals and groups can fill in online application forms if they require any gender related training session. Some of the previous trainees' feedback is also available online. On the website GAD, which is aiming at building up a digital platform for anyone who is interested in the cause of gender and development in China, not only are detailed training materials available, but also pre-investigation of what trainees expect from an upcoming session are occasionally approachable. Different from mainland's case with stress on raising gender sensitivity both among members within women organising and in the public, women organising in Hong Kong more often provide trainings for the public. For example, to improve women's capability of protecting themselves, especially their bodies, Gutsy Women offer self-defence course seasonally as well as diagrams of defensive skills on their web page.

Barriers

Though the party-state leaves sort of political space for women organising who do not demand overthrowing the authority in mainland China especially, there are certain barriers on the way of conducting cyberfeminism. Technology is the first one. By the end of June 2004, the sample websites of women organising in mainland China have not started supporting Bulletin Board System which enables immediate communication from multiple spots and has been very popular in mainland's commercial websites and Hong Kong's websites. In stead, many of them offer only Message Board in which users can leave message openly or secretly in some cases. Women's Legal Aid set up a Message Board in November 2002 and until the end of June 2004 there have been less than 70 messages received. Most of the messages are about women's concerns such as domestic violence and

women's rights while several are advertisements. Female user *Xie Yongyu* shares her experience with the readers:

I am a victim of domestic violence and suffered even last night. I personally believe that domestic violence can be hidden very well and repeated again and again. It can be said that the sufferers are living in the horror of suffering domestic violence at any time in their lives. Domestic violence almost always happens at night. Hopefully more people will care and save these domestic violence sufferers.

(05/03/2004)

Female user *Huang Honghong* also tells her story after reading *Xie's* message:

I sympathise with *Xie's* lot. My case is even worse than hers because my husband used to be a security officer. His position, identification and network protect him very well. This is also the main reason that I dare not to seek lawyers' help. Once I consulted a professor about divorce issue. When I told her my situation, she looked at me unbelievably and asked: "He can fight over you?" And then she said she had other appointment. I had to leave disappointedly. This experience left shadow on me and made me feel very helpless.

(30/04/2004)

User *Cui Ying* posted two messages as following: "If a woman were hurt in domestic violence, and sued the man, would the man be put into jail?" (26/06/2003) The same user asks on the same day, "If parents fought and influenced the kid, would the kid have the right to sue to the court? Could you please reply to me via email?" (26/06/2003)

The Message Board provides opportunities for the users to post their questions and worries publicly via leaving messages. However, this way the immediate communication and interaction between the host and users are delayed since the replies from the host are not seen on the Board. Also, it is very difficult for other users to respond to a message on the Board for no "Reply" button is provided for them.

Moreover, some of the mainland websites do not even have a Message Board which does stop users' participation. For instance, a user emailed the webmaster of Stop DV, and said: "It is really good to have such a website for domestic violence sufferers. Why don't you establish an online forum for the sufferers to communicate with each other? Sometimes, talking itself is a saver for those most isolated under domestic violence". The host put this email up on their website and claimed that it is a brilliant idea to have an online forum and "we have decided to have one in a way of putting up users' emails in this special section, Email Recording". Guess what happened? So far, not even a single email has been sent to that special section.

Technological limitation also restricts the way women's voice is heard. ICTs amazed people not only because of its transmission speed, but also its potential as multi-media. In Hong Kong, Nu Xing Wang has web radio program about teenagers' sexual life. Gutsy Women provides web TV show. But in mainland China, writing is almost the only way of publicizing women's concerns. ICTs' potential of being used as cheap and convenient media has not been developed very well.

Another barrier on conducting cyberfeminism is that women organising deal with users' message as agents. In mainland China, women organising usually do not guide their users to complain to any governmental institutions or public mechanisms directly. They work as representatives of grassroots users, select which message to answer, which to ignore. They do not organise users' involvement against wrong doings.

This is not to suggest that all women organising in Hong Kong have done this very well. Actually, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) often put up public statements on their website against central government or Hong Kong government on issues ranging from the appointment of officials to the National People's Congress' explanation on Hong Kong's basic law. But they use their website only as a propaganda instrument of voicing their attitude. No users are encouraged to express their opinions on those issues.

Compared to the AAF, Gutsy Women is a much younger, smaller and self-helped group. Their influence in Hong Kong is far less than that of the AAF as a women's concern group. However, they also managed some change in the way they favoured via using the Internet. They conducted a survey on the situation of sexual harassment on public transportation in Hong Kong and found the problem was serious. What they did is calling for email petition to the public service and demanding for a change. Recently the bus route No. 9 has put up a pink poster to tell female passengers not to keep quiet if sexually harassed on the bus. It is seemingly a very good example of how small women's groups manage social changes with the help of ICTs. However, this achievement caused a debate on their BBS afterwards because male users felt discriminated by the specific use of "female passengers" in the poster. They said male passengers might face similar problems but they would not be encouraged and supported in this case.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the websites of women organising have so far been places where writing and training with gender perspectives work well despite the regional differences in China. ICTs have provided even fairly small women organising opportunities of building up cheap information platforms as well as interactive spheres to conduct gender activism. As Nick Young

(2001, 9) puts forward, "small, autonomous organisations can have an important role to play in creatively addressing emerging social needs", Chinese women organising have started participating in addressing women's concerns via ICTs. It has to be noted, however, that barriers such as technological limitation and the lack of users' involvement need to be removed from the way on which women participants can speak, advocate, and act to change what disappoints them. The cyber practices of women organising will be less relevant to an emerging women's movement in China if these websites are limited to merely self-promotion for women elites within these popular women's groups and their international sponsors.

Web Resources

AAF www.aaf.org.hk

GAD in China www.chinagad.org

Gender Watch China www.genderwatchchina.org

Gutsy Women www.gutsywomen.org.hk

Maple www.maple.org.cn

Nu Xing Wang www.nuxingwang.org.hk

Rural Women www.nongjianv.org

Stop DV www.stopdv.org.cn

West Women www.westwomen.org

Woman Legal Aid www.woman-legalaid.org.cn

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