

# Thoughts on the World Conference on Women

The NGO Forum in HUIROU was an eye-opening EXPERIENCE for many CHINESE WOMEN. But they did NOT SPEAK about their new experience then. Only NOW does a Chinese woman DARE to speak.

by Chuan Renyan

*Translated by Sophia Woodman*

**T**he vast majority of Chinese women attending the NGO Forum in Huairou saw or heard the slogan "women's rights are human rights" for the first time. But in the duration of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the slogan appeared again and again with remarkable frequency.

In recent years, Chinese women's awareness of their individual rights has started to awaken as the general population's consciousness about human rights grew. Opinions infused with

Women of all colors gathered in Beijing



women's rights thinking appear frequently in newspapers and periodicals.

The Chinese government's nervousness before and during the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was not just because it was afraid of things like AIDS or lesbians, or even the myth of nude demonstrations it had itself concocted. What the leadership really worried about was the subversive character of heterodoxy contained in differing ideologies and in feminist thinking. Otherwise, why impose such strict precautionary measures? Chinese people were not permitted to visit the hotel rooms of foreign delegates. Journalists were not permitted to interview conference participants in their residences. Every hotel where conference participants were staying as well as every meeting had "coordinators" or "information personnel" assigned to it. Most Chinese newspapers only carried stories about the conference on page two, with only the opening and closing ceremonies making the front page. The arrival of three special trains, the speeches of a number of government delegates and other news were not reported to readers at all.

At Huairou, site of the 1995 NGO Forum, a banner with the words "look at the world through women's eyes" flew high above the road. This was a clear reminder, a resounding call. Prior to this,

many Chinese women who had participated in the preparatory activities in varying degrees had probably never risked such an idea: Women, like men, have their own view, their own vision. Just as the popular rock singer Cui Jian says, they had been looking at the world through the red blindfold that covered their eyes. The Chinese were used to seeing the

world through the lens of class struggle. Now we are getting used to seeing it from the perspective of the commodity economy. Everyone unconsciously uses the perspective of a male-dominated culture, to the point where women even describe their environment and express their thoughts through this culture's language. Women have almost never thought of using their own eyes to see the world.

### **New Kind of "Special Zone"**

For 10 days, Huairou was the only Special Thought Zone in China. At the NGO Forum, which turned out to be an exhibition of feminisms, 5,000 Chinese people—mostly women—were exposed to all kinds of ideas about women and feminism: those of the Vatican, of Islam, of protecting the values of the traditional family, lesbianism.

We protested against the many violations of women's rights such as unwaged work, domestic violence, sexual harassment on the job, women harmed in armed conflict. For the first time, we found out that women's health, particularly their reproductive health, should be considered part of the concept of women's rights. In the past, Chinese women either produced descendants for their husband's family because this was their sacred duty or sacrificed their needs and longings to the state's population control efforts. Now women are beginning to think about their own rights.

**L**ess than a month after the end of the FWCW, a shocking case happened in Beijing. A 15-year old son murdered his own father because he could no longer bear his father's torture of his mother. His father beat his mother when the two were still married and would not stop even after their divorce had been finalized. His mother asked help from the people's police and from the head of the man's workshop but to no avail. Finally, unable to bear it any more, the child took the tragic step of murdering his father.



In China, although the laws do contain a number of articles protecting women's rights, most of them are just on paper and are not actually implemented. In real life, women's rights are generally either ignored or not even recognized. Marital rape is only prosecuted when the woman has filed for divorce. The rights of those who have been sexually harassed, of lesbians, and others are still only to be dreamed of. To date there is only one shelter, in Wuhan, that helps women escape from domestic violence.

**L**ooking around with our newly-acquired "women's eyes," we can no longer feel proud or complacent about the number of women at work or the number of female representatives in the National People's Congress, even if these percentages rank China among the first in the world. We have started to discover the problems hidden below the high employment rate.

The Chinese government's report on the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies stated that 68.22 percent of women aged 16 to 19 were working, a figure seven percent higher than the number for males of a comparable age group. But the vast majority of Chinese working women have only reached junior middle school. This low educational level means a big number of Chinese women workers will be concentrated in the low-paying, low status occupations. In fact, according to the official pay rate figures for non-agricultural work, women get only 77 percent of what men receive.

### **Seeking a Just Perspective**

Of course, "women's eyes" are not the only perspective from which one looks at issues. But they are an indispensable means for seeking fairness, for creating public opinion that supports justice. The idea of a "human-centered, sustainable development," which the international community already accepts and which the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration repeatedly stress, means demanding

that the world stop looking at women's sacrifices as the price of development. "Women's rights are human rights" is therefore a basic principle.

However, China regards feminism as some kind of pollutant. The moment you mention the word, people usually link it with such things as sexual liberation, single motherhood and combative women opposing men. Since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, the mainstream of women's struggle for rights and freedom has always been referred to as "women's liberation" and later as "the women's movement." But feminism has been entered into the register of heterodoxy as the ideology of the bourgeois women's movement.

The Chinese—officials and ordinary people—are afraid of feminism. Officials are afraid of all things related to "rights," especially human rights. As soon as human rights are mentioned in any forum, officials immediately assume a guarded and polemical stance. When one dares speak of feminism, even in the absence of an official, a strong response is bound to come from some ordinary person there.

### **The Truth Behind the Statistics**

Official and unofficial propaganda say that Chinese women enjoy many rights. Even the 1995 Human Resource Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme ranks China as 23rd in the world for women's participation in politics and in the economy.

The truth is today's China is much in need of women's rights. Despite the policy of openness, which has continued apace in recent years, and despite the fact that the





anti-bourgeois liberalization campaign's singling out and labeling of works in women's studies as "influences by Western feminism" has become a thing of the past, the prohibition on feminism remains. Last year, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a conference on feminism, but news about the event did not appear in authoritative newspapers, apparently merely be-

cause of the word "feminism."

There are other very worrying factors in the situation of Chinese women. Of the 10 million people who have been laid off and are looking for work, more than 60 percent are women. Several tens of thousands of women are trafficked every year. No one is interested in hiring women over 35 who are on the labor market. And with the spread of commercial culture, practices verging on sexual exploitation that discriminate against women have become common under pleasant-sounding names like "female professions" and "spring-time (youth) occupations."

Despite legislation, such as the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests and the Labor Law, when women workers are in dispute with their employers, they are commonly unable to invoke the protection of these laws.

### **No Discussion of Problems**

During the Beijing World Conference on Women, both at the NGO Forum and the government conference, there was no chance for any of these problems to be mentioned, let alone to be seriously and constructively discussed either by Chinese women or between Chinese and foreign women.

Under these circumstances, the distribution at the conclusion of the meeting by a Chinese woman living in Canada of a "Note from a Chinese Woman" criticiz-

ing the Beijing World Conference on Women for not even addressing the problems faced by Chinese women is completely understandable.

The government wanted to use the opportunity of the World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum for propaganda. China was being exposed to the world during the event and quite a number of Chinese NGOs and individual women, without hesitation, considered "the righteous cause of the nation" and "the image of the state" to be of paramount importance. Consciously or unconsciously, they put themselves into the role of official spokespeople, enthusiastically explaining "the great progress made by women of our country" and arguing with "certain foreigners with ill intentions."

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), the largest women's NGO, shares the government's ideas in every way and never mentions "feminism." Because of its virtually official status as a "mass organization," it is very difficult for the ACWF to provide effective protection for women when their rights are violated.

China lacks an understanding of human rights; it is even more lacking in its comprehension of feminism. Today, we should not only struggle with the authorities to achieve human rights and women's rights, but also with men and women who are permeated by several thousand years of feudal culture and decades of Party culture.

On the positive side, there are some women in China now who dare to openly call themselves "feminists." Furthermore, in the course of the preparations for the World Conference on Women, a few non-official, grassroots-level women's organizations were able to obtain sufficient space to operate and expound on their ideas. Although the situation was still far from ideal, the space was a lot larger than before. Among these people are some who are sensitive to women's true personal interests and are keen to translate their beliefs into action. Their effectiveness, however, is currently hindered by insufficient resources. ♀

Source: China Rights Forum, Winter 1995