

# What Do Chinese Youth Really Think about Gender?

Written by Huili Meng

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/08/06/what-does-chinese-youth-really-think-about-gender/>

HUILI MENG, AUG 6 2015

*This article is part of a series on gender and sexuality in China. Read more here.*

### Why This Topic Matters?

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women[1] organized by the United Nations and held in Beijing was the first and only international event of its kind in China. It was a landmark event, during which the Chinese government gave a promise to address gender equality and legislate for women's rights. There have certainly been advances since, particularly in education, and I benefited from this when I enrolled on a Masters course in Cultural Studies and Feminism in 2003, a programme that could not have existed in China before 1995.

Gender studies in China is a now a rich field of study and as an academic I could choose to write about many different and important aspects of the 4<sup>th</sup> WCW relating to my own work. For example, the change of feminism studies through textual analysis and literary criticism to street performance of young feminism activists; or why gender is such a sensitive subject in the Chinese academy and education system (some male professors have announced they don't want to supervise female postgraduate students); or the 'five feminist sisters' who were detained by China's government on International Women's Day this year. They are all meaningful and important subjects but most have been well researched and written about by prominent academics.

So for this contribution I decided to turn to an area of research related to my role as a lecturer in Social Gender Studies and explore something important but overlooked by other feminists and academics; that is, the current state of gender consciousness of today's Chinese youth with my own students as the primary case study.

This students in this cohort were born in the same year as the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women took place, and as such, are treated as a kind of 'result' or 'evidence' of the political and cultural influence of the conference. At the start of my social gender elective course three years ago, this was the central idea behind my thinking. As young undergraduates they are supposed to be smart, educated, international, concerned about individual rights, and conscious of the idea of freedom and democracy and gender equality. But during teaching and interaction with this young and clever group of students I discovered they had little or no understanding about gender issues and debates, something I hadn't imagined. I was confused by this, by their attitudes and reactions through our discussions and by events that took place in the class. For example when a young gay student decided to 'come out' in my classroom, everyone gave him support and a warm applause, but on another occasion, I was surprised by their naivety when they declared they couldn't 'accept' transgender and cross dressing. For them, the LGBT group isn't seen as a collective for sexual minorities at all.

From this position of confusion and bewilderment at some of their opinions I decided to further explore the issue.

### Who Are They, the post 90s Generation of China

*Where does the data come from?*

The research includes three sections of data, online questionnaires, individual interviews and multi-generation family

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interviews, also my own participant observation during teaching.

- 418 online questionnaires completed by undergraduate students make up the principle part.

Between 13th February- 22nd April 2015, with my research team[2], a questionnaire enquiring about gender consciousness of college students and self-identity was deployed. We collected 418 responses from the same number of independent IP addresses, all of which were submitted by phone.

- 120 individual interviews with college students (regardless of whether the students have received gender training before)

Between April 2013- June 2014, 120 individual interviews with undergraduate students were carried out. Some of them were enrolled on the social gender class, which I referred to as the experimental team, the remainder of the interviewees, also undergraduate students, had not enrolled on gender or feminism courses before, this was the control team. All of these interviews were recorded as voice files or video files with formal consent from all interviewees.

In total we collected 158 interviews but eliminated any that were incomplete (less than 13 questions out of a possible 15), or the interview was less than 30 minutes (the average time is between 40- 60 minutes). This resulted in 120 finished interviews to date. [3]

- Three generation family interviews

In addition to the state of gender consciousness in college students, I was also interested in the context that informed and influenced it; for example, family background, education and culture. Between July and August 2014, with student assistants from team A and I went to Shaoxing and Jinhua (two small to medium cities in Zhejiang province) to conduct four interviews with three generation families – grandmother, mother and daughter.[4]

## *A basic description and gender consciousness of the respondents*

Of the 418 online questionnaires, over 70% are undergraduate students, 286 are female, the rest are male. In this group, 292 respondents (70.33%) lived in small or medium towns and cities, 238 people [56.94%] came from one child families. 59.59% respondents said they had used the internet for over seven years, and 66.5% of them were online for over three hours each day. There was no significant gender difference between the length of time spent online, or the daily online time, or the purpose of the Internet or Internet access. 85 respondents [20.33%] had social gender or feminism training/ education prior to the interview.

The respondents mainly had a low awareness of gender inequality, but there was a gender difference in their level of awareness. In the questionnaires most didn't agree that 'China has a serious gender equality problem', but at the same time they emphasized and agreed that the male gender had an advantage at a non-conscious level. Over 30% of the female respondents didn't recognize the value of their own gender.

The whole group had very poor gender literacy – 133 people [31.82%] said they never heard of social gender or relevant theories, and only 63 respondents [15.07%] had 'quite a clear understanding and knowledge' about these concepts and theories. Although the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a most important event for establishing individual gender rights, few respondents knew about it; for example, only 44 people [10.53%] knew that Beijing was the host city, and 147 people [35.17%] didn't answer this question.

We also asked: 'from your personal perspective, what is the level of gender inequality in your life?'

But, is this the end of the question? Both in the questionnaires and interviews, we asked another similar question about gender inequality but from a different perspective. If you could start another life, and you could choose your sex, what would you be? According to the chart, gender difference is an important factor in the perception of gender inequality. Basically, less than 3 percent of people agreed that 'gender inequality is serious'; 122 (42.66%) female respondents thought it was 'serious in some aspects', the number is higher than male respondents (16.9%). 106 females (37.06%) believed that there is gender inequality but that 'it's acceptable', while less than 6.12 percent of their male counterparts thought this was true. From the sample, it can be seen that men are more positive about gender equality attitudes than women, because as this age gender is a more personal and individual issue. This point proved to be the same among individual interviews, with many interviewees disagreeing with the fact that they might be living in a society with serious gender problems, but in a society where, 'gender inequality is exaggerated', 'they have not experienced mistreatment for their gender/sexuality, but someone else may have', 'it's a difficult situation for everybody, but also very difficult to change'.

The result of 418 questionnaires is as follow:

### **Do We Really Support Gay and Lesbian?**

Even though almost 70% of the respondents are female, according to the chart above, only 135 (32.3%) people chose female as their ideal sex. The details are as follows: of the 286 females, 120 (41.96%) wanted to be women if they could choose, compared to 132 male where only 15 (11.36%) wanted to change their current sex, (the reasons varied from sexual orientation, to trying something new, or social stress). Even they might not agree that gender inequality is prevalent in their world, the respondents' answers to this question painted a different picture. The interviews provided more details, men responded to this question in an easier and good humored way; for example one man said 'I've experienced what it's like to be a man already, I should try something different for fun next time'; 'I want to be paid more attention and to be looked after, so I'd better change to a girl.' But for women, gender is more problematic, although unconsciously; inequality has a significant impact on their lives. The women's responses revealed a very strong desire and heavy (social) pressure to be male, 'men have more privilege in our society', 'girl's have too many inconveniences', 'I want to be man and be strong when I feel wronged'.

Even though people don't treat gender equality very seriously, they seem to give more support to the LGBT issue; for example, in the popular Chinese social media Weibo (China's most popular online social media), the rainbow flag is always a hot topic for cybercitizens. They like to talk about handsome gay couples, or agree with same sex marriage, or call for more gays to come out. The same attitude and opinions came through from the questionnaire - 172 people (41.15%) explicitly supported gay rights, and only 54 people (12.92%) were against gay rights. This looks like a very bright and positive number, but different voices came out in interviews later.

Firstly, to a large extent this vocal non-discrimination is not about a consideration of others, it's a very narrow and limited in its kindness and is only evident when it doesn't directly involve them. People said 'I respect them (gay and lesbian), I don't have any discrimination at all, but I'd find it unacceptable if this had an effect on my life. Secondly, interviewees supporting gay rights was almost like a fashion 'show', not something that should be allowed to happen

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in everyday life: 'of course, people have their rights to choose their own lives, a variety of options, but it's not for me.'

'Homosexuality is abnormal, against our normal human morals, so it should still be defined as a disease, a congenital disease. But I don't discriminate against them because I never would against any other type of patient.' This answer shows us another subtle reason for people supporting the idea of equal treatment of homosexuality, treating them as patients or a vulnerable group.

Thirdly, the opposite to 'non discrimination' isn't encouragement or support. Here, some interviewees believe that for some gays and lesbians 'to be a gay' is probably just a way to be 'showy', because they 'want to be cool', that is, it is not a genuine sexual orientation. Another respondent said, 'In colleges and universities, this fashionable attitude to support gay pride is unusual, even abnormal.'

Finally, through the research, it can be found that people have more ignorant and naïve attitudes to other sexual minorities outside of the gay and lesbian groups, like transgender or bisexual. In an interview with a lesbian, she expresses concern about discrimination against gay people, but has a strong antipathy towards transgender or cross-dresser. 'They deny their own natural sexualities, it's a morbid sexual identity. But comparing transgender and cross-dresser, the former is better, some of them have undergone sexual surgery for their same sex lovers, then (after he or she changed natural sex) they can be together as other normal couples.'

Some people are too naïve to understand LGBT groups, but they also have a logic to understand 'what happened to these abnormal people': 'for gay people, there were too many females in their childhood when they were growing up, especially people who grew up with a mother, grandmother and grandmother in law, will have stronger tendency to be gay.'

### Liberating Girls but NOT Including Mothers

Respondents and interviewees have unbalanced, paradoxical attitudes to gender issues, the boundary of family is an important analysis latitude, but at the same time the influences of individuation and subjective consciousness have to be taken into account: people have a strong desire for individuality and independence, this includes financial independence, social and family roles, but they usually ignore the individual rights of motherhood. From the answers to some questions, young people seem to have very neutral and correct opinions. For example, compared to their grandparent's and parent's generations, they believe themselves to have no 'Son Preference'; they agree that men should take on more housework responsibility even though they also agree that men should pay more attention to their (professional) work.

In the question, 'do you think a 'man's image will be damaged by doing too much housework', 328 (78.46%) respondents disagreed with this but to different degrees, while at the same time, only 15 people said they supported it. For the question 'looking after children, in particular, taking care of a baby is a female's duty', 309 people (73.92%) disagreed with only 28 respondents saying yes. If we make a conclusion on the basis of this data, it looks as though any Chinese gender problem in the area of the domestic family will be completely resolved by the younger generation.

But interviews gave some different details. Traditionally, Chinese society insists that the husband should take charge of external matters while the wife should take care of domestic matters, but the truth in lots of families is that the husband takes charge of both external and domestic matters. 'It looks like my mum controls more things at home, but my dad manages the family's final decisions.' Mothers are keepers of money but not users and owners of it; fathers are the real lord in many families, they decide the 'big' family issues like how to spend money, which college major or job their kids should look for.

But this doesn't mean that females are completely dominated by males. In the multi-generation family interviews, the mother's generation is more subjective than the grandmother's generation, and has a clearer family strategy. Whether they are an 'iron lady' or a 'good mother', they have more of an 'exchange consciousness' about housework, with the wife's duty split into several parts: being a good mother and wife are more important than being a 'good

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daughter in law'. Doing housework is a division of labour, but not their 'sacred mission' any longer. They also have more ideas and influence when it comes to their children's future and lifestyle; today they hope their daughters will pay more attention to career and individual success instead of housework duty. A 'happy life' for a woman doesn't only depend on how good and successful her husband might be any longer, it is also about how good and successful she is.

The post 90s' gender consciousness in families is concerned more about the individual situation than family roles; for example, they think a couple should share housework together – more fair for both sides, but at the same time they won't support this 'fair and revolutionary' idea for their mothers, they can't transcend their own family life experience. They understand and sympathize with their mother's busy and hard life, but they no longer have the motivation to develop the motherhood; 'it's a very common life style of their (mother's) generation,' 'I don't have very high expectations for my mum, she just needs to look after me well.'

## Are we against the same 'Family Abuse'?

The younger generation focuses on individual rights and looks forward to a more democratic life even though they have blind spots about some gender inequality issues. They disagree with and refuse to accept any kind of behavior that might endanger an individual, such as family violence.

In response to the question, 'What do you think about family violence', 83.97% of 351 people said they have zero tolerance to it. But if the question goes a bit further, 'A man could be a victim of family abuse', the agreement rate drops to 61.24% (256 people), because for a lot of people, family abuse means the husband hitting the wife, or wanting to beat a woman. It is a highly gendered issue. During interviews, we received some answers that supported this point: although people don't have a tolerance for family abuse, the concept and boundary of the definition of this term are still blurred, simple and loose. There are plenty of people who don't know or misunderstand the meaning of oral violence and cold (emotional) abuse. They judge abuse by gender, and the extent of (physical) violence. In other words, the zero tolerance of family abuse is also a narrow and stereotyped attitude, 'Physical contact and abusiveness aren't violence,' but if 'a chair, knife or other dangerous weapon is used it is family violence,' or 'slap a wife's face so she bleeds', fall under the concept of family abuse. For these reasons, oral violence and abuse is just a 'small' thing and should be easily forgiven: 'Insulting someone can't really be seen as abusive behaviour.'

At the same time, family abuse doesn't cover all people or situations; for example, if the husband has an affair, his wife beating the other woman is seen as acceptable, because defending the family and marriage is the wife's duty. This kind of attitude exposes women to the gendered family defense battlefield but protects the man/husband in the shadows and safe area. It also produces a further gap in the idea of gendered oral violence to some women.

## Conclusion

As I finish this article, a conversation I had with a female Taxi driver I met in Yunnan province is still vivid in my mind. She told me she worked a twelve hour shift, sometimes longer, then back home she looked after her two sons and did all the housework. Her husband made no effort to help, he stayed at home or went out drinking and gambling. She couldn't take a day off for sickness because the husband would refuse to cover her work. She wants her sons to have brighter lives, and hopes they 'can treat their wives in a better way, and not turn into the male chauvinist their father became.' But I'm afraid that the post 90s Chinese, as they are known, can't transcend the patriarchal power system, or change the masculine status quo which they have grown up with. However, the data and interviews (from the experimental team and people who had gender train before) about the social gender course that I've been running for the past two years tells me that gender literacy is having a positive effect, building their gender consciousness, and giving them a new perspective about gender identity and individual identity. The 4th World Conference on Women may have launched a new vision for women and gender equality, but it is on the streets and in the classroom where the real changes will take place. For my post 90s cohort of students, it may just take more time for them to understand this and to put it into practice.

## Notes

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[1] Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/>

[2] Ateam is a student's academic research group on campus of Zhejiang University of Communication and Medias, main members include Pengnan HU, Jiajian YAN, Qianmin XU and Xuan LI. I supervised several social gender related projects of them, for example like the project 'Oral History of Mothers: Multi- generations families in Zhejiang Province as a example' wan the 'Top 100 Project of Young China Summer Programme 2014' which founded by China Young Leaders Foundation and *China Weekly*. Some individual interviews also made by them.

[3] In these interviews, Ateam group took 20 interviews with students of my social gender class, other 138 pieces are homework of my class at the second semester of 2012-2013 academic year.

[4] Its also the first phrase research of the project about social gender education which leaded by me.

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