

Women's Worlds 2005  
June 21, 2005  
Panel on "<Young Forum : The Rise of 'Young Feminists' Power in Asia>  
Thinking Feminisms in Asia"

Thinking and Re-thinking Feminism(s) in China

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This presentation aims to get a distant view of the question—What significant meanings does it have when a contemporary feminist of one geographic area turns her feminist interest and curiosity towards another geographic area of the world?—using concrete findings gathered from the presenter's own research. In this research, "a feminist" refers to a Japanese, while "another geographic area" refers to Mainland China. The discussions will be mainly on the reactions of Chinese women to the transition of socialist system but simultaneously approaches the Japanese feminists' interests toward it.

As for the background, although China and Japan are neighbors in a geographic sphere called "East Asia", they are quite different in the social and political context. On the women's situation, one adopts the equality of men and women within the socialist policy, while the other is said to have realized high economic growth on the basis of gendered division of labor.

However, Japanese scholars and activists have always focused on women in China living under the well-known slogan "Women can hold half of the sky". Japanese scholars were especially interested on the aspect of reproductive labor and published a lot of essays, expressing support or critic, regarding efforts of Chinese government in the 1960's to 70's to build communal canteens and day-care centers within the workers' living environment. But since the reform and 'open-door' policy started in the late 1970's, China gradually shifted to take the idea of "small government, big society" from their practical standpoint. At this stage, the debate "women go home" emerged. As an interesting fact, Chinese intellectuals at this time, put their eyes on Japan—there were some opinions that refers Japanese "full-time housewife" as an ideal woman to support the development of the nation.

This backlash might have disappointed feminists in Japanese or western context. However this phenomenon may also suggest re-thinking about the experiences of women in China. When the debate of "women go home" emerged, some women

answered: “I would rather go home”. This answer shows that women are not of monolithic unity, although the discourse of “half of the sky” set them homogeneous.

A lot of women in China have been protesting the backlash, and they do not only come from All China Women’s Federation but also include activists and scholars who tried to seek for new styles of feminist discourses and movements. Some of them are aware of the diversity of women at the practical level and seek for their own platform, which is neither of the socialist ideal nor the market fundamentalism. As a young feminist of Japan, the presenter considers it important not to miss these feminism(s) emerging in contemporary China. This attitude may also reflect on Japan, or other areas of the world to re-think about the importance of feminism(s) as a framework of critique.