

Civic Dialogue in China over the Past Century:

The Female Perspective

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Introduction

The changing political climate in China through the twentieth century has resulted in the formation of public identities that are tentative at best. When it came to the formation of a collective female identity, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was a catalyst for individualist and subjective thinking that would characterize the formation of a collective female identity and the literature of the May Fourth Movement as a genre. In the spirit of Ibsen and other Western writers, literature was a vehicle for the collective negotiation of identity. Ding Ling, a preeminent female writer and public intellectual in the 1920s, played an important role in the search for a female public identity; that is, she explored whom a Chinese woman was or could be, outside of her home, family, and husband. For writers of the May Fourth era, gender became an integral part of this negotiation of identity perception. However, as the influence and power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increased, literature and art could only continue to be political in nature if they were in line with and in service of promoting party ideology. As collectivist policies of the CCP considered the subjectivist search for identity to be bourgeois, gender issues were ignored as women were assimilated into a male identity.

The Chinese public sphere, the space between a state and society, is unique in its development compared to that of the West. This difference contributes to its complex nature, a result of the changing relationship of the state to society from the Republican era through to today. The policies of the Mao era left little room between the state and society; at the start of the reform era in 1979, there was only a marginal area that would be characterized as part of the Chinese public sphere.

However in the decades since the beginning of Reform and Opening, the public space has gradually opened and provided space for more participants. Conventional media laid the foundation at the beginning of the reform period for recent online journalist and netizen¹ activity online to drastically open up a new public space. The virtue of the internet is its accessibility, which provides more venues for individuals to access and contribute to public discourse. The various participatory websites available on the internet allow for a wider participation and have resulted in a completely new measure of public opinion. The influence of the internet in the wake of social and economic reforms shifted the network of public discourse from literary venues to a more journalistic mode of information exchange. As such, Chinese public intellectuals have adjusted their perceptions of societal roles according to changes on the part of the state. This paper considers their adjustments from the Republican era in the 1920s to the present by examining the influence of gender in the creation of a public identity.

The Public Sphere

Jurgen Habermas' characterization of the public sphere categorizes the press as the mediator between the state and private citizenry. His conception of the public sphere is rooted in medieval European history, where the distinction between public and private was created when the church separated from the state and religion became a private affair.² Habermas glorified the idea of a space for

¹ The term "netizen" is a popular liaison of "internet" and "citizen" that refers to individuals active in online communities.

² Habermas 51

collective opinion and designated civil society as separate and sometimes contrary to the state.

“By ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens... Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely.”³

For Habermas, the growing power of civil society, and the ability to stand up to the state, is a critical part of democratization. His view is representative of the Western conception of the public sphere, where the differentiation between public and private is contingent on the creation of a civil society organization, which at that time was the church, newly separated from its part of state function.

A common argument made against characterizing the Chinese public sphere in terms of or in comparison to the Western conception is that the Chinese consideration of “public” and “private” are very different. China cannot be reviewed within a Western schema of democratization. According to a contemporary Chinese scholar,⁴ Western and Chinese societies have distinct development paths, and a consultative rule of law regime is more likely to lead to democratization than an active civil society. Further, he believes checks and balances are a better way to curb corruption, rather than more elected officials. Wei Pan’s opinion clashes with other critics⁵ who believe the constitution should guarantee rights for citizens to operate

³ Wakeman 111

⁴ Wei Pan (2003)

⁵ See Yu Keping

in a public space, and that civil society plays a critical associational role between the state and society. The debate over the role of civil society in democratization reforms has led to an impasse in China, which is why I chose to discuss the public sphere instead of civil society as an area for individuals to access higher standing than the citizen-state relationship might otherwise allow.

In China today, individuals have been more successful than groups in finding a platform to broadcast and disseminate ideas. Collective action is deemed by the state to be more dangerous, and groups are therefore given less leeway in the political statements they make. Republican era literature was able to occupy the public sphere because subjectivism enabled writers to break into the patriarchy that still lingered from traditional Chinese society. The twenties thus set the stage for open public discourse for the discussion of a female identity. The definition of a female identity dealt both with the patriarchy of society and the oppression of the state, which in traditional society were mutually reinforced. The value of discussing gender in the context of the public sphere lies in the examination of the state and society for the critique of patriarchal elements in both, for each is informed by the other.

The Republican Era

The twentieth century witnessed drastic changes in the Chinese state and society. At the start of the century, the Confucian structure of society, a special kind

of patriarchy based on hierarchical relationships,⁶ was still the prevailing organization of society. As all relationships in life were predefined, this structure stifled the kind of exploration of the individual, which had been an ongoing process in the West. This introspective identity search was severely delayed in Chinese society, and widespread individualist thinking started with the May Fourth movement in 1919.

The women's literary movement in the 1920s, born partly out of the May Fourth movement, produced a search for a female political identity that was not exclusively defined in the private sphere. Writing and literature was the vehicle that facilitated the transition from private to public, and thus the need for a political identity. In the 1920s literary journals and other publications were the most public of platforms available to women to voice their opinions. The Republican era opened up a public space for women, albeit a very limited one; the female-accessible public space was restricted in the sense that it had very high barriers to entry. For the most part, only members of the upper class had the resources to educate their daughters. Women who were given the opportunity to develop a literary interest could reach the level where they would go to a teaching school, one of the only avenues of higher education society carved out for women. Education and literature was the most public space available to Chinese women in the 1920s.

⁶ These relationships were also reciprocal; just as the subject owes the ruler allegiance, the ruler is responsible for the well-being of his subjects. The subsequent relationships are based on the hierarchical and reciprocal relationship of ruler and subject; father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, older friend and younger friend.

Literature and Identity Negotiation

Female writers of the May Fourth era differentiated themselves from other writers of the period by questioning the traditional placement of women in the private sphere. The feminist literature of the 1920s participated in a search for an identity that was not defined in the context of a male and within the private sphere - the Confucian, patriarchal house. The May Fourth literary movement was a reaction to Qing social criticism literature that reformers felt had “degenerated... to the defense of conventional mortality,” referring to the Confucian philosophy that informed traditional Chinese governance. The reformers sought to fix the degeneration and revive the idea that social criticism (and literature) should be a reflection of society.⁷

One major catalyst of the women’s literature movement was Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*, which culminates in the act of Nora, the protagonist, who leaves her husband and children in order to be independent, rather than living as a doll in a house. The play was particularly influential in China, so much so that Ibsen was included in the 2006 compilation by the People’s Daily of 50 foreigners influential in shaping China’s modern development, a list composed mainly of philosophers, missionaries, and statesmen.⁸ Gu Zhongyi’s 1945 one -act play, which McDougall calls “a watered down and updated version” of *A Doll’s House*, is an example of the

⁷ McDougall 40

⁸ People’s Daily Online, “50... Development”

influence Ibsen exerted on modern Chinese writers. The play sends the message that employment is better for women than living a life of idle luxury.⁹

Nora's decision to leave was widely discussed and alluded to in literature of the day, and both admiration and criticism for her actions is telling of the conflicted attitude of society concerning the formation of a female identity that was not defined by the female's relationship to a man. Incidentally, the authorship of Nora-like figures in literature of the day gave male writers the chance to play their part in the redefinition of societal roles. As male writers such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun wrote modern, Nora-like women, into their stories, they expressed a reformation of the modern male identity. However, as Sanderson (2010) notes, while they discussed the role of the modern woman, they did so from a male perspective and thus controlled the gender discourse.¹⁰ Writing Nora-like figures articulated the uncertainty that surrounded the male protagonist's relationship to the modern female that was being created.

Lu Xun, the father of the May Fourth movement, gave a speech at Beijing Normal College in 1923 firmly criticizing the sentiment "A Doll's House" had sparked at that time, which might be called a feminine awakening on a societal level. He believed the notion that women can rise up and at leave their families to lead independent lives was idealistic, and living in the name of freedom and self sufficiency was impractical; the economic reality is such that a woman on her own would simply not survive ("Dreams are fine; money is essential"). Lu Xun points out

⁹ McDougall 55

¹⁰ Sanderson 26

the lack of wider applicability in the female literary movement in the 1920s, because all of its main figures were from well to do families and did not represent a collective “Chinese” people.

Western viewers and readers held a different view of Nora than Chinese people did, because Western social classes differ greatly from the Chinese system. For Western audiences, Nora and her banker husband were just members of the upper class, and the issue of gender was the only social issue at play. For Chinese audiences, or at any rate socialist ones, Nora’s husband represented the traditional family system, against which modern society would rise up. For Chinese audiences and readers, the oppression of women was a central issue, but so was the question of the capitalist class and revolutionary movement. According to Shuei-Mei Chang, Nora’s departure was a rebellious action concerned with individualism; for Chinese women, this meant finding an individual identity that was not cultivated by the traditional Chinese societal structure.¹¹ The fact of Nora’s gender is significant because her strike for independence revealed the overhang of patriarchal thinking that still permeated the Republican era. The concept of independence, of not being defined in relation to a father or husband, was at the very core of the assumption of female social and economic independence.

Ding Ling

Ding Ling (1904-1986) has a reputation of a writer, public intellectual, and party member in China that spans several decades. An active participant in the May

¹¹ Chang 23

Fourth literature movement, she authored numerous short stories in the years before she joined the CCP. Four years after Lu Xun's speech on Nora, Ding Ling published her 1927 short story "Miss Sophia's Diary," which was groundbreaking for its element of shock produced by publicizing what is usually private. Sophia has tuberculosis and during the diary's narrated days lives in a hospital with no hope of recovery. She is isolated and lonely, and though she receives numerous visitors she rarely connects with them. As the diary's author, she plays with point of view, often talking to herself (or the reader) in the third person: "Sophie is not a person who likes listening to explanations."¹² However she says even the diary only reveals a small part of her and it cannot fully encapsulate her misery.

Her diary is a venture to define who she is, but as she is isolated and sick, she wanders in her own thoughts so that they are unintelligible even to her. Sophie mentions several times that she feels she is going crazy; her narration varies between hopeless despair one day and flagrant optimism the next, and reserved when revealing her emotional states to visitors. Sophie's constant battle to find her own identity is similar to the experience of women in both Western and Chinese societies, as the concepts of feminism are continually negotiated. Sophie's diary is a clear indication that the concepts of feminism and identity are intertwined. "Miss Sophie's Diary" is one large argument that is never resolved: "Life sneaks on. Death too." Sophie is stuck in a limbo and cannot move either way; at the disposal of others, she only waits out her days to die.

¹² "Miss Sophia's Diary" 53

Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker (1982) points out that Ding Ling's "outspoken exploration of sexual feelings" gave her a notorious reputation.¹³ Sophie also writes plainly about subjects that counter those of mainstream society and culture, highlighting her position as an outcast. The most obvious of these opinions is her position on love—she does not think or behave as a young girl usually would. "These days when young people get together, they love to explore the meaning of the word 'love.'"¹⁴ Judging from her reports of her interactions with her two male love interests, her repeated need for someone to "understand" her, she seems to be reaching for a very lofty goal, much more than the "love" another girl her age would seek.

Sophie's diary is a self-narrative that examines her thoughts and feelings, which and Ding Ling then broadcasts them to society. By publicizing private aspects of Sophie's identity, Ding Ling forces the public to consider the individual that she is. Sophie's isolation can be interpreted as either a symptom of her illness or society's reaction to her personality. Certainly, her downward spiral is informed by her looming death. Her self-examination of her identity is unique, but her sickness and isolation is somewhat pessimistic. Sophie does not welcome or indeed expect feedback from society- the diary is her sole confidant, and nothing beneficial comes of her interactions with other people. In *Miss Sophie's Diary*, Ding Ling explores the thoughts and feelings of one woman, but does not propose a model for the relationship of woman to society.

¹³ Feuerwerker 31

¹⁴ "Miss Sophia's Diary" 66

Ding Ling and the Influence of the State

Just before the CCP's rectification movement in 1942, Ding Ling published an essay titled "Thoughts on March 8" in honor of International Women's Day. The piece discussed issues facing women in Yan'an at the time, which were eerily similar to articles published today on issues facing women in general society. She pointed out what Feuerwerker called "bitter contradictions"¹⁵ in the expectations of women in Yan'an, referring to the gender roles of society being stretched as women entered aspects of society other than the home, like politics, while Chinese society did not alter its expectations. For Ding Ling, women are defined by their societal context and cannot "transcend the age they live in."

Ding Ling starts to conclude the essay by saying, "If women want equality, they must first strengthen themselves. There is no need to stress this point, since we all understand it." She identifies areas where society is deficient in realizing the needs of women, let alone meeting them, but her suggestions at the end center around the ways in which women can improve themselves to survive in the current society on a very individualist level. In his account of leftist literature in China, Hsia Tsi-an (1968) calls Ding Ling's thoughts "only a plea from the weak to the strong."¹⁶ Hsia's view is representative of the general public reaction toward Ding Ling's essay when the essay was published. His primary concern was that Ding Ling had laid aside goals of the collective for her own interests as a woman. Once societal criticisms started, they "followed the familiar pattern of criticizing a woman not so

¹⁵ Feuerwerker 101

¹⁶ Hsia 251

much for what she writes but for what she is, for her personal character, or more particularly her sexual conduct.”¹⁷

In her forward to Ding Ling’s essay, Tani Barlow (1989) noted that Ding Ling “hung onto a sense... that the construction of ‘woman’ in political terms had to come before any Chinese woman of any class would be liberated.”¹⁸ Ding Ling argued for a defined political space for women, which is evident in her forceful statement about what happiness is: “Happiness is to take up the struggle in the midst of the raging storm and not to pluck the lute in the moonlight or recite poetry among the blossoms.”¹⁹ Her definition of happiness was a clear departure from the traditional view of femininity.

As the politics of the nation changed with the influence of the CCP, so did the politicization of writing and literature. The expectations of writers and artists of the CCP and rural revolution were complicated, and were not explicitly defined until Mao’s talks at Yan’an about literature and art in May 1942. These talks revolved around the uses of literature and defining literature within a revolutionary context. Writers associated with the Party either stopped writing or changed what they wrote about. During her first couple years working for the Party, Ding Ling did not publish any work because she had no time to write. Later, she began to write revolutionary literature that was, in the eyes of the CCP, sufficiently attentive to the problems of the masses according to the terms laid out by Mao Zedong in his Talks at Yan’an. Ding Ling’s interaction with the party before the start of the PRC in 1949

¹⁷ Feuerwerker 113

¹⁸ Barlow 316

¹⁹ Ding Ling, “Thoughts on March 8” 320

established a culture of quiet conformity for artists charged with criticism by the CCP. The relationship of the politicized artist or writer to the Party remained complicated throughout the Mao era and is still carefully negotiated today.

Mao's specification of the revolutionary uses and intentions of art and literature was due in part to the writing of Ding Ling. According to Feuerwerker, "she was one of the writers who precipitated the confrontation and called down on literature and art the authoritative pronouncements of Mao Zedong."²⁰ This review reconceived of the role of literature and naturally caused changed the practice of writing to fit those new standards. For Ding Ling, there was no longer a subjective concentration on the individual informed by Western literature, nor any stylistic elements of traditional Chinese literature. In 1948 Ding Ling published "The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River," her first and only full-length novel, which won the Stalin prize in 1951. The novel displays her response to the new criteria; she does not linger on individual or personal matters, but instead focuses on the community as a whole and its reactions to individual community members.²¹

Ding Ling's body of work is still widely read and discussed today. Her narratives on women still hold real significance to current gender issues. One current Chinese critic, Zhong Xueping (2006), connects the feminist writing of the 1920s to female commercial writing of today ("body writing") that discusses similar issues. In her essay "Who is a Feminist?" Zhong identifies the legacy left behind by writers in the Republican era as a cause of reluctance on the part of contemporary

²⁰ Feuerwerker

²¹ Feuerwerker 126

writers to identify as feminists, as the term has since developed a negative association. She argues that whether or not a contemporary writer identifies as a feminist does not mean the writer is or is not a feminist. Rather, the reluctance to identify oneself as a feminist stems from the historically charged nature of the term.²² This ambivalence leads to narrower avenues (or as Zhong puts it, “social space”). The limitations of this negotiation serve as one explanation for literature tending toward being a vehicle for art rather than political criticism after reform and opening. Zhong also reframes the debate over the female body. Compared to the body writing of the 1920s in China, in contemporary terms, “The battle to define the female body... is the battle for the control of power and privilege and control over the future of the societal order.” Modern reluctance to identify as feminists displays the influence social commentary had over social criticism and communication.

Social actions or activist developments become political when they are recognized by society, and political movements are vindicated by widespread recognition. With the victory of the CCP and start of the People’s Republic of China, the space between state and society became nonexistent; literature, becoming a regulated tool of the state, ceased to be a vehicle for independent social activism. The use of literature to find a female space in the public sphere did not create a political identity that could survive the political and societal change that accompanied the communist movement. In her early literature, Ding Ling used subjectivity to express a separate identity for female individuals. The search for a feminist political identity that the Republican era witnessed was dependent

²² Zhong 637

foremost on a concentration on the individual. As the Communist movement neglected the individual for the sake of the collective, the feminist search for identity was naturally overtaken along with the preoccupation with the individual that was informed by Western thought.

The PRC: Individual and the State

The Party celebrated Ding Ling in the early years of the PRC, awarding her the Stalin prize in 1951 and solidifying her position as a preeminent communist writer. However as the political landscape changed with the anti-rightist movement following the Hundred Flowers Campaign, she was expelled from the party and the first of many farms to labor for 20 years. Her sentence only ended in 1979 when the reforms under Deng Xiaoping allowed intellectuals, including Ding Ling, to resume their careers. The political change of the reform and opening period has important consequences for Chinese society today. Currently, the Mao era is history; the good parts are celebrated while the bad are whisked under the rug and considered taboo topics.

The reform and opening up period brought with it a fresh start for intellectuals who had been sidelined by the Mao administration. Ding Ling herself, a well-publicized victim of the Cultural Revolution, was “a symbol of the unresolved guilt and horror of the government’s thirty-year policy toward intellectuals.” Her final work, *Du Wanxiang* (1978), told the story of a woman who achieved liberation through her service and labors to her family and the state and the “total identification of the female citizen to the nation.” Ding Ling died in 1985, but spent

the last years of her life actively writing, researching, and giving interviews to ensure she would be remembered her way.²³ In her capacity as a celebrated writer and public intellectual, Ding Ling paved the way for Chinese women to follow in her footsteps. Perhaps the most significant contribution Ding Ling made was to provide the ability for women after her to be active in other areas of public debate, rather than being noticed or criticized for the fact that they are women.

Women in China got their own institution in 1949 with the founding of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a group that was not active in a remotely independent capacity until 1978. During the Mao era, the group had mostly concentrated on rural women's issues, and the effect they had on policy is probably minimal. At the beginning of the reform era, the organization expanded its policy scope and has become the most influential special interest group in contemporary Chinese gender politics. *Women in China* is a magazine published by the ACWF. In their study of media portrayal of women in China, Luo and Hao looked at representations of women on the magazine's covers from 1956 to 2003, with the exception of the years between 1966 and 1976 when the magazine was not published. As the ACWF is a state-controlled organization, its content is informed by party ideology. *Women in China* was the only English language publication concerning women, so the ACWF was responsible for presenting the world with the successes of the socialist system regarding issues of gender equity.

²³ Barlow 44-45

The study found that all the images tended to represent the “working woman,” but in the years before and after the Cultural Revolution, the preference for profession changed. One trend reflected was a switch from rural surroundings to an urban environment. Another change was a shift from the presentation of the collective to the individual. The last shift was from “de-feminization to re-feminization.” For example, magazine covers before 1979 tended to depict a scene of a group of women from afar; after 1979 covers showing single women were more common, sometimes showing a close-up of her face. All of these changes correlated with the transition into the reform era. The writers identified women’s career development as the most emphasized theme, as shown by over half the covers.²⁴

The success and domination of the ACWF leaves limited room for other groups to be active on women’s issues. While the strength of such a group with so much influence working with China’s powerful state may be positive for the advancement of some issues, the group’s affiliation with the state makes it impossible to categorize the ACWF as a part of a conventional conception of civil society. The relationship of the ACWF to the state has been in flux since it expanded its realm of advocacy to include a variety of issues in the public and private spheres. In the 1990s, some of the group’s members grew skeptical of the group’s relationship to the CCP; some wished for a closer relationship to the state, which would have meant becoming a department, and others wanted to be completely autonomous. According to Elisabeth Croll, this contradiction in roles is due to the belief that the ACWF represent “both the interests of women and the Party,” which

²⁴ Luo and Hao 10

were assumed to be identical.²⁵ Today the ACWF has 16 group members or subsidiaries, which are mostly smaller and more focused women's interest groups that work through the ACWF.²⁶

The 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing was a turning point for gender issues in China. Beijing was suddenly in the international spotlight, and as a result there was a concerted effort by the government to develop the gender-focused sector of NGOs in anticipation of the event. Howell notes that this effort was largely urban, taking place in China's large cosmopolitan centers.²⁷ The aims of the conference included alleviating women's poverty and enabling women through economic means.²⁸ The conference declaration also cites access to communication and markets as part of the requirement for economic success, and with it a need for the respect and development of a gendered civil society.²⁹ In their fifteen-year review of the conference, the Commission on the Status of Women, part of the U.N. Economic and Social Council, recognized the progress made toward the goals outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action, but acknowledged there was still more progress to be made.³⁰ The goals of the 1995 conference focused on female

²⁵ Croll 139

²⁶ Howell 197

²⁷ Howell 197

²⁸ "Promote women's economic independence, including employment, and eradicate the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women by addressing the structural causes of poverty through [economic changes], ensuring equal access for all women, including those in rural areas, as vital development agents, to productive resources, opportunities and public services;" (Beijing Declaration, Article 26)

²⁹ "The participation and contribution of all actors of civil society, particularly women's groups and networks and other non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, with full respect for their autonomy, in cooperation with Governments, are important to the effective implementation and follow-up of the Platform for Action;" (Beijing Declaration, Article 20)

³⁰ "Declaration on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women."

empowerment through economic and social means, developing strategies to empower the Nora whose fate was so debated 70 years before.

According to Howell, who argues that feminists and social theorists should discuss the place of family in the public sphere, gender relations are sometimes demoted to the domestic sphere, which seems not to warrant further discussion. However, gender issues in China have recently been discussed in that context- by some (official) accounts, it would appear that the only surviving societal divides are not in society, but in the home. A 2010 article for *GB Times*, an online magazine, outlined the history and progress the ACWF has made toward providing mechanisms for female safety and equality in China.³¹ Based on an interview with Mu Hong, head of the ACWF liaison office, the article presents an optimistic view of the progress women have made with the help of the ACWF and presents the position of women in China as similar to women in the West- they face little discriminatory hiring practices in large enterprises or public institutions, but still struggle with social issues like domestic violence.

China's public sphere is expanding, and with it the struggle for influence, a process that women have unquestionably been a part of. However, there is a fundamental difference between the way Chinese women see it and the way Western spectators see the public/private interaction. According to Wakeman (1993), "Chinese citizens tend to conceive of social existence mainly in terms of obligation and interdependence rather than rights and responsibilities."³²

³¹ Björkell, "ACWF: Empowering China's Women." _

³² Wakeman 134

Consequently, actors in the Chinese public sphere operate under different conditions than those in the West. The complicating factor is when East meets West. It is not simply a comparison, but an interaction, facilitated by multinational organizations like the U.N., globally read newspapers like the *New York Times*, or the process of globalization, accelerated and magnified by the Internet and its users.

Journalism and Netizens

Journalists, by the nature of their job, are active and present in the public sphere. The media serves as an intermediary between the state and the people. This role has to be carefully negotiated in China, where some media outlets are state-owned, and all media activity is in any case supervised by the state. The relationship between the media and the state has resulted in the media being closer to the state than the people. In contrast, state-owned media is free from the economic constraint facing independent media around the globe, whose content is still dictated in the sense that news enterprises need to be profitable by maintaining a consumer base. Independent media therefore is responsible first to the people and then to the state.

Since reform and opening, the roles of Chinese and foreign journalists in and covering China have changed. Chinese journalists play a complicated role in the public sphere, and they disagree on what exactly that role is. Some see their responsibility as to “be close to the citizenry,” and others as to be the “throat and mouth of the Party,” but still responsible to the people. In a survey of Chinese journalists in 1995-1997,³³ the most important and popular roles of the work of

³³ De Burgh 86

journalism endorsed by those interviewed were first the “fast and accurate dissemination of news”, followed by providing analysis and interpretation of issues. The least popular role of the media was the public forum role, which was to provide a free space open to the ideas of every citizen. In this study, it was clear that the only people in the public sphere were journalists, who perceived themselves as playing a unique and vitally important intermediary role between the state and society. At the time this study was conducted, it was clear that reporters did not always see themselves as representing the people when reporting on government activities, but usually representing the government to the people. “It is not our function to solve problems but to cast an impartial eye over problems. Nor is it our function to get you to go and solve the problem. There are appropriate agencies for that.”³⁴

The internet and online citizen activity has redefined the concept of “journalist.” If the same study were conducted today, the researchers would first have to reconsider what constitutes a journalist, as well as the diversity of media outlets that may or may not be considered journalism. If we take the lead from the Chinese government, then every venue with some form of oversight would be considered in the realm of such a study. The line between journalist and social activist is not simply defined by the maintenance of impartiality anymore- the roles that were previously separate now overlap, and in some instances are one and the same. However, social activism clearly requires a sense of urgency to speak to pertinent and sometimes controversial topics, where people who are affected cannot maintain an impartial role. Before significant online activity in China, state

³⁴ De Burgh 90

media seemed to have achieved a kind of dehumanization, where journalists were limited to relaying information between the state and society. Official control of Chinese media continues to be a high profile example of the hierarchical relationship between the individual and the Chinese state.

The term “netizen,” a combination of “internet” and “citizen,” was coined to describe people with an active and participatory online presence. The term is particularly popular in China, where netizens have taken up the position of government and society watchdog. An individual is no longer based in a specific place, but in cyberspace; at the same time, localized news is available and spread further and faster than it ever has been, because more citizens in more locales are online. The internet is the most grassroots of public entities because it is the most accessible. As consumers of information online, individuals act as their own editors. The everyday person has agency to control their personal flow of information as a reader and a participant. In the sense that individuals can edit and control their participation online, the internet allows everybody to be a journalist.

Netizen activity accelerated considerably with the advent of social media. Clear and simple interfaces encouraged participation of those with less technological experience, making them more user-friendly. Various social networks strike various balances between information dumps and communication flow; in each case, users personalize their communication and preferences each direction. Information inflow is secondary to fast and frequent communication. This change in netizen activity, bringing news followers off the sidelines and turning them into

news spreaders, can be measured by looking at news articles online. In the last couple years, media websites have added links at the top or bottom of each article where readers have an array of social networks to choose from. A netizen would share or comment on an article in some way, as opposed to readership, which is measured by the views of the webpage itself.

The China Digital Times is an online media organization that seeks to bring Chinese online voices to the world. One of its main aims is to “amplify the voices of Chinese citizens through translation,” as well as to interpret current trends among Chinese netizens in response to breaking news and censored topics. Accordingly, most of their stories are from Chinese media and translated for non-Chinese consumption. The organization also has the “Grass-mud-horse Lexicon” resource, which is a glossary of terms created by Chinese netizens and used in contemporary political discourse.

Public opinion as collective identity- Netizen reactions

The 2008 Sichuan earthquake reached a magnitude of 7.9 and subsequent landslides and power failures limited the flow of information in and out of the affected area.³⁵ The toll was initially estimated at ten thousand, but other reports cite the casualties in a range from 12,000 to 70,000 people killed.

The response of the online community to the earthquakes was overwhelming. Writing poetry in reaction to significant events is an element of traditional China that apparently still exists today, and posting and reading

³⁵ Hooker and Yardley

earthquake poems online became a cultural trend in 2008. The internet mediated the dissemination and secondary recreation of the poems, and helped facilitate what Heather Inwood (2011) calls a “convergence culture,” where a nation was enabled to grieve together, and as a result create a culture of national unity in the face of disaster. In her study of multimedia responses to the disaster, Inwood profiled one poem titled “Child, Quickly Grab Hold of Mama’s Hand.” The work was reproduced in hundreds of print newspapers and magazines, and online forums, blogs, and websites. Inwood located and analyzed 20 different multimedia adaptations of the poem, which included words, images, and music and sound.

Chinese netizen activity is up-front and concerned with collective values; in contrast to intellectuals of the republican period, netizen actions are much more visible than their individual identities. One may not know much about one person except what they put up online; some people may put every aspect of their identity online, completely out in the virtual public eye. The internet community is adept at reacting to particular events because of the constant activities of people online. Chinese netizens are unwilling to be subsumed by the Chinese media, though that is what officials would like as netizen activity creates a valuable national emotion. The multimedia responses to the poems represent a broader cultural shift where audiences are taking a larger and “participatory approach to cultural and media content.”³⁶ The online community created by earthquake poems created a more tangible national unity, because every individual contribution was unique.

³⁶ Inwood 946

Ai Weiwei, a famous Chinese artist and dissident, made a project of compiling the names and ages of those children killed by collapsing schools in the 2008 earthquake. The government would not release the information, so the artist organized the operation through Twitter. His followers on Twitter helped him track down the information of the child casualties, all of which he has compiled into a large art piece that takes up one long wall. Ai Weiwei's art is certainly prolific and controversial, but possibly not the most original. As one New York Times critic put it, "Too often in this exhibition, the objects come off as a window dressing that is all but overshadowed by the celebrity, pronouncements and predicaments of the artist himself."³⁷ His status as public intellectual and famed social conscience he may be considered dissident first and artist second. However, his celebrity is evidence of his skill for connecting with large amounts of people online; indeed, his "jousting with the government as some kind of performance art" is his ticket into the Western media and is responsible for his worldwide renown.

Women and Chinese Media

In 1998 when a small group of investors wanted to start a financial and business magazine, Hu Shuli was tapped to be the editor. During the decade she ran *Caijing*, she formed the company into one of the most prestigious and profitable media outlets in China. The newspaper's success came from knowing how to cover important stories without excessively trying the government's patience. Reporting on events like the government cover-up of the SARS epidemic was permissible, but

³⁷ Smith, "The Message Over the Medium."

avoiding topics that still considered taboo, such as the Falun Gong or Tiananmen anniversaries. She knew where the line was and how close to get without crossing it. This talent was critical to the success of *Caijing*.³⁸ However, the more money that was made with *Caijing*'s success, the more her financial backers grew concerned with the risks Hu was accustomed to taking. She resigned from her position as editor in chief in November 2009.

After resigning from *Caijing*, Hu Shuli started another news outlet called *Caixin*. The SEEC Media group, *Caixin*'s backer, is controlled by a small group of investors who allow Hu greater leeway in reporting edgy stories, which is why *Caixin* is considered more independent than other official state media outlets. When Hu resigned from her position at *Caijing*, *Xinhua*, a state news agency, reported only that magazine authorities approved her resignation, along with the resignation of her deputy editor in chief.³⁹ In contrast, the *New York Times* ran a long article about what they called a "high-profile tussle" with SEEC, *Caijing*'s financial backer.⁴⁰ Most importantly, the *New York Times* took care to point out Hu's celebrity status in China as a result of her quality news coverage at *Caijing*.

Hu Shuli has a sporadic presence on Twitter but an active writing career, taking time from her editing duties to write finance stories for *Caixin* as well as other stories for different publications. Most recently, a report for the BRICSAge Magazine advocated reforms China could make if it wanted to continue to be an

³⁸ Osnos, "The Forbidden Zone."

³⁹ Zhang Xiang, "Editor Leaves China's Leading Finance Magazine."

⁴⁰ Ansfield, "Editor Departs China Magazine After High-Profile Tussle."

important competitor in the global economy.⁴¹ She is also on the board of Directors for the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF). The IWMF is dedicated to strengthening the role of women in news media around the globe, as a means toward strengthening freedom of the press.⁴² *Caixin* media also sponsors journalism fellowships and conferences concerning both international and female journalists. One such conference was held in 2011 in Guangdong on "Her perspective," a salon for female journalists. Hu Shuli is a vocal advocate for reform, but uses uncontroversial rhetoric emphasizing cooperation and development.

Conclusion

The internet has clearly been a substantial force for changes in public discourse in China, as it has been around the world. The full effect of the public communication it facilitates has yet to be realized, and scholars and researchers must continue studying the internet and related discourse as it evolves. In the meantime, data from social media users allow researchers to look at trends that may reveal elements of society concerning a range of factors. Data from social media outlets have contributed to scholarship on what the internet and individual users reflect about society. According to one study of data collected on Weibo user activity during a popular TV show at the time of the lunar New Year, over 60% of Weibo users are female, but male users are more likely to have a large number of followers than their female counterpart. In a *Tea Leaf Nation* interview with Huan Sun, a graduate student at MIT who conducted the study, remarked that it is hard to make

⁴¹ Hu Shuli, "China, the New Growth Powerhouse."

⁴² <http://iwmf.org/about-the-iwmf.aspx>

generalizations about gender shaping public opinion because mainstream media is still very influential, and data concerning gender presence in the mainstream media is problematic to acquire.⁴³ In a country where polling to gauge public opinion is nonexistent/unimportant, netizen activity on public participatory media provides more easily accessed data to measure a collective opinion.

There has not been much writing yet on Hu Shuli's positions on social issues. She has not written about her own experiences rising to the top as a woman, or the experiences of any other women in her position.⁴⁴ Her own writing is on financial and policy matters, which speaks to the progress Chinese society has made since the 1920s in opening up educational and vocational opportunities for women. She is a successful editor and businesswoman, and her area of expertise is one traditionally dominated by men both in China and in the West. In terms of a public identity, she certainly has one, but there is no evidence that it was developed with any kind of gender consciousness. This development contrasts to other examples of women who have been singled out as successful *women*, lauded for because of their public service or business expertise, and handed down to younger generations of women as role models. Hu Shuli's gender, if anything, is a side note to her more pertinent accomplishments in journalism and business.

⁴³ Wang, "A First Cut at Gender Analysis on Weibo (Hint: the Men are Louder.)"

⁴⁴ In the U.S., a large discussion related to this topic was sparked in the summer of 2012 by Ann Marie Slaughter's article in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All." This article, concerned with a balance of work and family life, represents the kind of conversation that to my knowledge has not taken place in China, or if it has, it is in the context of contributions to a multinational (American/Western) conversation.

There is no question that significant societal change has taken place. If gender is considered almost a non-issue, women are for the most part noticed or criticized for their ideas and actions, rather than their sexual nature and the fact they are women, as they were in the Republican and Mao eras. Hu Shuli is a prime example- she is known for pushing boundaries and editorial success, not for being a woman. The irrelevancy of gender, while sometimes making the absence of gender discussions conspicuous, has nevertheless made way for female progress in society. On the internet, it is possible to conceal one's identity or act anonymously, enabling individuals to let their ideas stand on their own. By being unburdened by a public discussion of collective identity, consideration of the individual is the priority.

At the same time, it is dangerous to ignore existing gender issues. The lack of a public discussion on gender issues is worrying, and probably does not signal the end of an era of inequality, where all that matters is an individual. The fact is that we do not live in cyberspace, and there is a very real public sphere which all members of society should have the opportunity to access. The issue of a female sub-identity is not an inappropriate question; some individual participation may be encouraged by not identifying with the gender aspect of their identity. However, society as a whole does not benefit from anonymity. The issue of a Chinese female identity should continue to be negotiated, because the process is as valuable as the resolution. As women gain prominence and agency in society, their gender should not be a side note, nor should it be at the center of their public identity.

The search for a Chinese female identity is complex. Nora sparked a societal-level discussion on individualism, which the writers in the May Fourth movement contributed to by breaking from tradition and writing as a reflection of society. The career and writings of Ding Ling demonstrate how political changes affect perceptions of societal roles. Changing conceptions of public and private, as well as the role of individuals and groups in the public sphere accompanied this political evolution. Journalism and the internet have played a significant role in the changes that contributed to the formation China's public sphere, which the discussion of netizen activity and the accomplishments of Hu Shuli attempt to elucidate. The role of gender and the discussion of gender issues in Chinese modern technological society have yet to be defined, though the internet is the most promising avenue for such a conversation. The vehicles for the creation of public identity in China reflect a dynamic relationship between the state and society, as well as an optimism for the future of China's public discourse.

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