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Gender, Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies

BEAUTIES AT WORK

Liu Jieyu

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Liu Jieyu

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Beauties at Work

palgrave
macmillan

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United Kingdom

Gender, Development and Social Change
ISBN 978-1-137-50574-3 ISBN 978-1-137-50575-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50575-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016946991

Cover illustration: Original cover design by Serena Dinelli

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

To Beth and John

Series Editor's Preface

Gender, Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies: Beauties at Work by Liu Jieyu gives a fascinating account of the working lives of female white-collar 'beauties' through the lens of locally grounded research on gender and sexuality. The book blends Western feminist theory with a starkly different approach to researching and understanding the gender-sex system in East Asia, specifically China. The treatment of the highly patriarchal and I would venture to say sexist and misogynist practices in the workplace reveals how gender and sexuality are an intimate part of the processes of the structural masculine domination in both workplace and home for these highly educated middle-class women in China. It is perhaps telling that the term 'Chinese Beauties' is used in the book, a category that the women themselves have to learn to live with and strategically use in terms of surviving the workplace. It refers to a deep level of objectification that these high-status women have to take on in order to move in a male-dominated world. The book is clear about the agency at work in both the compliance and the resistance of these women. Their very particular historical and generational position marks their lives out as important ones to study in order to elaborate, as the book does so well, the different concerns for Chinese women, which vary from those of their European and American counterparts. In its rich detail, the book reveals the complex negotiations in the lives of these women as they, even through silence, aim to disrupt the troubling double standards at work and in the home in relation to sexuality and gender.

Through different chapters around work, sex, family and self, Liu analyses how these women are objectified, even commoditized in the name

of modern Chinese economic growth, and how they resist, opening up the possibilities for them to act as feminist agents for social change in the urban middle-class Chinese cultural and historical context.

The book is a very welcome one in the Series, not only because it is so well written, provocative and engaging in its storytelling but also because it points to possibilities for change from a very different angle than other books which consider the same through a more traditional gender and development lens. Putting together gender and sexuality in the Chinese context is a daring project which I am very pleased the Series can assist, and as Liu Jieyu says, perhaps it heralds some social change for future generations for whom Chinese 'beauties' will no longer be labelled as such, but seen as workers and leaders regardless of their gender.

Wendy Harcourt
The Hague
May 2016

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the women and men who participated in my research for their generosity in spending time with me and telling me interesting stories about their work and life. Their kindness in co-operation provided me with a fantastic opportunity to understand the complicated and nuanced social reality of the new millennium Chinese white-collar workplaces. I would like to thank Stevi Jackson, Anne Akeroyd, John Holmwood, Delia Davin, Barbara Einhorn, Harvie Ferguson, Ruth Pearson and John Weatherburn, who offered advice and continuous support in my research and career. I am also grateful to Barbara Einhorn, Christina Brian, Amber Husain of Palgrave and Wendy Harcourt, editor of the series, who offered their advice and assistance during the completion of this manuscript.

I am very grateful for the financial support received from the British Academy (ref. SG48096) and the White Rose East Asia Centre, who funded my 2008 fieldwork and subsequent fieldtrips to the region. Finally, I would like to thank all my colleagues at SOAS University of London: Michel Hockx and Robert Ash who supported me during the writing of this book and Collette Harris, whose work inspired my ethnographic writing and shed light upon the wider relevance of the Chinese historical-cultural understanding of the gender system.

Part of Chap. 4 appeared in Liu Jieyu (2013) 'White-collar workers: gender and class politics in an urban organization', in Minglu Chen and David S.G. Goodman (eds), *Middle Class China: Identity and Behaviour*, Chap. 5, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 75–89. I would like to thank Edward Elgar publishing and the book editors Minglu Chen and David S. G. Goodman for their permission

to re-use the material. Part of Chap. 5 appeared in Liu Jieyu (2016) 'Beauties at Work: Sexual Politics in a Chinese Professional Organization'. NAN NÜ: Men , Women and Gender in China. 18(2). I would like to thank Brill publishing and the journal editor Harriet Zurndorfer for their permission to re-use the material. Part of Chap. 6 appeared in Liu Jieyu (2008) 'Sexualised labour? "white-collar beauties" in Provincial China', in Jackson, S., Liu, J. and Woo. J. (eds) *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures*. London: Zed Books, pp. 85–103. I would like to thank Zed Books for their permission to re-use the material.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Chen

Chen is a slim, tall young woman with big eyes and long straight hair tied in a plait. Unlike her mother, who had limited education before being assigned to work in a local factory by the state, Chen completed a Master's degree in engineering and then applied for a post at a prestigious foreign trade company. As the company is highly profitable and offers good welfare provision, it is a desirable employer for graduates in the region. After two rounds of assessment, including a written exam and a face-to-face interview, Chen was thrilled to be offered a role in the company. One of her male classmates, Zhong, was also hired by the same company in the same recruitment round. Zhong had a rounder physique and was slightly shorter than Chen.

When I started my ethnography in 2008, Chen and Zhong, who were both 27 years old at the time, had worked at the company for a year and both had started as sales assistants. Three years later, when I revisited the company in 2011, Zhong had become a sales manager while Chen was a middle-level sales assistant. By 2015, Chen, who had been praised for her attention to detail and commitment to work, had been promoted to senior level assistant and transferred to a new section. The head of the new section was Zhong.

In addition to being locked in a dead-end job, Chen was resisting mounting pressure from the workplace and her parents to get married. As marriage and family are traditionally viewed as the socio-cultural cornerstone which define a person, and especially a woman, in Chinese society, everyone is expected to get married. Zhong was a conformist; he got married two years

J. Liu, *Gender, Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies*, Gender, Development and Social Change, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50575-0_1

after he joined the company and had a child soon after. In contrast, Chen broke up with her university boyfriend as she felt that he was not kind and respectful towards her. In the eight years which followed, she had been introduced to various potential suitors via matchmaking colleagues and relatives who all focused on the economic wealth of the suitor; however, Chen remained firm in her desire to find someone with whom she also had an emotional connection. In 2016, reflecting upon the career trajectories of Zhong and herself, combined with the pressure to get married, Chen had started to contemplate going abroad to forge an alternative way of life.

Yu

Yu has an oval face, fair skin and almond-shaped eyes with ironed, curly short hair. I first met her in 2007 at her family home where I interviewed her. She was 28 years old at the time. Unlike her mother, who had a middle school education and had been assigned to work in a local factory by the state, after graduating with a BA in business and management studies, Yu had worked her way up to become the sales manager of a state-owned publishing company. Yu owed her role to management's belief that the opposite sex were appealing to each other, and so female employees should be sent to attend business negotiations with the company's predominantly male Chinese clients. According to Yu, doing business within China requires extensive relationship building activities such as taking clients to banquets, karaoke bars and sometimes a sauna.

As a dutiful employee, Yu practised drinking alcohol in private at home to ensure that she could keep pace with her clients. She reported encountering harassment from clients at the leisure venues, but considered this to be an unpleasant but necessary part of working in the male-centred business world. After all, there was no organizational procedure to deal with harassment. Yu's frequent contact with male clients and trips to leisure venues associated with sexual connotations cast a shadow over her reputation. However, Yu felt her business connections were an important career resource and so she ignored the workplace gossip.

In 2011, Yu was introduced to a doctor through a mutual acquaintance. They got married and a year later, she gave birth to a son. With the help of her mother (who took on many childcare duties), she was able to continue her job and attend social gatherings with clients. However, her husband and in-laws frowned upon these frequent interactions with businessmen. Her husband sometimes secretly followed her to the leisure activities and the trust between them gradually broke down. After a period of sustained emotional and verbal abuse from her husband, Yu applied for a divorce when her son was three years old.

Yu's parents initially encouraged her not to give up on her marriage but, witnessing how unhappy she was (and the fact that she was their only child), they stood by her. However, as it is considered socially difficult for a divorced woman with a child to remarry, Yu's parents advised her not to take guardianship of her son. Against her parents' suggestion, Yu insisted upon obtaining guardianship of her son and, after settling the marital property division, Yu moved back in with her parents. As a form of protection as well as revenge, Yu cut all ties between her son and her ex-husband's family. With her parents' help in caring for her son, Yu used her business contacts to switch into a better-paid sales manager role at a bigger company. In order to compensate for the lack of time she spent with her son, Yu pampered him by taking him on various family trips over the weekend and then advertised what a good time they were having by uploading their pictures on social media.

This book provides the first ethnographic account of the work and life of 'white-collar beauties' in China in the new millennium. Hailed by the media as intelligent and beautiful, this group of women is considered to be living an enviable lifestyle on the frontline of a pioneering modernity. Like Chen and Yu, this group of young women share certain common characteristics: urban, highly educated, professional occupation, only child of their natal family and generally have a strong ambition for personal development. Materially and socially, this group enjoys far greater opportunities than older urban women (Liu 2007), rural women migrant workers (Lee 1998; Jacka 2006; Pun 2005; Zheng 2009) and young urban women employed in the classic hospitality industries commonly referred to as 'youth occupations' in China (Hanser 2009; Otis 2012). However, as the stories of Chen and Yu illustrate, life as a 'white-collar beauty' has exposed these women to gender discrimination and sexual consumption; there is a gendered and sexualized story to be told.

Post-socialist China has witnessed a growing deployment of a sexualized femininity in the market domain; as a result, commercial culture and public discourse have been widely imbued with the sexual objectification of women (Zurndorfer 2015). Existing studies on gender and work in China, when touching upon sexuality, have examined the life of sex workers (Zheng 2009) and less-educated service workers (Hanser 2005). This book aims to make an essential and timely contribution to our understanding of highly educated women in the labour market in East Asia. In China, the urban women of the Only Child Generation have gained unprecedented educational investment and enjoy far greater occupational mobility than their mothers' generation. Further, Western feminist studies often view family as a source of subordination, contributing to

a wider system that reproduces women's social and economic inequality. But is this 'cycle of vulnerability' (Okin 1989) reproducing for this particular cohort of women?

Theoretically, by grounding analysis in local socio-cultural meanings and mechanisms of the gender-sex system, this book aims to shed fresh light upon the ways in which gender and sexuality are integral to the processes of compliance and resistance in the structural masculine domination at work beyond a Euro-American parameter. In doing this, the book promotes positioning feminist theory production in local research.

Existing feminist theory remains grounded mostly in an Euro-American axis that has defined its priorities. The recent critique by East Asian scholars in Cultural Studies alert us to the asymmetry of cultural and academic exchange between the 'West' and the rest of the world with the global conceptual vocabulary generally derived from Western theories. Chen (2010) notes,

> Europeans, North Americans …[and others have] been doing area studies in relation to their own living spaces. That is, Martin Heidegger was actually doing European Studies, as were Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas. Once we recognize how extremely limited the current conditions of knowledge are, we learn to be humble about our knowledge claims. The universalist assertions of theory are premature, for theory too must be deimperialized.

Chen highlights the false dichotomy between 'general theories' generated by the Euro-American axis and the particularity of 'area studies' for scholars working on other regions. In comparison with general social scientists, feminist scholars are more sensitive towards analysing inequalities and asymmetries on a global scale, but there is a still long way to go. So far, major attempts to globalize feminism have been framed in terms of an opposition between First World and Third World women or more recently, between North and South (Kandiyoti 1996; Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1994; Mohanty et al. 1991). While it is evidently necessary to develop feminist analyses of the widening gap between rich and poor nations, the effect of this is to exclude Chinese women who are neither Western nor from the global South.

There is a substantial body of literature on Chinese women available in the West (see Hershatter 2004), yet it has only a marginal impact on Western gender studies and feminist theory. This seems to be closely linked to socio-linguistic constructions such as East and West or North and South, which are implicitly premised upon a superiority of the former colonialist

powers. Therefore, epistemologically, rather than being re-trapped in the hierarchical discursive framework enabled by these artificial categories, this book promotes an alternative way of thinking by anchoring feminist theory production in local research. Western feminist theories are 'local' theories written from a Euro-American social reality and any local theory should be viewed as equally important in understanding what an interconnected global structure could be.

Taking cues from anthropologists' warning against a cultural essentialism and a structuralist tradition in sociology (see Giddens 1987; Gupta 1998; Pigg 1992; Rofel 2007), it is suggested here that there are three layers in the foundation of a locality: historical and cultural remnants, socio-political and economic transformations, connections and tensions with other societies/cultures. These three layers of locality do not stand alone but interweave and reshape each other; locality is therefore the result of an accumulative yet interactive mosaic of various forces. Only seen through locality, can it be made possible to understand the complicated and nuanced ways in which social systems such as gender and sexuality could constrain as well as assist women in their compliance with, and resistance to, a masculine domination.

The third objective of this book is to examine women's agency and raise a new feminist inquiry of social change. For most feminist research, the ultimate goal is to challenge hierarchical gender order and achieve justice for women. Grounded in the experiences of young educated women in urban China, it is argued here that a bottom-up approach could be more productive in continuing the unfinished gender revolution in China. When compared with other groups of women in the country, young urban women from the Only Child Generation possess a great potential as agents for social change via their educational capital and advantageous position in the wider intergenerational family. The irreconcilable contradiction between the structural barriers against women's development and women's unprecedented ambition in personal development became an important drive for women to strive for better development/recognition at work. To facilitate women's enactment of agency, it is important for feminist scholars to go beyond examining how women exercise their agency and identify the mechanisms in place that work to a woman's advantage.[1]

Finally, it is noteworthy that, because the companies involved in this empirical examination were mostly Chinese state-owned (i.e. reformed former socialist work units), an implicit aim of this book is to dovetail with my earlier book on gender relations in urban work units (Liu 2007). This should reveal the continuities and changes in gendered employment in