

# Two echo chambers: Contradictions in voices of women social entrepreneurs in China

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**Abstract:** This study uses data from Chengdu, China, to analyse two differing approaches of Chinese women social entrepreneurs in gender discussions and the fight for women's interests: gender and development and women in development. Each approach has formed an echo chamber and the development of social enterprise certification in China has deepened the gap between them. Balancing the practical and strategic interests for policy formulation and cultural construction is a process that requires the coordination of various women's groups and their interests. Better dialogue in the public sphere and social systems is needed to broaden the understanding of women's social entrepreneurship and facilitate a benign reflexive relationship between their differing voices and related policies.

## 1. Introduction

In April 2021, a public dispute, which drew much attention in China, brought gender issues into focus.

A woman, identified as Xiao Meili, and her friends were dining at a hotpot restaurant in Chengdu, while a man at their adjacent table was smoking. Xiao requested the man to stop smoking, explaining that she had lung nodules and could not tolerate second-hand smoke. She changed seats once, and the man stopped smoking for a short time, but soon resumed. When she raised an objection again, the man not only refused to stop smoking but also behaved rudely. Xiao filmed the scene with her phone, which angered the man; he then threw an unidentified liquid at her. When she called the police, the man apologized and compensated Xiao and her friends by paying 1,000 yuan for dry cleaning charges. Xiao wrote about this incident in a post on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website, requesting people to pay serious attention to the issue of tobacco control in public places, as well as gender issues embedded therein. This topic started to attract attention on the Internet, and Xiao's identity as a feminist also triggered a big controversy. Some people asked, 'What does smoking have to do with women's rights?', whereas some pointed out that 'It is okay to discourage smoking, but it is not necessary to provoke gender antagonism'. With public opinion turning against her, Xiao was abused in what was seen as a serious case of cyber bullying. The public welfare activities that she had participated in earlier, social events started by her as a feminist, and her social impact awards were raked up by some people who used them as a tool to criticize her political stance. During this controversy, the original focus of the dispute (tobacco control in public places) was diluted and even shifted. To

combat this situation, Xiao and her friends worked tirelessly to make their voices heard. As one of her friends stated, civic behaviour such as standing up in public spaces to raise legitimate problems and actively defending one's rights is closely related to their feminist ideal.

For a long time, the topic of second-hand smoke in China has often attracted comments such as 'I hate it,' but there also lurks the unspoken statement, 'I dare not say it,' behind these comments. The China Adult Tobacco Survey 2018 released by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) revealed that there are more than 300 million smokers in China [1]. The percentage of smokers over the age of 15 years was 50.5% for males, and 2.1% for females. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) China 2010 Country Report showed that the problem of exposure to second-hand smoke among women is particularly significant [2]. The rate of exposure to second-hand smoke in 15-year-old female non-smokers in China was 71.6%, and 40.7% of women were exposed to second-hand smoke almost every day [3]. The appeal made by Xiao following this incident directly pointed to gender culture as a power relationship. Specifically, China's existing tobacco control regulations in indoor public places do not give non-smoking passers-by (who do not want to be exposed to second-hand smoke) any rights or powers to prevent others from smoking. Thus, under the existing power structure, it is difficult to raise objections against second-hand smoke and safeguard people's (particularly women's) right to health.

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## 2. Feminists' attention to power structures

Feminists have recently been rethinking and resisting this existing power structure, as shown in Xiao's video of the incident. The man (who was smoking) asked Xiao furiously, 'How much did you spend [on food]? What power do you have?' He even tied the act of smoking to masculinity and cultural customs. His supporters believed that the incident itself was trivial (thus implying that because it was so common, Xiao should have been used to it); they believed it was Xiao and her feminist friends who provoked gender antagonism and thus committed a heinous crime. Afterwards, during the serious case of cyber bullying, Xiao and her friends still insisted that when people talk about 'gender inequality,' they compare 'men's social status' with 'women's social status,' and, evidently, women have always been the oppressed party. When a group's oppression of another is widespread in society, opposition already exists. Shen [4] has mentioned in her latest article that we need to reorganize the causal relationship between difference and discrimination among genders. She cited related studies by Lorber [5] and Scott [6], pointing out that the gender construct has produced the social differences that define 'man' and 'woman', that is, people are divided into men and women, thus creating differences between them. As Rippon [7] has said, 'A gendered world will produce a gendered brain'. Therefore, the gender differences do not cause inequality, but rather inequality causes differences between genders. Inequality is the value judgment behind the differences. A crucial criticism of Xiao's reaction to the aforementioned incident was that her behaviour—narrating her ordeal on Weibo with photographic evidence and a public appeal highlighting the gender culture as a power relationship—highlighted the differences between men and women, which could cause antagonism between the two genders. However, the appearance of the differences between men and women is one of the manifestations of women's rejection and oppression by men, rather than the cause.

## 3. Feminists as social entrepreneurs

Another point for which Xiao was attacked in cyberspace was regarding a feminist Taobao (a Chinese shopping platform) clothing store that she founded and had been operating since 2012. With the intention of establishing this original clothing store brand, she stated that feminist visual products in fashion culture are also important channels of communication and expression. In addition to making their voices heard against misogynist marketing, she also hopes that people who use feminist products, regardless of whether they are men or women, can feel united, excited, and happy when they recognize each other on the streets for having similar beliefs. However, those who mocked and questioned her, alleged that the concept of 'feminists also have to eat' was absurd and accused Xiao and her friends of advocating under the banner of feminism for money. For a long

time, while conducting advocacy campaigns and promoting public discussions on gender issues, feminists such as Xiao have encountered various stigmas associated with the word 'feminism'. Stigmatizing terms such as 'pastoral feminism' and 'feminist bitch' have been hurled at them.

Although no unanimously agreed upon definition exists, Xiao is undoubtedly a social entrepreneur, as the core characteristic of a social entrepreneur is the dual mission of social and economic value creation. This has been recognized by many scholars [8,9,10]. Dees and Anderson [11] propose that social entrepreneurship encompasses not only earning income to achieve social goals but also innovation, social impact, social value, and social goals. They argue that social enterprises should innovate by integrating corporate and philanthropic methods to create sustainable social value. Peredo and McLean [12] articulate an understanding of social entrepreneurship with 'appropriate flexibility' in the following five characteristics: (1) aims at creating social value, this could be in flexible forms ("either exclusively or at least in some prominent way"); (2) has a capacity of opportunity identification to create that value; (3) innovates within a wide range from 'outright invention to adapting someone else's novelty' in serving social value; (4) would be willing to take 'an above-average degree of risk'; and (5) knows the value of 'being relatively undated by scarce assets' in the social venture. The last characteristic has been discussed further in other studies in the field of social entrepreneurship and is defined as social bricolage [13], which refers to invention by reconfiguring and converting existing resources when resources are scarce. In this sense, Xiao's clothing store employed creative marketing methods that are different from mainstream ones (according to Saebi et al.'s classification of social entrepreneurial activities [14]). Xiao's company mainly adopted a one-way value model; for example, social enterprises adopt innovative methods to minimize production and transportation costs, in order to be able to sell affordable products or services to beneficiaries, when lacking resources in terms of funds, talent, policy support, and so on, to promote their own social values. Xiao invested most of the company's income in feminist activities, which makes it a relatively mature social enterprise.

## 4. The main voice: women social entrepreneurs in certified social enterprises committed to women's interests

In China, social entrepreneurship and social enterprises have been attracting attention in both academia and private industry in recent years. Let us consider Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province in China where Xiao lives, as an example. In 2018, the Chengdu Municipal Government took the lead in issuing a series of documents, such as 'Opinions on Cultivating Social Enterprises to Promote Community Development and Governance'. The document clearly states the relevant

tax policies and regulations regarding the development of social enterprises. The Chengdu government defines social enterprise as a specific business type that is registered by the enterprise registration authority; their main purpose is to help solve societal problems, improve social governance, serve disadvantaged and special groups (such as the elderly, migrant workers, the unemployed, the disabled, and low-income families) or community interests, adopt innovative business models and market-oriented operations as the main tools, and reinvest profits in their own business, the community, or public welfare projects based on their social purpose, which should be unwavering. As the first city to clarify that social enterprises were not launched by registration but by evaluation and certification until 2019, Chengdu had 63 social enterprises certified by China Charity Fair (CCF), ranking first among Chinese cities [15]. At the same time, based on its own annual certification that started in 2018 and developed by a third party (a non-profit organization) authorized by the city's Industry and Commerce Bureau, it currently has a total of 72 certified social enterprises. These certified social enterprises benefit from a series of financial and policy support systems. Females account for approximately one-third of the founders of these social enterprises, and their fields mostly focus on education, community development, employment services, and skills training. Four social enterprises clearly state that they are dedicated to women's interests (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Certified Social Enterprises Set up by Women Social Entrepreneurs Committed to Women's Interests in Chengdu.

Name	Year of Certification	Mission
Chengdu City Window Cultural Development Co., Ltd. (City Window)	2018	Help with the employment and survival of women at home and those left behind in poorly developed areas.
Chengdu Miss Startup Technology Social Enterprise Co., Ltd. (Miss Startup)	2018	Promote women's innovation and entrepreneurship.  Provide women entrepreneurs with assistance and services in business incubation, brand promotion and related areas.
Chengdu Mordo Culture Communication Co., Ltd. (Mordo)	2019	Help poor women in rural areas and people with disabilities to acquire skills and work at home.
Chengdu Xishu	2020	Set up a training and employment service platform,

Qiaomei Housekeeping Service Co., Ltd.  (Xishu)	run by women, to provide assistance to women between the ages of 30 and 55 years.  Provide vocational skills training to women, mainly for providing care such as maternity care, senior care and housekeeping.
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Table 1 shows that these social enterprises have many similarities. Except for Miss Startup, all the enterprises seek to help disadvantaged women find jobs; further, most of their activities pertaining to training and employment generation are concentrated in the traditional hand embroidery industry and field of health care. Regarding Miss Startup, a year after its establishment, the organization shifted its core business to providing the social services that have been set as the focus of development by the local government. Miss Startup repositioned itself as a 'community quality service provider', rallying for various projects in the community, and providing services to the community. Through the aforementioned entrepreneurial activities, women entrepreneurs have become successful advocates for other women, and their social enterprises have been supported and honoured by the government. This brand of social entrepreneurship by women is well in line with the Women in Development (WID) approach implemented by the government since 2001, which has strived to improve the condition of women and change the reality of inequality between men and women by integrating women into the mainstream of economic, political, and social life. Currently, its development strategy places more emphasis on economic growth and glorifies market mechanisms. Against this background, these recognized women social entrepreneurs have created a set of 'orthodox' discourse systems for women's development and the improvement of their status. With some economic achievements gained in the process, they have become representatives of 'feminism' in China today.

## 5. Two voices and two developmental approaches

However, there is another group of women that comprises controversial feminists such as Xiao and her friends. It is difficult for them to obtain support from the government and empathy from the public for their social entrepreneurship; they are also likely to be easily marginalized and stigmatized. They voice their opinions in their own echo chamber, pointing out that the current environment of economic empowerment, which refers to the promotion of women's participation in the market to enable them to obtain cash income as individuals or groups, has merely integrated women into the existing process of development without affecting the power relations that cause inequality between men and women. As Razavi and Miller [16] observe, WID avoids challenging the root causes of women's oppression and subordination, and this non-confrontational approach

does not fundamentally change women's marginalization. The author interviewed the founder (a friend of Xiao) of a national feminist organization. She emphasized three aspects: 1) refusing to regard women as 'problems' of development or passive victims; 2) believing that we must examine the gender relationship in the developmental process and focus on changing the unequal power relations between women and men in the family and society; 3) emphasizing that women are not a homogeneous category, but are divided into different groups based on class, race, ethnicity, and so on. As for successful 'elite women', their class identity is higher than their gender identity; thus, some of their opinions and values cannot represent those of the majority of women. From this point of view, it appears that this founder seems to be more inclined to the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, and her perspective is consistent with the GAD theoretical proposition summarized by Martinussen [17]. Her as well as her companions' feminist activities have emphasized the strengthening of women's participation and empowerment through women's self-organization. Moreover, they actively initiate discussions on public issues in everyday life (such as the issue of smoking in public places cited earlier) and use it as an opportunity to examine the social relations between men and women and the mechanisms of women's subordination to men; they also advocate gender analysis by linking the gender system with the family unit, communities, markets, countries, and other systems. As Geotz [18] observes, this shift from the WID approach to the GAD approach embodies the re-evaluation of the concept, analysis, and action of gender equity policy.

## 6. Challenges: embracing contradictions

Regrettably, the two voices of women's development have not converged but, instead, have formed their own echo chambers. Specifically, in the field of social entrepreneurship, the currently fast-growing development of social enterprise certification in China has to some extent increased the differences and gaps between the two approaches. There is almost no platform or institution facilitating dialogue and cooperation between proponents of the two voices. One represents women's practical gender interests in a mainstream and 'orthodox' manner, which refers to the needs that women have in their daily lives due to the specific situations they face. These kinds of needs are often viewed from the prism of the roles assigned to them, which stem from the traditional gender division of labour: healthcare, chores and works for the family, community services, and so on. These divisions sometimes involve requirements for more equal educational opportunities, job opportunities, and so forth [19]. The other considers public discussion an entry point to resist existing gender power structures, particularly focusing on the realization of women's strategic gender interests. This means that systemic adjustments to social structures and social relationships

between the genders must be made to achieve overarching changes. Shen [4] points out that these two voices are contradictory. The realization of women's practical gender interests may harm women's strategic gender interests because the former is often adjusted based on accepting the traditional division of labour, whereas the latter requires a change in the traditional division of labour. However, Shen also indicates that the two are occasionally consistent, such as in terms of improving women's work environments and providing women with equal job opportunities.

## 7. Conclusion

Balancing the interests of the two bands of interests (practical gender interests and strategic gender interests) for policy formulation and cultural construction is often a process of coordinating the interests of different women groups [4]. At present, those categories across which women's social entrepreneurship is divided and are favoured by policy inclination are relatively limited, and the development of these social enterprises has clear policy-driven characteristics. For example, Miss Startup has changed its position from 'female entrepreneurship' to 'community quality service provider', and the reason behind this change is the local government's view of social enterprises as an important tool for community building. Additionally, the implementation of social enterprise certification has accorded the WID approach an overwhelming position in this field. The GAD approach represented by feminists in the field of social entrepreneurship (particularly in social bricolage) has been neglected by existing policies and related research. Therefore, fostering better dialogue in the public sphere and improved social systems in the future may broaden the understanding of women's social entrepreneurship and facilitate the formation of a benign reflexive relationship between their differing voices and related policies, rather than establish one-way guidance or intentional and unintentional neglect. Further discussion and research on this topic are thus merited.

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