

“THERE IS NO DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN”

Yiping Cai

- *The Chinese historian who advocates that men and women should have access to the same resources and rights*

By Luiza Bodenmüller

Yiping Cai came into contact with what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society even before she was born. Baptised by her grandfather, she was given a neutral name, which is used in China for both girls and boys while the family awaits the birth of the first child. She was born as Yiping. “Even though I was born a girl, they did not change my name. So, I think they simply accepted it”, the historian commented. While she affirms that she has never suffered gender discrimination, Yiping says that she was drawn to women’s rights issues during a series of meetings.

During university, she familiarised herself with social and economic issues and even though it was rare to hear about gender in discussions, Yiping chose to view the world from this perspective. “I also began to look at the role of women in history because we didn’t talk about women. A lot of the history we study is about men. So my question was: where are the women in history?”, she remembered. It was during this period of questioning that Yiping began to work as a journalist in a newspaper for women.

For Yiping, her contact with gender issues came from her contact with reality. These issues are “holistic” and directly related to other aspects, such as social, cultural and economic ones. Even though China’s constitution recognises gender equality, Yiping believes that this

equality is not enforced in a meaningful way. When a woman gets married, for example, she ceases to be part of her family of origin and becomes a member of her husband's family. Land titles are registered in the name of the leader of the family, which is the man. Therefore, when a couple gets divorced, the woman is left without the right to land: “Where will this woman go? Where will she get access to land from?”, Cai asks. Selective abortions that allow boys to be carried to term while girls are disposed of are also common. Today, there are more boys born in China than girls. Issues seen in other developing countries also exist in China, such as the wage gap between men and women in the labour market.

According to the historian, development in China, however, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought a series of issues related to women to the surface, which had a direct impact on the traditional patriarchal society upon which the country was built. “Many policymakers recognise women's contributions and the importance of engaging women in the development process”, she affirms. “But are we also recognising women's rights or are we only seeing them as a tool for development?”

The turning point in Yiping's career was in 1995, during the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. “Thousands of women from all over the world were discussing a range of issues that I had never thought or even heard of before. This experience made me certain that I really was interested in the matter and that this is what I wanted to work on”, Yiping explained. In her ten-year career as a reporter, she had the opportunity to come into contact with Chinese women from a wide variety of social and cultural spectra: from the country's elite to farmers and from famous to socially vulnerable women. But it was one interview in particular that sealed Yiping's fate.



After suffering from years of domestic violence, one woman felt empowered enough to lay charges against her husband and put him in prison. But the process that led to the trial had not been an easy one. For years, she sought the help of various public authorities in vain. The trial - and the conviction - was only possible after two groups linked to the fight for women's rights intervened. “What she said at the time was what made me feel the need to do something for the rights of women. She said, ‘you know, when my husband would beat me, I felt that he wasn't treating me like a human being. But when I went to these agencies for help, I realised that the people who were supposed to offer me help weren't protecting me either. They also did not treat me like a human being’”, Cai recalls.

It was these experiences that led Yiping to join DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era. DAWN is a network that brings together activists and feminists from the Global South with the goal of producing knowledge and investing in advocacy for the construction and consolidation of public policies that propose alternatives for the inclusion of women in society. For her, there is no democratic development without the participation and contribution of women and, more importantly, if women do not occupy space as rights holders. This is where she gained the understanding that the struggle to ensure that men and women have access to the same resources and rights – and take advantage of development in the country in the same way – is a valid fight that deserves more dedication.

In the case of China, Yiping highlights some points that she feels are essential for achieving gender equality. One basic idea is the enforcement of existing laws that guarantee women's rights. Yiping emphasises that the law that criminalises domestic violence was implemented only in March 2016 and creating new laws is just as important as guaranteeing compliance with the ones that already exist. Furthermore, she believes that increasing women's political participation at all levels – from the parliament to the village councils – is vital so that women start participating in decision-making processes and putting issues and proposals on the table from the perspective of women.

This Chinese activist also stresses the importance of the feminist movement recognising - and accepting - its own diversity. There is not only one agenda; there are multiple agendas and multiple struggles and one must reflect on the tools and strategies of each of these issues in various ways and in accordance with the plurality of contexts. Finally, Cai defends dialogue between the feminist movement and other social movements. “The only way for us to become stronger is through mutual support and by building alliances, because the opposition, the institutions we face are very strong and powerful. There is no way we can win the battle alone. We need allies, support from other social movements and activists”, she argues. In Yiping's case, neutrality is limited to her name, and not her struggle. Looking at the world from a gender perspective has become the main motto of her life and her work, which is now a source of inspiration and empowerment. There is no going back on this path and it is one that cannot be walked alone.



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