Distortion and Rights:
A Study of Women's Rights Based on Public Communication

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#### **Abstract**

This essay examines the evolution of women's rights in modern China, focusing on the political and social dynamics that have influenced their development. Through the case studies of the personal self-media account "Song Qingfeng" and the feminist bookstore "La otra", it examines how internet-based gender antagonism intersects with grassroots feminist initiatives. A gender dichotomy is created by emphasizing the economic pressures faced by men in Song Qingfeng and contrasting these with perceived female privileges. This narrative attracts significant viewership but exacerbates gender antagonism and distorts public understanding of feminism and gender equality. In contrast, "La Otra" promotes gender equality and women's rights through public events and discussions, while maintaining operations by adhering to regulatory frameworks, aligning with mainstream values, and leveraging online marketing despite cyber violence and opposition from society at large. In a conservative public authority and traditional social norms, grassroots cultural enterprises face challenges and can advance social change. For the effective promotion of gender equality and women's rights in China, the study emphasizes the multifaceted nature of gender issues and advocates for a holistic strategy that integrates online activism with offline educational and policy efforts.

# 1. Evolution of women's rights in modern China

Since mankind entered a patriarchal society, women have long been in an unequal position of being deprived of all kinds of rights, a phenomenon that continues to this day. In political science, women's rights are usually defined as women's ability to participate, express and enjoy their rights in the political sphere. This includes a focus on women's participation in political decision-making, holding public office, and enjoying the right to vote and to be elected. The political science definition of women's rights and interests emphasizes the application of the principle of gender equality in the political system and the importance of eliminating gender discrimination and promoting women's participation in politics.

The understanding of women's rights has evolved as society has progressed and understanding has deepened. In the early part of the 20th century, the political science definition of women's rights may have focused more on appeals to the basic rights of women to participate in politics, such as the right to vote and the right to be elected. However, in the second half of the 20th century, this definition gradually expanded to a broader scope, including a focus on gender equality, gender consciousness, and gender justice. In 1949, the United Nations promulgated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which explicitly included a statement guaranteeing equal rights for women. This initiative signaled the international community's formal attention and commitment to women's rights. Prior to this, however, women had long been exploited. Since the reform and opening up of China in 1978, research on women and gender studies has been active in Chinese intellectual circles, but limitations remain. Although there has been much interpretation and discussion of Western feminist theories, scientific analysis and theoretical generalization of the problems faced by Chinese women are still insufficient.

# 2. Challenges to women's power

The development of Chinese women's status took an important turn at the World Conference on Women held in 1995. The Beijing Declaration adopted by the conference explicitly put forward for the first time the proposition that "women's rights are human rights", providing important support for the universal recognition of women's rights. At the same time, the Declaration states that "equality between women and men is a condition for human rights and social justice, and an essential prerequisite for equality, development and peace". This evaluation criterion is extremely important for the promotion of global gender equality. However, Hong Lida points out that in the era of post-socialist reforms, the various benefits that women have gained in the historical stage have been undermined. In recent years, feminist actions in

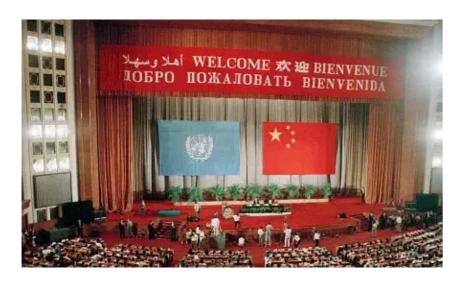


Figure 2-1. In 1995, the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women was held in Beijing.https://www.sohu.com/a/534400345\_121106991

China have become increasingly "politically sensitive" and even suppressed by public power.<sup>2</sup>

From 1995 to the present, the suppression of women's rights in China has gone through several core stages. First, the collapse of government credibility marginalized gender equality issues, resulting in a lack of strong political support for women's rights advocacy. Second, between 2014 and 2018, the Chinese government swiftly banned many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those working on gender equality and women's rights. This action not only weakened the civil power of women's rights defense, but also limited society's open discussion and research on gender issues. At the same time, the high-handed management policy has, to a certain extent, stimulated the awakening of women's consciousness. In the face of repression and injustice, more and more women have begun to pay attention to their rights and express their demands through social media and other channels. However, this awakening has also been accompanied by a retreat of women's rights, and many women have faced social and legal pressures after speaking out publicly, making their situation even more difficult.

- 1. Greenhalgh, S., & Wang, X. (2019). China's feminist fight: #metoo in the middle kingdom. Foreign Affairs,98(4), 170-176.
- 2. Han, L., & Lee, C. (2019). Nudity, feminists, and Chinese online censorship: A case study on the anti-domestic violence campaign on Sina Weibo. China Information, 33(3), 274-293. https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X18807083

# 2.1 Chinese-style male-female antagonism (Internet misogyny)

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 was a turning point in the rise of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Promoted by the FWCW's Independent Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations (IFNGO) and funded by overseas foundations, the first generation of feminist NGOs in China began to form and flourish. Since then, the feminist movement has usually been considered politically safe. However, after a brief boom, feminist activism in China is once again in the doldrums.

In 2012, a new feminist movement was sparked by a younger generation of feminists who created news and attracted public attention through street performance art such as "Occupy Men's Restrooms", pushing the government to increase the ratio of pitches in male and female toilets by making their own foam toilets. Since 2014, however, the feminist movement has faced greater challenges due to increased media control, with media in Guangdong province explicitly banning coverage of feminist topics. In addition, certain controversial issues among women themselves, such as the discussion on the bride price, have also had an impact on the advancement of the feminist move-

ment. The controversy mainly focuses on the heavy financial burden that the high bride price imposes on the man's family in some areas.



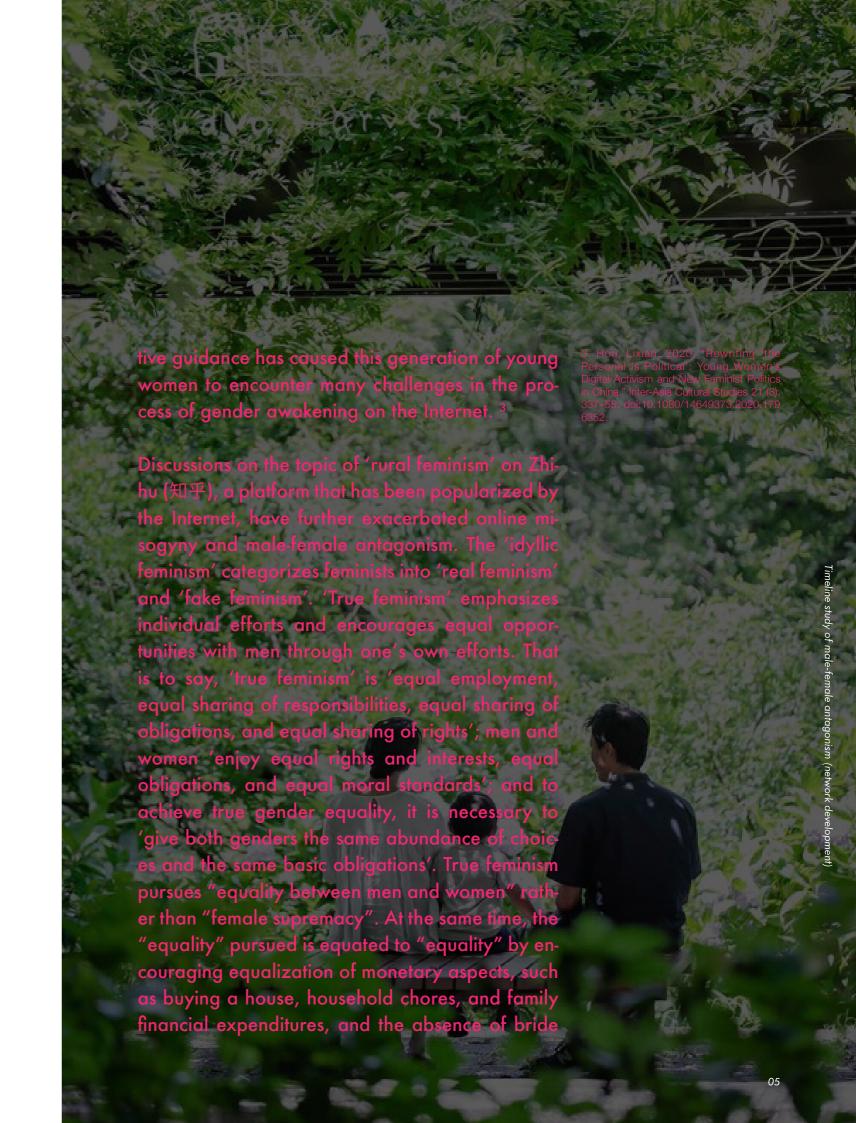
Figure 2-2. On March 06, 2012, four female students held a sign saying "Occupy the men's toilet, let me relieve myself" in Chengdu City.https://m.thepaper.cn/

In summary, the early controversies are generally accepted in society where the debates are mainly focused on the online community. Whereas the male and female side of the marriage, the parties' attitude was to solve the problem and consummate the marriage. However, with the blooming of social media, the aggressive viewpoints on such platforms as opposed to reality, transformed into completely unjustified arguments.

# 2.2 Timeline study of male-female antagonism (network development)

In recent years, the rapid development of Internet platforms and social media has contributed to the spread and popularization of feminism in China, enabling a younger generation of feminists to use these platforms to promote feminist views. This trend has contributed to the development of socalled "neoliberal feminism", which has exposed younger women to feminist culture. At the same time, however, it has also contributed to a culture of hate speech and misogyny. Meanwhile, the government's selective deletion has had a very negative impact on the overall communication which reflects the government's attitudes.

Since 2014, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China have faced severe policy pressure, especially those working to promote women's rights. Government censorship and regulation have led to the closure or restricted activities of several NGOs that support women's education and rights. Against this backdrop, the Internet has become a new battleground for the younger generation of women to explore and express their gender consciousness. Although the Internet provides a relatively free space for discussion, the lack of systematic gender education and authorita-



price and dowry. False feminism, also known as "idyllic feminism", is summarized as a combination of rights without obligations, i.e., a subtle blend of traditional Chinese family values and Western feminist ideology, but only enjoying the rights and benefits of both models without fulfilling the obligations of either, a 'double standard'. 'double standard'. The rights that "idyllic feminists" aspire to enjoy include, but are not limited to, men earning money to support their families, a high bride price, signing real estate certificates, and high holiday gifts. Obligations that they do not fulfill include what traditional Chinese women are called 'obligations', i.e., family responsibilities within the traditional Chinese family, such as household chores, raising children, and selflessly sacrificing their careers to serve the family.

Social media platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu have become a major venue for young women to discuss gender issues. On these platforms, female users actively share their personal experiences and initiate online discussions on issues such as gender discrimination and domestic violence. However, this spontaneous online activity also exposes problems caused by a lack of education, such as polarized views, immature strategies and internal divisions. More seriously, the phenomenon of "blowing up" on the Internet, in which accounts of certain viewpoints are blocked through a large number of reports, reflects the confrontational and exclusive nature of the online discussion space.

In addition, research has shown that although the Internet provides a new platform for women to express and interact with each other, this digital gen-

der awakening has not necessarily led to actual policy changes or fundamental shifts in social attitudes. <sup>4</sup> This suggests that future gender education and promotion of women's rights need to rely not only on the expansion of cyberspace, but also on the combination of physical educational resources and policy support to form a comprehensive promotion strategy that combines online and offline.

In such a social structure, men at the bottom not only have to bear the economic exploitation from the capitalist mechanism, but also have to face the competitive pressure from the same sex. Their social status and self-worth are often based on the suppression and control of women, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in online misogynistic behavior. At the center of this logical chain is gender competition, reflecting the complexity of the underlying male perspective on feminist issues under social pressure.

Under the neo-liberal capitalist system, men at the bottom are themselves in a disadvantaged position, facing multiple dilemmas such as unstable jobs, insufficient income and psychological pressure. In their efforts to maintain their social status, they often target women, who are even more vulnerable in the social structure, and wrongly attribute their personal struggles to women's "privileges" and "advantages". This strategy of shifting focus is not only a self-protection mechanism, but also inadvertently supports and perpetuates socio-economic inequality and patriarchy.

4. Siyuan Yin & Sun Yu (2020): Intersectional digital feminism: assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1837908

# 3. A case study of the personal self-media account Song Qingfeng

#### 3.1 Basic information

"Song Qingfeng" Account Details: Formerly known as "Song Qingfeng, the No. 1 Anti-Punching Man". The account is operated by an individual named "Song Qingfeng", who uses his personal background as an IP and is active on the WeChat video platform, a typical virtual individual who spreads his personal views through the Internet, opens a window for merchandise after accumulating a period of traffic, and conducts occasional live broadcasts to bring goods. Due to the special mode of WeChat video number that does not count the number of fans following the account, the number of followers of the account cannot be seen at present. As of February 14, 2024, the account has produced a total of 443 pieces of original content. The operator of this account also operates the WeChat public number "Song Qingfeng's Nest", which shares occasional essays and has produced a total of 23 pieces of original content, and is currently certified by WeChat as an "Emotional Self-media".

Based on the statistics of 443 original videos on this account, the subject categories of the videos cover a wide range of areas such as emotions, values, marriage, work, and so on. The keywords and tags of the videos mainly focus on 'gender topics' 'gender equality' 'male and female topics' 'emotion' 'female fist' 'female fist' and 'female fist' and 'female fist' 'relationship view' 'fairy' 'double standard'.

The account takes a male perspective, and by emphasizing the plight and pressure faced by men in marriage and family, contrasting with the socalled privileges enjoyed by women, such as financial strength and full-time motherhood, and subtly 'grafting' negative behaviors made by some women onto all women, highlighting the various unfair treatments of men in society. It attempts to evoke anger and empathy in the male audience. In fact, most of the women in the extreme cases cited by the blogger do not have the status of feminist, but are just ordinary women, and do not represent 'radical feminists', let alone all women. The blogger's behavior, on the surface of attacking 'extreme feminism', actually stigmatizes all women. Lastly, by creating so-called male-female dichotomies and contradictions, the blogger shifted the focus from male oppression under the capitalist system to blaming women, thus achieving the goal of attracting viewers and gaining traffic and money.

By describing and discussing the pressures and dilemmas faced by Chinese men, such as the house, bride price, and sense of responsibility, Song Qingfeng triggers empathy and concern among male viewers. And cleverly attributes the gift of men to women in the process of relationship to 'sense of responsibility'. In fact, men's gift to women is misunderstood as an exchange of value that should be worth more than what it is worth, but in reality, men are often unwilling to fulfill their due responsibilities and use it as an excuse for exploitation.

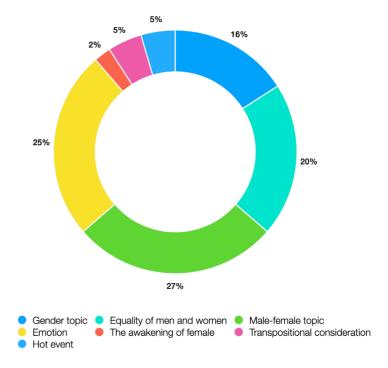
This content echoes the impact of conservative public power on men's social status, emphasizing the responsibilities and pressures on men in the family and society, but at the same time deflects attention by focusing on complaints about women.

Song Qingfeng's short videos often use compelling titles and keywords, such as 'Chinese men's unique thoughts' and 'Men can't earn waste for 20w', to attract viewers' clicks and attention. These headlines tend to exaggerate the plight and victimization of men, thus winning more traffic and attention. By creating public opinion and provoking confrontation between men and women, men are viewed as a vulnerable group exploited by "women", and by comparing men in overseas countries where there is no pressure to pay a bride price or buy a house, they highlight the "suffering" of Chinese men and try to capitalize on such emotional resonance to He tries to capitalize on this emotional resonance for his own benefit. He chooses to contrast the plight and struggles of men with the 'privileges' and 'advantages' of women, thus reinforcing his position and the appeal of the topic. This approach is not only a misinterpretation and distortion of feminist issues, but also a misrepresentation and misunderstanding of social reality.

### Song Qingfeng's videos usually adopt the following logical model:

- (1) Creating virtual "suffering": By bringing up the problems faced by men in marriage and family (such as bride price, mortgage, unreasonable demands from partners, etc.), it creates emotional resonance in the viewers.
- 2) Reinforce the empathy of male viewers: Focus on the economic pressures and challenges of men's lives in a capitalist society to create empathy.
- 3) Shift the perspective to gender dichotomy: By showing the so-called inequality between men and women, the viewer is led to blame women for the problem, especially by wrongly generalizing the extreme behaviors of some women to that of all women.

### The proportion of topics on Song Qingfeng's videos



#### Gaozhan Video Analysis (WeChat Video No. Platform)

| Highly Liked Video | Number of likes | Content analysis   | #Topic  |  |
|--------------------|-----------------|--|---|--|
| 1                  | 2.4w            | Emphasizes the economic pressure and social expectations faced by Chinese men, who need to prepare a house and a bride price in order to gain women's respect. Points out that women generally believe that men should take on this responsibility, but will not show the appropriate respect. Emphasizes the importance of men working hard, but also points out that even if they do, the bride price is still a social norm, and the lack of a bride price may affect a marriage. | # Gender topic # Gender equality # Gender topic # Emotion # What is love # Love concept # Female boxing # empathy |  |
| 2                  | 2.7w            | Referring to quarrels between couples, emphasizes that love runs both ways and mutual tolerance. Calls on men not to lose their temper over trivial matters, while emphasizing that men should not occupy the position of the humble inferior in a relationship.   |   |  |
| 3                  | 1.2w            | Criticizes the unfair expectations of men, such as the belief that not having enough financial strength is a sign of incompetence. Emphasizes the pressures and burdens that men bear in the family, such as having to work and earn enough money to get married.Points out that men face pressure from society and family to meet certain economic conditions in order to be seen as successful men.  |   |  |
| 4                  | 1.3w            | Criticizes public opinion's entertaining treatment of male tragedies and emphasizes that men's plight and struggles should be taken seriously. Points out that public opinion's entertaining treatment of male tragedies is a gender dichotomy, with men seen as objects of jokes or farce. The due respect and care for male tragedies is emphasized against gender bias and double standards.  |   |  |



Figure 3-1. The 380,000 yuan bride price mentioned in the video is compared with the 380,000 yuan can buy goods.

#### 3.2 Analytical study

Within the framework of patriarchy, men are usually regarded as the pillars of the family, a role that gives them a certain amount of power but also puts them under tremendous economic and social pressure. Especially in rural areas, this pressure is more pronounced and often manifests itself in the economic exploitation of males as well as the unfair distribution of educational resources. For example, boys are often expected to take on the responsibility of being the breadwinner, which not only limits their access to education, but also increases the pressure they face in the future.

However, despite the heavy economic burden placed on men, patriarchy has not been challenged as a result. On the contrary, it is often strengthened by shifting the focus to more vulnerable groups - children and women. In many rural areas, "patriarchal" attitudes remain deeply entrenched, and the exploitation of women and girls in terms of educational and social opportunities is commonplace. In addition, this gender bias is reflected, for example, in marriage practices, where women are often seen as part of the economic exchange between families.

Through the observation of several male accounts on social media that hold similar views to Song Qingfen, such as "Sugar Gekko 01 Big Blue Book" "Damon Kochi Male Emotional Counselor" and others it can be seen that these accounts often disseminate information about how men are neglected or exploited in society and in the family. While these narratives shed light on the problems faced by men, they tend to ignore the broader societal structural issues of how patriarchy itself maintains male dominance at the expense of women's rights.

## 3.3 Underlying Logic of Account Generation

To summarize, Under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, the intertwining of socio-economic structures and patriarchy in Asia has intensified the competitive relationship between genders, especially the complexity presented between underlying Asian men and feminist issues. Neoliberal capitalism emphasizes market freedom, individualism, and competition, which not only leads to significant socio-economic inequalities, but also enhances the pressure on men to compete for economic and authority. In this environment, the traditional patriarchal system is used as a tool to maintain the existing class and gender order, reinforcing men's gender role identity as the pillar of the family and representative of authority.

This content strategy not only reflects the disadvantaged position and pressure of men in society, but also reveals that under the influence of conservative public power, some disadvantaged groups may choose to maintain their social status by exploiting more disadvantaged groups. By doing so, Song Qingfeng attracts viewers and increases traffic and financial gains, but this may at the same time exacerbate gender antagonism and distort the public's understanding of gender equality and feminism. While this tactic may be effective in the short term, it may have a negative impact on gender relations in society in the long term.

## 3.4 Diffusion of influence from private to public domains

In the digital age, the influence of private accounts to the public sphere is increasingly significant. Content creators with low education and weak logical thinking skills, such as Song Qingfeng, are not only limited to the private sphere in the content they publish through their personal accounts, but are also able to widely disseminate to the public sphere and influence public opinion. In this process, the mechanisms of communication science exacerbate the male-female dichotomy, especially when content creators emphasize the gender dichotomy to attract viewers and increase traffic, which in turn drives economic benefits. For example, attracting attention by showing inequality between men and women in life and work, or by exploiting images of women, while these practices can bring shortterm attention and financial gain, they may have a negative impact on the improvement of gender relations in the long run.

This proliferation from the personal sphere to the public sphere demonstrates the important role of social media platforms in modern societies, but also reflects how modern communication tools can be used to reinforce or challenge existing social structures and gender roles.

# 4. A case studies of La otra-the first feminist bookstore in Beijing

#### 4.1 Basic Information about La otra

La otra was established at the end of March 2023, with a start-up capital of 100,000 RMB. The bookstore has a floor area of about 60 square meters, the old location was in the alley space, and the new location is in the Cultural Park of No. 1, Halfbidian, Chaoyang District, Beijing. According to the owner, Cui hisself, the initial motivation for the bookstore was twofold: 1) He wanted to promote the status quo of gender equality in the country, and 2) the owner, Cui was raised by his mother, growing up in a so-called single-parent family, and rebelling against his stepfather, and so he felt that it would have been a good idea if his mother had been able to see more when he was younger and had more knowledge, for example, of the world. able to have more knowledge, such as being exposed to feminism, perhaps she could have had more choices in her life. In addition, the bookstore's function is close to that of a "transit point," i.e., it serves as a platform for discussion of cultural and social issues through the organization of lectures, seminars, and other public events. Cui's also tries to be a force for social change. Although the bookstore makes a profit, its main goal is to influence and educate the community.



Figure 4-1. Proprietor of the bookstore Photo source: "Youth People's Congress People's News Department

When the bookstore was launched, the store's manager, Cui, received a lot of publicity, mainly focusing on his male identity. According to Cui, "Many readers who enter the store are curious and careful to ask the question - why are you, a man, opening such a bookstore". At the same time, the network platform on the attack on Cui did not stop. In the face of cyber violence, Ah Cui said, 'the emotional level is definitely hurt, and then rationally can also understand. Because for many people nowadays, gender has become an outlet for people to vent, and in the past years, the male group also has a certain degree of oppression and injury to the female group, so people may naturally produce a kind of unfortunate feeling, this kind of unfortunate feeling first of all is understandable. Secondly, the Internet is not a particularly good place for discussion and communication in an anonymous environment, so people may amplify some of their daily lives, whether it's malice, bad opinions or anger, and they may express it more recklessly. And in a way, gender for an outlet, so that I can understand everyone's such a number of views. Because. It's true that, number

one, it's true that a lot of men did roll over doing things like this before, and it's true that men have oppressed and victimized women for a long time before, and it's also true that this exists.



Figure 4-2. The "I am Free" sharing event at the bookstore.https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8fAFvxJGn-AY1cXyC4p8ZA



Figure 4-3. A corner of the bookstore. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8fAFvxJGn-AY1cXyC4p8ZA

#### **Evaluation and Revenue**

La otra has received positive reviews from some segments of the population in the region, especially those who support gender equality and women's rights. However, commercial profitability is not its main pursuit, so it may not be as financially viable as a purely commercial bookstore. In addition, the operation of the bookstore depends on community participation and support for its cultural activities.



Figure 4-4. I organized a cultural event at the bookstore

#### 4.2 Analyzing Research

In early 2024, the first feminist bookstore in Shenzhen closed for political reasons. Compared to Half, a feminist bookstore in Shenzhen, the fact that La otra was able to survive can be attributed to the following three points:

1) Staying in touch with political power: To ensure that its activities and operations do not touch the red line of policy, La otra reports every social activity with the community where it is located and passes through the approval process to ensure that its activities are carried out within a safe range. Meanwhile, La otra is governed by the Office for the Administration of Overseas Non-Governmental Organizations of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau (under the Ministry of Public Security).

Events hosted or organized by La otra are particularly tightly regulated during the sessions and Pride month.

- 2) Endorsement of mainstream values: While promoting gender equality, Cui's strategy is to engage in a modest renewal of social attitudes without overly challenging mainstream values.
- 3) Online attraction to promote physical consumption: Attracting customers to physical stores through online marketing and social media campaigns is a common way of survival for modern independent bookstores.

In emphasizing gender issues, La otra may be at-

tacked by negative feedback or opposing views in cyberspace, and these oppositions sometimes evolve into an anarchic and intense male-female dichotomy. This phenomenon is not promoted in a substantive way and is a mere formality: despite the bookstore's commitment to educating and promoting gender equality, its impact may be limited by the constraints of a strong conservative public authority and social traditions that make it difficult to achieve broader social change.

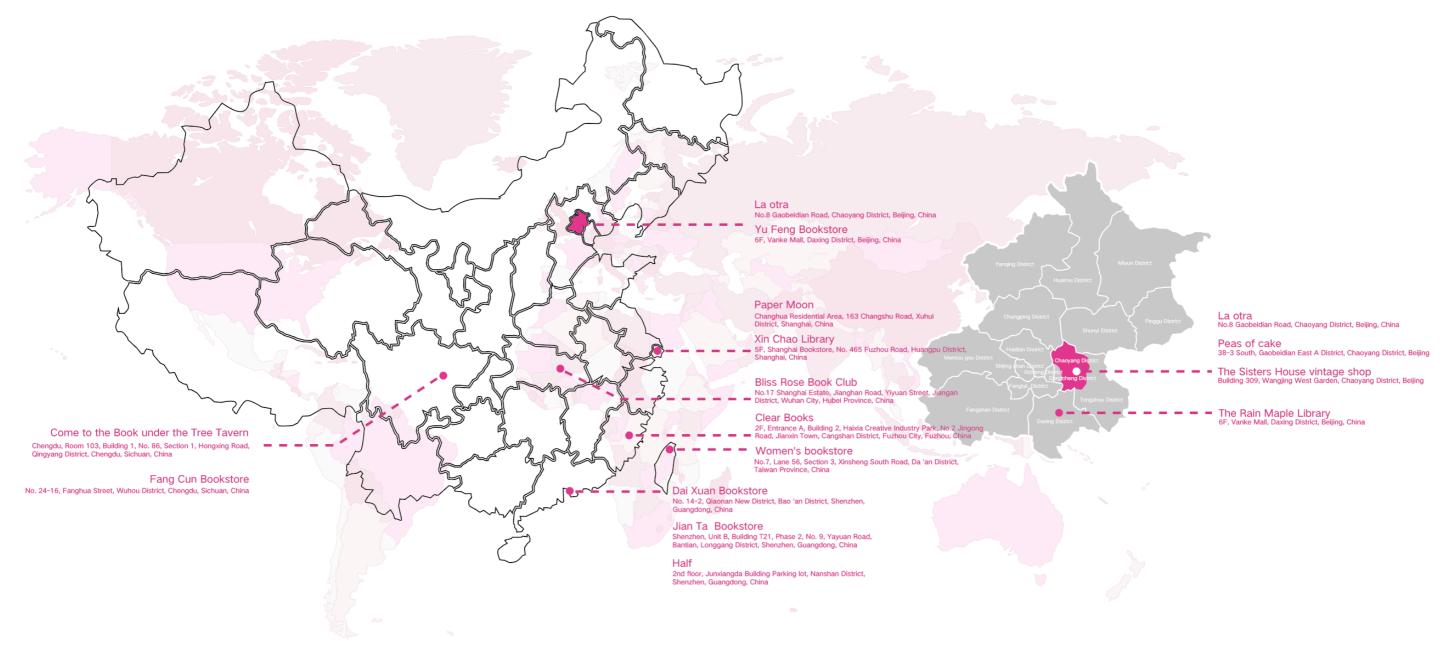


Figure 4-5. Chinese feminist Bookstore & Feminist space in Beijing, China

#### 5. Conclusion

The case of La Otra reflects the dilemma of how a more idealistic social enterprise tries to survive and have a voice in the real world. Cui's experience and the way the bookstore operates provide a powerful case study of the challenges and opportunities in transforming impact from the private to the public sphere. Such attempts to move from small-scale private activities to influence the wider public sphere, while difficult, show the potential role and value of cultural entrepreneurs in driving the process of social civilization. Through such practices, we can gain a deeper understanding and assessment of the effectiveness and limitations of the tools of public communication in contemporary societies, and how they can be more effectively utilized to promote social justice and equality. Aimless opposition only leads to the collapse of human rights, impacting the effectiveness of bookstores advocating for women's rights and suppressing the rights of everyone except those with vested interests.

# 6. Challenges and Opportunities

In 2024, the spectrum of pan-feminism is becoming increasingly complex, with internal tensions and external conflicts causing significant concern. Current challenges faced by women's rights include government suppression of non-governmental organizations, media censorship of feminist issues, and society's limited understanding and acceptance of gender equality. On internet platforms, discussions about feminism often encounter hostility and misunderstanding from male users, which not only exacerbates gender antagonism but also weakens the voice of women's rights. Additionally, traditional views and conservative forces remain strong, restricting women's full participation and development in political, economic, and social spheres.

However, despite these challenges, there are many opportunities and prospects for the future. Firstly, the proliferation of digital platforms offers new channels and interactive spaces for feminism. Through social media and online communities, women can more widely share experiences, express opinions, and organize collective actions. Secondly, with the progress of globalization, international attention and support for women's rights in China are increasing, providing more resources and opportunities for collaboration. Furthermore, advances in education and economic develop-

ment will help elevate women's social status and self-awareness, advancing the realization of gender equality.

The key to advancing women's rights in the future lies in the comprehensive utilization of both online and offline resources and strategies, forming a broader and more effective social movement. This includes policy support and protection, strengthening public education, and fostering international cooperation and exchange. These efforts can enhance societal recognition and acceptance of gender equality and effectively address and resolve the existing gender antagonism and conflicts.

Overall, the path of pan-feminism in China remains long and arduous, but its potential and promise are equally significant. Through continuous effort and innovation, we can aspire to create a more just and equal society in the future, ensuring that everyone's rights are no longer undermined by purposeless antagonism, and truly promoting the progress of social civilization.

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