Report on the conference ‘Gender and Communication - representation, voice and empowerment in and through media, film and information and communication technologies (ICTs)’, held Beijing 22-23 September 2014 as the fifth conference in the Sino-Nordic Women & Gender Studies Conference Series convened by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and the Nordic Centre, Fudan University, Shanghai.

Gender and Communication Conference Beijing
– a window to China for Nordic scholars

The conference ‘Gender and Communication - representation, voice and empowerment in and through media, film and information and communication technologies (ICTs)’ was held in Beijing 22-23 September 2014. The conference was hosted by Professor Bu Wei, the Institute of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing and Professor Marina Svensson, the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, Sweden. It was the fifth conference in a conference series convened by NIAS in collaboration with the Nordic Centre Fudan. The conference series has brought together gender studies scholars from China and the Nordic countries since 2002. For participants from the Nordic countries the conference provided a unique opportunity to meet gender studies scholars from China. Similarly to previous conferences in the series, this conference offered what one participant from Denmark, who has embarked on research in China within recent years, called ‘a window to China’.

Communication practice and theory

Papers and discussions at the Gender and Communication conference covered a wide variety of topics and foci on gender and communication theory and practice. They ranged from the communication practices of women workers’ organizing described by project manager Ding Li of the Firefly NGO in Shenzhen, who worked in a factory from the age of fourteen, to the keynote speech ‘Gender, South to North - Thoughts on gender, communication and global power’ by Professor Raewyn Connell, University of Sydney on the dominance of knowledge production in the world by the global North. Professor Connell critiqued the world economy of knowledge and the way it is centered on concepts from the global North. Her examples of historical key feminist thinkers from Asia included Raden Ayu Kartini (1879-1904) a pioneer in the area of women’s rights for Indonesians and He-Yin Zhen (ca.1884-ca.1920) a theorist who figured centrally in the birth of Chinese feminism. She argued that they, as well as contemporary thinkers such as Bina Argawal, should have a status similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, but that this is not the case due to the global economy of knowledge.

The power of knowledge produced in Europe and North America was also prominent in the keynote speech by Professor Sunera Thobani, Simon Fraser University, Canada. She provided disturbing insights on the gender and race of the global war against terror. She argued that feminism has been hijacked by a colonialist, imperialist paradigm, and described how dangerous it is to resist.

Similarly to previous conferences in the series, the conference was infused by a desire to bring together theory and practice. Thus, participants included not only scholars but also NGO activists. In the panel on ‘Gender Identity, Gender Education and Media Empowerment’ scholars from universities in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing as well as Wei Tingting, Program Manager at the NGO Beijing Gender Health Education Institute presented research on sexuality education. Here again the source and use of knowledge came up in a discussion of the relevance of applying the notion of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) as a framework for education practices as
well as to theoretically conceptualize transformative practices. The equality between the four elements of LGBT was critiqued as an example of how predominant Northern theory creates an illusion that does not necessarily reflect actual practices.

China and the Nordic

Other conference papers were presented in panels on ‘Media Representation and Media Criticism’, ‘Gender and/in New Media Space’, and ‘Mediating Society: Women and Children’. While all papers presented by China-based scholars discussed issues relating to China, papers by Nordic based scholars included papers on China as well as on the Nordic countries. These included a thought-provoking analysis of changing stages of gender politics in the People’s Republic of China from the ‘collective male feminism’ during the first half of the twentieth century and up to the reform era to current understandings of gender in neoliberal, neo-Confucian and New Left politics, presented in the panel ‘Journalism, Gender Politics and Communication Theories’ by Associate Professor Qi Wang, the University of Southern Denmark, as well as a paper with the title ‘Duckface/Stoneface: The social semiotics and gendering of selfies among 10 to 13 year old pupils in four Swedish schools’ by Michael Forsman, Södertorn University, Sweden. Many of the papers on China, including papers presented in the concluding panel on ‘Gender Policies, Advocacy and Practice in China’, critically engaged with theoretical and practical communication issues relating to gender equality issues in China. A concluding keynote speech by Cai Yiping, Executive Committee Member of Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) placed the challenges in China within an international development framework.

The conference was attended by about one hundred participants from China, four of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), as well as from Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Indonesia and the USA. Selections of conference papers in Chinese will be published by Professor Bu Wei, while a volume of papers in English will possibly be edited by Professor Marina Svensson.

Research collaboration beyond the conference

Several participants expressed a wish for the establishment of research collaboration between scholars from China and the Nordic countries. This could be in the form of parallel and/or comparative studies in the two parts of the world. Potential research areas that were mentioned included journalism, inspired by University of Gothenburg Professor Monika Djurf-Pierre’s keynote speech on ‘Journalism, gender equality and the good journalism’, as well as education and hate speech in China and the Nordic countries. Several papers at the conference addressed the issue of extremely violent and gendered hate speech being communicated on the internet. This led Professor Monika Djurf-Pierre, the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and Associate Professor Jack Qiu, the Chinese University of Hong Kong to the idea of publishing a book on Internet Backlash/Digital Backlash that would include papers by conference participants as well as other contributors.

2017 conference – Oslo University

The 6th Sino-Nordic Women & Gender Studies Conference on the theme of ‘Modernization, Gender and Generation’ will possibly be held at the University of Oslo under the leadership of Professor Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen. An organizing group will meet in Shanghai in May 2015 in connection with the convening of a PhD course at the Nordic Centre at Fudan University on ‘Modernization, Gender and Generation’. For further information on the PhD course contact Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen h.b.nielsen@stk.uio.no
The Sino-Nordic Women & Gender Studies Conferences Series - Nordic Value

Why hold a series of conferences aimed at a specific group of scholars from China and the Nordic countries? Actually, there have been participants from other parts of the world at all the conferences. However, the main aim of bringing together gender studies scholars from China and the Nordic countries stems from the desire of Chinese gender studies scholars to gain knowledge about gender relations in the Nordic countries. To address these needs demand the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, University of Copenhagen and the Nordic Centre at Fudan University in Shanghai have collaborated to convene the series of conferences since 2002.

During the course of convening five conferences it has become obvious that the series of conferences not only provides an opportunity for exchange between scholars from China and the Nordic countries. It also offers an extremely valuable entry point to gender studies communities in China for Nordic scholars embarking on studies in China.

Five Conferences from 2002 to 2014

The conferences have been held alternately in a Nordic country and China every three years since 2002. The first conference was held in Shanghai on the theme of ‘Re-Negotiating the Politics of the Public and the Private - Gender and Politics in China and the Nordic Countries’. The second conference was held in Malmö, Sweden in 2005 on ‘Gender and Human Rights in China and the Nordic Countries’. The conference resulted in the publication of the book Gender Equality, Citizenship and Human Rights: Controversies and Challenges in China and the Nordic Countries, edited by Pauline Stoltz, Marina Svensson, Sun Zhongxin and Qi Wang. The third conference with the title ‘Gender at the Interface of the Global and the Local: perspectives from China and the Nordic Countries’ was held in Kunming, Yunnan in 2008. Following the conference a collection of papers entitled Advances of Gender Equality under the Influences of Globalization and Localization and edited by Zhao Jie and Wen Yichun with Cecilia Milwertz, Merete Lie and Birte Siim was published in Chinese. The fourth conference was held in 2011 at Aalborg University in Denmark on ‘Travelling Theories within the Context of Globalisation. Transnational Feminism and Knowledge Production’.

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