Chinese "female force" in an "American Factory": Women's identity formation in an English reading club

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Abstract

This paper investigates the mediated narratives and identity construction of a reading club of female workers in call centers of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the Chinese city of Dalian, where the discourse of an empowering 'female force' has been popularized and scrutinized on Chinese social media. These professional workers manage and construct their emerging middle-class identities through embodied experiences and mediated discourses fostered by an English reading club that is both online and offline. Responding to recent critiques of neoliberal feminism in the Chinese context, this study uses a mixed-method approach to unpack the complex processes of these women's identity construction and performance through participatory reading practices. This includes ethnographic participant observation in offline reading club activities, in-depth interviews, and a discourse analysis of mediated narratives on social media (WeChat). We argue that Chinese working women's identity construction and performance are shaped by complex intersections of class, nation, gender and workplace/institutions, where their encounters are in flux, given the changing neoliberal globalization process after China's four-decade long opening up reform. This study challenges and extends the critique of neoliberal feminism and finds evidence of agency and tactical engagement whereby female workers negotiate their emerging middle-class identities and forge possible solidarities within a networked workplace.

Keywords

Chinese female force, negotiated identities, reading club, neoliberal feminism, womanism, tactical participation

Abstract in Chinese

鉴于"女子力"的话语在中国社交媒体被广泛讨论和构建，本文调查和分析了大连软件园某跨国公司全球呼叫中心英文读书会中女性的媒介化话语和身份认同构建过程。 着眼于中国改革开放四十年的现实背景，运用田野调查、深度访谈、微信群话语分析等混合分析的进路，本文对依托西方学界性别研究范式对中国女性生活实践和研究的新自由主义批判做了回应，并试图揭示中国职业女性由乡村到城市阶层跃升过程中如何通过参与式阅读和再学习进而实践主体性觉醒，身份认同构建和展演的复杂过程。在全球化背景下，本文融汇东西方哲学理论对身份认同理论进行了创新尝试，提出"社会性过渡自我"，并用其阐释中国职业女性身份认同构建和展演的过程受多重因素交叉制约和作用，如，阶层、国别、社会性别、企业性质、制度、媒介素养等等。通过调查和体认职业女性在其策略式参与和协商实践中的主体性和能动性，本文挑战并发展了对新自由主义女性主义的批判。本文指出在研究中国女性权利实践时不能陷入历史的虚无，在不同社会制度层面和现实面前，职业女性可以运用科技、职场、公共领域等资源，策略性地运用资本制造的潮流话语制造"网络化职场"，践行职业女性间的互助与团结。

Keywords: 女子力、社会性过渡自我、读书会、新自由主义女性主义、策略式参与、身份协商

Introduction

With the proliferation of mobile technology and social media in China, learning via social media has also penetrated people's everyday lives. Among rich and varied experiences, reading clubs are a neglected practice, since recent research on participatory culture tends to focus on popular culture and the entertainment industries. These include fans as poachers of films and TV shows (Jenkins, 2006; Zhang, 2016) and transmedia prosumers (Chen, 2018). Such research has attempted to extend the public sphere into the online/virtual sphere, which was anticipated by skeptical views on how far such affective participation can push the boundaries of the online public sphere (Papacharissi, 2011). The practices in-between, for example, of reading clubs and study groups are neglected by scholars of media and communication studies, especially in organizational contexts. Reading clubs and relevant mobile apps in China are becoming lucrative business for entrepreneurs and platforms. To address this research gap, our study focuses on a staff-initiated and company-supported reading club of female workers in call centers that work for multinational corporations (MNCs) in Dalian China in the discourse on empowerment, referred to as 'female force' (*nvzi li*). This study has three aims: to engage with the critique on neoliberal feminism and womanism in the Chinese context; to investigate how 'female force' affects the negotiated identities of female workers through voluntary and participatory reading practices; and to propose a theoretical framework synthesizing Chinese philosophical accounts of change to interpret identity construction and performance and foster possible cultural change and solidarities.

We undertook our investigation at the Dalian Software Park (DLSP), which was established when the first outsourcing wave hit the northeastern shore of China twenty years ago. DLSP, home to many aspirational working women who are tech savvy and culturally aware, represents 68 percent of the workforce of the company (DLSP, 2018). However, they

work in different shifts to cater to time differences in call centers. Even though they are white-collar office workers, the female participants sarcastically dubbed their company as an "American Factory," invoking the Netflix documentary of this title to vent their frustration regarding overnight shifts, surveillance-laden working environments (on-call, checked-in, and audio-recorded), and alienation experienced during their emotional and labor-intensive daily routines while dealing with demanding customers.

Drawing on modern identity theories and given the context of traditional social norms within which this group of emerging middle-class women are placed, this paper explores how traditional Chinese ethics and values combine with neoliberal ideas regarding female workers. We combine the Daoist concept of change with Confucian values on familial relationships and expectations of women, which are both intertwined with and disconnected from feminist empowerment proposed by the neoliberal and consumerist ethos. Based on our ethnographic research, a number of themes under the umbrella of Chinese pragmatism emerged in the process of modern identity formation of these female workers: negotiated identities, rewarding learning, work-life integration, and networked workplace and solidarity.

Although earlier literature has considered how women engage with literary activities, for example, reading romance (Hartley, 2003), little is known about why Chinese women read in English, given the broader economic, social and cultural contexts in a social media age. With deepening globalization and continuous foreign direct investment (FDI), MNCs in China employ more white-collar office workers, earning RMB8000-10,000 per month, (Daxue, 2020) with a significant number of female workers, who use English to mediate their "diasporic" experiences after leaving their hometowns, while they have inter-locale mobility (You, 2011). In China, 300 million Chinese—nearly the entire population of the US—are English learners, powering an English-training industry worth RMB30 billion (Tan, 2015). In this backdrop, we situate female workers in their everyday corporate and domestic settings in

an "American Factory" located in China, taking into account the wider political economy of call center franchises and the intersectionality of uniquely positioned working women with various social and corporate roles and expectations of a patriarchal society.

Such corporate-supported "empowerment feminist" reading is used as a marketing campaign for organizational purposes. Such support, however, is repurposed creatively by agentic female workers. Therefore, "female force" is more in tune with womanism (*nvxing zhuyi*) than with radical feminism (*nvquan zhuyi*), given their evident, albeit constrained agency, reflected in their embodied experiences and womanhood that intersect with nationality, class, organization, and individual aspirations and motivations. Such intersected identities are constantly being negotiated, are in flux and may have progressive potential. Chinese female workers benefit from such practices as part of their middle-class identities at work, where their everyday encounters enable them to discover new subjectivities, while they negotiate and struggle for new possibilities. Incorporating demographic, cultural and agentic aspects of these, we will first begin with a literature review, explain the methodology, present our findings, and follow up with a conclusion.

Literature review

Social media mediated learning is a rich site for cultural analyses, given the texture of the participatory behavior, motivation, identity and discourses. It is an alternative and neglected space where female readers have significant emotional and affective investments and active reflections. The "network effect," achieved through social media platforms and accumulated social capital, motivates and maintains a connected and solitary community (Chen & Cheung, 2018). However, recent research on Chinese digital/virtual feminism is preoccupied with media representations and online flames (Chen, 2009; Li & Li, 2017), which are stigmatized and censored on the one hand (Mao, 2020), and are limited to the textual level on the other (Li, 2015). This has to do with differences between critical scholarship and activism, in

addition to competing voices from within various feminist groups (Li, 2011; Wang & Driscoll, 2019). We are sympathetic regarding the optimistic projection of a Chinese online public sphere, which calls for a structural change (Han, 2018; Peng, 2020). However, there seems to be a missing link between the macro-structural, meso-organizational (Howell, 2003) and micro-personal changes. To map out the missing linkages, we want to invoke the late anthropologist and activist, David Graeber (2018). As organic scholars, we need to rethink the gap and, more importantly, the linkages between scholarship and activism. As a starting point, our ethnographic approach aims to follow an anthropological perspective that treats other(ed) culture and identity with care. The ultimate aim of this is to foster a potential for change of culture (technology included), as this is successful activism.

A Chinese X Western framework for self-transformation

So why does *female force* matter for the Chinese female workers? In this paper, we frame it as the agency of these women due to its close association with the notion of womanism. Since the 1980s, womanism became an alternative and also extension of feminism, where black women were included into the discussion/struggle of feminism, not only to respond to sexism but also racism in white feminism (Walker, 1983). In China, translations of these two terms have gone through a series of mutations even though they are used interchangeably in academia and the media. Womanism (women's gender-ism) is an alternative to feminism (women's rights-ism/power-ism) in two ways (Yu, 2015, p. 7). Firstly, it draws on the black feminist legacy, includes all humans, and gains support from men (Braendlin, 2007, p. 116). Secondly, women's rights-ism/power-ism suggests a western-centric, radical overturn of the patriarchal order. However, the latter encountered setbacks in China given its central focus on rights, calling for legislation change and radical activist movements. Therefore, the compromise translation rendered indigenous feminism in China as a "smiley" or "friendly/complimentary Chinese-styled feminism" (Schaffer & Song 2007, p. 20). As our

investigation of female identities under these two entwined discourses is not about female identity in an ontological sense, we instead focus on female agency. That is, what female readers can do and act or perform (Butler, 1990) through their reading practices and activities, especially for self-empowerment, self-change, and self-transformation.

We first draw on the concept of *change/transformation* in Daoism. In *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), this state of being prepares for *HuaSheng* (transformation and production) and stresses the importance of the interplay between the self and the environment, natural and socio-political included (Lai, 2008). The unity or harmony between heaven, earth and humanity is equally emphasized in Confucian philosophy (Tu, 1985). For example, Xunzi is primarily concerned with a humanistic (human-centered and human-initiated) approach in planning and governing a state (Lai, 2008, p. 47). Hall and Ames (1998, p. 49) argue that such a Confucian "self-cultivation" process is "an ongoing, dynamic achievement of equilibrium." It requires voluntary deference as readers and fans often have when consuming media texts. The self-cultivation process starts from the individual level and takes care of the social self with agentic tactics, an assumption proposed by Goffman where a real self is behind various performing social selves in dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1971; Scott, 2015). This offers a nuanced and much neglected strand of thought in terms of social-self construction, an attempt to resist yet not leave certain social hegemony. In doing so, a calculative social self (Bourdieu, 2010) becomes a situated and embodied subject in an agency-structure assemblage, maintained by what de Certeau termed strategy and tactics (Chen, 2018). The cultural and meaning offerings from the readings work as "vectors" which are fluid and contingent in nature (Bailey, 2005). The internalization process can be understood as a "folding" process (Deleuze, 1988), where an individual subject synthesizes Mead's "I and me" fold (Bailey, 2005). Me, or the objectified I, is a "generalized other" within a social and cultural context. By selectively taking in external meaning offerings

through socialization and reflection, the "me" is incorporated into the "I," making self-construction a negotiating process. This process never ends and is always in a state of becoming (Scott, 2015).

Therefore, an agentic subject is foregrounded, as one who actively works against, with and around external stimuli and the environment, underpinned by tactical, social and pragmatic agencies. This is in particular the case in Eastern philosophies that are preoccupied with ethics for cultivating oneself in relation to personal, familial, community, and national connections (Behuniak, 2004). Such a synthesis underscores the hermeneutic approach to identity formation and performance through media prosumption. This is rarely discussed in research that adopts a "media effect" or "use and gratification" approach. Conversely, the synthesis proposed here is useful in analyzing the self-becoming dynamics between symbolic and material spaces. Such a process maps and in turn is co-shaped by the regions of front-stage and back-stage where social order can be maintained, and possibly challenged, in Goffman's terms (1971). In doing so, the slash between the western/eastern self challenges the dualism of individual and collective, where a new subjectivity is possible and emerging, something we call "a social and transitional self." The framework proposed here is based on the premise that the reading club and learning practices have outcomes that can be incorporated into female readers' self-construction and self-performance processes, making reading practices part of the assemblage of their work identities.

Methodology

The subjects of our investigation are situated in a peculiar geo-location with both online and offline engagements; therefore, we adopted an ethnographic and mixed-method approach. This included doing participatory observation by attending reading club activities, such as the online WeChat group discussions and offline meet-ups. We contacted the company, obtained institutional ethical approval and consent from participants and undertook our observations from 2018 to 2019. We attended more than six workshops and actual face-to-face meetings in

Dalian. A thematic analysis followed, of the WeChat group discussions was followed by in-depth interviews and a bilingual staff survey (with 181 participants), in addition to our compilation of fieldwork notes. In all, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews, individually or in groups (see Table 1). We also translated notable quotations to illustrate the relevant themes identified.

Table 1: The Informants

Demographics % (Frequency)	
Interview conducted (n=12)	35 informants in total
Individual Interview	50 (6)
Focus groups and events	50 (6)
Sex (n=35)	
Female	100 (35)
Male	0
Age Range (n=35)	
25-35	60 (21)
36-45	40 (14)
Nationality/Ethnic group (n=35)	
Han Chinese	77 (27)
Korean Chinese	14 (5)
Mongolian Chinese	6 (2)
Korean	3 (1)
Career Stage (n=35)	
Junior	51 (18)
Mid-Senior	49 (17)
Educational level (n=35)	
Diploma/higher diploma/associate degree	2 (1)
Undergraduate	66 (23)
Postgraduate or higher	31 (11)
Domestic education	74 (26)
International education	26 (9)
Marital Status (n=35)	
Single	37 (13)
Married	54 (19)
Divorced	8 (3)
Mobility (n=35)	
International secondment	2 (1)
Rural to Urban	20 (7)
Inter-locale	69 (24)
Local	31 (11)
Property ownership (n=35)	
Yes	74 (26)
No	26 (9)
Yes and non-local	57 (20)

BPOs and female workers in a globalizing Dalian

Given the broader industry and economic shift of the past 20 years in business process outsourcing (BPO), call centers have undergone an adaptation process manifested by globalization and glocalization. Dalian, a coastal city located in a once-industrial Northeast China, was one of the first to build software parks to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and accommodate multinational corporations (MNCs). Compared with metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, Dalian has the advantage of low-cost infrastructure, economic and competent human resources. The city is discussed enthusiastically in Friedman's *The World is Flat*. In particular, significant changes in the Dalian Software Park (DLSP) between 1998 and 2004 made it hard for Friedman to "recognize the place" (Friedman, 2007, p. 33). Since most MNCs in DLSP are customer support centers, foreign language skills are a basic requisite. Dalian was once occupied by Russia and Japan and due to its proximity with Japan and South Korea, it has attracted many foreign companies to build their support functions, for example, Genpact, IBM, Accenture, SAP, to name a few. It is also a multicultural city with more than 20 tertiary institutions that offer language enhancement pathways and degrees (Dalian, 2018).

MNCs in DLSP contribute significantly to its green economy. According to the latest municipal government report, the Software and Information Service Industries have expanded exponentially in the past 20 years. It hosts around 2000 companies, more than 60 of which are Fortune 500 enterprises. The total turnover started from RMB200 million back in 1998 and amounted to 100 billion in 2017, creating 200,000 jobs (Dalian, 2018). Before the opening up reform in 1978, Liaoning province and Dalian were famous for heavy construction and manufacturing industries, such as coal-mining, thermal power and shipbuilding plants. From 1998 onwards, the city saw a 500-fold increase in BPOs, measured in gross income (Dalian, 2018), mostly call centers and for business support functions,

despite the slowdown caused by the financial crisis around 2008/2009. Some MNCs shut down their call centers to serve the volatile capital movement (Xiang, 2006), as their home companies needed to locate new centers in tier-two or -three cities or back in India.

The companies that supported the reading club we partook of and observed have gone through a series of layoffs and restructuring. However, most of our interviewees saw their companies as female-friendly, ranked among the top in local league tables compiled by industry associations and the government. Dalian is considered a good city for raising families and nearly 90 percent of our informants were from rural Dalian or smaller cities. Most female workers were from the Northeast, transforming their citizenship from rural to urban, as change in household registry (*hukou*) works as an incentive scheme[1] (DLSP, 2019). Given the changing demographics of these rural-to-urban working women (20 percent) with inter-locale mobility (rural to urban and urban to urban) (69 percent), some contextualization of Chinese class identity and classification is needed. According to Goodman (2016), the term "class struggle" has been shunned in Chinese mainstream discourse after the Cultural Revolution. "Social stratum" has replaced the politically sensitive notion of "class," especially after the reform. From 2002 onwards, a discourse of "middle stratum/class" (*jieceng*, instead of *jieji*) was developed by the government to tackle the issue of social inequality better. Goodman (2016) contends that this discourse maintains ambiguity, wherein class is classified both in terms of occupation and ideology. For those who aspire to be part of the middle class, which is the dominant force that ensures stability, support for good governance, and economic growth, this new discourse of *jieceng* works well in keeping people's thoughts orchestrated towards such a common goal.

In the case of Dalian, the "emerging middle class" does not equal the standard set by the World Bank, measured primarily in terms of income, which forecasts that almost the entire population of China will be middle class by 2030 (de la Torre and Rigolini, 2013).

Rather, we adopt the meaning of *jieceng* (stratum) and use the term "emerging middle class," referring to *occupation* (our emphasis) as a term that is more all-encompassing and representative than middle class and is directly connected with white-collar women and sets the stage for our study. Even though the global economic recession after COVID-19 seems to be the new norm, with the steady development of the Chinese economy, ICT, and higher education, at least in the last 30 years, for these aspirational women their status at home and in the workplace seems to have improved (Erdenebileg, 2016).

Rewarding learning experience

At the outset, the recurring theme of "rewarding learning experience" emerged in our fieldwork. Even though the reading club was deemed a social activity, the participants spoke highly about it and regarded it as a learning and even schooling experience. It was well-structured and its members had the incentive to perform. Their learning outcomes were assessed and highflyers were awarded labels such as "growth heroes" within the company, which revealed the motivations of the participants. However, as will be discussed later, these female workers used such company support for their own purposes. Most participants, aged 25-45, attributed employability, work-related pressure and environment as some reasons to learn more skills. They wanted to remain competitive in the precarious job market, as indicated by the survey results provided by the local Human Resources (HR). Of the participants 21 percent had worked for their companies for 1-3 years, 19 percent for 3-5 years, and 30 percent for 5-10 years. This was in line with our interview findings as many (35 percent) also engaged in other online training for self-improvement for one to two hours a week. As one 34-year old female participant commented,

> I do this (reading club) because I get to learn a lot...It saves me a lot of time to get resources and you learn from each other as well. I also like the sharing sessions

delivered by our guest speakers and leaders of our own company. They provide

insider knowledge (Personal communication, 3 October 2018).

Her account explained certain spheres in which she wanted to improve and the information she wanted to gather that she deemed as beneficial for her. Her reflection was in line with the idea of what we call the "social and transitional self" or one who was self-directed (purposive), as an organizationally and socially situated self undergoing anticipated change and transformation. Her later interview also revealed the aspect of performance in such activity. She could thereby get to know senior leaders better in the company she had worked in for four years, perform as "a good employee" and impress her managers and co-workers within the hierarchical organization. This echoes Goffman's notion of impression management both front- and back-stage (Goffman, 1971).

Dealing with labels: Performance highflyer and nurturing mother

Most participants of the reading club were female workers. Its selection of books and topics therefore had a primary focus on "women's development." The second theme identified in our research involved an assemblage of various desirable traits and labels that qualified participants as perfect and outstanding women. These included notions of good worker and highflyers in performing at work or as nurturing mothers, supportive wives, and filial daughters(-in-law) at home.

As seen in the discussion on the previous theme, the subject of female force or women's development was subject to diverse interpretations by participants from different backgrounds, motivations and preferences. In the western (Anglo-American) context and literature, endeavors of women's empowerment have been criticized for being overtaken or hijacked by commercialization and consumerism, termed as "neoliberal feminism." According to Rottenberg (2018), recent discourses on feminism tend to create an ideal model

for modern women. For example, many self-help books try to teach them how to achieve balance between successful work and happy family lives. In doing so, neoliberal feminists create a hegemony wherein women's desires, aspirations and behaviors are shaped by consumerist logic (Meng & Huang, 2017). McRobbie (2015) contends that such modelling processes create enormous pressure for women. Stambaugh (2015, p. 4) argues that consumerist and neoliberal feminists undermine feminism as "it interrupts collective action by decentralizing political attention from the group to the individual and encouraging self-actualization and self-sufficiency as the means for economic and political advancement." Such a critique is largely formulated by or modeled on a white, middle class and developed western perspective. Chinese women are losing their voices in this 'collective movement,' which is ironically claimed to be international.

Even though Chinese feminist movements have considerable connections with their international counterparts and alliances, they are starkly different from what is going on in the West, where digital feminists from China are distancing themselves from the term 'rights-based feminism'(*nvquan zhuyi*) and opting for 'womanism' (*nvxing zhuyi*) instead (Mao, 2020, p. 245). In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party established PRC and declared that women's liberation was also part of all-round human liberation. "Women hold up half the sky" was not a mere slogan, since women were in the labor force and political participants (Erdenebileg, 2016). However, scholars such as Dai (2016) and Liu (2014) critiqued that this de-gendering or masculinization of women created subjects without self-consciousness in Maoist China. In this changing context of identity politics in China, the seeming self-interpellation or objectification, criticized as neoliberal feminism, might be beneficial as an unfinished endeavor and process to redefine or regain female subjectivity. Based on our observations and interviews, these aspirational working women were well-educated and culturally (politically) aware. It is worth noting that nearly 90 percent of the informants

interviewed were upwardly mobile and came either from rural areas or less advantaged contexts to the city of Dalian (see Table 1). Their accounts of roles expected of and performed by them at work and at home were self-reflective. For these women workers, it was legitimate to possess desirable traits even if these were transmitted through consumerism. Obvious emotive and defensive reflections were evident wherever female workers compared their lives with those of their mothers' generation. For example, as one of our participants put it:

> Mothers go square-dancing now. Their generation only got to wear military-styled green uniforms or grey clothes. It is like a compensation for their lost youth, wearing colorful outfits and dancing shoes. For our generation, we buy things we like, using money earned by ourselves. For our mothers, they had to contribute their salaries to their families. We just live in different times, why is it that our life-style gets criticized so severely? (Personal communication, 6 October 2018).

Therefore, for the new breed of working women, being labeled as possessing certain desirable traits did not seem to be an issue. This presents a starkly different picture of two generations at the material level, as well as in their perceptions and values. Class awareness becomes salient as the have-nots fight for basic rights to work and make ends meet while these upwardly mobile women were determined to improve their quality of life by using spending and self-improvement as a benchmark. Relevant arguments such as "we earn and spend our money on our own terms" emerged in a focus group interview. In addition, the goals or role models they wanted to achieve or emulate were "within their reach" (51/49 percent of junior/mid-senior career women, see Table 1). This renders a re-anchoring of female subjectivity as being reflective and tactical. This makes the western neo-liberal feminist critique historically nihilistic in the sense that such a discourse ignores the socialist legacy in striving for gender equality.

For these aspiring working women, the primary aim is to seek balance and reconciliation through incremental change, rather than radical and revolutionary social movements. This was underpinned by their emerging middle-class identities. One interviewee further elaborated the generational gap and unpacked the changing identities and struggles shared by her peers, which reflected some consensus:

> I don't really want to become my mother(in-law). They are somewhat traditional Chinese women even though they sing as "the new generation of the 80s". *Xianqi liangmu* (compassionate and supportive wife and caring mother) is deeply rooted in their values. In reality, they cannot locate or orient themselves if they are not needed in the kitchen…If my husband and especially if I go into the kitchen, they become really upset...I was trying to be helpful, you know. (They think) we sort of steal their thunder at family gatherings, a highlight of their day as a domestic contributor (Group discussion, 8 October 2018).

This focus group also contended that their mothers felt torn between being equal partners with their fathers, in the hope of being treated equally, and being venerable and deferential women who need some, if not more, care. Informants also admitted that such perplexity was experienced by members of their generation as well. However, such reading club gatherings offered opportunities to them to discuss such issues in a comfortable and supportive environment. We will explain the progressive potential of such gatherings on familial and marital relations later, by further articulating class as an intersectional factor.

Use your female force: Work-life balance or integration?

In a female leadership session, a senior manager was invited to deliver a keynote speech. She drew on the book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg to encourage her female colleagues to improve their self-awareness and will to lead. The book was also prepared as a token of

encouragement and inspiration (Figure 1). She started by problematizing the notion of "work-life balance."

Figure 1. Sandberg's book as a token of achievement

> To be honest, I have issues with the term. It seems that only women have such an issue, as if work is the entire life of men and that is not a problem. They can just focus on work…Only women have to balance between the two (Plenary session, 8 October 2018).

This was a moment where supportive sisterhood and solidarity was manifested, by a cheering audience and approving laughter. However, she did not aim to create a division between men and women with respect to familial and marital relations. She advocated the term "work-life integration," wherein women should tactically "educate" their partners to be on the same page and as equal contributors for their families (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Offline meet-up event on Leadership

Based on our interviews, these emerging middle-class families would allocate their familial tasks, according to their respective "skillsets" to maintain "harmony" [our emphasis]. For example, as another participant put it,

My husband cannot really do laundry. He can fix things, do gardening and move tables and the TV around. Ah, he is also a good cook. I am fine with him not doing other housework. Because he simply cannot do this well. I can of course "educate" him, but we are fine with our deals, you know, it is more efficient and we get used to it. I can learn to be a better cook, but I would not put in much effort into it anyways. I am OK with where we are now. "A harmonious family will prosper" – the most important thing. But, you've got to use your *female force* (to achieve and maintain that harmony) (Personal communication, 8 October 2018).

Taken at face value, her account sounded convincing and sensible for allocating tasks based on male and female skillsets. However, such an allocation fits too neatly with gendered roles.

What was at play, was the term 'female force' and how it contributed to reinforcing an old saying which reflects Confucian family values. This can also be interpreted as the agency and tactics the female informant employed to negotiate her status regarding her marital relations. Being a woman in a marriage in a patriarchal society, she might suffer a lot, as claimed by radical feminists, but there are benefits as well, to invoke Foucault's account on "productive" power relationships. The tactical "female force" holders choose to stay in such power-relationships and negotiate their positions without completely leaving them (Chen, 2018). Therefore, the understanding and utilization of female force reveals a pragmatic tendency. The very tactics for the reconciliation between men and women, by way of "womanhood" and mutual agreement within family units, makes the discourse of female force a manifestation of womanism rather than radical feminism. To a certain extent, these aspirational female workers did achieve or are achieving work-life integration, mediated by such reading clubs/workshops and through their own familial and workplace arrangements.

As such, workshops have a primary focus on "how to be a happy and successful woman," most discussions are dedicated to familial and marital relations and resonate strongly among other female participants. For the rookies at work, they don't have the financial or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010) to get married and are often termed as "leftover/surplus women," even though they are quite young. A common topic of discussion is that it is very costly to get married in China, "to put together an expensive show" (as one interviewee put it) for their socially connected audiences. Some couples choose to have what are referred to as "*luohun* (naked marriage)," i.e., without any economic strings attached. This was enthusiastically debated during the discussion, reflecting a "stratum (*jieceng*)," if not division of class and age. Younger participants were looking for tactics which have proved successful for their mentors and role models and are within their reach, as they worked and learned together with them in the same company, while dealing with similar

problems. For the married participants, they tend to recommend and select books and topics more relevant to parenting and pre-school education. During our fieldwork books such as *Animal Farm* and *DK series on Psychology* were used as reading material, not for their political satire, social critique or specialized knowledge. Instead, these were read and interpreted in ways that catered to the group's specific needs in a pragmatic way. This led to another theme regarding English as the medium for conducting such activities.

Figure 3. Welcome corridor with multiple languages

Foreign language as a marker of prestige, status and disconnection

When asked about why two books in English were chosen, the organizer said this was due to the nature of their work. Working in call centers that support customers in North America and Europe, required them to be fluent in English. For non-native speakers, this seemed to have become a life-long learning project. As revealed by the staff survey, the top ranked desirable skillset was English (51.9 percent). As discussed earlier, Dalian as a multicultural city also has a foreign-language speaking software park that supported customers from around the globe. As seen in Figure 3, there were at least five languages used in such call centers, including English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, and Korean. DLSP is one of

many such parks that host MNCs in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Suzhou, Chengdu, and Changzhou, where employees speak foreign languages, creating white-collar jobs and for an emerging middle class.

For working women to excel at their day-to-day job, language skill was crucial and had become part of the requisite cultural capital that contributed to their identity formation and performance. In their WeChat group of more than 240 members, participants would read out loud excerpts they found inspiring. This was part of their daily routine and check-in tasks, to ensure that they could finish the books on time. Workshops followed in order to help them digest these and also improve their language skills with the help of native speakers (termed as cultural coaches) in the club. An interesting observation was that participants not only posted such "achievements" within the group, but they also shared the screenshots, likes and praise on their public WeChat Moments (similar to Twitter feeds). They painstakingly composed the often multilingual posts, showcasing their language skills. Therefore, identity construction is actualized through a social identity performance, an official 'passage' that marked their stages of development (Goffman, 1971). As one interviewee puts it, while most participants would target their audience at work, she had a more pressing concern relating to her family and said:

> I read the book with my five-year old son. I did have the intention to let him learn a bit of English. More importantly, I want to create a learning atmosphere for him. He gets to see his mother and father, learning something every day. I have to confess that I did not learn too much myself. I did this for him, to keep him interested. I hope this will have a long-lasting impact on him. We may decide to send him aboard for education in the future (Personal communication, 8 October 2018).

To this working mother, who was obviously extending her 'female force' into parenting and early childhood education, there was clearly a performative element in it. By creating a learning habitus, she was aiming to pass on her cultural capital to her son, with his future in mind and referred to his higher education.

Within the reading club, however, disconnections emerged regarding the participants' negotiated identities. English as a marker of distinction and exclusivity for these working women could cause anxiety when other intersectional factors are considered, for example nationality, class and their disorientation "suspended" between the East and West. During our latest field work in 2019, the reading club organized a screening event for the newly released documentary *American Factory*. Dubbed as 'The Obama Production,' the female participants discussed the narrative enthusiastically with reflections about their own experiences. What is noteworthy is that they called their workplace an "American Factory," not company, stressing the division of class identity between traditional manufacturing factories and modern white-collar companies. At first, they were proud to be part of the globalization process and for the privilege to interact with the developed West with their language skills and professional know-how. However, some were laid-off and worked as contractors for outsourcing companies. With the current escalated US-China trade war, existing nationalist sentiments were amplified in the room. After the screening, some participants recalled their training sessions delivered by their American culture coach, referring to a scene where American middle managers came to China to learn how to improve efficiency for the newly established Glass Factory in Ohio. A female participant who had been with the company for 12 years commented as follows in a very emotive and sarcastic tone:

> I am a fountain of emotions now. This is like history repeating and reversing itself.
>
> Chinese billionaire saving the American economy and exporting "the advanced
>
> Chinese management expertise"?! Is Obama a comedian, a socialist avenger? I don't

fully understand this but I feel he understands our first few months here so well

(laughter emanated in the room) (Group discussion, 25 August 2019).

However, other female participants who had obtained their degrees abroad responded differently to the documentary. One of them discussed how The Union works (when it does work) to protect workers' interests. However, no consensus was reached in the discussion. The disconnections, exemplified by distinctive views on the East and West (China and the US), were intertwined with and complicated by the different backgrounds and experiences of these aspirational working women even in the same company. In addition, this nuanced texture reflects a much anticipated female-led and bottom-up womanism, compared to the previously unbalanced and men-led movements in the third world (Dooling, 2005, p. 205).

Enabling corporate working culture in a networked workplace

So far, we have demonstrated that even though this reading club was corporate-funded and supported by The Union, female readers used such resources for their own cultural capital to enhance their familial and marital relations, including their children's education that were deemed crucial for their womanhood. In this section, we will explore how such activities created opportunities for self-improvement and solidarity even within the competitive corporate culture and for women from different social/educational backgrounds. While many participants had a clear plan in terms of what to learn and how to learn, others felt this reading club gave them the 'soft skills' needed for their career progression. Ranked second on the anticipated learning goal or outcome, 26.5 percent of the participants were keen to increase their emotional quotient (EQ) and communication/interpersonal skills at work. The survey also validated that around 80 percent of the participants agreed that such activities

improved communication with and increased the appreciation of their line mangers. As one woman said:

> I attend this because it provides me with a very relaxing environment. You know, a lot of small talk can happen between you and your line manager. At your desk, this is difficult to do. Say, you demand a pay rise in one-on-one meetings and you have to justify it with your KPIs. Once a year! Here, such requests get channeled naturally. They witness what you've done for work. Plus, you are a passionate learner, a team player, helping others to learn and improve (Personal communication, 8 October 2018).

This informant also said that such activities could increase solidarity in the guise of company loyalty, which could function as a work-stress buffer and may eliminate work related tensions through gossip and complaints. There was also a seemingly paradoxical discourse at play. One interviewee linked this to employee welfare as follows:

> It is like, I work for you, get stressed. And with your support, I get the opportunity to get the stress off my chest and create a new self. It is not a bad deal at all (laughter) (Personal communication, 6 May 2018).

This indicated that within a hierarchical and competitive corporate setting that is a power apparatus and assemblage, the agency of the power-less is evident. The club organizer still believed that this company-supported initiative was beneficial both for the employees and the company, as it could create solidarity among colleagues after the negative emotions were eliminated, albeit partially. It could also work as good PR to attract new talent to join in. She also added that after the participants completed a series of check-ins, they would get a book in print as a token, together with a certificate (Figure 1). We also found some highflyers

display their trophies visibly on their desks. This especially adheres to the ritual theory of Goffman (1971), wherein identity is constructed via a social and witnessed process. Despite the anticipated and positive contribution and goals of such activities, this informant also identified a complex, if not gloomy future, for feminist endeavors and the limitations of a corporate setting. She said,

> Our events and activities are well received by our female colleagues with a high satisfaction rate based on our survey. However, where are our male colleagues? Don't they see a need for improvement? Or, is it because they are men and they can get promoted no matter whether they attend such activities or not? (Personal communication, 6 May 2018).

To examine this question critically, it again makes sense to see such a corporate-organized and "gender-neutral" initiative as Chinese-womanist rather than Anglo-American-feminist. This is because such an approach does not aim to disrupt or overthrow the current system but to create ruptures and make positive changes within it. The benefit claimed and felt by the organizers and participants was a compromise, as this corporate-supported reading club was meant to include both sexes. However, it turned out that most participants were women. That said, we think this also made the *female force* adaptable and tactical in nature, since it was negotiated, social and inclusive, both for some male allies and women of different social upbringings. In our observation, international colleagues (often on secondment and senior) were invited to speak about their own experiences for inspiration, while colleagues with international education often undertook mentoring roles and made positive contributions to club activities.

Conclusion

We have conducted an ethnographic study of an English reading club of female call center workers in the MNCs of Dalian, China. With the emerging discourse on the Chinese *female force,* mediated through social media, we cut through the situated and embodied experiences from online and offline platforms and moved back and forth between them by undertaking fieldtrips, in-depth interviews and participant observation. This project demonstrated how female professional workers construct, manage, and perform their emerging middle-class identities through mediated discourses, fostered around such an English reading club. We conducted our analysis based on an original synthesis of Chinese philosophy on self-change, self-cultivation, and self-transformation, in addition to modern western identity theories. We argue that modern technology such as social media and reading apps facilitate such a self-becoming, self-improving and self-performance process. We also responded to recent critiques on neoliberal feminism by contextualizing what is meant by 'female force' and female identities in China, as forged in solidarities in a networked workplace. This female labor force is not on the radar of western scholars. Our ethnographic and empirical study therefore directly contributes to such a gap in the literature and practice. We argue that Chinese working women's identity formation and reflection are shaped by the complex entanglements of class, nation, gender and organization/institution where their unique encounters work in tandem with the changing neoliberal globalization process after the country's four-decade opening-up and reform.

Our study challenges and extends a critique of neoliberal feminism and finds that agency and tactical engagement were evident among emerging middle-class women workers who negotiated their identities by drawing on resources from social (peers and mentors), organizational and technical pools, which represent an indigenous womanism in the making.

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Compared with their mothers' generation, these young female workers were tech savvy, culturally aware and aspirational in negotiating their identities through their individual and collective endeavors. At a practical level this also addresses the missing link between self-improvement and a much-anticipated collective endeavor of research on digital feminism. At the organizational level, such activities do contribute to gender equality by agentically re-purposing company budgets for working women's self-improvement and peer support. This study provides a necessary reminder for researchers who conduct further investigations on Chinese feminism. Just like the divisions among feminist scholars, issues of female identities have to consider class, among other intersectional factors – more importantly – as a becoming and transforming process. This offers embodied and situated contexts for mobilization and possible solidarity formation, policy intervention and further institutional and structural endeavors.

The more immediate contribution of this paper for scholarship on Chinese feminism is probably the distinction and connection between feminism and womanism. This is not meant to represent Chinese particularism, but to provide a necessary reminder to avoid historical nihilism and for better understanding about the trajectory of transformations with respect to Chinese women and wider gender politics. This includes the reified female equality that was based on asexual/gender neutral working subjects in Maoist China, the absence of Chinese and other colored women in white feminism, and the now emerging 'female force' within a patriarchal, neoliberal, and consumerist global culture. Future research might need to expand its focus on other groups of a different demography and locality. Correlation between identities and an English study/ international education experience may be a promising area of research in order to further generalize such findings to Chinese women working in MNCs and beyond. To invoke Papacharissi (2011) again, social media only gathers people together, it is the shared narratives, lived experiences, and affective practices that connect and unite us.

Acknowledgement

Note

1. In China, different cities have different incentive schemes to ensure that talented persons do not leave. In order for a household register to be issued, one needs to fulfil a set of criteria that includes education, work permits, and investments. Shanghai and Beijing, for example, will automatically issue the *hukou* for those who have PhDs. Shenzhen, in contrast, has a local credit system that includes tax contributions, real estate investment and residential history.

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