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China

The Crisis of Social Reproduction, Women’s Agency, and Feminism in China

- Features -

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Dramatically falling birthrates and a skyrocketing number of divorces as the number of marriages collapsing increases all point toward the erosion of the capitalist family unit in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Such trends, furthermore, represent an existential crisis for the nation, as the deepening crisis of social reproduction in the post-socialist country also threatens the reproduction of its necessary supply of labor power. But what exactly is this crisis of social reproduction, and what, if anything, is specific about the situation in the PRC? What role does the feminist movement in the PRC play in all of this?

In this interview, Ralf Ruckus talks to Yige Dong, who witnessed the movement of young feminist activists in the 2010s, and has researched the role of proletarian women's agency in the PRC. Dong has written extensively about different aspects of the PRC's crisis of social reproduction, women's struggles, and feminism.

In your opinion, what is described by the term social reproduction?

In my understanding, the Marxist feminist term social reproduction refers to the institutions and processes that maintain and renew the labor force and social relations within capitalist societies.

In other words, social reproduction is about creating the necessary conditions for capitalist societies to renew and sustain themselves. This can refer to mundane tasks such as cleaning, cooking, caring for the young, the elderly, and the sick, or to more institutional systems like the health care system, the pension system, and the education system.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the concept of social reproduction. However, many who use the term do so in a straightforward and even descriptive manner that fails to account for its roots as a critical term that emerged from a long, Marxist feminist tradition. If we are to truly understand the term, we must unpack its latent implications, particularly in contexts outside of the societies where it was developed.

At its core, the social reproduction paradigm highlights the tension between social reproduction's essential role in reproducing the conditions of the capitalist system, on one hand, and the devaluation and nonrenumeration of socially reproductive activities, on the other. In other words, to use the term social reproduction is to acknowledge these structural tensions inherent in the system.

What are useful theoretical references for you when you apply the term social reproduction?

As I said, I use the term with respect to its context as a framework rooted in this Marxist feminist theoretical tradition.

I first encountered the term back in the early 2010s when Marxist feminist thought was undergoing a revival in academia, in the form of Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). The contemporary social reproduction feminists who have influenced me include, but are not limited to, Lise Vogel, Cindi Katz, Nancy Fraser, Sue Ferguson, Tithi Bhattarcharya, Cinzia Arruzza, and Alessandra Mezzadri. They draw from earlier debates and activism pushed forward by figures such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati, and the late German sociologist Maria Mies. Of course, Marx himself also talked about the reproduction of labor power in volume 1 of Capital, but, to him, that women performed all of the unwaged domestic labor was just a taken-for-granted condition.

In short, the development of SRT is a result of collective and multigenerational efforts. Today, there are many more scholars and activists engaging with SRT. I find it interesting that we have seen a revival of SRT concurrently with a global crisis of social reproduction and care, and at a time when many feminists are joining and shaping a new wave of internationalist socialism.

What is specific about this term and the discussion about social reproduction in the Chinese context?

That is a very good question because, to my knowledge, few people have attempted to theoretically compare the case of China with other cases elsewhere around the globe through the lens of SRT.

I am writing a book that looks at care work in the Chinese context during the country's transformation from state socialism to capitalism over the past decades. To theorize what is different or unique in China requires both a comparative study of different socialist contexts and one of capitalism and historically existing socialism.

Let me address two aspects here. First, China is an outlier—a unique case—because of its communist or socialist past. In terms of terminology, I know this definition is controversial, but China between the 1950s and '70s was categorically different from capitalism as we know it. I argue that one signature difference was that the Chinese state took social reproduction seriously, at least at the discursive level. In fact, the Chinese Revolution built its legitimacy, at least in part, on the promise of a future where everyone was fed, sheltered, and educated—social reproductive justice, if you will. After taking over the country, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) built an urban welfare program designed to offer workers welfare services from the cradle to the grave.

Of course, that socialist welfare system was unsatisfactory, uneven, and mostly limited to top-tier state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and party administration units. But my research at the grassroots level shows that people really believed that the party should and sometimes did offer necessary welfare coverage to citizens. Thus, though they were not always successful, ordinary people did make demands of the state based on these promises.

My research also shows the categorical difference between the 1950s and '80s in the PRC—the latter arguably being the golden era of SOEs and their welfare policies—and what began to happen in the 1990s. With the market reforms of the '90s, all service units that had provided welfare in the SOEs—such as kindergartens, cafeterias, and health clinics—were shut down or privatized.

That brings me to my second point. China's turn onto the capitalist road was accompanied by its development of one of today's most austere welfare regimes (at least compared to the countries' proportion of the GDP spent on welfare, care, and education). While the reproduction of the labor force is very important for China's economy, China is, indeed, one of the worst off in terms of social reproduction, especially when it comes to the rural population. Across the history of the PRC, rural communities have borne a disproportionate share of the total cost of social reproduction, effectively subsidizing an albeit very limited welfare state in selected urban areas.

In that sense, if the key insight of SRT is this tension—the difference between the necessity and devaluation of these processes, then China is unique because it has the biggest gulf. Yet, given the PRC's socialist past, the working class in China still invokes its legacy of social reproduction when it makes demands.

Based on that, what are the origins and symptoms of the current crisis of social reproduction in China?

Since its establishment in 1949, the PRC has had a two-tier labor system. At that time, more than ninety percent of the labor force were peasants, and only ten percent belonged to the urban working class. The socialist welfare

system only covered the urban ten percent of the labor force, and even that was highly uneven and limited. The rural people had to rely on themselves for welfare and, in addition, had to pay taxes that subsidized industrial accumulation in the urban areas.

In the 1980s, eighty percent of the population was still rural. But as market reforms began to kick off, rural people were able to go to cities to sell their labor. Many rural migrant women worked in the informal care sector, as urban double-income families with aging parents and small children were now able to outsource household chores and some care labor by employing them.

Today, this commodification of care work is more pronounced than ever before. While most middle class families cannot afford to outsource care work in many high income countries, in China's first and second tier cities, many white collar families can do so because of the relative cheapness of rural labor. This is because rural migrants sell their labor power to do industrial or care work in the city while, until recently, their own social reproduction happened in the countryside at a very low cost. In order to support their children working in the cities, aging rural parents took care of their grandchildren while doing farm work on the side.

The crisis of social reproduction lies in the fact that this two-tier system has become less sustainable over the past two decades. Migrant workers' cost of living has risen as fast as their children's education costs and health care bills. This increased cost of living means that migrants need jobs with higher wages. Additionally, many no longer want to work in sweatshops.

The rising cost of migrant labor has already led to capital flight from China. China could bear the cost of labor reproduction because of the two-tier system, but what if this system collapses? When migrant workers' wages are so low that people at the bottom tier can no longer afford their own social reproduction? In my opinion, that is the root cause of the crisis of social reproduction.

As the late Giovanni Arrighi observed, historically, other superpowers had different ways to deal with the rising costs of labor reproduction when they were on the rise on their paths to becoming global hegemons. The British Empire, for instance, was able to outsource the cost of social reproduction through exploiting informal labor in its colonies. The United States lowered the cost of social reproduction by taking advantage of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and, afterward, through discriminatory immigration policy. China has been unable to outsource the cost of social reproduction in quite the same way and so, until now, has had to fully internalize it. How the Chinese government will proceed to deal with this increasingly pressing issue remains an open question.

This takes us to the next question: How does the crisis of social reproduction affect women from different class backgrounds in China?

Rural people are most impacted by the crisis of social reproduction. Chinese rural culture is, in some regards, more patriarchal and sexist than the city. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural women's emotional and care labor for family members (especially the elderly) is more likely to be taken for granted. The expectation is that women should provide that labor for free. The elderly female population finds itself in a particularly miserable situation, as they often have to take care of the grandchildren while also working in the fields because all the young people have left the villages.

But they are not the only ones affected. Female migrant workers do not only work in factories, such as those at Foxconn making iPhones, but also constitute the world's largest informal care work force. Today, China has about thirty million domestic workers. Almost all are female and from the countryside. Their domestic labor is highly informalized, unregulated, and exploitative.

Another aspect of the social reproduction crisis affects the urban middle class as well, as evidenced by the formation of the "sandwich family," a working age family with a disproportionate number of elderly and young dependents. China is very idiosyncratic in this sense since, beginning in 1980, it followed the One-Child-Policy. In 2015, the policy was lifted, allowing families to have up to three children. Now, many middle aged couples with white collar jobs may have up to four aging parents and several children to take care of. Due to gender norms, women—as daughters, wives, and mothers—still have to do the bulk of the care work in these families. While, as I mentioned earlier, these individuals might earn enough money to be able to outsource some of the care labor, this does not always cover the increasing demands for care work.

What's more, because of a contracting labor market, middle class families in China are investing a lot into their children's education. Middle class mothers, who may have had paid employment have increasingly withdrawn from the labor market, to do intense and unwaged care work to support their children's education.

Men often use the excuse that they are busy with their "996" (a popular Internet idiom meaning working from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week), and therefore have no time available for care work. So, the crisis is not simply due to the shortage of relatively "cheap" care labor, or the fact that the aging population needs more care; it is also linked to a competitive and cutthroat labor market in general. Psychologically across classes, people—and women, especially—feel overwhelmed trying to deal with care work for family members of different generations.

Speaking of economic pressures that have increased in the past decade, to what extent does this crisis of social reproduction add to a crucial turning point in the trajectory of capitalism in China?

That is an important question. Soaring costs of labor have triggered capital flight. It is a myth that this is exclusively due to Trump's initial tariff war. Way before US tariffs were raised, capital had already begun leaving China to look for cheaper labor and resources. The Chinese government has responded by promoting industrial upgrading in the domestic economy. It wants to support the development of a more highly skilled labor force and capital intensive industries that are supposed to replace unskilled and low waged work in the current labor intensive, export oriented sectors. For economists, then, the problem lies in the gap between the leaders' ambition to upgrade industries and the fact that many workers in China are either unskilled or low-skilled, while many migrant youths are unemployed.

That is something to look at for sure, but the reality is more complicated than that. Investing more in the human capital of migrant workers does not mean all of them will be employed, nor does it resolve all problems. Seen from a SRT perspective, accumulation requires an army of cheap and precarious labor—which is at once the backbone of the economy and unable to sustain itself due to austerity; this contradiction is built into capitalism itself. And hence, the system is crisis laden.

In my view, these contradictions and crises are the engines enabling capital to develop. While the state may want to invest more in education and human resources, it will maintain its policies of austerity. It does not want to distribute resources evenly or equalize education, or skills. What we see is capital "going out"—that is, the globalization of Chinese capital owned by the top echelon of Chinese society. While Chinese capital invests in other developing countries, the majority of the population in China remains poor and unskilled. That arrangement favors the powerful in China because it allows them to keep people divided into different, competing tiers.

From time to time, they offer a bandage, by rolling out selective welfare policies. If they want families to produce more children, they might give them a child-allowance for that purpose. It remains to be seen whether this will work, given the budget crises impacting local governments in recent years.

So far, I've mostly focused on the structural level. Let me add something to the question on the turning point. It is

important to emphasize agency because the resilience of capitalism and the rise of welfare capitalism elsewhere is connected to the push back of grassroots workers' resistance and protest. The political environment in China has not been conducive to that kind of change, but during the massive layoffs in the 1990s, SOE workers resisted in mass. Rarely seen in headlines today, Chinese workers are still protesting in small pockets as we speak. So, it is important to think about grassroots strategies in terms of how to push back and make demands.

If the Chinese state is running out of "cheap" labor, and if it is running out of workers who can take care of the elderly, then it has to offer something to the masses. It is my opinion that, for people living through it on the ground, even a version of China's current capitalism that includes a more generous welfare infrastructure is better than no change at all.

How is the Chinese state dealing with the different aspects of the crisis of social reproduction?

I don't know what kind of multidimensional chess the government in Beijing is playing, if any. It sees the dire need of more workers in the care labor market, especially more workers to take care of the elderly. China's population is aging rapidly. There are not enough children to fill up all the spots in day-care facilities and kindergartens, so kindergartens and primary schools are closing down. There is a fast-growing so-called silver economy that is centered on care work for the elderly, but people do not want to work in that sector due to low pay and tedious work.

So, there is some bargaining power vis-à-vis the state. While the state is trying to standardize the quality of domestic work, it is still unwilling to formalize that labor. Domestic workers in China are not covered by labor law, and therefore do not have labor protections. Their contract is based on civil law. That means they have all the liability and responsibility, without many rights. The state should formalize domestic work instead of enabling profit-seeking agencies to dominate that care labor market.

The state is also following a selective strategy to boost fertility rates. As of this year, the central government started to give out child allowances, where every child is eligible for a total of 1,500 USD distributed over the first three years from birth. That is only a drop in the bucket. We can use the trajectory of Japan or South Korea as an example. Once the fertility rate had become extremely low, no matter what the governments did, they were not able to push it up again.

Giving more generous benefits to families is not enough. Implementing such incentives does not mean that people will suddenly decide to have more children. It has already become a systemic issue, with both material and psychological effects. People are pessimistic, and they do not want to bring new life into a society characterized by suffering. That became obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a video clip that went viral on social media, a government official said to a man, "if you don't do this and that, we will punish your children." The man responded: "There will be no children, we are the last generation!" That is how disillusioned some people in China already are.

How have women from different class backgrounds in China reacted to the different aspects of the crisis?

I have talked to many migrant workers as well as urban workers who have been laid-off. While many are suffering under this patriarchal system and cultural sexism, they do have a lot of agency. They are not just following what the family expects them to do. Foxconn workers I talked to told me that they came to work in the factory to make money for their children who were in school, and they were worried about their children's future marriage—especially, if they had a son—because of the high dowry prices. [1]

Some women have also taken to social media platforms like WeChat, posting things like: "I have to first think about how to be a woman today. I have to do something for myself. I should enjoy small things in my own life." They value

economic independence and self-dignity as much as they care about the future of their children.

For the past fifteen years, there has also been a refreshing upsurge of Chinese feminism which has attracted global allies. It is mainly driven by relatively young, well educated and tech savvy Chinese women with some degree of English speaking skills. They have already caused profound changes in popular culture. The market has been quickest to respond to the changing mentality. If you want to make a successful movie today, you have to add a feminist element—for instance, a powerful female protagonist.

This upsurge started in the early 2010s, when some grassroots feminist initiatives started things like "Occupy Men's Toilets," asking for more public or workplace bathrooms for women. They've also campaigned for maternity leave and spoken out against sexual harassment. These demands have mostly been co-opted by the state. The new Civil Code includes a paragraph against sexual harassment, more bathrooms for women have been created in many workplaces, and so on. The state is deliberately co-opting because of how widespread the support has been for these causes, and how much momentum their demands have been able to gain. But to fully tame the feminist energy, the state arrested and silenced the individuals and small groups that initially came up with these demands. Many of the individuals have left China.

What about the impact of feminism on women of different ages and different class backgrounds? Do women in general refer to feminism as a concept, or do they simply relate to feminist content and demands?

From my own observation, we have seen a categorical change. Twenty years ago, small groups of feminists came together and pushed for these demands. But most people among the general population did not use the term feminism or know what it meant. That has changed. Younger, urban women seem to all know the term, and some of them dare to embrace it. There is the backlash from men who invoke the term on social media by saying that feminism is a bad thing—being a feminist means you are selfish and want to control men. That shows how threatened they feel.

There is also a small subset of men who say things like: "I am a male feminist!" In a blockbuster called "Hao Dongxi," a high grossing, mainstream movie from 2024, the male protagonist tells the female protagonist that he wants to have a good relationship with her and, therefore, would read a feminist book by Chizuko Ueno. [2] I was pleasantly shocked when I heard that! Ueno is a Marxist feminist from Japan who has gained popularity among Chinese readers, especially urban women, in recent years. But I never thought that her name would appear in a popular movie in China.

Still, like in other contexts, everybody has their own take on what feminism actually means. If you compare critical feminism with what some self described feminists in China say, you might think that the latter represents "lean-in" feminism or corporate feminism, or that they are not progressive enough. Here, my take is probably unorthodox. I think in today's China it is a good thing when more people claim to be feminist because they are up against a generally suffocating political environment. But the spontaneous, grassroots, and self described feminist energy—like all other social movements—will definitely not solve all of our problems. For instance, self described feminists in China are very critical of gender based violence, sexual harassment, and women trafficking, but very few have the capacity to reflect on Chinese nationalism. In that respect, I don't entirely blame Chinese feminism. Commentary that is critical of Chinese nationalism is much more likely to be censored online in China, while people have more space—albeit tightening—to bring up issues related to gender.

After observing this crisis of social reproduction and the social contestations around it, in your view, what will happen in the next few years? Is there a way to alleviate the crisis? Or will it lead to even graver crisis symptoms?

I do not see a promising political opening in the near future where, all of a sudden, those feminist grassroots activities are able to reappear. What we will more likely see is even more state cooptation as well as corporate cooptation of what is coming up in feminist demands. From the state's perspective, low fertility and the aging population will continue to be worrisome issues. As we speak, new welfare benefits around fertility and aging are being rolled out. And we might see a more aggressive commodification of care services, especially, for the elderly, as this has started already.

The One Child generation born in the 1980s is now at an age where they have to worry about their parents. This generation has little time to take care of them, but it has some financial resources. That makes them a top target for businesses.

It is also possible that the state will try to import guest workers to fill up some of the void. That is going to be a big shift because the Chinese state has not developed capacities to deal with immigrants in volume yet. However, it is already considering this possibility.

In addition, the urbanization rate has reached almost seventy percent, and only thirty percent are still counted as rural. Increasing urbanization, a rising cost of living, ongoing commodification of labor will force the state to offer better welfare such as pension schemes. But many provincial governments have literally no money, and are being left by the state to fend for themselves: Ninety percent of the resources for care have to be provided by families. If you are rich, you can afford the necessary care services, if you are poor, you won't.

After giving a rather bleak picture of what is currently going on and what will come in the future, what would a feminist alternative be? Where does an alternative perspective start that could eventually go beyond patriarchal capitalism?

One promising aspect is that many young people are talking about "lying flat," refusing to work a lot or do overtime. That is not just happening in China but around the globe. With opportunities for upward mobility diminishing, part of the younger generation does not want to give in to capitalism or neoliberalism; they want to opt out. They ask: "Why should I have to put all my energy and time into the corporate or meritocratic world? What if I live on a meager wage and use the time to do what I feel like doing?" That is a spontaneous way to readjust our value system. It might not be the best way, but it is definitely an interesting way.

A lesson we can learn from social reproduction feminism is to question the current value system. The devaluation of care work is arbitrary, alienated, and follows a capitalist logic. We should reevaluate every activity in our lives, and we should definitely not see everything as part of a market exchange. It is really hard to make it happen on a large scale. But I think people are already taking steps and, perhaps unconsciously, to readjust their value system. They are refusing to get married, to have children, and to work overtime. Those are all necessary challenges to the status quo.

I am a fan of the progressive version of universal basic income (UBI) because that gives us an opportunity to readjust our value system. I know that UBI as an abstract idea is very controversial, as people from the right also endorse some versions of it, but I see an opportunity in it to create a situation that is unconditionally humane, where you can rethink what really matters to you and to the community. The feminism espoused by Kathi Weeks is particularly interesting in this respect. [3]

My last question: We talk about China, and you are currently in the United States. In your opinion, what can women and feminists outside China learn from feminist struggles in China?

So much! If you put this in a longer historical arc and look at the beginning of the twentieth century, you realize that Chinese politics has often been shaped by turmoil and violence. But in every moment of Chinese history, you see unapologetic feminists. Following Wang Zheng's work, we can learn from these feminists to be strategic and how to use what she calls the "politics of concealment."4

In my own research on the Mao era (1949-1976), I often get questions from the audience like "You mention agency, resistance, and protest, but your data does not show that. So, where were the grassroots protests among women workers in the 1950s?" It is important to understand that, in the Chinese context, resistance is not just about taking it to the streets or open protest. Sometimes women have had to conceal their real agenda, or cooperate with their male colleagues, or take a marginalized position in the system. It is better to be resilient—be water, to borrow the term from the Hong Kong protestors—than do nothing. I think this kind of resilience is underappreciated in Western politics, because people in the West take it for granted that you have the right to open protests. In environments such as China, that option is not always viable.

Besides, Chinese women are among the most vocal today precisely because of a sense of deprivation. I belong to the generation of Chinese women who came of age when China was reintegrating into the global market. The UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was a highlight. Chinese feminists back then thought that, compared to the West, our feminism was underdeveloped, and our human rights as women were not protected. Western feminism was the ideal against which we compared our situation.

That generation of feminists made a lot of demands based on an idealized Western feminism. Nowadays, it has become clear that the West is not what we thought it would be, but trying to live up to this ideal for two decades created the energy that pushed my generation of feminists to make the demands they have. That is why these feminists have been so vocal. They have always thought that things could be better and that the Chinese government is so bad and backward when it comes to supporting women, especially with regard to individual rights, for instance, against sexual harassment.

I think globalization, with all its premises and predicaments, has had this interesting effect on Chinese feminism. This is the case with human rights NGOs and labor NGOs. They also put forward demands and developed leverage based on their idealized view of the West. In the past, Chinese NGOs had a lot of connections with the US and its allies through international development agencies. These organizations were not puppets; they knew how to navigate the political cracks to advance their own causes.

Now, with the West—especially the United States—losing or abdicating its power over global social movements, Chinese domestic activists must resort to their own power, to develop methods of change from within. This is without a doubt a hard and dangerous task, as censorship and other forms of political oppression are pretty severe.

On the bright side, there has always been some space for activists to maneuver. In a country where Marxism is still, ironically, the official political theory, basic concepts in the Marxian tradition such as "labor," "trade union," "exploitation," "revolution," "women's liberation," and "equal pay" cannot be censored because they overlap with the official discourse. There is a large volume of young people (the post 1990s and 2000s generations) who have been attracted to these Marxist concepts and ideas and have been enthusiastically discussing them.

These may become the seeds, perhaps in unintended ways, for changes in the future. After all, twenty years ago, who would have expected Chizuko Ueno, the Japanese Marxist feminist, to become a bestselling author in China?

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*Source: **Spectre**.*

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[1] According to contemporary Chinese social norms, the groom's family is expected to provide the bride's family with a substantial fortune in the form of money or property—most typically an apartment and an automobile—with a total value ranging from several thousand to around twenty thousand USD.

[2] The English title of this film is "Her Story," see https://www.imdb.com/title/tt31807233.

[3] See Kathi Weeks. The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries, Duke University Press, 2011.

