

A Cognitive Dissonance Theory Perspective on Contemporary Feminism

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Abstract: Since the New Culture Movement brought Western feminism to China in the early 20th century, feminist awareness has been awakening in China and has been developing locally. With the social changes over decades, feminism has evolved to be more consistent with “local conditions” in different times. However, in the contemporary society, under the cultivation of mass media (e.g., The presentation of “great lady” series) and the Internet, the evolution of local feminism in China has accelerated which led to an unprecedented scale of feminist consciousness and discussion in history.

1. Introduction

According to the “China Marriage Report 2021”, China’s marriage rate has been declining year on year since 2013, falling by 12.2% year on year in 2020.^[1] At the same time, online buzzwords such as “marriage fear” and “feminism” have been widely discussed on social media platforms, the “Great Lady Film and Television” productions are also proliferating.

2. Cognitive dissonance theory

Assume that a girl has a sweet tooth, while she read some news one day that too much sweet food is bad for skin. After that, she is struggling to decide whether she should have sweet food. We can notice that her behavior of eating sweet food is inconsistent with her opinion that sugar is not healthy which leads to psychological discomfort. The phenomenon is called cognitive dissonance.

According to Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance is that people are painful when they find their behaviors in conflict with their opinions or holding different perspective with others. Consequently, they tend to take actions to reduce dissonance.^[2]

2.1 “Traditional feminism” and “Modern feminism”

The earliest wave of feminism emerged in Western countries during 1792 and 1960, with its primary idea that women should have the same educational opportunities as man. Then it was the emergence of the second and third wave of feminism. In the second wave, feminists argued for equal payment and job opportunities for women and men, and expanding childcare services. In the third wave, Pan (2016) summarized that the feminists of this wave acknowledged gender

differences, “they concerned about how to respect and protect these differences in legitimate ways”. After the May Fourth Movement, abundant information of Western ideology came into China, and people began to concern about woman's rights. However, due to various social and economic reasons, Chinese women's awareness of equality was not well promoted at that time. The “modern feminism” came mainly from Western middle-class academia and thus it was criticized that a large part of these feminism content only considered white, middle-class, and educated people. It is this critique that led to the birth of racially specific or pluralistic forms that better correspond with “local” feminism. Today we will discuss “Chinese Feminism” or “Made in China Feminism” which coincides more with the contemporary social context.

However, in the discussion of this paper, we regard feminism as the phenomenon of women who are gradual utilitarian (i.e., focusing more on personal interests) due to cognitive dissonance generated by social changes, old and new notions about female rights.

2.2 The dissonance between traditional and modern women ideology

The belief of “men’s work centers around outside, women’s work centers around the home” rooted in traditional women’s mind. They willingly devote most of their time to household chores. Because of depriving of financial resources, they are dependent on their husbands. Therefore, “being good at housework” is indispensable skill for them. Nowadays, this notion has become a hope and even a requirement of old generation for their daughters. Apparently, traditional women believe that housework is woman's job, not man's and it is also evident from the phrase that they consider the goal of being able to do housework is to marry someone, which validates their view that marriage is the most important thing in life. Similar conversation, education or behaviors of elders who have conventional ideas can affect three outlooks of next generation. However, with the influence of western feminism in China and the rapid growth of Chinese economy, the appearance and impact of the perspective of “equal rights for man and women” has undermined the harmonization in modern women's minds. In contemporary society, the idea of women needing self-reliance is constantly relayed to the public: in real life, there is plenty of images of successful and independent women in the business world being promoted. As summarized by He (2000), cognitive dissonance arises when people hold two opposing ideas. In order to reduce this dissonance, people change their attitudes (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, when women realize that they can have different choices, they choose behaviors or attitudes that contradict their previous perceptions, such as not wanting to marry, not wanting to have children, and wanting to be financially and spiritually independent to reduce dissonance.

2.3 The dissonance between modern female ideology and status

Women have been taking half of the responsibility in social and economic development of China for a long time. But that is exactly why Chinese women have experienced the dilemma of cognitive dissonance for a long time for balancing the relationship between caring for the family, raising children, and work in this historical period. Obviously, they have accepted this situation and comforted themselves with the words “This is a women’s destiny”, which is also a way for them to reduce their dissonance to compromise with traditional ideals. From the perspective of social development, Chinese feminist ideology and actual performance is also closely related to the social environment. All of this resonates with male public intellectuals’ call for married women to “return home” to fulfill their “long neglected” domestic duties (Song 2011; Yan 2008). It is precisely because of the frequently changes in society and the trend of public opinion in recent years that contemporary Chinese women are suffering from more serious cognitive dissonance. In this generation that has received a lot of information about “independent women” and “equality between

men and women”, they have long been a general perception that women need jobs and family obligations are no longer just for women. With the implementation of the two-child and three-child policy, the further reduction of the burden of compulsory education students’ homework and off-campus training, and even the society’s promotion of the values that women should “return to the family”, these are contrary to many modern women's positioning of themselves again. According to Festinger, this dissonance comes from “individual behavior and cultural mores”. One way to reduce cognitive dissonance is to change behaviors that conflict to attitudes (Ma, 1999).

3. The cultivating of media - A study of television as an example

3.1 Cultivation theory

George Gerbner proposed the early cultivation theory, whose basic cultivation theory includes: firstly, the cultivation effect of audience is positively correlated with the amount of television watched; secondly, the cultivation effect of television on audience is unidirectional and holistic, as long as the audience watches television, it will produce a certain cultivation effect. George Gerbner (1980) believes that in modern society, the influence of the mass media on people's understanding of the world is a long and subtle process of "cultivation", and that the formation of people's ideas is influenced and conditioned by the mass media.

3.2 The evolution of female image in TV

In the case of television dramas, “there is a clear process of gradual change in the portrayal of women in reality dramas.” From the early days of <<Crave>>, which portrayed the tough “good Chinese woman”, to the later, very reform-era <<Migrant Girl>>, to the <<Chinese Divorce>>, which broke away from the traditional image of the good woman, the image of women has continued to be three-dimensional and diversified, with “big female leads” emerging. For example, in recent years there have been <<Nothing but Thirty>> and <<All is Well>>, as well as <<Big Little Lies>> and <<Why Women Kill>> from abroad.

It is important to project women’s inner desires and emotional patterns, because in the past, women were in fact suppressed by a patriarchal society for a long time, and now when women see various “successful” women or previously discriminated female characters in dramas who have good lives. They can actually satisfy their own psychological appeal the drama is a great way for women to feel a strong sense of empathy. As Gerbner suggests, “resonance” postulates that when the symbolic reality presented in the world of television appears in the same context as the individual’s experience of reality or converges with the subjective reality in the individual’s mind, the cultivation effect of the medium on the audience becomes more pronounced and prominent .

For example, Andy from <<ode to joy>> appears as a highly intelligent and powerful woman. Tong Wei in <<Nothing but Thirty>> is a near-perfect housewife, after being betrayed by her husband, also starts a new life in a more independent and powerful way. Su Mingyu in <<All is Well>> is a character who has been treated quite unfairly as a child but who has worked his way up to a more privileged and affluent life than her brothers. The emergence of these female figures has provided the public with a new way of thinking that women can be more than just housewives, that they can achieve self-worth and a better life, that they can be independent even after suffering injustice.

3.3 The cultivating of media - A study of social media as an example

Feminism information, which features challenging traditions and authorities, emphasizing

equality, and defeating society bias in content, prevails in this battlefield like a duck takes to water. Feminism has been well embraced by the social mass and found itself a place in the civil context.

Moreover, the real-time and amplification effects of the Internet make it a most convenient tool for feminist organizations and KOLs to address their points of view on the public under merely no cost of resource. Lu Ping, director of the Chinese NGO Woman Media Watch Network (WMWN) and founder of weekly e-newsletter “Gender Watch” points out that “...gender and feminist perspective is almost invisible in the mainstream media...Through social media, NGO activists and feminists are able to form circle and engage in public debate, even though the discussion seldom enters the public sphere” (Liu, 2016). While KOLs are promoting their ideas, their followers are also given the freedom to share opinions by comment, repost, and tags. Empowered by the fission effect of social platforms, netizens together constantly enrich the topics and spread them at a geometric level. This co-construction magnifies the cultivation effect back at the audience at a speed history has never witnessed before.

4. Diversified feminism information produce resonance in all walks of daily life

“In contemporary China, waves of women’s agitation flood popular media, especially the Internet, in response to various news items, entertainment programs, gossip, and anecdotes” (Wu & Dong, 2019). According to the author’s observation, taking Douban for example, feminist social content mainly includes six aspects: academic discussion, policies and regulations, news and crimes, career and employment, family, and daily experience. Whether they are active discussion participants or passively exposed spectators, women viewers can always attain resonance and references for real day-to-day issues in those fragmented, multi-polarized messages. The cultivation power grows especially strong over them as they perceive that what have been posted online are very much like their own life.

Undoubtedly, the dynamic discussions reveal how thoroughly Chinese women have been re-considering their down-to-ground life from a feminist perspective empowered by the Internet. In other words, feminism no longer just stays as an ideology beheld by the elites. It has become a perspective of guidance for women to apply in judging daily issues. However, as feminism conception penetrates every layer of daily practice, they are confronted with cognitive dissonance more often and it more or less becomes an inevitable problem for every individual woman to deal with.

5. Conclusion

This also means that there is a growing dissonance between “traditional feminine ideology” and “modern feminine ideology”, as well as between “modern feminine ideas” and “modern feminine status”. The gradual weakening of the national permanent employment system and welfare system, and the implementation of the second and third child policies have invisibly reinforced the functional value of women’s “return to the family” which has seriously destabilized the status of women in the labor market and further exploited the rights that women should be equal with men.

As a result, contemporary Chinese women are choosing to reduce the growing cognitive dissonance by “not wanting to get married”, “not wanting to have children” and even “gender dichotomy”. Not getting married or having children is the best option for them to increase their competitiveness in the workplace as well as to have a more comfortable individual life. Therefore, we can conclude that cognitive dissonance has led women to be individualistic and utilitarian. The perspective of “de-feminization” and “selfishness” are contrary to the traditional concept, in fact, is a forced “self-preservation” behavior for contemporary women who are trapped in serious cognitive dissonance.

Simone de Beauvoir famously said, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman.” What she means is that being female is not the same as being constructed as women. In contemporary China, thanks to information and communication technology, we are witnessing an era of redefining “What makes a woman?” However, only corresponding economic, social, and cultural reforms can answer “How to be it?” by providing feasible institutional guarantees and structural changes for Chinese women to break out of cognitive dissonance and patriarchal exploitation, and finally for our whole society to achieve gender equality.

References

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