

Sanba: Chinese Feminists in Struggle: Maoist Past, Coercive Present

Monday 18 March 2024, by [DUAN Jiling](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2024).

SANBA (三八), literally translating to “Three Eight” or March 8th, has long been a discriminatory term for women (*funü*, 妇女) in Chinese, as this date marks International Women’s Day and thus has become associated with women, and particularly, working class married women. “Sanba” is part of a lexicon, associated with women, that has acquired derogatory meanings and reveal attitudes about gender roles, age and social class.

In her reflection on *funü* (woman) as an undesirable identity, Wang Zheng, a feminist scholar and activist who lived through the Mao era, recalls how, as early as 1978 when she was in her twenties, she and her female peers in college felt a deep aversion towards the term “*funü*” and explored why: [\[1\]](#)

“For us, the contemporary Chinese term for women, funü, invoked the image of a married woman surrounded with pots and pans, diapers and bottles, sewing and knitting needles, and who hung around the neighborhood gossiping. Her world was filled with such “trivial” things and her mind was necessarily narrow and backward. We were certainly not women.” (Wang 2001: 27)

Instead they gladly embraced the identity of *qingnian* (youth, 青年), a social label laden with Maoist connotations and revolutionary fervor (Wang 2001). However, *qingnian* was soon supplanted by *nüxing*, a more fashionable identity, amidst the market economy driven waves since the 1980s.

Unlike *funü* and *qingnian*, *nüxing* is not a product of the party-state propaganda but rather a market-driven identity. It emerged from the proliferation of commercialized, objectified and sexualized portrayals of women’s bodies in mass media, coupled with a narrative of “desirable femininity (*nürenwei*, 女人为)” which was promoted by male liberal intellectuals advocating for the recognition of female sexuality suppressed during the Mao era. This shift aligned with the mass layoffs of factory workers, disproportionately impacting women.

The inclination of rejecting the *funü* identity, due to its association with undesirable femininity and the attempt to distance oneself from it, remained widespread among young women in the 2010s.

In higher education, especially among those born after the 1980s and in urban areas, even the *nüxing* identity has become undesirable. A more favored label is *nüsheng* (female students, 女学生). In comparison to the implication of being an adult woman grappling with gendered social norms and obligations, *nüsheng* not only emphasizes their age — or sexual capital — advantage but also underscores their educational privilege, thereby distinguishing female students from women in other age and class groups.

This identity, exclusive to female college students even if only claimed during the brief period of college life, can still be leveraged as a legitimate tool to mobilize advantageous social resources. [\[2\]](#) Therefore, despite being acutely aware of the gender inequalities in areas such as employment and education, some female students hesitate to embrace the *funü* identity, as it places them at further

disadvantages related to age, class, marriage and the workplace.

Moreover, the *funü* identity is attached to a de-sexualized, working class, revolutionary image from the collectivist era, sharply contrasting with the contemporary image sought by modern female college students who aspire to individuality, independence and self-fulfillment.

“Girls’ Day,” Sexual Harassment Day

Though its exact origin is difficult to trace, a so-called “Female Students’ Day (*nüsheng jie*, 女生节),” or “Girls’ Day,” gradually gained popularity in higher education since the early 2010s. Scheduled for March 7 (*sanqi*), the day before International Women’s Day to highlight the age difference between a *nüsheng* and a *funü*, “Girls’ Day” was quickly hyped by large commercial companies as a shopping and revelry festival just like Women’s Day or Mothers’ Day.

Similarly, some male college students – voluntarily or organized by their female peers – adopted the party-state’s Women’s Day custom of distributing small gifts such as laundry detergent to women. Better, male college students added certain romantic gestures by presenting flowers and preparing breakfast – and displaying banners.

To publicly express their “admiration” for female students, male students would cover campuses’ most prominent locations with banners. Once this action gained attention on social media, it turned into a competition among universities, resulting in even more banners each year.

Eventually, it transformed into a self-proclaimed territory for male students to openly harass their female peers, showcasing a akin-to-fraternity masculinity. While many banners were harmless, merely boasting in a self-congratulatory manner that is cringe-worthy, some were not.

“On Girls’ Day, [we] just want to give you a set of [our] inherited ancient chromosomes” — An advertisement for free sperm from male students majoring in International Business, Class of 2015. Apparently, what remain ancient are not just their chromosomes.

“Forensic Goddesses have great skills, studying, dissecting, and raising babies” — Male students majoring in Forensic Science, Class of 2013, offering their sincere admiration for their female peers. Perhaps thinking that the term “female student” is not sufficient to express their admiration, they replaced it with another increasingly popular label “goddess (*nüshen*, 女神),” adopted by many young women who desired empowerment.

“Girl, you are the only daughter-in-law designated by my mom” — Unilaterally declared marriage arrangement by male students majoring in Pharmacy, Class of 2014, seemingly hoping to turn March 7th, Girls’ Day, into an engagement day.

“Hey, girl, just sit tight at the front of the boat, and let [me] fight for socialism on shore.” Well, it seems like male students from the Marxist College have higher aspirations after all.

In a country where any public protest with banners might lead to imprisonment, these male students not only freely express a form of sexual harassment but also receive encouragement from both school authorities and society at large.

As “Girls’ Day” became a popular campus culture, the celebration activities on March 7th marked a rare exception — a large-scale, public, student-organized event not only approved but explicitly sanctioned or even encouraged by both universities and government authorities.

As one of the primary promoters of Girls’ Day and reportedly one of the earliest universities to have

celebrated it, Shandong University takes pride in its role. The official university accounts even proudly showcase sexist banners on social media, cheerleading its male students.

Given the Chinese Communist Party's tight control over college students since the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, what collective actions students can or cannot undertake have always been tightly regulated. After all, the open expression of "affection" from male students to their female counterparts, met with seeming enthusiasm from the female students — with a few killjoy feminists being the exception — raise neither questions nor criticisms regarding the widening gender gap in employment among college students and prevailing gender discrimination.

Everyone is pleased — everyone but feminist troublemakers.

"No To March 7, Celebrate March 8"

Since the early 2010s, a succession of feminist advocacies has been consistently surfacing in public spaces in China. These initiatives often involve strategic street performances, followed by online mobilization and petitions. The campaigns aim to promote cultural and institutional change while demanding accountability from the government.

As part of their activism strategies, they usually schedule their campaigns on special occasions, such as Women's Day. This not only helps grab more attention from the public but, more importantly, provides a platform for them to articulate their demands more effectively.

On the eve of International Women's Day in 2014, nine female university students from nine different major cities, including Guilin, Lanzhou, Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, Kunming, Shenzhen, Nanjing and Zhuhai, sent a gift box to Yuan Guiren, the then Minister of Education in China. The box contained bread, roses, and a letter suggesting improvements to address gender discrimination in textbooks. [3]

In 2016, a group of Chinese feminist activists launched the "#fansanqiguosanba (#SayNoToMarch7CelebrateMarch8, #反三庆八)" campaign during International Women's Day. Feminists across various social platforms added the term funü to their IDs, adopted a uniform profile picture, and used the hashtag to speak out on social media, openly claiming the funü identity. Simultaneously, they gathered banners suspected of overt sexism and exposed them online, sparking intense discussions. In the end, the hashtag garnered over 110 million views.

In *The Anxiety of Desire*, a documentary directed by Wan Qing capturing the #SayNoToMarch7CelebrateMarch8 campaign, feminist activists are shown raising banners during a promotional event for Girls' Day, where young women's bodies are exploited to attract customers.

Their banner reads, "We want not only sanitary pads, face masks, and laundry detergent but also a gender-friendly campus environment." They climbed onto the stage set up by the businesses, singing a song adapted by the feminist theatre group B-Come [4] titled "Do You Hear the Women Sing?" [5] The lyrics go:

*"I want to go out [in public space] without fear
[I] Want to be beautiful without being harassed
[...]
I sing for myself
Not to be your object of judgement
[...]
I have sparkling dreams*

I also have rich desires [...]
Break the heavy chains
Reclaim the power of women!"

On a bulletin board adorned with stickers of "Girls' Day Wishes" —female students expressing their holiday wishes, usually a small favor or gift, and then their male peers fulfill them — feminist activists added their voice: "Our wish is for a campus job fair without gender discrimination [against female students], can you fulfil it?"

This discordant sticker was swiftly removed by the event organizers, with a group of male students shouting, "Tear it off!" In response, feminist activists promptly posted a more proactive sticker: "We want lubricant, foreplay and true orgasms, dare you provide that?"

In an interview with feminists, a couple of female janitors working at a university dining hall in Guangzhou were asked about their opinions regarding Girls' Day and its celebration activities on campus. One responded candidly:

"I don't even care about the Spring Festival, [6] not to mention Women's Day or Girls' Day. We don't get a day off for the Spring Festival or any gifts; nor on Women's Day. If someone tells you that meat tastes good, but you have never had meat in your whole life, [then you would] not know what meat tastes like. [...] I just find Girls' Day very ridiculous and pretentious. I don't feel jealous at all. Actually, I feel quite disgusted."

Her remarks highlight the bourgeois nature of the protests, and how they marginalize issues related to working women, such as the need for time off and inadequate pay that does not allow them to purchase meat.

In March 2019, an enraged female student at Shandong University set fire to the Girls' Day banners on campus. Despite receiving overwhelming support online, she faced disciplinary penalty from the university. She then posted her "apology" on Weibo, "Setting fire indeed lacked safety considerations, and I apologize to the university. I should have used scissors."

Reclaiming Sanba Identity

In the documentary, an interesting scene unfolds when feminist activists visit a college campus in Guangzhou. A university "Women's Committee," comprised of and organized by male students, is inviting female students to participate in a game they've designed to win Girls' Day prizes. One activist approaches and asks,

"If a female student experiences gender discrimination or has grievances, can she come to you?"

Negative.

"Is there a platform for female students to express their concerns?"

There is no such platform.

"Have you made any attempts in this regard?"

They claim to be trying, as always.

In a sense, this dialogue carried a hint of "progressiveness," as feminists achieved direct and relatively honest communication with a representative from the authorities, and even received evasive but prompt responses. This alone is hard to imagine in the real interactions between feminist activists and governmental officials, not to mention security police.

Activism and Repression

In 2013 Xiao Meili, a feminist artist and activist, walked thousands of miles from Beijing to Guangzhou, sending petitions to local governments and education departments along her way, only to receive minimal responses.

Even worse, she then became the target of persistent police harassment. In 2017 alone, she was evicted five times [7] and her Taobao store, crucial for her livelihood, was temporarily shut down with the removal of many of her feminist designs.

In March 2021 she again found herself targeted by state-sanctioned smear campaigns and online violence initiated by nationalist misogynists. Simultaneously, a significant number of feminist activists' social media accounts, including Xiao's, were banned. [8]

On March 7, 2015 a group of feminist activists planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers on public transportation across major cities on International Women's Day. They were arrested the day before the event, and five of them were detained for 37 days. Even after being released on bail, they lived as criminal suspects for a year, enduring ongoing police harassment and surveillance up to the present day.

On March 6, 2017 a dozen feminist activists dressed in attire reminiscent of the May Fourth era (the historic student protest movement of May 4, 1919 -ed.) took to the streets in Guangzhou.

To minimize risks and ensure online dissemination on Women's Day, the action was implemented two days before March 8, following a strategy often employed by feminist activists to evade state repression. Their goal was to retrace the route of China's first public commemoration of International Women's Day nearly a century ago. [9]

In 1924, initiated by He Xiangning (何香凝), a prominent female revolutionary and pioneer in the Chinese feminist movement, a gathering and demonstration were organized to commemorate Women's Day. Over a thousand participants, consisting of female students, factory workers, and various women's groups, first convened in a park in Guangzhou, and then chanted slogans, marching through the streets of Guangzhou, delivering pamphlets and speeches along the way.

When He proposed commemorating slogans at the nationalist party KMT's first National Congress two months earlier, including "Equality between men and women," "Allow women to [work at governmental] institutions," and "Marriage freedom," she met with a great deal of criticism. But the opposing voices did not stop the then-raging tide of women's revolution.

Almost a century later, Chinese feminists retracing this historic march faced effective obstruction by authorities. Anticipating challenges, they concealed slogans as scrolls in their sleeves, unfurling them only during photo sessions. Messages on banners read: "The feminist road does not end," "The feminist fire does not extinguish," "A hundred years ago, they woke up, and a hundred years later, you are still asleep."

Despite disguised attire and excuses such as they were taking "artistic photos" or "graduation commemoration photos" when questioned by security guards, they were forced to leave the park where women had successfully gathered in 1924. Even taking photos with banners at historical landmarks or sculptures required a strategic battle with the security guards. [10] Eventually, they completed the entire route under constant surveillance.

As the CCP promotes a nominal "Marxist women's perspective" as a substitute for feminism to control the women's movement, the official representative of Chinese women, the All-China

Women's Federation, increasingly functions as a mouthpiece and puppet implementing the party's will.

Marxist feminist activists such as Yue Xin and Zheng Churan, who vigorously advocate for social justice and defend workers' rights, had either gone missing or been arrested. [11] Additionally, NGOs serving female migrant workers, exemplified by Sunflower (向日葵), a feminist labor NGO based in Guangzhou and featured in the documentary, faced continuous suppression, leading many to shut down.

In 2021, Pepper Tribe (花椒部落), the only feminist alternative media platform in mainland China serving migrant female workers, ceased operations amid numerous obstacles.

The current situation for Chinese feminists is far from optimistic. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude with the title of an album from one of my favorite bands, "Live fish swim against the current, dead fish drift with the flow (逆流而游, 顺流而下)." In 2024, may we all be live fish.

Jiling Duan

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P.S.

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/sanba-chinese-feminists-in-struggle-maoist-past-coercive-present/>

Footnotes

[1] Wang, Zheng. 2001. "Call Me 'qingnian' But Not 'funü': A Maoist Youth in Retrospect," in Zhong, Xueping, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, eds. *Some of us: Chinese women growing up in the Mao era*. Rutgers University Press, 27-52.

[2] To further understand the complications of nüsheng identity, see Song Shaopeng. 2016. "Identity and Campus Festivals: A Discussion of Girls' Day in Higher Education." *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* (2): 88-101.

[3] The phrase "Bread and Roses" originated from the slogan of a march by 15,000 New York women advocating for gender equality rights on March 8, 1908. In this context, bread symbolizes survival, while roses symbolize dignity.

[4] B-Come was a feminist theatre group based in Beijing. It adapted the feminist play, *Vagina Monologues* into a localized version, *Our Vaginas, Ourselves* (我们的阴道). This play was later adopted and performed by many Chinese feminist groups worldwide.

[5] The melody of this song is from the theme song, "Do You Hear the People Sing" in 2012 movie *Les Misérables*, and Chinese feminists changed the lyrics to make it a "Song of Women."

[6] The Lunar New Year holiday, the most important tradition holiday for family gathering in China.

[7] The Guangzhou police pressured her landlords to evict her.

[8] More on this story, please read the *New York Times* report, "Women Are Battling China's Angry Trolls. The Trolls Are Winning,"

[9] More about this campaign, see this report on the *New York Times*, "Postcard From China: Secret Video of a Women's Rights Demonstration,"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/insider/postcard-from-china-secret-video-of-a-womens-rights-demonstration.html>.

[10] In China, while security guards do not possess the same law enforcement authority as the police, they act as an extension of state violence and are typically the vanguard in suppressing protests and assisting in "maintaining social stability."

[11] More about their stories, see report at CNN by Ben Westcott and Yong Xiong, "Young Marxists Going Missing in China after Workers' Protest,"

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/13/asia/china-student-marxist-missing-intl/index.html>.