

Original Paper

Power through Culture: The Gender Paradigm in China's Soft Power Engagement in the Global South

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Despite the growing scholarly interest in China as a Global South power, two themes remain under investigated: One of the ways in which China has used soft power to project its comprehensive national capabilities and international power. Another theme that is overlooked by the existing China scholarship is the issue of gender. The so-called “miracle” of China’s recent rise as an economic powerhouse has also been a highly gendered process about which millions of women within China and outside the home raised concerns about the task of stronger political policies and actions that can institute gender equality and non-discrimination for women and girls. Soft power has played an important role in China’s international relations and the Party-State legitimacy among the people in China in terms of improving national pride and demonstrating that the world outside China admires the Chinese way of life—its social, economic institutions, cultural values, and the communist party of China’s (CPC) governance system.

This study presents an analysis of the gender equality paradigm in China’s soft power engagement in the Global South. A history of the CPC shows a consistent policy concern for women’s empowerment and gender equality, generally represented in the concept “women hold up half the sky”, and therefore entitled to their right to resources and equal position in society. Since the 18th National Congress the CPC, President Xi Jinping and the Central Committee committed to adhering the basic national policy of gender equality “as a code of conduct and value standard” for the entire society (China Government Network 2021:3) and advocated for women’s equal rights through strategic measures like participation in economic construction in the family and society, including “equal sharing of housework” and family responsibility such as care work (Chinese Government Network, 2021:31). Have these policy concerns for women’s empowerment been part of China’s structural system of soft power or part of China’s

negotiations with any country in Asia?

1. China's Soft Power

At the meeting to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping emphasized four major principles in promoting China's culture within the country and to the world outside China: 1) Strengthen cultural consciousness and cultural confidence; 2) Strengthen confidence in Chinese values and actively spread these values; 3) Strengthen Confidence to create a cultural masterpiece and write a new epic of Chinese nation; and 4) Tell the China story well with confidence and build a good image of contemporary China (Feng, 2016). These four principles represent China's soft power or cultural soft power, a concept used in China over a decade ago. More recently, on March 15, 2023, President Xi Jinping in his keynote speech at "Walk Together on the Road to Modernization" at the High-level Dialogue between the Communist Party of China and the world's political parties, for the first time proposed "Global Civilization Initiative". He stated "The Global Civilization Initiative calls on all civilizations to use smart or soft power, rather than hard power, to address challenges that threaten the world's pluralistic democratic model. Today, China is using its soft power to persuade the world to respect other civilizations' different forms of democracy and their modernization paths and to uphold the principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness" (Guangming Net- Guangming Daily, 2023).

China's cultural soft power has both external and internal functions. Externally, the CPC would like to spread the traditional Chinese culture, establish China's image as a powerful country, expand the circle of Chinese friends, facilitate the process of understanding well China's discourses on power in an international environment that promotes the construction of an community of shared future for humankind. Internally the soft power was geared to build a socialist spiritual civilization, enhance the attractiveness and appeal of a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, improve the guidance of the Party-State leadership and theoretical frameworks and enhance national cohesion with credibility of news and public opinion (http://www.zgjx.cn/2021-10/15/c_1310246096.htm).

In his pioneering work on soft power (2004, 2011) Joseph Nye discusses two types of power. Hard power is the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and use strategies through coercion, threats, and inducements. Unlike hard power, soft power is the ability to get "others to want the outcomes that you want" and "to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Nye identifies three key sources of soft power: culture, values, and foreign policy. China's definition of soft power (ruan shihli...), however, emphasizes the cultural dimension; and combines traditional culture with ideology, history, morality, and economic governance. Unlike Nye's concept of soft power, the Chinese concept of soft power sees fluid boundaries between hard power (ying shili....) and soft power. China sees the two powers as symbiotic and mutually empowering and associated with political stability and social cohesion (Repnikova, 2022, p. 52). The soft power concept as defined by China is interestingly a mix of Confucious historical values with the

pursuit towards modernization to realize the goals of prosperity and harmony around the world. It is about bringing confidence in China's theoretical frameworks, cultural institutions, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the report of the nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping pointed out, "Culture rejuvenates the country, and culture strengthens the nation. Without a high degree of cultural confidence and cultural prosperity, there will be no great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0704/c40531-31212375.htm>). The main idea was that if China's material capabilities have to make a good appeal to the world, it has to be combined with "Telling China Story Well" through public media, news channels, televisions, public magazines, and Expos and Olympic games which China has been hosting in the last decade. The focus was on how to generate positive discourse about China, its development advantages and China's comprehensive strength is to be converted into external and internal discourse advantages. (https://www.sohu.com/a/273654768_775072)

In the Confucius theory, abundant wealth is the material foundation of a strong country, and the primary goal of national governance is to be rich. Confucius always very consciously combined the development of national hard power and the development of cultural soft power when discussing the way of governance, emphasizing that military strength must be combined with literature, "rich" must be combined with "education" "sufficient food" and "foot soldiers" must be combined with "people's faith" (The Analects of Confucius, Zi Lu). He paid attention to both hard power as the foundation of the country and soft power as the soul of the country.

(<http://scsv.tsinghuajournals.com/article/2017/2096-1189/101350D-2017-1-006.shtml>)

Soft power plays an important role in China's internal politics, in terms of improving the CPC's legitimacy of the political system among the Chinese people. "Appealing to the national pride of Chinese citizens by demonstrating that foreigners admire and are attracted to China" in many ways like governance and social, economic, and cultural systems (Edney et al., 2020, p. 4). However, in China's dealings with African countries there were stories about corruption, debt trap, unemployment, and exploitative colonial practices. Nevertheless, Pew research of 2018 showed favorable ratings for China in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. It is evident that China's Economic engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative and the banking system have created a mix of administration and fear, now also a question of the sustainability of China's economic growth model.

Daniel Lynch's analysis (2020) gives a detailed assessment of the current state of academic debate over soft power in China. He indicates that China's global image has generally worsened over the past 10 years. Chinese scholars blame the west for "tarnishing China's reputation" (Liu, 2017, p. 166); they do not question China's soft power strategy. China's scholars like Liu maintain the position "If China does not manufacture its own national image, others will manufacture one for it" (Liu, 2017, p. 163). That China's historical values embedded in socialism are a civilizational power that has the capacity to challenge western norms (Wang, 2016).

The construction of China's cultural soft power is a major strategic task of the PRC; it is "formed at the

centre” and “released outward” (xing yu zhong er fa yu wai). It means that soft power is formulated by the Party-State in view of its cultural history, political system, and socio-economic development. This model of PRC would be used to tell the outside world about Chinese strength with its cultural values, “intertwining with economies and politics..... in the competition for comprehensive national power” (Mingjiang, 2008, p. 2).

2. The Gender Paradigm

At this point we would like to understand what policies and laws were formulated to reduce or end women’s historical inequality in China. Did the Party-State recognize women’s role in building a socialist, gender hierarchies and patriarchal cultural values “at the centre” and how they were “released” or conveyed through the cultural soft power to the outside world?

- As early as 1948 the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee decreed that when a family is taken as a unit for issuing land deeds, a note must be made upon them to the effect that men and women have equal rights to the land. Following liberation in 1949, new marriage laws reduced the male power of the family by providing for choice of partners, monogamy, equal partnership in raising children and by changing patterns of inheritance and custody of children in favour of women. The Agrarian Reform Law gave women the right to hold land in their own names (for details, see Kelkar, 1990). The implementation of these laws, however, was followed by numerous cases of women suicides and murders.
- In The Great Leap Forward in 1958, women were encouraged to join labour force as part of agricultural collectivization. Stacey (1983, p. 214) noted that “there were estimates of 4,980,000 nurseries and kindergartens and more than 3,600,000 dining halls were set up in rural areas by 1959”. However, these lasted only a few years following local male demands for “hot and cooked food at home”.
- A nationwide campaign in the mid-seventies 1970s for 1) more equal work point ratings, including redefining “equal work” as work of comparable value rather than the same work; 2) men should be willing to share household work and childcare responsibility; and 3) promotion of matrilocal marriages and questioning of patrilocal as a source of gender inequality embedded in traditional marriage practices and family structures (Soong Ching-Ling in Renmin Ribao, 1972; Kelkar, 1990, p. 124).
- Women experienced rapid progress in gender equality during the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), using men as the yardstick: “whatever men can do, women can do too”. However, there is evidence that women still suffered a low status in the ultra-left movement of the Cultural Revolution (Wang, 1995).
- In the mid-1980seighties, several professional women’s organizations, with support from All China Women’s Federation and Women’s Committees in trade unions, protested changes brought about by the Household Responsibility System and demanded gender egalitarian relations in the economic

distribution system (Kelkar, 1985; Nolan, 1983, Shandong Women's Federation, 1986). Chinese women rejected the policy suggestions that asked them to rearrange their time to attend to both housework and contracted work, whether in agriculture or side-line production. Criticizing the traditional morality that "a woman should be a virtuous wife and good mother", women suggested to the policymakers that if men assumed more responsibility for housework, women would become more equal within their families as well as in society (Kelkar, 1990, p. 131).

- The 2005 Law on Protecting Women's Rights and Interests stipulated women have equal rights in the Household Responsibility System of land, and that women's access and control overland must be guaranteed irrespective of their civil status (Wang, 2013; Zhang et al., 2015).

Throughout the period of revolutionary reconstruction in China, women individually and collectively struggled for their right to resources and an equal place in decision-making. For example, a popular song in rural China during the land reform period in the 1950s was:

*Your place is by the stove,
I forbid you to touch my land.
But my name is on the title deed too....
We are equal now, you must give me my due
Or, shall we ask the court to decide?...
Nobody heeds your old rules today.*

Source: The Zhang River, 1949

In response to the male assumption of a "meek, weak and sweet wife" (Xinmim, Wanbao, 14 June 1985), several women asked men "to uphold traditional morality" and to become "virtuous husbands and good fathers". Critics of woman's dependence on man and her inferior social existence declared: "A woman is not the moon. She need not depend on the light of others to shine". They suggested that if men assumed more responsibility for housework, women would become equal within their families as well as in society: One woman, determined to discuss women's liberation with her husband, wrote:

Comrade husband do not overlook the attitude of men towards housework... since you know that the liberation of women is a yardstick of the general liberation of a society, then get moving and do some housework; at least reduce your dependence (on your wife). The family is the cell of society. If only equality between men and women can be achieved within each cell, then the day when women will be liberated will soon follow."

Source: Women of China, 07 July, 1984.

In 2016, the first Women's Forum of Countries Along the Silk Road, (hosted by Xinjiang Women's Federation) discussed the needed opportunities for women in three areas: women's development space; women's leadership and economic benefits; and women's entrepreneurship and employment. In the following year in 2017 at a Forum called "women hold up half the sky" in public diplomacy of the Belt and Road Initiative at China-South Asia Women Entrepreneurship Round Table in Kunming, women demanded from the Party-State to pay attention to "giving full play to women's character and ability";

increasing the women's participation in Belt and Road diplomacy at all levels and promoting women's activities in Belt and Road projects and in global governance for gender equality.

At the Shaanxi Women's Research Association, in comparing the World Bank and China's aid participants suggested that China should pay more attention to gender equality and awareness; that China should incorporate gender equality issues into of international development and its cooperative practices (China Women's Daily 2021, negotiations 12 January).

Furthermore, in August 2022 at the Women's Culture Forum meeting, ACWF Vice Chair, Cai Shumin said that the Forum "will further promote solidarity and cooperation among women from all over the world, and contribute to improving people's wellbeing, promoting civilization and progress and achieving common development" (Xinhua, 2022, August, 2016).

China's experience suggests that it is unrealistic to expect that women's liberation will automatically follow the establishment of a socialist system. Rather, it suggests that women's struggles to resolve gender-specific problems and to rectify the neglect of the analysis of women's position in economic development will continue as long as there is a tendency to belittle the woman question.

Did these examples of women's concern for gender-egalitarian relations form part of the PRC's soft power negotiations in constructing multilateral and bilateral relations? At the global level, China has signed the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action at the 1995 UN Beijing Conference. President Xi Jinping pledged USD 10 million to UN Women for their work on peace and development. Importantly, China has successfully promoted itself through the election of its staff to key roles in the United Nations and many inter-governmental bodies. This implicit power manifests itself in China's participation and presence in every meeting and attending every speech. China's role in multinational and national platforms is consistent with gender equality because PRC leadership sees this "discourse power" as crucial to its international power (Palmer, 2023). Also, China has signed the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with attention to gender equality, women's reproductive health and freedom to express sexual and gender identity.

China has pledged to support women and girls from developing countries in the provision of health care, vocational training, financing for education and other assistance (Center for Emerging Worlds, 2019). Reportedly, China Women's University has established a training and research centre for women from developing countries. In Nepal, ACWF, and Beijing started various capacity-building programmes for women by promoting entrepreneurship and employment generation schemes. As part of this collaboration, the National Women's Association of Nepal started a radio project aimed at enhancing women's capacity building in rural areas.

In his speech in October 2020 at the high level meeting of the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing+25), President Xi Jinping acknowledged the important role of women and announced the need for action: 1) to strive for genuine gender equality and create opportunities for women's participation and decision making, to eliminate prejudice, discrimination, and violence

against women and to make gender equality a social norm and moral imperative for all; and 2) to enhance global cooperation in advancing women's development to eliminate violence, discrimination, poverty and other old problems, and address new challenges such as bridging the gender digital divide and support greater representation of women in the UN system.

More recently, at the 20th National Congress, of the Communist Party of China in October 2022, President Xi Jinping emphasized that:

- The Party-State will accelerate the development of China's discourse and narrative system, better tell China story, make China's voice heard and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable.
- The Party-State will remain committed to the fundamental national policy of gender equality and protect the lawful rights and interests of women and children.

As we noted above, China has made commitments at several major international platforms for gender equality and women's rights (e.g., CEDAW, SDGs) and has a comprehensive "Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2021-2030)" with the Party and State guarantee "to adhering to the basic national policy of gender equality" and having a guiding ideology of "gender equality to become a code of conduct and value standard that the whole society follows.... and give full play to the role of "half the sky" of women in building a socialist modern country" (China Government Network 2021:3). In the following discussion, we intend to explore contents and commitments for gender equality and women's empowerment in institutions to promote soft power.

3. Culture as a National Strategy of China

Since 2012, almost every major state event has a cultural content and a series of large-scale high-level foreign cultural events that were organized to showcase the essence of Chinese culture. In November 2014, President Xi Jinping and the Australian Prime Minister jointly attended the opening ceremony of the China Cultural Centre in Sydney. In January 2016, President Xi Jinping, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi jointly attended the opening ceremony of the China- Egypt Cultural Year. In June 2016, President Xi, Serbian President, Prime Minister, and all cabinet members jointly laid the foundation stone for the Belgrade Chinese Cultural Centre. Since 2013, China has held five symposiums on "Sinology and Contemporary China" and 10 training programs for young Sinologists, inviting 125 internationally influential sinologists and think tank scholars from 49 countries and 360 young scholars from 95 countries to China. (<https://www.mct.gov.cn/preview/special/8323/8324/201710/t2017101393124.htm>)

As early as October 2005, at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CPC, it was required to accelerate the implementation of the "going out" strategy of cultural products. In the following year, the outline of the National Cultural Development Plan for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan period proposed to change the passive situation of a large-scale trade deficit in cultural products in China and actively promote the "going out" strategy.

The Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee meeting acknowledged that more and more countries were interested in the improvement of cultural soft power as their development strategy. Whosoever occupies the commanding heights of cultural development and possesses strong cultural soft power would be able to win in the fierce international competition. The Central Committee at this session formulated a “Cultural Proposition” with an explicitly stated intention to strengthen the direction of Confucius Institutes; they should be increased in numbers and play a greater role in promoting Chinese culture globally and in building China a socialist Cultural power (Zhao, 2012).

4. Confucius Institutes

Towards the end of 2011, the Confucius Institute Headquarters had established 400 Confucius Institutes in 108 countries. There are more than 500 Confucius Classrooms in primary and secondary schools, and nearly 20,000 overseas Chinese teachers and volunteers were appointed. At the same time, a number of Confucius Institute Overseas Student Scholarships were established. In 2018, President Xi Jinping pledged 50,000 Chinese government scholarships and 50,000 new training opportunities at the Forum on China-African Cooperation.

The main functions of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms included teaching Chinese language and Culture. They organized cultural events, like exhibitions, film screenings and talks on select topics. Towards the end of June 2020, Repnikova reported 541 Confucius Institutes and 1,170 Confucius classrooms at the High School level in 162 countries (2022, p. 11). There were three functions of the Confucius Institutes 1) act as an instrument of China’s soft power (Park, 2013, p. 2) function as an instrument of China’s cultural diplomacy (Hartig, 2016); and 3) act as a propaganda project of the Chinese leadership (Sahlins, 2015). Xiao defines the Confucius Institutes as a platform to promote China’s soft power (2017, p. 46). Soon after the Confucius Institutes were set up, Xu Lin, the Director-General of the Confucius Institutes Headquarters described the Confucius Institutes as “the brightest trademark of China’s soft power” (Xinhua, 2006). However, it was also printed out in the Chinese scholarship, that most of the personnel employed to run the Confucius Institutes did not clearly see their role as the promoters of China’s soft power. Nonetheless, Confucius Institutes were seen as having the potential power to influence people and engage their hearts and minds in China’s economic progress (Nye, 2008). The teaching of language and culture was seen as the desire to benefit economically by speaking the Chinese language (Hartig, 2014).

Confucius Institutes were reported to have made great strides at teaching the Chinese language, and the Chinese way of life, as well as at localizing teaching materials and creating diversified platforms. They were, however, questioned on the quality of teaching, outdated depiction of China, and for ignoring the local cultural contexts (Zhang & Lu, 2019). Despite these challenges, the Confucius Institutes with their language teaching skills continued to be the high demand in many countries in the Global South.

5. Internationalization of Education and Cultural Exchange

At the turn of the 2000s the CPC geared itself to be an attractive international center for knowledge production and training of foreign students in China. From 1978 to 2018 the number of international students increased from 1236 to 1492 (Hu Shi, 2019). A great majority of students came from African countries but there were students who came from Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, Nepal, India, and the U.S. (Zhao, 2019). The Chinese language was the most popular subject, as reported by China's Ministry of Education in its publications. The Chinese Government has also sponsored many short-term trainings, and fellowships for foreign journalists and visitors and introduced sponsored cultural exchange as a component of "people-to-people" diplomacy and soft power.

The 2016 document the "Opinion on work of the opening-up of Education in the New Era" that directed China's educational opening up, stated its goal "to promote China's development and accomplishments" to foreign students and teachers in China (Ogunniran, 2020). One of the major objectives of China's educational exchanges was to sensitize foreign students about the Chinese worldview, Chinese society, culture, language, history, and politics, and thereby formulate their own policies and structure of governance similar to that of China, like in the case of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania.

In addition to building foreign students' awareness about the Chinese way of life, there were also economic motivations behind the CPC first for internalization of education. Monetary gains from self-funded international students presented an attractive opportunity to China's Ministry of Education and many universities in China. In Nepal, for instance, the Chinese scholarship scheme was reported to be targeting individuals associated with governmental networks and scientific expertise centers that could help support China's economic interest in Nepal (Jain, 2021). The Party-State driven "Made-in-China 2025", a plan introduced in 2015 aimed to upgrade its manufacturing with advanced technologies and high-level foreign experts (the State Council, 2015). The High-End Foreign Experts Recruitment Programme was launched with the stated objective to seek expertise in four key areas: strategic technologies and development; industrial skill innovations; social and ecological construction; and agricultural and rural revitalization (Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology, 2020).

There is a mixed impact of the foreign students' education and training in China. Whereas many students and short-term visitors from developing countries returned from their sponsored visits with an appreciation of China and readiness to bring change in their countries in favor of China – their experience of hospitality and modernity, there were others, however, who questioned China's fusion of culture and market logics, and critiqued, China's quality of educational standards. A more complex issue was that of reports about racial discrimination, unequal care, and discriminatory access during the pandemic (Lem, 2022; Jain, 2021). These incidents did some damage to China's soft power with African countries and in general with the Global South.

With the purpose of extending and expanding the soft power approach, China organized a range of spectacles, mega events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo as well

as a series of regional summits like the FOCAC in 2018 with the African continent; China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum 2012 and China-CELAC Forum with Latin America and Caribbean states in 2015. These summits, though involving huge expenses, were aimed at international audiences and participants to promote China's political agenda in its international existence as a powerful country. For example, in 2010 Yang Jieche (then China's foreign minister) stated that the Shanghai was organized to promote China's friendly cooperation with various countries and to demonstrate China's accomplishments in sophisticated technology and Chinese culture on par with the Western countries (Xinhua News Agency, 2010). At the same time, Chinese leadership used these events as domestic educational platforms, in the sense of conveying to Chinese people national self-importance and China's greatness of combining traditional cultural harmony with the modernity of technological development (Hubbert, 2017).

6. Conclusion: The Marginality of Gender Factor

During the revolutionary tenure of the CPC, one of the dominant policy concerns appeared to be women's empowerment. However, these concerns were repeatedly met with a set of vexing challenges in governance, national and international. The revival of Confucian ideology and its embeddedness in the Soft Power approach, as evident from the important role assigned to Confucius Institutes, seems to be the main barrier to the inclusivity of women empowerment and gender equality in China's Soft Power. Since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-219 C.E.), feminine virtues included obedience and loyalty. The most famous Confucian code was "Three Obedience and Four Virtues" (San Cong Si De). This obedience required women to obey the father before marriage, obey the husband after marriage and obey the first son after the death of the husband. The four virtues were (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work. A woman was not required to be intelligent or clever. Yang Chen, a famous Confucianist of the time, wrote, "If women are given work that requires contact with the outside, they will sow disorder and confusion throughout the empire" (qtd. in Van Gulik, 1971, p. 121). Her role was confined to the household as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, while the man's domain was essentially in the outside sphere and decision-making. Admittedly some leading feminists in China questioned their practices and social norms that implicitly saw women as sexual objects, childbearing machines, and a servant of the entire family; not having an independent identity of their own (Gao, 2003).

All China Women's Organization and feminist analyses in China have shown that these traditional values, beliefs, and attitudes result in shaping gender inequalities and unfreedoms of women in social, economic, and political relations. Furthermore, they are seen as slow-moving institutions compared to policy and technological changes. The forces of these ideas, norms and practices in China are evident from two major factors: women's marginal representation in the political decision-making organizations and the State institutional structures (e.g., only one-woman minister in the present-day PRC), and 2) the inadequacy of women's rights of productive resources within the family and society.

For example, the National People's Congress has less than 25 per cent of women, and the global average for women's representation in national parliaments is 25.9 per cent of women. In China, women earn less than 70 per cent of men's earnings, and twice more time than men in carrying out household work (All China Women's Federation, 2021).

Notwithstanding, the above analysis, there are two areas that potentially draw a silver line in China's soft power approach: 1) Chinese women's movement and its feminist voices and relentless efforts to redefine Confucianism with the inclusion of women's rights in the Confucian tenets (Li Yuning, 1992; Batista, 2017) These voices through their flagship publication "Women of China" urged the Party-State to pay close attention to feminist's visions for systemic change, (Wang Zheng, 2010); and 2) a global call for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals with attention to Goal 5 (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment), as well as the World Economic Forum's gender indexing. China, like any other major power in the Global South, would not be in a position to ignore these national feminist critiques and international goals to which the PRC has been a signatory.

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