

Women's Rights Feminism vs. Sex Rights Feminism in Taiwan (An English Outline¹)

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The Center for the Study of Sexualities at NCU, "Sex Center" for short, is initially called The Center for the Study of Sexuality and Differences, emphasizing the importance of connecting issues of sexuality to issues of gender, class, age, race and other social differences. (An English introduction of the Center can be found at <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw>) The Sex Center therefore disagrees with any type of reductive analysis, whether the analysis is based on gender (as held by mainstream feminists), class (as held by the traditional left), or race (as held by the nationalists). We believe this theoretical stance has practical implications for the actual social formation of Taiwan, as I shall indicate later.

The Sex Center was founded in 1995, as a response to a growing woman's movement that was beginning to ostracize elements standing in the way of its upward mobility. The first wave of ostracism and exclusion was aimed at an outspoken feminist sex radical, Josephine Ho, whose controversial stance on female sexuality (detailed in her highly controversial but influential book *The Gallant Woman: Feminism and Sexual Emancipation*, Crown Publishers, 1994) drew criticism from both the right and left. The second wave of purification culminated toward the end of 1997 when gay and lesbian activist Wang Ping and others who were supporting the emerging prostitutes' rights movement were fired from a longstanding feminist's group. The symbolic exclusion is still evolving and spreading. And although vocal and active, the excluded feminist sex radicals remain invisible to the official woman's groups, which continue to deny the legitimacy of the excluded as gender concerned.

In this essay I shall use "Women's Rights Feminism" and "Sex rights Feminism", to designate the two sides. To characterize the difference, the debate and the evolution of the two sides will be the focus of this essay. However, since three important Women's Rights Feminists have written on this subject separately in three polemic essays, in relation to three different stages of the development of Taiwan's gender/sexuality movement, I shall utilize their writings with some comments to explain the basic differences between the two sides.

I. "Sex Critique vs. Sex Liberation"

After the split of the feminist movement and the establishment of the Sex Center, Yan-Ling Gu (professor then, Taipei city government official now) thus characterizes the difference between "Women's Rights Feminism" and "Sex Rights Feminism":

1. There are two themes in Taiwan's women movement: the politics of gender and politics of sexuality.

¹ This is only an outline of the original essay (about 10,000 words), written for the 2001 conference of inter-asia cultural nexus.

2. On the whole, the politics of gender contributes more to the welfare of women; and the politics of sexuality is restricted by the objective social structure.
3. Within the politics of sexuality, there are three different orientations or movements: sexual liberation (i.e., “Sex rights Feminism”), sexual autonomy (“Women’s Rights Feminism”), and lesbianism.
4. Gu says: The subjective perception of sexual subjects cannot substitute for the real social condition of women as victims of sexual objectification. Only the success of the politics of gender can bring us a safe and equal environment for multiple erotic choices. “Our sexualities may be many, but our gender is only one.”

II. “Banning prostitution vs. prostitute’s rights”

1. Fang-Mei Lin (professor then, cabinet member now) first characterizes the two sides of the movement as “reform within the system vs. marginal combats” or “masses vs. minority”. The agenda of the former includes day care, personal safety, care for the aging and employment opportunities, which are public/social policies that extend beyond gender opposition. The latter, as politics of difference and identity, is said to focus only on ethnicity, class and sexuality.
2. Following Gu’s distinction between the politics of gender and the politics of sexuality, Lin subsequently criticize Sex rights Feminists as parasitic on the Women’s Rights Feminist organizations, without acting independently or forming one’s own organization. Lin suggests that if the two sides are separate, it may be better off for the movement. Thus it is justified for the Women’s Rights Feminist organization to fire Wang Ping and others.
3. Lin agrees with the position of Yu-shiou Liu (another Women’s Rights Feminist) that the “pure” women’s right movement should adjust to a “universalism of alliance.” That is: “In order to win the election, to sell our policies as better products for electoral votes; our platform thus should be broad-based and go beyond the narrow perspective of women’s-interests-only, so that all political parties and candidates would want to include our platform. We should try to ally with as many as we can—be it labors, the middle class, political groups, environmentalists, or even capitalists. It is necessary to seek consensus instead of conflict.”
4. Lin continues: After we win the election, women’s movement becomes institutionalized; we are part of the system. As (would-be) “femocrats”, we need to learn some new tricks. First of all, we face a different crowd. We are not just to serve women, but the masses that are votes without specific gender, age and class. If we cannot be accountable to our constituency, our allied political groups and we will fail in the next election. Secondly, we have to acquire the abilities to do the administrative work in a mainstream way. We used to lack these abilities and were not aware of their crucial importance. These abilities include: to exert leadership (or to accept leadership) within the bureaucracy or a field of hierarchy; to

familiarize with civil services, begets, accounting, personnel, regulations, etc.

III. “our man President Chen”

1. After the women’s rights feminists’ closest ally, President Chen, who banned the legal prostitutes in Taipei which caused the upheaval of sex work movement, won the presidential election in 2000, Yu-shiou Liu (president’s close advisor and master mind behind the Taipei legal prostitutes controversy) recently attacks the sex rights feminists as a confluent of postmodernism and late capitalism.
2. Liu approves the Marxist critique of postmodernism. (Alex Callinicos, Terry Eagleton, Teresa L. Ebert, Xiaoying Wang vs. Deleuze and Guattari, Nietzsche, Kristeva, Donna Haraway, etc.)
3. Liu believes that sex rights feminists and postmodernism jointly promote the right to Dirty Thought and Evil Doing (vile acts), which were once repressed in our unconsciousness but were unleashed by postmodernism. Dirty Thought and Evil Doing (vile acts) such as buying sex can strengthen men’s ego but will weaken the prostitutes’ ego, leaving her addicted to drugs. Various types of addiction are phenomena in late capitalism. Addictions, poverty and postmodern management and hi-tech communication fuel the desire of prostituting, leading women to sell their sex “voluntarily”. This postmodern sex industry drains the resources that should go to the real needs of the people, and create a reserve army for the sex industry in Southern nations, aborigines, children, colored people, etc.
4. In other words, Liu criticizes not only the prostitutes’ rights movement, but also legalization of drugs, youth liberation and cultural radicalism that are also promoted by sex rights feminism. (It seems to me the future debate will not be confined to that between sex rights feminism and women’s rights feminism, and the topics of the debate will not be confined to gender/sexuality either. Genetic engineering, body technology, privacy, medicalization, emotional labor, consumption/popular culture, teenager problem, globalization, are the emerging battlefields, and the understanding of the nature and the project of modernity will be the central theoretical issue.) Liu sees the difference between the two sides as that of modernity vs. post-modernity, and the welfare state as feminized caretaker vs. (late) capitalism; while I see the difference as early modernity vs. reflexive modernity, and a vision of Taiwan locked in a parochial nation-state vs. a vision of Taiwan as trans-national space in globalization.