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## A Tale of Solidarity? Exploring Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network

¿Una historia de solidaridad? Explorando las redes sino-nórdicas en los Estudios de Género

Una història de solidaritat? Explorant les xarxes sinó-nòrdiques en els Estudis de Gènere

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## Abstract

This article provides an account of the Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network, which was founded in 2002, and had since then played a significant role in shaping feminist research and activist exchange between China and Nordic countries. However, the history and practices of this network has received scant attention in studies on transnational feminist solidarities. The aim of the article is twofold. First, we analyze the network using historical and autoethnographic approaches and map out a genealogy of feminist knowledge production that is located at the intersection of China and Nordic contexts. Second, we read the network through the lens of solidarity, all the while critically engaging with its defining parameters. As we will show, although solidarity has been increasingly associated with transnational feminism's political and ethical orientations, the case of Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network compels rethinking how and why the term is used and criticized. The complex relation between interpersonal relationships and the power imbalance between the various institutions and funding schemes calls into question the strict division between collective and individual that informs much discussion of feminist solidarity. Rather than simply being a good practice of feminist solidarity, this article argues that the Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network offers important insights into the doing of solidarity even in its seeming absence.

## Keywords

Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network; Solidarity; Transnational Feminism

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta la Red Sino-Nórdica de Estudios de Género, fundada en 2002 y que, desde entonces, ha desempeñado un papel importante en la configuración de la investigación feminista y la confluencia de activismos entre China y los países nórdicos. Sin embargo, la historia y las prácticas de esta red han recibido poca atención en los estudios en torno a las redes transnacionales de solidaridad feminista. El objetivo de este artículo es doble. En primer lugar, analizamos la red utilizando enfoques históricos y autoetnográficos, y trazamos una genealogía de la producción de conocimiento feminista que se sitúa en la intersección de los contextos chino y nórdico. En segundo lugar, leemos la red a través de la solidaridad, al tiempo que nos comprometemos críticamente con los parámetros que la definen. Como mostraremos, aunque la solidaridad se ha asociado cada vez más a las orientaciones políticas y éticas del feminismo transnacional, el caso de la red sino-nórdica de estudios de género obliga a repensar cómo y por qué se utiliza y se critica el término. La compleja relación entre las relaciones interpersonales y el desequilibrio de poder entre las distintas instituciones y sistemas de financiación pone en tela de juicio la estricta división entre lo colectivo e lo individual que es parte del tejido de gran parte del debate sobre la solidaridad feminista. Más allá de resultar en una buena práctica de solidaridad feminista, este artículo sostiene que la Red Sino-Nórdica de Estudios de Género ofrece importantes perspectivas sobre la práctica de la solidaridad incluso en su aparente ausencia.

## Palabras clave

Red de Estudios de Género sino-nórdicos; Solidaridad; Feminismo Transnacional

## Resum

Aquest article presenta la Xarxa Sinó-Nòrdica d'Estudis de Gènere, fundada en 2002 i que, des de llavors, ha exercit un paper important en la configuració de la recerca feminista i la confluència d'activismes entre la Xina i els països nòrdics. No obstant això, la història i les pràctiques d'aquesta xarxa han rebut poca atenció en els estudis entorn de les xarxes transnacionals de solidaritat feminista. L'objectiu d'aquest article és doble. En primer lloc, analitzem la xarxa utilitzant enfocaments històrics i autoetnogràfics, i tracem una genealogia de la producció de coneixement feminista que se situa en la intersecció dels contextos xinès i nòrdic. En segon lloc, llegim la xarxa a través de la solidaritat, al mateix temps que ens comprometem críticament amb els paràmetres que la defineixen. Com mostrarem, encara que la solidaritat s'ha associat cada vegada més a les orientacions polítiques i ètiques del feminisme transnacional, el cas de la xarxa sinó-nòrdica d'estudis de gènere obliga a repensar com i per què s'utilitza i es critica el terme. La complexa relació entre les relacions interpersonals i el desequilibri de poder entre les diferents institucions i sistemes de finançament posa en dubte l'estricta divisió entre el col·lectiu e l'individual que és part del teixit de gran part del debat sobre la solidaritat feminista. Més enllà de resultar en una bona pràctica de solidaritat feminista, aquest article sosté que la Xarxa Sinó-Nòrdica d'Estudis de Gènere ofereix importants perspectives sobre la pràctica de la solidaritat fins i tot en la seva aparent absència.

## Paraules clau

Xarxa sino-nòrdic d'estudis de gènere; Solidaritat; Feminisme Transnacional

## Introduction

This article provides accounts and analysis of the Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network, which was founded in 2002. The three of us – Dusica, a feminist China studies scholar, from Serbia and currently based in Finland; Yan, a Norway-based Chinese sociologist; and Xin, a Sweden-based Chinese gender studies scholar – have participated in the network at different times and with different levels of involvement. In 2019 we collaborated for the first time and took part in organizing the network conference “Gendering Transformations: Feminist Knowledge Production and Trans/national Activist Engagement.” Since the beginning of 2023, we have been working on a voluntary basis to maintain and reinvigorate the network by for example applying for funding. The network played a significant role in shaping feminist research and exchange between China and Nordic countries. However, the history and practices of this network have received scant attention in studies on transnational feminist solidarities. We believe that this knowledge needs to be chronicled, and the practices of bringing together Chinese and Nordic researchers and practitioners of various generations should be analysed, as they provide new insights into transnational feminist practices of solidarity. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the growing anti-gender movements in many parts of the world, and the heightened geopolitical tensions that make collaboration with Chinese feminist scholars and practitioners, particularly those based in China, challenging.

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it mobilizes the notion of solidarity as a lens to analyse the specific forms of knowledge production, feminist practice and power dynamics that this network enables and is shaped by. Second, in asking about what solidarity does in the presence and absence of its articulation within the network, this

article also critically engages with the notion of solidarity, especially in terms of its implications for transnational feminist practices. It proceeds as follows. First, the article briefly introduces the network as well as the notion of solidarity. Subsequently, three accounts of the network are presented, which draw on analysis of archival materials and feminist memory work (Berg, 2008; Frazer and Mitchell, 2015). These accounts are guided by and address questions concerning solidarity. Finally, the article considers the key elements of solidarity in the context of Chinese and Nordic feminist collaborations, that the network participates in and contributes to.

## Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network

The network is envisaged as a bottom-up initiative of scholars and activists from China and the Nordic countries who are encouraged to initiate and convene feminist events. Its aim is to foster feminist exchanges and to develop transnational, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations on researching gender related questions in the Chinese and Nordic contexts. The network was hosted by Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) at the University of Copenhagen until the closure of NIAS at the end of 2023. Its aim has been to facilitate the exchanges between scholars, activists, and NGO practitioners.

## The notion of solidarity

Solidarity became a key term for feminist theorizing in the Anglo-American context in the 1980s as a response to the black and postcolonial feminists’ critique of the white western-centric feminism (Littler and Rottenberg, 2019). It builds upon a normative understanding that feminist politics can take differences or even conflicts across formations of race, class and sexuality into account and unite women through struggles and learning (e.g. hooks, 1986). As Paul Stoltz

et al. write, building solidarity necessitates “questioning stable categorisations and presumed homogeneous cultures”, including the reification of what counts as “the ‘good’ radical subjects that can be created in feminist, antiracist, and trans\* politics” (2021, p. 12).

In this article, we draw on and critically rethink theorizations of solidarity. As Jo Litter and Cathenrine Rottenberg (2019) note, there are different approaches to solidarity in feminist theorizations, including affective (Bartky, 2002; Hemmings, 2012), communicative and reflective (Dean, 1996), and collective action-oriented (Allen, 1999; Mohanty, 2003a; Rai, 2018). The affective approach of solidarity emphasizes empathetic identification and support. On this account, solidarity “emerges in the wake of certain embodied experience alongside an affective orientation towards others and the world” (Littler and Rottenberg, 2019, p. 867). The communicative and reflective approach considers solidarity as a mode of communication. That is, solidarity does not arise from “feeling with the other” (Bartky, 2002), or affective dissonance, but emerges in and as ongoing discussions and arguments (Dean, 1996). It is thus reflective, necessitating recognition of differences and the inclusion of multiple perspectives through dialogic engagement. Chandra Mohanty (2003a) and Amy Allen (1999) extend the communicative approach and consider solidarity as emerging in the doing. On this account, solidarity is not simply a dialogic process, but is oriented towards feminist collective and political mobilisation that is committed to make visible and challenge the asymmetrical relations of power and mechanism of oppression in specific contexts. In particular, we take inspiration from Mohanty’s emphasis on solidarity as an ongoing active struggle. This praxis-oriented approach foregrounds diversity and difference, and challenges “vague assumptions of sisterhood or images of

complete identification with the other” (Mohanty, 2003a, p. 3).

These formulations of solidarity provide important starting points for our analysis. More specifically, we attend to two interrelated concerns of feminist solidarity, namely, the question of difference and the relation “between the individual and the collective solidarities” (Wickström et al., 2021, p. 5). As Wickström et al. suggest these concerns become more pronounced in the context of the neoliberal co-optation of liberation and empowerment discourses, which reduces the question of difference to apolitical practices of diversity and self-achievement. Adopting the lens of solidarity, our following accounts and analysis are guided by and address the following questions: (1) how is solidarity generated through making connections, embodied encounters, communications, and discussions within the network, even in the absence of the explicit use of the word? (2) What does the presence of the word “solidarity” do, and fail to do, in the context of the network practices? And (3) what are the individual, institutional and collective dynamics, and power relations within the network and what are their implications for solidarity? In the next section, we provide three accounts that address these questions.

### Three accounts of the network

Dusica: Evolving network: Encounters, exchanges, friendships

The Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network started with a conference in 2002 at Fudan University in Shanghai. As recalled by the network’s founder, Cecilia Milwertz, she and her colleague Qi Wang were conducting their gender studies research fieldwork in China where they had both been meeting gender studies scholars who asked questions about gender and gender studies in Denmark and the Nordic countries (Milwertz, 2023). Since

gender issues in the Nordic countries were not the area of expertise of both scholars, they decided to organize a conference that would bring together Nordic gender studies scholars with Chinese gender studies scholars. One additional aim of the network was to connect young scholars who engaged in research on China and gender in the Nordic countries, who often felt isolated and alone. As the 2002 report reads:

The conference was the beginning of a face-to-face and scholarly collaboration on women and gender studies between China and the Nordic countries. By bringing Chinese and Nordic participants together, as well as scholars of China and/or the Nordic countries from other places, the conference created a forum for exchange of ideas, debates, and scholarly cross-fertilization and proved to be a source of mutual inspiration (Milwertz, 2002, p. 2).

At the same time, the coordinators of the network had a far-reaching understanding of the potential implications of the exchange between the Chinese and Nordic scholars and activists on feminist struggles. They emphasized the relevance of the network's efforts and activities for the feminist transformative practices and processes in China. As a section of the funding application noted:

Research has documented that even in countries where the state is dominant, civil society weak, and the political participation of women limited, effective change in achieving gender equality and respecting human rights can be brought about through the mobilization of global human rights discourses by local knowledge communities (epistemic communities or networks). Since the 1980s women and gender studies scholars in academia and activists in Chinese

women's NGOs have played an important role in reinterpreting gender issues in China. They have increasingly adopted human rights perspectives and interpretations on gender equality issues and based their lobbying activities for policy change on these. Meetings with scholars and activists from other countries have played a very important role as catalysts to processes of such change. The Gender & Human Rights conference is a further step in strengthening these processes of change (Milwertz, 2002, p. 4).

The documents of the internal archives, which we consulted, were stored at the servers of the NIAS at the University of Copenhagen. The archives were compiled by Cecilia Milwertz over the years, and, upon her retirement, they were downloaded from the servers and stored. Some of the archived documents were made available on the network's webpage with the intention of familiarizing the wider public with the work of the network. These materials also contain the feedback collected by the participants at the network-organized events, as well as files showing a number of funding applications submitted by the Nordic-based organizers and members of the network.

What could we read from the testimonies kept in the internal archives of the network? First, the way in which the network was initiated brings into the light a particular doing of solidarity of the Nordic-based feminist scholars: the network was put in motion because of the interests of the Chinese colleagues, and not imposed upon them from the colleagues positioned in more affluent Northern European academic spaces. This claim is not to be understood as over-romanticizing of the network members and organizers coming from the Nordics: the network certainly did have a positive role in advancing their prospective careers. It created and strengthened their professional and

important private networks in China, and brought them more nuanced knowledge and understanding of the processes taking place in China's blooming civil society. Still, what the consulted documents show is that in the more than two decades long history of the network, Chinese feminists and their concerns and aspirations were central to the activities organized by the network and to the direction in which the network evolved. This is particularly visible when it comes to Chinese feminists' interest in obtaining and further developing the theoretical framework, institutional infrastructure and the best-practice knowledge related to the issues of domestic violence. As one of the key network's members told Xin, through the network, Chinese feminist practitioners had the opportunity to observe domestic violence trials in Nordic countries which was important for developing strategies to defend victims before the passing of the anti-domestic violence legislation in China in 2016.

Yet, the question that still needs to be asked is whether and how the network succeeded to produce solidarity, understood in terms of fostering mutual inspiration, among Nordic and Chinese feminist scholars and activists. Whether and how have Nordic feminist scholars incorporated Chinese feminist perspectives in their work? Relatedly, whether, what and how have Chinese feminists – from their own different positionalities in local, regional, and global academic and socio-political contexts – selectively and strategically incorporated the network and the space it created for their collective and individual goals? These issues are too complex to be tackled now, but they must be mentioned as important lines for further enquiry.

The network's first conference was held at Fudan University, with the assistance of funding granted by the Danish Foreign Ministry, and co-organized by Cecilia Milwertz, a feminist China studies scholar

from Denmark based at the NIAS, Wang Qi, China-born researcher who moved to Denmark and worked at Aarhus University, and Pauline Stoltz, a political scientist who was then based at Malmö University in Sweden. It became customary for the network to convene conferences every three years, with the conferences being organized in the Nordic countries and China in alternating years. Three of the conferences had a PhD course connected to them. The exception was the last conference of the network which was coordinated by the National Central Library in Taiwan.

Over the years, a number of institutions including NIAS, Fudan University, the Nordic Centre at Fudan University have provided a modest amount of seed money for the conferences. However, the primary responsibility for securing the necessary financial resources rested with the conference organizers, given that the financial stability of the network was never assured. The tasks for applying for funding were undertaken by both Nordic and Chinese members. Members from Nordic countries have applied for funding from, for example, Nordic state agencies and private foundations, diplomatic missions, and universities' internal grants. In China, funding was ensured mainly from Chinese academic institutions, the Nordic Centre in Fudan and the Beijing Office of the Ford Foundation. The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation was also listed as the important sponsor of the network's third conference organized in Kunming in 2008.

While the consulted archives do not provide sufficient details of each network's event needed for a thorough analysis, they do offer insights into the dynamics of these events. We elaborate upon these insights from the following three perspectives: (1) the positionality of the participating academics and activists; (2) the framing of the specificity of Sino-Nordic feminisms; (3) differences in

participation in the network among Chinese and Nordic participants.

The sources we consulted imply that the axis of the network's events was mostly organized by mid-career and senior academics and activists from both China and the Nordic countries. Early-career researchers, students, and practitioners, especially those based in China, also gained access to the network through their connections with the more senior members. This shows the extent to which the network relied upon its members who had greater access to obtain institutional support and whose connections had significant impact on the development of the network. Moreover, and interestingly, the organizers formulated the similarities between the two contexts by differentiating them from the US context. As it was noted in several internal documents related to the second conference:

The Nordic countries and China differ in many ways, but there are also similarities. In comparison to differences between China and, for example, the USA, one could claim to recognize certain similarities between China and the Nordic countries in the strong role the state plays in terms of intervening in the lives of citizens in the respective states. Another similarity between China and the Nordic countries can be found in the strong political commitment to creating gender equality, as well as in a high degree of cooperation between women's organizations and the state [...] Moreover, many Chinese and Nordic researchers use theories that originate from other contexts and primarily from America. These theories have then been indigenized into something Chinese or Nordic. But how is this done in practice? And what are the consequences of acceptance or

rejection of "foreign" theories? (Milwertz, 2005)

These narratives underscore the close relationship between feminist and state practices, as well as the translation and reappropriation of Anglo-American feminist theories, in both China and Nordic countries. In so doing, they seek to evoke a sense of specific Sino-Nordic similarity and solidarity that decentres Anglo-American feminism, and legitimizes and creates spaces for Sino-Nordic feminist work largely unmediated by the participation of US/Western feminists and funding infrastructure. Yet, what has been addressed on a number of occasions by both Nordic and Chinese organizers is an imbalance of interest among the Chinese and Nordic scholars related to the engagements and participation in the events organized by the network.

The evaluation of the second conference rather clearly elucidates this point. The conference was organized in Sweden, and the organizers disseminated the evaluation sheets to hear the voice of the participants. As noted at the beginning of the document "Evaluation by participants", it was mostly Chinese participants who filled in the form. They praised the collegial, warm, and open atmosphere, the "amiability of the organizers", the range of topics for discussion, as well as the diversity of "cultural, political, social, academic background" of the participants. In addition, the Chinese participants expressed the wish for more "fund[ed] joint projects", for more connections with Nordic "women's NGOs and related institutions."

This feedback indicates a high degree of curiosity among members from China regarding the practical implementation of the academic knowledge within institutionalized feminist practices. It also reveals that the Chinese members of the network were interested in collaborative work with their Nordic colleagues *and* that they also hoped that the network – presumably its Nordic



members – would assist in identifying and ensuring funding for such future endeavours. The participants did not expect the Nordic colleagues to handle all the financial burden. Instead, the archives imply that the Chinese participants saw their Nordic colleagues as more experienced in obtaining funding and more familiar with the associated procedures. In fact, in some periods of the network's activities, the funding from China-based institutions was more stable and more generous than the funding obtained by the Nordic participants.

The question of funding needs to be further researched. As previously mentioned, the documents we consulted imply that the financial standing of the network was never stable. The members, organizers and coordinators of the network spent a significant amount of time repeatedly applying for funding from different institutions. We could see that the Nordic organizers and members regularly applied for funding from the Nordic-based institutions: universities, institutes, foundations, diplomatic missions, and banks. Chinese partners, especially during the early years of the network, eagerly invested their time and financial means to organize the network's events. However, even in those occasions finding funding for mobility of Nordic scholars to China were often a task undertaken by the Nordic members. What needs to be emphasized in all these cases is the effort and time that both groups invested in preparing funding applications, at times emphatically persistent despite being unsuccessful.

In addition, and importantly, the participants' feedback offers insights into the Chinese participants' perceptions of the imbalance of interests and participation in the networks' events. What the evaluations – and the archival documents we had an opportunity to consult – reveal is the acute awareness about the imbalance between the responses of the Chinese and Nordic participants to the calls

for feminist dialogues. From the outset of the network, Chinese organizers and participants have sought to encourage greater participation from Nordic researchers and practitioners. This included efforts to increase the number of active Nordic members, to have more papers about Nordic countries, and foster more engagement and communication with the Nordic-based NGOs.

The disproportionate interest of the Nordic gender studies scholars to join the dialogues with their Chinese colleagues warrants further analysis, as there are a number of factors which may have influenced this dynamic. Still, it is important to highlight it here because of a remarkable contrast between individual and collective/institutional commitments to the Sino-Nordic feminist exchanges: the Nordic network members, especially the coordinators and event organizers, listened and responded to Chinese participants' suggestions by consistently working to motivate Nordic colleagues to join these conversations. In fact, the efforts and close personal connections between the individual Nordic researchers and their Chinese colleagues played a crucial role in sustaining the network, thus creating and maintaining a form of solidarity which is 'done' without being verbalized.

#### Yan: Solidarity in view of double consciousness

I was doing my PhD in sociology, with a project on transnational adoption and the construction of nationhood in the Norwegian context. Since the project was inspired by feminist (and) postcolonial theories, I got the information about the 4th Sino-Nordic women's and gender studies conference in 2011 in Aalborg, Denmark, with the theme "travelling theories in the global context." I submitted a paper on intersectionality which was one of the sub-topics under the conference. In addition to its thematic relevance to my own project, there were

several other things that made the conference attractive to me, including inspiring keynote speakers (among others Diana Mulinari who was one of the leading scholars who introduced the feminist postcolonial perspectives in studying the Nordic context), opportunities for networking with *both* relevant gender studies researchers in the Nordic countries *and* gender studies and feminist scholars from China. Young scholars, particularly PhD students, were encouraged to send abstracts to the conference. A PhD course with the same theme was attached to the conference, and a separate session for PhD students would be arranged.

Ever since I entered the conference, I felt a double consciousness, or an ambiguity concerning my positioning in this network. On the one hand, I was neither a PhD student from China nor a Nordic PhD student. In fact, when I applied for the conference, the conference organizers were uncertain how to position me. When they saw my name, I was assumed to be a Chinese PhD student (and was thus informed about the possibility of applying for the travel grant), yet when they found out that I was doing my PhD in one of the Norwegian universities I was then categorized as a Norwegian/Nordic participant. On the other hand, nobody raised questions about my presence in this network: I was considered a right and relevant participant and I felt welcome. Maybe in the effort to recruit Nordic participants to join the network's activities (as described by Dusica in the previous session), transnational scholars like me, that is Chinese scholars studying (in) the Nordic and Europe, and vice versa, happened to fill in the space. For example, there were also Indian students doing PhD in Denmark and Chinese students doing PhD in the UK.

Meanwhile, I felt an immediate affiliation to this network: this was just the right place for me. In this way, the network shaped a valuable space for researchers who were

positioned transnationally both across and beyond the Sino-Nordic contexts. Looking back, I would say that I have benefited a lot from the network, not least through *both* the individual *and* the institutional connections and collaborations I developed through the network, which has been very meaningful to my academic path.

What distinguished this conference from others that I participated in earlier, was the presence of many young participants from China who were not scholars but rather activists representing different feminist and women's movement organizations, including queer communities or NGOs in China. What is more, I observed a close interconnection between the scholarly and activist communities. For example, some of the PhD students and the Chinese NGOs representatives were friends and studied together under one prominent scholar from the Chinese side of the network.

During the conference, separate networking sessions were arranged, for example, one for the PhD students. It was through this event that I got to know some of the PhD students from China and elsewhere, with some of them I still have contact with today. Through some of them I was connected to the Chinese activists or NGOs' representatives who attended the conference. Ever since then I received newsletters from a feminist group (feminism-in-action, 女行邮件组) and kept updated on the current events in feminist movements in China (which unfortunately were much less frequent today). This connection has also become meaningful to my own engagement in feminist activism in Norway where I am positioned as a migrant woman. Two years after the conference, on the occasion of the International Women's Day in 2014, celebrated with the theme "international women solidarity," I and my organization, Kvinnenettverket Noor, a grass-root migrant women's organization in North Norway were invited to hold an appeal.

We soon decided to produce narratives on women's movements in the Global South that would serve to underscore their capacity to act as subjects, capable of fighting for themselves. This provided a counter-narrative to the idea that women in different locations in the Global South are simply the passive recipients of the support and rescue from feminist groups in the Global North. Our intention was not to reject the idea of global feminist solidarity, but rather to challenge the underlying imbalanced positionalities, particularly the objectification of women in the Global South in the dominant narrative and discourse of global solidarity (Mohanty 2003a, 2003b). With my established connections with the local feminist activists in China, I quickly chose two cases to be included in our narrative, which was also made into a short video available online<sup>1</sup>. The two cases were: the campaign started by the Chinese activist Ye Haiyan called "Principal, call me if you want to get a room. Leave the pupils alone" and "male toilet occupation" started by female university students in Guangzhou. While the first case was about protesting against a primary school principal accused of raping six female pupils, aged 12 to 13, the second case was about the increasing awareness of invisible gender inequalities among the young Chinese women. In addition to the Chinese cases, there were also cases from India, Afghanistan, Ghana, Saudi-Arabia and Nepal. If this video can be said to be a concrete product of solidarity practice, what we see here is the dynamics of how individual connections that I was able to make in the Sino-Nordic conference had become part of a collective narrative on solidarity in a wider transnational or indeed multiple translocal contexts. This narrative encompasses an intertwining of academic feminism and feminist activism. It demonstrates that politics of location and representation as a

transnational feminist strategy can work in certain circumstances. However, representation based on boundary-thinking can also become problematic as one's positionality is never fixed, and it changes along time and space.

After I finished my PhD, I started to get more involved in planning and carrying out the network's activities, such as the series of conferences and PhD courses. I used to think that my participation in these activities was at an individual level, indicating that I was invited into the network's organizing because of my Chinese background. However, when I was part of the organizing team of one of the network's PhD courses in Shanghai in 2015, I happened to sit on the board of the Norwegian National Research School in Gender Studies as the representative of my institution. As well, my institution's name stood in the list of the organizers of the 6th Sino-Nordic Gender studies conference in Oslo in 2017 due to my participation in the organizing committee. Maybe these intersections of individual and institutional participation were not coincidental? They demonstrate a good strategy of the network for embedding collaborations within the institutional contexts, even though these collaborations were mostly reliant on personal engagements. Meanwhile, these intersections happened in a time when institutional cooperations and partnership with China were generally perceived positively and were valued.

Observed from transnational in-between positions, it is quite obvious that the network, as a transnational feminist project, contains a solidarity-approach, not least the idea that the collaboration was based on recognition and respect of differences. The Nordic partners, for example, have been very cautious of unintended negligence of excluding Chinese perspectives in arranging the network's activities. Yet, who can and should represent the Chinese perspectives? For example, when

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<sup>1</sup> Kvinnenettverket Noor (2014). Kvinne i aksjon – 08.03.2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nZaDZcN17o&t=26s> (accessed: 19.01.2025).

I was positioned as Chinese, could I really represent Chineseness? I sometimes experience that the perspectives of my Nordic and European colleagues who are China studies scholars are more Chinese than mine. As addressed earlier, one of the central concerns in discussing solidarity is exactly the question of differences. Recognition and, to some extent, an emphasis on the differences, may on some occasions, lead to a reification of the boundaries (Wickstrom et al., 2021). This can be the case of the network. A prominent boundary was constructed and maintained in the endeavour of identifying and respecting the differences: a boundary between the Chinese and the Nordic, both in terms of who (the participants) and what (the issues and the perspectives). For example, because of my double situatedness I experienced that my positioning or representation could be at times quite flexible. In a political climate where cooperation with China was valued, this double situatedness and consciousness could certainly provide academic productivity, especially in the context of one's career path. Other times I also felt the difficulty to fit into any fixed position. For example, while I consider it problematic to represent Chineseness, I also felt awkward representing the Nordichness. I also experienced that the Chinese partners positioned me neither as "one of their own" nor "Nordic," or "Nordic enough." This double consciousness or indeed ambiguity, that I described, raises again the questions of politics of location and representation as implied in transnational feminist solidarity thinking. The illustrated hybridity of a position of in-betweenness may echo a postnational critique of politics of locations that assumes innocence of nation-states (Deshpande, 2009) and national identities. Or, as Kerner (2018) argues, solidarity acts often aim at transgressing differences of privilege. However, we cannot understand the complexities of these solidarity acts without

addressing the power relations that these difference lines often come with.

### Xin: Solidarity as practice

The Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network workshop "Exploring Gendered Dimensions of Welfare: China and the Nordic Countries" was held at the Danish Cultural Centre in Beijing in March 2019. I was asked to lead one of three working groups. In my role as a working group leader, I had the opportunity to propose potential invitees and suggest key themes for the group's focus. The workshop centred on the welfare state in both Chinese and Nordic settings, with a particular emphasis on gender-related inquiries. It consisted of three working groups.

One delved into the theme of "parenting, family policies and gender (in)equality." Another engaged with the question of "feminist activism." The workshop that I led explored the question of "welfare states and feminist transnational knowledge production." The working groups were allotted two days to work independently, crafting recommendations for future welfare solutions from the perspective of gender. Each recommendation was presented to a panel of experts who then provided comments. After the workshop, the recommendations were put together in a report titled "Gendered Dimensions of Welfare in China and the Nordic Region – Feminist transformations, Visions and Recommendations."

In addition to the working group discussions, the workshop featured keynote speakers from both China and Nordic countries who were researchers and activists working on welfare-related questions and feminist movements. Two documentary films were screened and discussed during the first two days of the workshop. It should be noted that only the programme of the final day of the workshop was open to the public (with security personnel stationed at the entrance).

Presentations and film screenings on this day provided insights into “Gender, Sexuality, Violence and Power” related issues in Chinese and English. The workshop ended with the performance by the Chinese feminist folklore band 九野. Founded in 2016, the band members consisted of four women who were migrant workers, teachers, and doctoral students.

In what follows I zoom in on a couple of observations I made at the workshop through the lens of solidarity. I elaborate upon the instances where solidarity was explicitly mentioned but was non-performative and where it was absent but made sense of and engaged with through other forms of relating. What is especially interesting is that solidarity as a term appeared only once in the workshop program – in the title of the final round-table discussion “Transnational solidarities in feminist and queer spaces.” It could be argued that solidarity was not a central theme of the workshop, at least not in an explicit manner. Instead of being clearly defined, its meaning was multiple and emerged both through its usage in conjunction with other terms such as “transnational,” “feminist” and “queer,” and through the specific spatial arrangement, form and content of the roundtable discussion. For example, it could be argued that solidarity was employed by the working group leaders who planned the round table discussion to explain the specific transnational feminist and queer practices they had in mind. In this particular instance, the group comprised two Nordic-based feminist scholars and two Chinese feminists. One of the latter was finishing her postgraduate studies in the US, while the other was a leading Chinese feminist community organizer with rich international experience.

The sense of solidarity in terms of a non-hierarchical, cacophonous community of dialogue was materialized in the spatial arrangement. During the presentations by the

working groups, the working groups and the expert panel were seated at the front of the room, facing each other. At the back of the room, other workshop participants were seated facing both the working group and the panel. This configuration represented a multiplicity of mutual dialogs, including those between the Nordic and the Chinese, between the network and the scholarship outside of the network, between gender studies and welfare studies, between the experts and the general public. During the round-table discussions, the participants sat in a circle, facing each other. There was no clear division in the room. The circular configuration made visible and felt the existence of a community of sorts, however provisional, centred around a specific issue. In contrast to the setting during the panel discussion, where the spatial demarcation of the room materialized the difference and separation between those who presented and those who listened, in the round-table every participant was potentially a speaker, an audience, and a contributor to the round-table discussion.

Solidarity here could also be understood in terms of bringing together voices from researchers, experts, activists, and students. The question that needs to be asked is whether this form of solidarity, which entails the convergence of different voices, might lose its political efficacy, including for example the sense of collective endeavour, trust, and responsibility.

In light of the concerns regarding the political sensitivity of the term “feminist” in the Chinese context, the term was rephrased as “gendered dimensions” of the welfare state in the public version of the workshop description. This rephrasing served to tone down, if not completely displace, the political dimensions of feminist theorizing and practices. In contrast, the description of the working groups did not require consideration of issues of political sensitivity and censorship in China. As the working group discussions

were not open to the public, the titles and descriptions of the working groups, as well as the round-table discussions were decided by group leaders and participants. The title for the final round-table discussion “Transnational solidarities in feminist and queer spaces” was proposed by Swedish participants working on transnational feminist and queer activism. The contrast between the displacement of the political dimension of the term “feminism” in the description of the workshop and the round-table’s emphasis on solidarity was not addressed during the workshop.

As a researcher working in the field of gender studies in the Nordic countries, I was familiar with the term “transnational feminist solidarity.” In the Nordic context, the term transnational feminism and the notion of solidarity are often coupled together. In many ways, it could be said that transnational feminism and solidarity are mutually implicated, although solidarity cannot be reduced to transnational feminism as it suggests a much broader political alliance that foregrounds alterity. It is perhaps for this reason that neither the presence of solidarity in the final round-table discussion, nor its absence in the overall workshop description, nor the contrast between the two, raised any questions for me during the workshop. Additionally, the contextual and historical specificity of the Chinese word for solidarity – 团结 – was not discussed at the workshop. The connotation of class-based struggles of the communist revolution of the Chinese word 团结 is lost in its English translation. As Dusica mentioned during our discussions for this article, the term solidarity is seldomly – if ever! – used by Chinese feminist scholars and activists, who would prefer to use terms such as exchange, collaboration, learning and communication.

As I see it, the workshop’s use of the word solidarity was non-performative. That is, it did not engage with the contextually specific socio-political power dynamics that shaped

the framing of the workshop nor the relationship among the participants. Discussions on these issues, however, came up in the context of other modes of relation, such as the relation of learning. In the working group that I led, some participants from the Nordic countries challenged the framing of the workshop as learning from the gendered dimension of welfare state practices in the Nordic countries, which for them presupposed and reproduced unequal relations of power between the copy and the original, materialized along deeply racialized and gendered lines. When I discussed these concerns with some participants from China, they expressed that while they could understand the concern of power hierarchies, they did not feel that the usage of the word “learning” per se was problematic. For them, it was not wrong to say that there were aspects of welfare state practices in the Nordic countries that could provide important insights for addressing gender equality issues in the Chinese context. Similarly, the research on, the practices of and the discussions about welfare issues in the Chinese context might inspire and shed new light on the welfare state practices in the Nordic context. In view of this, it could be argued that the notion of learning performed, contextualized, and even critically engaged with solidarity, even though solidarity was not mentioned at all in these discussions.

### Conclusion: Doing solidarity

The above accounts, although concerning different aspects, periods, and scenarios of the network, all take as their starting point the recognition that solidarity is a set of practices. By way of conclusion, we make explicit the key aspects of solidarity based on the three accounts.

## Solidarity: Individual, institutional, and collective

The relation between the individual and the collective has been one of the key concerns of feminist discussions about solidarity (see for example Elomäki, 2012). For example, it has been argued that feminist attention to individual agency and different subject positions sits uneasily, if not paralyzes, feminist solidarity that is collective mobilizing (see for example Zerilli, 2005). Moreover, as Wikström et al. (2021) observe, the tension between the individual and the collective is further intensified due to the increased neoliberalisation of equality work that effectively promotes individualism in the name of empowerment. While taking inspiration from these important observations, our analysis of the network raises questions about the distinction made between individual and collective efforts. As for example Dusica and Yan have pointed out in their respective accounts, a key aspect of the network is the individual connections that were produced and sustained through the course of the network. These connections have not only enabled collaborative efforts both within and outside the network, but also, and importantly, have been crucial in maintaining and sustaining the work, especially in the face of the lack of institutional support, and in terms of obtaining funding for the network.

The question of funding is seldomly examined in discussions about the relation between the individual and the collective of feminist solidarity. However, based on our experiences both in participating, organizing and reinvigorating the network we suggest that the question of institutional support, the funding structures as well as the geopolitical context that they are located in, are important aspects that mediate and challenge the strict bifurcation between the individual and the collective. For example, as Yan shows in her discussion, funding schemes shape how the positionality and location of the individual

member is perceived and understood: who can take part in the application (e.g., legible PIs often need to have affiliations with, if not permanent employment at, an institution, in certain locations) and how the application should be framed, whose interest should be highlighted. As Dusica shows, securing funding for the network often falls on individuals and has never been easy. In recent years, it has been increasingly difficult to keep the network going due to the precarious academic working conditions (we have been working on reinvigorating the network on a voluntary basis), the changing structures of institutions (for example NIAS which used to be the base of the network closed down at the end of 2023), and changing group composition (for instance some of the most active network members have recently retired).

The geopolitical climate is an important factor in this regard. In addition to its influence on funding practices, it impacts the scope of individual and institutional agency, for example through how collaborations with China would be perceived in general (as pointed out by Yan) and the concerns about how to frame the topic of the workshop (as described by Xin).

In view of this, we suggest that it is more productive to ask about the dynamic relation between the individual, the institutional and the collective that shapes practices of solidarity, rather than simply considering individual positionalities as the a priori condition to be negotiated by the collective, or equating individual interests with individualism. Moreover, analysing the specific epistemic and material conditions for, for instance, the funding and institutional structure, and actors that adopt (or not) the vocabulary and framework of solidarity, eschews the risk of producing an all-encompassing and a de-contextualized prescriptive feminist politics that simply entails the inclusion of all differences.

### Solidarity: Rethinking power imbalance

The differing experiences and interpretations of solidarity by the three of us shed light on how achieving solidarity in the Sino-Nordic Gender Studies Network can be both possible and challenging (impossible). As we have shown, relations of power are complex, contingent, sometimes contradictory, and manifested on and across various levels – the interpersonal, institutional, and geopolitical. In other words, they cannot be reduced to a fixed positioning of the subject and object of solidarity. As Dusica shows, the Nordic participants are often seen as more privileged due to their geopolitical and institutional locations, and have taken on the responsibility of securing funding and providing space for the network's activities. At the same time, there is a noticeable imbalance of interest between the Nordic and Chinese feminist scholars and practitioners. And yet, individual Nordic-based scholars – especially the coordinators and organizers – have placed the interests of their Chinese partners at the centre of the evolving network, by for example framing the network's activities and discussions in line with their expressed interests.

Relatedly, as Xin shows, the problem of learning that often troubles transnational feminist solidarity work due to its perceived connotation of the gendered and racialized hierarchy of origin and copy, fails to explain the complexity of power that shapes and is emergent in the network. The Chinese participants did not mind learning, and quite on the contrary, wanted to learn. This is not because they considered learning as an indication of a deficiency on their part. Rather, for the Chinese participants, learning testified to their openness, interest and capacity to participate in a mutual exchange. This understanding of learning did not start from the problem of origin and copy, which, as Xin's account elucidates, seemed to be the

starting point and end goal of certain strands of feminist critique that might risk reproducing the very hierarchies of power it seeks to challenge. Our accounts show that the network's power-dynamics was much more complex. Chinese participants, especially the ones who were more established, exhibited confidence both as learners and as contributors. Their work was highly respected not only in China, but also by the Nordic participants.

### Solidarity: Transnational feminist practices and the in-between positions

The binary framework of the Global North vs. the Global South, or West vs. East is problematic not only in relation to analysing power and power relations in transnational feminist practices, but also concerning the question of positionalities and representativeness in the transnational feminist movements. As pointed out in Yan's memory work, the emphasis on respecting difference in order to promote solidarity may inadvertently lead to uncritical approaches to representations in the network. It seems that there has been ambiguity in the definition of who is a Nordic and who is a Chinese scholar. This has resulted in the phenomenon whereby one became "Nordic" by being based in the Nordic countries, and one remained "Chinese" wherever one was. We also witness a tension *between* the emerged positionalities of in-betweenness and hybridity *and* the strengthened boundaries to maintain the binary locations and subject positions. This, to some extent, echoes Aihwa Ong's critique of the postcolonial theories and its binary approach for not being sufficient to "capture the unevenness, heterogeneity of experiences of globality in so-called 'Global South'" (Andersen, 2015, p. 15; Ong, 2011). We are aware that our own analysis cannot inevitably avoid this binary framework of the Sino vs. the Nordic. Our argument is not to completely abandon the mechanism and impact of



existing binary structures in addressing transnational feminist practices, but rather to direct more attention to the practice of border crossing and the potentials that the emerged and emerging “transnational” positionalities and subjectivities may bring in producing both feminist knowledges and activisms. Yan is certainly not alone as being transnational in the network. When we look back at the whole journey of the network, transnational scholars have been central in both establishing and maintaining the network. For example, both Cecilia Milwertz and Qi Wang can be said to be positioned in between the Nordic and China: Milwertz, a Nordic scholar doing research on and in China, and Wang, a Chinese scholar located in the Nordic countries. Also, we who are now working to revive the network are positioned as transnational.

Meanwhile it is important to point out that “transnational” is not a homogeneous positionality. Within the network, transnational scholars were positioned differently in relation to various and intersecting sets of power mechanism, such as different layers of center/peripheries locations, academic privileges related to types of employment, academic titles, and even situational positionalities. For example, while Yan’s and Xin’s presence in the network were never questioned (and their flexibility of being able to be placed in both categories was even considered as an advantage), Dusica, as a

transnational Serbian-born China studies scholar, encountered the question several times, “Why are you here?”. The fact that she formally joined the network after she got a Postdoc position in Finland (despite her personal contacts with Cecilia Milwertz can be traced back in 2006) demonstrates the problem of representativeness based on the logics of methodological nationalism.

Although the accounts and analysis are limited in scope, they invoke important questions about solidarity. We would like to end this article by posing the following questions in the hope of generating further discussions on transnational feminist solidarity. How might the notion of solidarity in the context of transnational feminist practices signal not a self-evident good practice, but a point of tension and contestation? How might the negotiation of its visibility and interpretation raise the question of not simply “who speaks,” but more importantly, of the contextual processes of translation that holds differences, including financial, institutional, and epistemic power differentials, accountable, all the while shaking up their rigid boundaries? And how might its apparent absence articulate and produce a form of solidarity that is not defined by the relation of heroines and victims, but by a relationality of response-ability as trust and learning that fosters individual connections in/through/as collectivities?

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