

Why Is China Experiencing an Ueno Chizuko Boom Now?



The feminism section of a bookstore in Beijing (photography by author)

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Her Books Become Book of the Year

Sociologist and feminist Ueno Chizuko (Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo) is currently enjoying charismatic popularity in China. *Ofuku shokan: Genkai kara hajimaru* (Correspondences: Starting at the Edge), which was co-authored with author Suzuki Suzumi and translated into Chinese in September 2022, was not only selected as book of the year on Douban, the largest book review social networking service in China, but ranked third in the weekly ranking in the middle of May as of the writing of this article.

Topping the best seller list in 2022 at a Peking University campus bookshop was Ueno's *Onnagirai* (Misogyny) published in 2015. Feminism sections have been established at bookstores in the city and Ueno's books line the shelves.

In September 2022, the Japanese language and culture of the School of Foreign Language at Peking University, to which I belong, asked Ueno for an online course as there was strong demand from students. As it was during the pandemic, the venue was limited to 100 people. Participants were limited to Japanese language students only and it was to be a course in Japanese with no interpretation, and yet the phone of the person in charge rang off the hook with inquiries from people not only from Beijing but from all over China.

Just like the in-person participation, there was a flood of people wishing to join online, even though it was limited to Japanese language students only, and Ueno herself was unable to connect at one point. I was once again surprised by the enthusiasm after seeing that a student had sent a message in WeChat (a major messaging app in China) the day before the course, saying “I think I may cry thinking that I will finally get to meet Professor Ueno herself tomorrow.”

Furthermore, in February 2023, there was an online conversation between Ueno and Dai Jinhua, a female film researcher with immense popularity in China, at an event hosted by *The Beijing News*, a major media outlet. I participated in this conversation as a guest interpreter. Only around 60 people were allowed into the venue, but the excitement was considerable, and the few people in attendance spread the details of the conversation via Weibo (China’s largest social networking service), occupying the top of the hot word ranking for the day and indicating high visibility.

An article covering this conversation was released online on March 3, and despite being a more than 13,000-character article, there are currently more than 100,000 views and 6,277 likes. Some of the comments on the article included the following: “I read this while taking notes,” “I read this article relishing each word and phrase,” and “I think I will re-read this article many times.”

It Started with a Congratulatory Speech at a University of Tokyo Entrance Ceremony

What caused this boom in interest, which appears somewhat sudden? It was directly triggered by a [congratulatory speech](#) given by Ueno at a University of Tokyo entrance ceremony. This speech, which became a topic of conversation even in Japan and referred to the gender gap at the University of Tokyo and in Japanese society, was translated into Chinese and spread via social networking services (hereinafter “social media”) mostly by highly-educated women. At the time, there were many students around me who read this speech and cried, and it became widely talked about. It pierced the hearts of women when Ueno said, “an unjust society awaits, where hard work won’t always be rewarded.”

That same year, she visited China and spoke in Beijing, Nanjing, and several other places. At her speech delivered at Tsinghua University in Beijing, students from Peking University and other surrounding universities flocked to see her and I was told her speech was enthusiastically received. She was already a very recognizable name among university students.

This has evolved into an even larger trend over the course of several pandemic years.

One reason behind this is that Ueno’s books have steadily been translated and published in Chinese. In the Chinese publishing industry, 2022 was called the “Year of Ueno Chizuko” with seven books translated and published in one year. But that’s not all. It is safe to say that her words were needed due to the various circumstances surrounding Chinese society, including the increase in disparity and the stabilization of classes following economic development, as well as feelings of despair brought about by the spread of COVID-19.

Centered Around Women in Their Twenties and Thirties

This boom is centered around highly-educated women in their twenties and thirties, or in other words, women born in the 1980s and 90s. These women are from the single child generation, and they were raised as a three person family with their two parents. These women were only children, so they were valued and expected not as a boy or a girl, but equally, and they fought and won against the rigorous university entrance exam.

With this generation, many of their parents are from the red guard generation, spending their youth during the Cultural Revolution. Many of these parents wanted to offer ample education to their children to make up for the proper education that they couldn't receive themselves and many of them believe that this is the only way for their children to live their lives without hardships. These women were raised within this cultural environment. Their entire lives were about beating the university entrance exams, and in reality, they could be called a group of winners and a reserve army – women who passed the entrance exams, attained fitting employment, and possess a level of economic power. In other words, this is a group of highly-educated women with economic power that has never existed before in China. These women now have choices that the women before them did not have. They can choose whether or not to get married, whether or not to have kids, or whether or not to have a second child. Men will assume equal responsibility for housework and childcare (and sometimes more than the women), and retired parents will also take over housework and childcare.

However, with the increase in choices comes an increase in worries, and these women are further confused by the visualization of the contrast between other women through the spread of social media as a tool, including women in the public eye, married and single women, mothers and childless women, and more. These women must at some point also consider care for their parents, who they currently rely upon for domestic labor. The fact that these women, facing unprecedented worry, get their hands on books on feminism is a natural progression. And it was here that the pandemic began.

In 2021, one of the words selected for the Top 10 Buzzwords of 2020 in China was the word, “*nei juan* (内卷).” It was originally translated as “involution,” part of the lingo of cultural anthropology, but students at Peking University and Tsinghua University began to use the word with a cynical meaning as a word expressing the fierce competition that continues upon entering university.

According to Baidu Baike, an online encyclopedia, the online text that spread this word across China describes the universal situation directly facing the most astute youth in China currently as follows: “Success within extreme competition holds down growth, causes companions to compete against one another, and leads to exhaustion.”

“*Nei juan*” is still used in business circles and among friends to mean a competition fought over limited resources. Tired of this exhausting and fruitless competition among companions, a “lying flat (躺平)” movement (one of the Top 10 Buzzwords of 2021) has emerged in which companions no longer participate in the competition but lie down and do nothing.

Of course, this competition existed before the pandemic. But prior to the pandemic, everyone simply believed that tomorrow would be better than today as economic growth continued, and with many chances to go abroad for study or work, there were more resources to fight over than there are now. With the spread of COVID-19, people were no longer able to travel abroad. Society turned inward, competition gradually intensified, and now there are many large companies which will not hire applicants unless they have a master's degree. Though universities have mass-produced highly-educated youth with master's degrees or doctorates, the employment situation remains intense.

Ueno's speech plainly conveyed both the existence of “an unjust society, where hard work won't always be rewarded” for these women, and the fact that they therefore must study.

Focusing on a “Weakness Phobia”

Ofuku shokan: Genkai kara hajimaru, which I mentioned earlier, is a book of epistolary-style dialogues between Suzuki Suzumi and Ueno. Suzuki holds a doctorate from the University of Tokyo, and is a

highly-educated women with experience at a major newspaper company, and within this book, she speaks freely of things of the past and of her personal life. Chinese women of the same generation deeply empathize with her way of sincerely confessing her worries. There are more than 20,000 comments on Douban praising the fact that Ueno does not offer superficial, warm words to Suzuki as an elder, but instead cuts sharply while hoping for growth and awakening.

Particular attention has been paid to the “weakness phobia” as pointed out by Ueno in this book. It is a mental state of hatred towards the weak and a desire to not think of oneself as weak, and it is translated into Chinese as “恐弱,” meaning “unable to admit weakness.”

2022 was also the year in which shocking incidents related to women were reported. Video of a woman chained by the neck in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province spread in January. The woman was from Yunnan Province and had birthed 8 children in a farmhouse in Jiangsu as a result of being bought and sold multiple times through human trafficking. She was chained to a room with no electricity or sunlight, allegedly because she had a mental disorder.

In June, a video from a security camera was posted showing a group of men sitting at a table near a group of women eating in a restaurant in Tangshan City, Hebei Province before dawn. In the video, the men make a pass at the women, and upon being rejected, they attacked the women persistently. Of course, in both of these incidents, the authorities took action and the relevant parties were prosecuted, but they sent major shock waves across society.

These were both incidents where urban residents were confronted with the harsh reality of the countryside where these sorts of things still happen, as they do not often hear about the situation in farming villages or medium or smaller cities in the countryside having lived in urban areas. However, in response, some women harshly reacted on social media, saying, “there is no safe place for women in China.” In doing so, several of these accounts were closed for inciting confrontation between men and women. In the previously-mentioned conversation hosted by *The Beijing News*, Dai Jinhua stated that the anger, empathy, and willingness to help women in China due to the fact that they are victims is not because women are weak. She analyzed the situation as being a reaction to “a society that was equal in the past and still appears equal today.” The emphasis on women’s position as victims is due to this illusion or system of speech being at an impasse.

She also stated that the “weakness phobia” is the flip side of “longing for the strong.” She pointed out that in a society where everything encourages people to become winners, all weaknesses, all disdain, and even the logic of treading on losers becomes inevitable in some way, regardless of gender. People are treated unfairly when they should be equals. In a society that requires everyone to become strong, there is no forgiveness for becoming weak. Rather than being critical when seeing one’s own weaknesses in others, it is unbearable for someone with something in common with oneself to be treated unfairly on account of a fear of becoming weak. Is it possible that this mentality has given rise to extreme responses?

The reason why *Onnagirai* continues to sell today is here: it offers a clear reason behind the uncomfortable feeling felt in “a society that was equal in the past and still appears equal today.”

The book has drawn close to 30,000 comments on Douban, including the following:

“I was briefly dumbfounded after finishing the book. All of the things I have experienced over the last few years are written in this book!”

“You can find examples of cases in modern Chinese culture in every paragraph”

“The patriarchal societies of east Asia will be thoroughly beaten if Ueno Chizuko opens her mouth”

“If I were to write a synopsis to go on the cover, I’d write, ‘How to Elegantly Diss the Misogynistic Men In Your Life’”

The Online Conversation that Set the Web Ablaze

In this way, Ueno gained overwhelming support from highly-educated women. This became unexpectedly known across China with a video conversation released in February 2023 between Ueno and three women in their thirties who graduated from Peking University. This was to be one of several online conversations with influencers planned as a promotion by a publishing company, but the video stirred up great criticism. At the beginning of the video, the three women asked Ueno why she was single, whether it was because she had been hurt by men or because of how she had been raised. The women were harshly attacked for this, with comments such as “How rude,” “You don’t understand feminism,” and “Are you really graduates of Peking University?” It seems it made a bad impression that all three women were married.

Furthermore, it seems that things had not been coordinated well beforehand. The three women were sitting on a bed relaxing while hugging cushions and without wearing makeup during a pajama party, while Ueno faced the camera and was dressed quite well. This was criticized as being impolite, and the women were further attacked for using the Peking University brand and words like “Peking University graduates” and “Peking University dorm talk” to gain views, even though it had been over ten years since the women had graduated from university. This video was deleted a few days after it was released, but it had been copied and cut and it continued to spread, becoming what could be called a major incident on the Chinese web in the first half of 2023. Since the women used the Peking University name, I was sent the video from various people and was asked to agree that this was disgraceful. Truth be told, I never understood why people said what they did.

While there were certainly rude or immature questions, it was a good video where each side understood one another, as each of the women expressed their experiences in their relationships with their parents and listened to what Ueno had to say. There are people today who wonder why this video actually set the web ablaze.

The criticism that this was rude to Ueno immediately became a criticism aimed at the individual influencers. One of the three women was an executive in an IT company, who graduated from Peking University, married, had a child, and got the chance to speak directly with Ueno as an influencer. There were many comments of envy towards this woman.

This seems like a form of jealousy from passionate fans in response to casual fans without much love or knowledge acting as the face of all fans and interacting with those who the passionate fans see as their favorite. There is also pride at play, saying it is a disgrace to Chinese people to act in such an embarrassing way towards a foreign guest.

As a result of this video setting the web ablaze, Ueno Chizuko gained greater name recognition and respect in China, having sincerely answered rude questions. A similar conversation between Ueno and male influencers that was also recorded in February was substantial. There weren’t any rude words or actions and the influencers had done their homework, but it didn’t really cause a buzz compared to the conversation with the women. Following the criticism it received, there was surely an increase in the number of people who criticized the video with the women after watching only a portion of it.

Lost Memories of Feminism

As written, the reason why Ueno has been enthusiastically accepted by mainly highly-educated Chinese women is because before her, there were no words appropriately expressing the distress, bewilderment, and discomfort of these women. So then did feminism not exist at all in China? It did exist, of course. In response to this situation, He Guimei, a researcher of modern literature, put forward the idea that “theoretical amnesia” had occurred in Chinese feminism in a series of interviews with female researchers.

The World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 was the first time the Chinese public was exposed to the word “feminism.” There were 17,000 people in attendance at this UN-hosted conference, including representatives from 189 countries.

Lectures were given by American Hillary Clinton, who was the First Lady at the time, and Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, and the Beijing Declaration was adopted, along with the Platform for Action, which laid out goals in twelve areas, including women’s poverty and education. The conference had the full support of the government and media with around 5,000 people from Japan in attendance, and after this conference, many female writers and researchers emerged in China. But this trend vanished in the 2000s.

He Guimei points out that there are two reasons for this. The first is that it was not a trend brought about by internal motivation on the part of women. As a result, the trend lacked a driving force, and when things cooled down, there were few people left with continuing interest. The second reason is that discussions remained on a personal level, meaning it never brought about substantial social change. Some young researchers managed to present the new academic discipline of women’s studies, but nothing else was left behind.

If interest in past feminism is seen as a new trend in feminist thought, then the disconnect with this trend that occurred in the 1990s should be called “theoretical amnesia,” and the younger generation that has no idea what happened at the time is discussing gender from personal topics empty-handed. There is a lack of intellectual contemplation here. After the blaze from the video conversation, the new Ueno boom trend in feminism appears to be somewhat relaxed on the surface. Instead, reports of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry have gained public attention recently. There is a reasonable possibility that interest in feminism that was once enlivened will gradually wane as new topics continue to appear and are discussed on a superficial level. In fact, since the spread of social media, a great many people and incidents have gained great popularity only to be forgotten.

Ueno’s books will still be translated and published in China, and it is reassuring to know that in addition to readable books for the general public, scholarly books are also being properly translated. Will China be able to take in Ueno’s research along with the research of others from Japan and other countries and speak about feminism in their own words in a way that is appropriate for China? The future hinges upon whether or not this Ueno Chizuko boom ends as something transient or not.

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