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Women's interests, and perceptions of contextual influences?

– a minor field study on women's political interests in China

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Abstract

The status of women in society has in recent years become increasingly important in the discussion about development in different contexts around the world. The aim of this thesis is to see what women in China care for and what interests they have. This to determine whether it is possible to talk about common interests among women in China and if it is possible to find common perceptions of background factors that are believed to affect the interests which arise among them. The definition of what the concept of political interests include has been focus of debate in various theories. Whether the contexts, or the belonging to a certain gender, created women interests has been of focus for discussions. This thesis will be a try helping to move this discussion forward by studying a context that for long have been left out of research on this area. Is it so, that women's interests differ in different contexts, are they taking various expressions, or is it possible to suggest that there are universal female interests that can be applied to women everywhere, regardless of the context they live in? The results of this study found that there are areas of interests that are common for young women in China. The results also show that women's perceptions of the context can be seen as explanation to what interests women have.

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1. Introduction

Since "women's status in a society is a key marker for social progress"¹ it is of special interest to examine the political interests of women in developing countries. What political interests' women have is interesting to study for all countries, but perhaps especially in those where development is moving forward fastly. The importance of getting women's interests in key arenas, and in the same way raising their status is important for various reasons in those countries, but maybe in particular to not forget the women in the developing process.

The focus of this thesis will be to identify the political interests that exist among young women in China. This is to see what interests that could be found in a context not very similar to contexts that have been studied before. And for previous assumptions made on the subject it is important to make studies like this. Especially since *the adoption of clear delineated female interests, which would apply to all women in all classes in all countries, has been one of the victims in contemporary feminist criticism, and the discovery of the large amount of differences between women has undermined more global understanding of women's interests and affairs.*²

Women's status is today a frequently discussed topic around the world. An example of this is the *World conference on women* arranged by the UN since 1970's.³ To improve and make it better for women in the society is a topic of high priority since it is of great importance to make women a part of the development.⁴ Since women today have thoughts regarding both the private interests as well as interests for the society it will be interesting to see what the women in China address as their interests. China is a country going through massive development, both in economy and at other areas in the society.⁵ The changes that have taken place in China through recent decades seem to have affected women and their status in the Chinese society. Since the Chinese state nowadays puts less effort than before to have affect on

¹ http://womenofchina.cn/Projects_Campaigns/Awards/Outstanding_Women/199943.jsp

² Philips s. 86

³ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/index.html>

⁴ McLaren E, Anne p. 114-116

⁵ According to Swedish SIDA, China has undergone a rapid and substantial economic development but have lacked behind in many other areas. Changes have been implemented in many areas in the society which brought major changes in community structure, both positive and negative ones.

women's interests it is of interests to see whether it's more liberal attitude towards women have had affect on women's interests as well as their status in the society.⁶ Or does it appear other underlying factors that affect women and their interests at a large level?

Younger women in China are growing up in another society than previous generations which could have influenced their interests but also their views on the society. The definition of political interests that I utilize in this thesis limits it to needs, wishes, demands and preferences, after a definition previously made by Anna Jonasdottir.⁷ In previous research a narrow definition of interests limiting it to needs have often been used. However, the benefit of using a definition as the one given above is that it can show wider aspects of interests".⁸

2. Purpose & Questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore what political interests can be found among young (cosmopolitan) women in China. When talking about the concept of interests some theorists say that *the concept is particularly significant in analyses of the society we actually live in.*⁹ The second purpose of this thesis is to explore weather interests are culturally derived, or if they are gender specific. The questions for the thesis are therefore:

1. What political interests can be found among young Chinese women?
2. Does the Chinese context affect young women's political interests and their views on the society?

⁶ Howell p. 43-44

⁷ Jonasdottir p. 158

⁸ Jonasdottir p. 152-153

⁹ Jonasdottir p. 152

3. Theory

3.1 Definition of political interests

Women's political interests is a frequently discussed concept. Much focus has been put into what can count as interests. Needs has for long been said to work as an explanation for what interests a specific group, i.e. women, might have. To focus only on needs of a group have been further discussed since it could be a weakness to narrow a groups interests to be based only on one thing. To speak of needs you have to take in to count whose needs it is spoken about, and who takes act for them. Different individuals shape different needs, which make it difficult to talk about generalizing interests. It all comes down to who defines them, and how they do it.¹⁰ Theorist on the subject are arguing whether it is actually possible to speak of a concept like women's interests since they are likely to have diverse economic and social needs and aspirations.¹¹

The used definition of interests includes both private and public interests, or as some theorists say, subjective and objective interests. This even if this have been criticized by some scholars, *like the pluralist that says that what are considered to be a group's or individual's objective interests always rest upon the researcher's subjective values and thus are unscientific*¹². Other theories rejects that thought and says that *during the 20th century it was claimed that the notion of public interests is both realistic and necessary*¹³

These two areas will therefore be distinguished in a further analysis of how the interests of the women in China are structured, but also to see if it really is possible to distinguish private and public interests when speaking about the concept.

¹⁰ Jonasdottir s. 152-153

¹¹ McLaren p. 109

¹² Jonasdottir 154

¹³ Jonasdottir p. 154

3.2 Theories about women's interests

In today's discourse it is a divergence of opinion the concept of political interests. Is the interest based on experiences given from the context people live in, is it needs that decide what political interests that arise among them? That the needs would serve as the exclusive explanation when it comes to female interests, however, is a contradicted subject of feminist theorists who believe that the needs and interest are related and can be connected. This is because they have historically gone hand in hand, and in many cases formed the basis of theoretical assumptions about the political interests of women.¹⁴

Theorists on the subject of women's interests say that *there are specific needs, interests and concerns that are emerging out of women's experiences*¹⁵, which mean that women therefore share interests. This seem to be a point of conflict since *some feminist scholars argue, against traditional political thinking, that women as women should be considered a group with 'representable interests'*. *Other feminist researchers, who otherwise have differing views, question this argument.*¹⁶ The ones arguing against the explanation that experience creates interests mean that you need to look at other background factors as well.¹⁷

Anne Phillips presents in her book *The politics of presens* the idea that women might have similar areas of interests and priorities as they generally live in similar circumstances, such as the family life, health care and welfare institutions. She says that *as society is currently structured, they have specific interests arising from their exposure.*¹⁸ Although, she doesn't accept the idea that this is the complete answer to what interests appear among women and continues her reasoning by saying that *if it by interests is understood what women express as their priorities and objectives, there is a considerable disagreement between women.*¹⁹ But when discussing the possibility to assume that shared experiences for women can explain what interests that creates among them it do seem as *a majority of feminist students as well as activists are in agreement about maintaining some sort of minimal common denominators: the interest in not allowing oneself to be oppressed as a*

¹⁴ Jonasdottir p. 35 ?

¹⁵ Philips p. 85

¹⁶ Jonasdottir p. 151

¹⁷ Jonasdottir p. 151

¹⁸ Philips p. 86

¹⁹ Philips p. 86

*woman, or, in fighting patriarchy.*²⁰

Anna Jonasdottir is reasoning similar to Philips on this point, that the needs of women to some extent can't be used as a whole explanation for women's interests. Despite that, Jonasdottir means that it simultaneously can be an important aspect of what issues are of women's interests, and not, by saying *that needs and interests lend a special historical significance to political theorizing about sex/gender in contemporary society.*²¹

Philips develops her reasoning by saying that women also may have interests that arise differently in another context. The importance of belonging to a certain gender and share experiences must be questioned and *the idea of that shared experience ensures shared beliefs or goals are unfounded.*²² Women's interest in different areas can therefore have both similarities and differences, regardless of where they live and what the context look like. The status of different groups in the context can change, and what is of interests for those groups can take different expressions in different contexts. This assumption is made, while not excluding the fact and importance of contexts for what interests that arise in different groups. Women could possibly be interested, and care for, similar things regardless of context.²³

3.3 Context matters

Some previous research conducted in different contexts, both Western and others, shows that the assumption that contexts have impact on interest might be true. As a group, women can potentially have similar areas of interest, such as, for example, social welfare. The differences found in different groups, and the explanation to this differences, may be found in the context. What is included in the areas of interests can take different forms depending on how the society women lives in, looks like.

The areas of interests may include different items and may appear different in the west and east, based on what is in need for individuals in the different contexts. What is needed in different contexts, and what is in need to be fulfilled in order to satisfy the groups may vary based on how the society that they live in looks like.

²⁰ Jonasdottir p. 156

²¹ Jonasdottir p. 153

²² Philips p. 69

²³ Philips p. 69

The interests for the same questions along women all over the world take different expressions depending on where they are shaped. Social welfare might be a common area of interests for women, but when women in China are expressing a need of better welfare institutions for people in developing areas, women in other eastern countries wishes they had access to a better healthcare and water.²⁴ This in comparison to when different western contexts are discussing weather to have a private or public healthcare etc.

In other contexts, for example in a country like China, the outcome of what interests that could be found among women could show new results. These results could either help to bring new sights on the contextual influence on interests among women as a group, or it could neglect the importance by giving new insights to the subject. As the context is discussed as a possible explanation for what interests that arise among individuals in the society, the changes, and development, that are happening on different areas in China makes the chosen context interesting to further explore.

4. The Chinese Context

4.1 Chinese women and political history

China has, like many other socialist states through the years tried to work to obtain the gender equality in the country. Laws and rights were implemented early for women's social rights and the women could take advantage of these laws, set up by the government, both in their social life and at work. These gender thoughts also seem to have been implemented in the society since the women today seem to have more rights and possibilities in certain areas, especially in accordance to many other countries in the world today.²⁵ Of course, you can still put this in relation to other areas in China where the country have been more, or less, sufficient in their work towards great development.²⁶

²⁴ Rai p. 104-105

²⁵ http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_CHN.html

²⁶ Shangh p. 195

Despite the earlier progress on the mentioned area the great economic progress seems to have had impact of the progress of the women in the Chinese society in a totally different direction. The women still have possibilities to affect their economic status, make career and the social rights implemented for them are still there. Yet, they seem to have lost their previous gaining in the political area. The good development in the women's' private life which is a benefit from the social rights is probably pushed forward by the laws that was institutionalized for the women many years ago.

In China, it has in recent years, however, been a change when it comes to women's participation in politics, its political areas of interest and views on feminism in the country. Earlier there was the state dictated feminism²⁷ which, in addition to laws and rights in a comprehensive manner, presided over the issues which would operate when it came to gender equality and women. This also had some affect when it came to what areas women were expected to engage in. This state feminist approach was for long one of the successful attempts to get women to participate in political processes and was considered to give the woman a good chance to have influence on a political level. When the winds of change began to blow around the community structure it also made the state's involvement and participation in the earlier feminism to look different. From previously being state-controlled are the rules on which areas women today engage in fewer. Now it is up to women themselves to take their chances of participation, with the interests of their own choosing.²⁸ This more liberal view against women and their involvement seems to have had a positive influence on women's involvement. This applies to both the market and in other institutions, but not in the political sphere, where women lagged behind men in both the representation and influence.²⁹ In order to prevent the continued loss of women in the political sphere, the Chinese government has now introduced various quotas to ensure that women should be represented to a certain extent in decision-making. The question that remains is whether women have voluntarily withdrawn from the policy due to lack of interest or if they even had to leave it for various reasons?³⁰

²⁷ The government created women's organization to work for specific questions etc.

²⁸ Howell p. 43

²⁹ The percentage of women in the parliament used to be 25 but has now gone down to a level of 9 according to official numbers from the Chinese government.

³⁰ Shangh p. 195

The state controlled organization Women of China, who's promoting women's issues and is working for women's rights in the Chinese society still have a specific policy when it comes to what areas women should take act in. It says, "Women should play a key role in promoting a harmonious family and community. Women could contribute to the social equality, development and harmony in society. They could also make contributions to economic, political, cultural and social development."³¹

5. Method

5.1 Research design and choice of geographical area

The choice to study young women in China in this thesis was due to the lack of previous research done of women's interests in a context that differs from previous research made in mostly western contexts. Young women in China today are facing the future with other possibilities than previous generations and are living in a context that is changing rapidly in many areas. The interests found in this group could have influence on their society in the future and could therefore be seen as important for the developing processes that is now happening in the country. Yet, it is possible to believe that the study could have been carried out in other developing countries with alike contexts as well.

Much of previous research has focused on Western contexts and the interests that exist there. By studying the Chinese context, which largely differs from the western contexts that often appear in the research, it can help to develop the previous research, and move it forward. At the same time, the perspective of interests can be wider and the context effects on women's interests could be further explored. If one is talking about a strong contextual effect on the interests it may be important to ensure a variety of contexts before excessive conclusions. The development that occurred in China lately, and is expected to go on, make its context even more interesting for these studies.

³¹ http://womenofchina.cn/Projects_Campaigns/Awards/Outstanding_Women/199943.jsp

The decision of carrying out qualitative interviews to get material for the thesis was mainly due to the fact that it could be seen as one of the most possible ways to find the information needed. China is, as we all know, a huge country and to believe that conducting survey-based research during a short period of time would be possible would be, the way I see it, very naive.

5.2 Choice of sample group – selection of respondents

The women in focus in this thesis are women with an academic background in China. On this basis, the selected group in the study were determined to be young women who are either studying at university or recently completed their university studies.

The choice of studying only women's interests fell naturally when women's status and role in the society is getting more and more attention in the world. This is also a fact when it comes to China, which was mentioned earlier in the paper. The development that occurs for women in China today might affect the Chinese society to come, and the distribution of status may change between men and women which makes it interesting to see what interests that could be found among them.

That women studying at the university would be more interesting to study than a group of none academic young women when it comes to political interests can be questioned. The idea of narrowing the young women, that the investigation thus come to be made to the inside or the ones that just left the university system, is to introduce the idea that women's employment, and the generation and age, may influence the perception on political interest. Even thoughts about participation in advancing their interests, and a general awareness of political processes and opportunities to influence can be better. My reasons for choosing this specific group of women was mainly due to these above mentioned reasons as well as pragmatism.

Throughout its history in China, students have had a significant impact on the development of the country, including on the political plan. The political awareness

within the group tends to be relatively high in relation to other young people standing outside the academic world. Student organizations of various kinds have been responsible, and have influenced in one way or another, of various significant events in China in recent years. There are, for example, the May fourth movement from 1919 and the student uprising in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989.

Other studies carried out in different areas in China show that the political interest and willingness to participate in various political organizations, and engage the interests of different arenas, has increased with higher education among people; in particular, it has greater significance for women's involvement. This would ultimately mean that the interests, and approaches of these thoughts, among women in China have a high probability to actually come up at various important venues, both in various policy and those in various organizations.³²

The women who study or have recently studied at the university is growing up in the generation that has experienced the changes that have occurred in China in recent years. They are raised by a generation, which lived in the old system with the state ruled feminism. At the same time, they grew up in the newer, more "free" system when it comes to women's issues and feminism, and can now take advantage of the new, different China and all the possibilities that comes with that. The women have experienced the differences during the period between the old and new, which means that they are likely to be influenced by this community when it comes to gender equality and its own thoughts of this while they can relate to previous generations of struggle and lack of opportunities in society. This young generation of women is now facing a different society and has other opportunities than women before them.

Young women who are in, or just left, university, will in the future be on various positions in society, both politically and in business. This, at first, is making them more interesting than those that do not have any experience from the academic world. At the positions they will be at, regardless of high or low, their interests will be circulated and rings on the water could appear both in these organizations or companies and outside. If women's interests also distinguishes itself from the men,

³² Shang p. 195-198

the women's interests in the society is also important since these positions allows the women to disseminate their values and opinions, and by that have a greater influence in different ways.

5.2.1 Sample group

The maximum spread will apply to the paragraphs rural/urban childhood, age, political interest and major subject on their studies. Yet the thesis will not make any attempt to generalize the results from the interviewed women as if they are representing Chinese women.

The variation on different variables within the interviewed group is to try to find as many different perspectives as possible among the interviewees. Perhaps their backgrounds influence their view of both interests and their perceptions of the importance of context in their lives. This could therefore mean that the answers are more to the numbers than they could have been if the spreading of background factors in the group hadn't been as diverse as it now is.

Based on the maximum variation in the sample group it could appear as much variation as possible within the selection group. A maximum variation is optimal to have in the investigation because the idea is that respondents in the survey will provide as many thought patterns and ideas as possible. To have respondents that are much alike in the sample group would not give equal opportunities to empty from the sample group of these light categories, etc. A variation can provide more different answers, which is interesting for the survey and mapping at the conclusion drawing.

However, the maximum dispersion in the sample group does not represent the Chinese women in general or Chinese women studying at the university. More likely is it that it shows the trends that can be found among female university students in Shanghai. The results are therefore not possible for generalizations to a large population.

5.3 Method in collection of data

The results in this thesis are based on answers given from qualitative interviews with nine women living in Shanghai. The choice of basing it on responses given from qualitative interviews was made since answers through such interviews can show a more complete answer.³³ It is also possible to believe that the respondents could reveal more dimensions of the thoughts and opinions. This is needed if we are to find answers to the questions underlying the thesis. To understand why women believe certain things affect their interests might be difficult to get if the study were carried in other ways.

5.4 Background to conclusions/ Method for analyzing

The first analyze in this thesis will be made by a *method of essence*. That is to see if it is possible to identify and find a common denominator of perceptions among all respondents, which could serve as explanation for the interests that exist among them. Since previous research made in other contexts with likewise/same topic found that context, and other things as gender, can affect the political interests of individuals it means that the environment could have an affect on the respondents' thoughts and ideas. It is therefore interesting to see if it is possible to see similar trends among the women in the Chinese context.

The other analyze in this thesis will be based on a mapping of the interests found among the interviewed women. These interests will be divided in to three categories: *private*, *public* and interests that are *both private and public* interests. The four definitions of what could be included in the concept of interests made by Jonasdottir will form the basis for what will be appointed to be political interests in this thesis anyway. This brings in a more effective way to categorize the answers given in the interviews. Merely talking about the concept of interests, but without find out what the basis is for them, it could be both misleading and creates confusion. The interest is defined in this way since it is important with a more narrow definition for the thesis structure and clarity.

³³ Esaiasson et al p. 283-284

The main reason for using these two methods in the analysis is to make it possible to see how the various interests are affected by the context, if shared context, experience or needs all have impact on the interests that can be found in a group. By seeing women's interests divided in to categories at first, it could help when trying to find what reasons that could be possible to find as explanation for them.

5.5 Weaknesses in the research

The city of choice for the research might not have been the best. Or as one interview-person said:

"You would examine the political interests of women in Beijing instead of Shanghai. That is where they care about politics. In Shanghai people cares only about money and career." (R3)

This quote probably says something about the problematic of only carrying out interviews in the chosen city, despite a maximum spread in other areas among the participating interviewees. The economic situation in Shanghai is in comparison to for example Beijing, is in many important ways very different. It is also said that people living in Shanghai cares more about economy and development in the terms of making money to have a good life of their own, than other chinese people.³⁴

Another problem is when every respondent is currently living in Shanghai and studying at a top-level, even if they do not come from the same place originally. Yet, the background factors for the respondents look different. Place of birth/ where they grew up, family conditions, etc. may have affected their areas of interest.

The interviews were conducted in English, which is neither the interviewer nor the interviewee's native language. This can be problematic when problems with the language easily can occur at such times. A full understanding of concepts and reasoning may be flawed on both sides. A question may be misinterpreted as well as a response can be interpreted wrong by the same reasons. The reason not to use an interpreter during the interviews was mainly because there is always a risk that misunderstanding between the interviewer and the interpreter about the questions

³⁴ Zhang p. 94-96

can occur, that the answers are not translated properly and that the interpreter can distort answers, consciously or unconsciously along with its own values. To avoid this, despite the fact that any linguistic problems could occur, the choice to use an interpreter was made. In addition, discussion about issues and thoughts that could arise during the interviews could open up for a deeper understanding of how respondents think about different things. To lose this opportunity would be a pity and a disadvantage for the thesis.

6. Results and analyses

6.1 The context's effect on women's interests

Interests among women in China occur mainly for two reasons. Shared experiences in life among a group (i.e. women) play some role in what later forms interests. This goes hand in hand with Philips theories of why women have certain interests. However, ambient conditions and expectations that exist in the Chinese context appears to be the most possible explanation to why certain interests exist within the group, and not.

Most of the respondents' interests seem to have been shaped by its surroundings and the contexts they are living in. Mostly they have been affected by expectations that the society puts on them, and norms that are to be found and created there. Areas of interests are a bit different in comparison to previous research made in different contexts when it comes to details around the interests. The main difference between the Chinese context and context carried out previous research is not areas of interests. It is rather possible to see how the interests are expressed differently in different contexts. The respondents are clearly sharing the idea that they believe their society creates their interests for them in a major sentence.

The following quote from one of the women interviewed demonstrate that interest, despite the importance of gender identity and the importance of interests because you belong to a specific gender, are influenced by the context they live in. Some interests are likely to be formed through the social norms in the society and therefore interests that women "take" to fit in to these social standards. The

respondent used the following words to express this:

“Boys like women with traditional values that put family and its interests first.”
(R1)

To get married and have children, the formation of a family, seems to be very important for the majority of the respondents since that is “how it is supposed to be”³⁵ in the Chinese society today. With this as background information it is easier to understand the importance of the quotation above.

The expectations society has on the women and the interests and areas they are supposed to care about seem to play a major role. This although there are social norms that underlie and no institutional decisions that could actually act with real sanctions against the women if they did not comply with these interests. To fit in, and follow the norms in the society, also seems to be of great importance to women's interests.

“If you are a women you are not expected to care for anything else than family (...) Having a family, and children, are the most important things in life. If you don't care about those things people will start think strange things about you.”
(R6)

The background factors to the interest are also of contextual relevance, which clearly was revealed by several respondents. Like one said:

“Education is typical female interests which make it easier for women to care about”(R4)

When education is seen as a women's interest in society, it seem, as the context is one of the main reasons why an area is of great interest to them. They can care about it since it is seen as a typical area for women to care about and it makes it a lot easier for them.

It appears that it is easier for women to engage and deal with issues and concerns relating to the fields that are by society seen as the typical areas of interest for

³⁵ Several respondents told me this as it was supposed to be an obvious thing to know about

women. Those areas do not require as much energy and sacrifices for women and that is making it easier for them to commit themselves to them. It seems important to women that their interests in different areas do not have to make them eliminate those interests that are seen as important by their surroundings, the ones that the society expect them to care for, for example the family life. To prioritize in a wrong way could be fatal for them in some ways, which is expressed by the women like this:

“Of course you can care for things that are not expected for you as a women. (...) I sometimes think that it would be good for me to know more about the political life, how Chinas relation looks like to other countries, or things like infrastructure and development for different people in the society. But it is hard to find information, and it takes time. So I let it go and hand it over to people who have more time and energy, it takes to much energy for me to care for those things even though I think I want to.” (R6)

The women also express some ideas about women in the society that do not prior things that are expected. They call them a “third” gender³⁶, someone that won’t be able to have a family in the future and someone who the traditional society will look down on.

“I do not want to be a woman like that. They are sad, they will never be able to have a family and they are strange. How can they care so much about themselves? (...)People look down on them. I’d rather be a traditional girl, actually, I think I am and I like it. (R2)

Or like another woman said, that shows that the norms and values of the society also have had influence on the women’s ways on looking at other women, that they have adopted the values of the society:

“To be older than 30, without a husband and kids, it’s a tragedy. Those women are tragic.” (R5)

The weight of influence from social norms standing opposite their private interests shows that their interests weight easily against what the society thinks of them. It is clearly shown that it is more important to follow the norms in the society and care

³⁶ “There are men, women and something in between” as R1 told med during the interview.

for things that are expected than to create new interests from areas of their own interests. To fit in and not stand out from the norm could be bad for them.

By looking at specific areas of interests among the women in China you can also see another link between the context and the interest found. The probability that the interest for economy has a major link to the context rather than something else is possible to adopt. The interest in this area is great among Chinese women and might have to do with China being a developing country. This has yet not to do with expectations from the society and norms that the women have to follow. It is more possible to believe that this is an area of interest for them because it is important for people in China in general and therefore a common interest based on experiences from the society. By not having an interest in it could possibly have consequences for them in other ways than being judged by the society. The importance for economy can be explained by last years major changes in the country.³⁷ Or like one women express it:

”You need a good job and lots of money to make it in this world (...) If you have money, through work or anywhere else, you are given a lot more opportunities in the society” (R8)

This can be changed in the future and there is nothing that says that this area would not be of interest to women in a different context where the conditions are the same as they are for the Chinese women today.

The perception of that woman has greater need for safety and security in today's society, along the way it's looks today, seems to have had affect women's interest in these areas. The common view of this matter seems to be based on shared experiences and it affect how they see that the safety, laws and rules for how to behave and act towards women as important. At the same time the women express that women's rights are not considered to be equally well developed among the women themselves as they probably are expected to be. Some respondents believe that it doesn't matter what laws are there, or not, since people in the society do not tend to be follow them anyway. That some consequences would follow for those who don't care about following laws and rules that are beneficial to a woman is not

³⁷ Zhang p. 95

very likely.

“ Women today are a much more weak group in the society than men. It doesn’t necessarily mean that we are unhappier; it just means that our rights are not well taken care of, as they might be supposed to. (...) Laws are hard to understand and know about, even for me, so I doubt that people are aware of those and what they say. (...) I just wish that I could feel safe in the society, for myself right now, and for the future.” (R7)

However, it appears that it is both necessary and of desire for women that there are laws and rules to care for women’s rights in society. That discrimination, an are frequently discussed among the respondents doesn’t seem to be accepted by them, and they feel a great need of help from the state to help to remove this, or at least try to. The role of women must be strengthened to their status in society to become stronger and more stable.

”Some of the laws put up for women are good. (...) Mainly because they can help to improve women’s status in the traditional system in the society. The traditions are built up on old values that are changing now, these values cant still be important when it comes to women’s part in the society if it is changing on other areas.” (R1)

6.2 Private or public interests

The interests found among the interviewed women could be divided in to three different categories, private, public and interests that are *both* private and public. The concept on interests used are the four different aspects³⁸ of possibilities that could explain an interest as mentioned earlier. The sectioning of interests is inspired by the previous research on how to look at women’s interests in a broader perspective. The women express why these interests are important areas with different arguments when it comes to all the three categories.

To be public interests in this paper, the analysis does not require that the answer is given by a certain number of persons interviewed. Interest status is not dependent

³⁸ needs, wishes, preferences and demands

on how many people that think it is an important area of society to fit into the above category schema. A public interest is not destined to be just a public interest along the size of the group who consider it important. Rather than that, this analysis counts public interest, to be those areas women interviewed consider important areas for the wider society, the social welfare state, not themselves. The private interests will therefore go as the ones that the interviewees see as important for them self and their own life and progress. No matter if these interests are connected to contextual basis or because of their belonging to any type of group in the society.

Figure 1.
Political interests among Chinese women

Private	Public	Private and public
Economy	Economy	Economy
Family/Childcare	Family/Childcare	Family/Childcare
Healthcare	Healthcare	Healthcare
Culture	Environment	Social welfare
Social welfare	Education	Education
Media/Communication	Social welfare	
	Development	

6.2.1 Analyze of the differences of political interests

a) Economy / Culture are *private* interests

The private interests are most strongly represented among the respondents as those that are of great importance to their own lives. They affect the private life in different areas in varying degrees, but are seen as very important to them, both in their temporary existence, but also for the future. *Economy* is one of the areas that most clearly represented by the respondents as an important private interest. This can also be linked to that there seems to be of highly contextual weight from the

Chinese society.

“Making money is the main goal since it opens up for many new possibilities for me in the society. By making money, and know a lot about economy, you can be able to have a good private economy which gives you the opportunities to start caring for other things. But first you have to look after yourself and your own needs.” (R9)

In order to link them to the previous research of interests the economy is something that is both a need and desire of respondents to their development and progress in the society. This is presumably because it is of great importance for them in order to be able to get the demands and desires they have in their lives to be realized.

Some women also express the importance of their interest in economy as something that makes them stronger and more independent, which can be explained by their experiences of how society works.

“If I have a job with decent salary I can feel more secure, both in myself and in the society. I can take own decisions and I don’t have to be dependent on someone else. Money would give me more freedom, that’s why I study so hard, to be able to be independent” (R7)

Having money gives them opportunities to take own actions and decisions that are not likely for them to take if they have to depend on someone else. When the women speak about freedom and independence it is something all respondents mention as one of the most important things in life, even though a major part of them see this as a pretty unrealistic dream. But by having a stable economic situation they may at least be able to challenge all the ideals and expectations that they have on the society. With money it seem as you automatically get more space to say and do what you like to.

“People are listening to people with money, they have more power because of that. If you want to reach somewhere in the society, or do something special, you need to have a good economy. Not until then will other people listen to you.” (R5)

That culture is also a private interest shown by respondents mention that it is developing its own personality, but nothing that society should put too much resource to give priority to development in. It is rather seen only as an area of interest as some respondents appreciate to be able to have in its life, or as pointed out by Jonasdottir, it is their own need that will be satisfied when they care about culture.

b) Development / Economy / Media-Communication are *public* interests

Since the public interests are the interest areas that respondents believe are important to the society they live in we can see that development, economy and communication are seen as that among responses given by the interviewed women.

“Development is important in the society, it is far to big inequality. For example the rights for migrant workers are not very good. It needs to change.” (R3)

Or as another women said:

“The development needs to improve. A fair opportunity for development is needed, both in rural and urban areas. Today there are too much difference on different areas and I don't believe that they are doing as much as they can to change this inequality. For example, the possibilities for people at the countryside are not as good as they are here in the city. You can't as easily benefit from what are your rights in the society.” (R2)

Better development for everybody in society, more opportunities for the poor or disadvantaged groups and a willingness from the respondents to make the society more fair to everybody, regardless of which group in society you belong to, is evident in the interviews. Those who govern should be spending time and resources to rectify these inequalities in order to make the society better. The respondents do express that they think the development in many cases are progressing, but they think it might be possible to make it go faster.

That media and communication are public interests shows by the respondents when they are saying:

“I think it would be good for us to be able to get more information about what is happening in China, and in the world. As it looks today I am pretty sure that I don’t get all the information right from reading newspapers or on the internet. (...) Freedom of speech is not very good in China, the politicians today need to do something about it. People need to get right information and they need to be able to say what they want about, not be silenced.” (R3)

It is of their own private interests to be able to find proper information about things in the society but at the same time they address this demand directly to politician and other people with power in the society, as they seem well aware of that they can’t do anything about it on their own. Freedom of speech is a public problem that affects the people in China in a negative way.

c) Economy, Education and Family/Children are ***both private and public***

As previously mentioned, the economy can be seen as a private interest for the interviewed women. This also applies to areas such as education and family-life/children. One of the interviewed women illustrates this well by the following quotation:

“Education is very important in the society. I might care about it because it is close to my own life, both when it comes to my future job but also because I am a student at the moment...but it is also important because everybody needs a good education. It is your chance to get a better status in the society and the government need to explore the possibilities to get education, and further on work, for everybody.” (R4)

Education also seem to be important when the women talk about how it could help them progress as a group in the Chinese society in the future. A good education will for example work as an instrument to change inequalities in the society among different groups. It is told that one of the major inequalities, according to these women, is the lack of education in undeveloped areas in the country. With a good education for everybody it could help the country to progress in many areas of the society. As long as people are excluded from the education-system they believe that other problems in the

society will be hard to work against.

“As a woman I can see that education is a good instrument for me if I want to have a good life. Education gives women more power in the society, the lack of education in this group, in certain places, won’t help the developing- process for women in the society”

Another woman is reasoning around the one-child policy as both a public and private interests. The one-child policy is a government invention, but is something whose impact affects all the inhabitants in the country. That it is both a private as well as a public interest shows the following quotation:

“Due to the one-child policy, it takes away the nice and warm feeling about having a family. Everything gets to systematic and you are not able to decide on your own how you want your family to look like... But as a Chinese person you need to listen to the government, they did put up these rules about the one-child policy and it makes everybody in the society affected by it. You can just hope that they will change it sometime, even though it might not be good for everybody.” (R6)

The private becomes public no matter what the women do. It is something that they can’t decide over, and if they don’t care about the policy it will have a negative effect on their own, private life. The states decisions have deep impact on the private life. The private gets public and vice versa.

7. Final discussion

So, for returning to the questions earlier posted in this thesis, can we find common interests among the young women, and do they share perceptions that could explain women’s interests in China? Is it possible to see the context as an indicator to what interests arise among them?

7.1 Areas of interests

Theorists like Philips, on the subject of women’s interests, say that *there are specific*

*needs, interests and concerns that are emerging out of women's experiences*³⁹, which mean that women therefore share interests. That women's interests can be explained due to specific needs and experiences in society are to some extent a possible explanation when it comes to the investigated group of women in China. We can find common areas of interests among the young Chinese in the study.

That experiences can work as an explanation for what interests that are to be found in the group of women is especially possible if you look at interests that are by the respondents considered as private. These interests are of special interest for women because they consider them to be important for themselves, in their own life. The private interests are created along the experiences they have had with them in life and is a possible explanation for the common interest among women on these areas. Women also seem to share experiences of how contacts to certain areas create the shape of the interests.

Women's needs and demands towards the society are also a possible explanation for why certain interests exist among them. These needs and demands can be linked to the experience women have had in life. Shared experiences will here lead to similar needs and desires of what is in need to be fulfilled in order for the women to be happy in life.

The needs, wishes, preferences and demands that Jonasdottir believes are a useful definition if we want to understand the background to specific interests seems among the Chinese women possible to use. Women in China seem to a large extent share interests, mainly because they share views on the above mentioned elements in society. Yet again, it appears that experiences play a role in how, and why, interests arise among the women. Women seem to feel the same need for i.e. social welfare, similar demands on their environment in terms of healthcare and have similar wishes for what the society could make for them and help their financial situation in different ways.

When talking about public interests for women the shared experiences in life are not likely to be important to same extent as when it comes to private interests. Here it

³⁹ Philips s. 85

rather seem as the interests arising could be of interests of women due to many different reasons. So, shared experiences as the basis for an interest seem to have different meanings for the outcome depending on whether the interest was private or public. When talking about private interests the personal experience seem to be important, but when it comes to areas of interest that are public it appears as women are founding these interests on other things. Here are the shared experiences of less importance. Perhaps it is difficult to know of the needs and requirements imposed in areas when you can not put your own emotions and thoughts in to the areas of interests in the same way. When the consequences are not equally significant for the individual, the emotional aspects are likely to play a smaller role when it comes to what you find interesting as a woman.

7.2 Context matter

The results from the study clearly show that the context have deep impact on women's interests in China, and it is possible to find indicators on that women's interests are generated by the impact from the Chinese society. This goes hand in hand with Philips idea about that women have common interests since they share experiences because of how the society is structured.

The assumption made by Philips that *if it by interests is understood what women express as their priorities and objectives, there is a considerable disagreement between women*⁴⁰ is yet partly contradicted by the women interviewed in the study. The study show that the shared experience coming from the context also gives them a similar approach to what areas that is of interest. It is possible to believe that the context here serve as an explanation when women's interests actually seem to be affected by this, and not only are based on their own needs and requirements. The study also show that the importance of the chinese context effects on women's interests rather has to do with the demands and expectations from society towards women, than vice versa. Women's interests are emerging from society's structure but also in the societies views of women and what interest they believe women should have in society.

Even though there is no longer a state superior that decides what women in China

⁴⁰ Philips s. 86

should care for, and a regulatory framework for what interests should be available to women, it is shown that the previous ideas are still there. Although the state released women in the sense that they nowadays can create and obtain what interests they would like in the society, old values and traditions still remain of great importance for the women when it comes to interests. Education, childcares etc are areas that are historically, and even contemporary, typical female areas of Chinese society. One reason for the interest in these areas is that women can relate to them. Since the context seems to have influenced what areas that should be of interests for women it is possible to believe that women's interests arise from their common experiences in society, just like Philips is reasoning.⁴¹

Women's interests in the studied group in China arise from the way their life looks like in the context. Society does not only affect how the interests should be shaped and how they are expressed, it also appears to affect why some interests arise from the beginning. The needs, and to some extent also the requirements towards the society that the women have, also seems to shape the interests that are created among them.

The reasons for why women do not develop their areas of interest further on the basis of these contextual conditions can have both with institutionalization factors as well as cultural influence for the individuals. The Chinese society would, consciously or not, bring sanctions against those who stand out from the norm, which could be another explanation. The latter appears also to have supporters out of several respondents who express some skepticism towards fellow human beings in similar social situations that themselves but who choose to violate the fixed conventions that exist in Chinese society. For example, the women who choose to invest in career instead of the family even during the later stage in life than just after their university studies. A woman in China is expected to simply give up certain parts of her life for the benefit of family life etc. This make it likely to believe that women are likely to give up parts of their areas of interest, such as political ones, for the sake of typical areas of interests. There is not enough time for them to combine other areas of interests with those and at the same time not break the rules or expectations from society. To care for these interests make it easier for the women

⁴¹ Philips p. 86

to fit in to the life of how a women is expected to live in the society. To focus and care for these interests doesn't require as much scarifies of time and energy from them.

It is sometimes said that women have no political interests as long as they are excluded from the political arena. Until they have an obvious place there, it is considered that home and children are their main interests. This view would, in many people's eyes, especially with Western ones, be strange. But in different contexts in which social structure and daily life looks different this position can't be rejected as easily. In a traditional culture where women for long have been excluded from policy and other important areas of society, the interests have been put aside, or not developed at all.⁴² This could, as the study points out, be the fact when it comes to women in China.

So, on the whole it seems as both Anne Philips theories that women's interests in China can be explained by shared experiences because you belong to a certain gender. This, as well as Jonasdottirs assumptions about that the context do have an effect on women's interests since the norms and social requirements affect women.

The explanation that the belonging to a certain gender affects the interests are possible to adopt when we see to the fact that women in China tend to focus on "typical" women interests/issues. At the same time we can see that the contexts also share another part of the explanation for what interests the women have when we see the rising of other, not typical interests for women. The rise of certain questions and issues are important in the specific context in which the women live in, for example the interests in economy that doesn't go as a typical female interests in previous western research, but in China seems to be to great importance for the women. The developing process in China today could possibly have influenced the areas of interest for the women. Areas of interests varying between the "traditional" areas of concern for the individuals, like social welfare and education, and more "hard" areas such as economy can be explained by looking to the new society that is emerging in China today. Maybe Zhang were right about that the normative traditions, and the structure given by this, are being challenged by new, foreign

⁴²Jonasdottir p. 151-152

(western?) standards and traditions that create new values of the Chinese population. The needs as well as experiences for the women are changing and therefore even the interests for them.

So, when talking about women's interests you have to take in to count what context the studied women live in and how it looks like. The affects from the context on the young women in China seem to shape the interests to great extent and are of great importance if you want to understand how and why they have certain interests.

The results may be related to the theories that believe there is nothing that could be called special interests that are universal for specific groups. Rather, the facts suggest that it could work as a part of an explanation for what interests that arise in a group, but you have to take other things in to count as well. Different contexts have different outcomes on interests that are similar, but due to the fact that the society looks differently, the interests appears to be different as well. However, it is possible to speak about common interests among women in the Chinese context, the experiences made by living in that particular context affect the outcome of the interests among them and the impact from the society seem to work as a good explanation on why the interests are interesting for them.

8. Further research

Bringing a correlation of interests between men and women in the Chinese context would be of interest for further research. It could give another picture of how gender affects the views at various issues and how the belonging to a certain gender affect their views on interests that occur. Perhaps the gender matter just as it seems to have made in Western contexts according to previous research done there. It would be interesting to see if it looks the same in the Chinese context, or if it is possible to talk about differences in the reasoning of areas of interests.

Furthermore, research could focus on studying women's interests in a broader perspective than that done in this thesis. For example to include more women from various positions in Chinese society, but also use more variation when it comes to background variables used among the respondents.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Factors important for selecting respondents

Age: When it comes to age in the sample group it can be envisaged that awareness of political interests are different depending on how long you have studied. It can even have effect on their reflection on their own situation in the society, and have had time to notice the "new" time for women and their chances to influence.

Urban – Rural: These areas are interesting when a person growing up in a city or in rural areas may have seen the different family patterns in these different contexts. Women in these different locations and contexts can be aware of political participation to differing degrees because they have seen different things. By growing up in a city individuals can have been brought up differently and seen other family patterns, working conditions, etc. than those who have grown in the more rural-like forms.

Education: Depending on what you study the women may have different opportunities and have experienced different aspects of the society than someone who studies something else.

Member of any kind of political organisation: The political interest is important to take into account as this could demonstrate that it is more or less aware of opportunities to participate to participate. Their political interests may be more explored if you are engaged to politics in any kind of way.

Appendix 2. Interview guide

Age?

Rural/urban childhood?

Current occupation?

Interested in politics?

Member of any political organisation, party etc?

Can you tell me about your childhood?

Can you tell me how you think about your future?

What are your thoughts about your life right now?

What is the most important thing in life, according to you?

How do you want your life to look like in the future?

What goals do you want to achieve in life?

Why?

Can you tell me how you will achieve these goals of yours?

What difficulties do you see that could be in the way?

How come you have these goals in life? Can you tell me the background to them?

Are there any political areas you find more interesting than others?

Is there something in the society that you feel really devoted to/in? Especially?

What expectations do you have about/towards the society?

The future?

Your life?

Do you feel that you have some special needs that needs to be fulfilled in your life in order to feel ok/be happy/satisfied?

What is the most important thing in your life?

Is there something you miss in your life that you'd like to have?

In order to be satisfied in your life, what do you think the society needs to provide to you?

What questions do you believe are the most important for women in the society today?

Why do you think so?

Do you think you share this view with other Chinese women?

Now I would like you to tell me about what you think that the Chinese society needs in order to be a good community/society for the Chinese people - Are there any questions that you think are more important than others to develop in a good way?

Why do you believe so?

Do you think that the society is giving right amount of attention to the right issues in the society? How do you like their priorities?

Do you feel like you share experiences in life with other women? Could you give me one example of when you believe that women do that?

When it comes to your own social life, do you think that you have other concerns in the society than you male friends, boyfriend, father etc?
How come?

In general, how do you experience women's situation in the society today?

Are you satisfied with how the situation looks like for women today or would you like to change anything?

How do you see female approach their political interests?

How do you perceive your possibilities to affect the political agenda today?

If a woman wants to participate in policy making/politics/organisations, how do you think she could manage that?

Can you tell me how you, if you wanted to, would act towards something in the society that you wanted to change/be a part of etc?
(Difficulties/opportunities/other peoples views on this action etc)

How do you think that the laws and regulations that are put up by the government for women in the society will affect women in their personal life?

Are there any specific areas in the society that are typical for women to handle?

Are there any tasks that are better suitable for women than men?

Why is it so?

Can you tell me what expectations the Chinese society has on a Chinese woman?

Do you think that women today have other chances in the society (for example when it comes to earn money, have a career, work possibilities or having a family) than previous generations, for example if you compare your own situation to you mother's, grandmother's etc?

Can you tell me what you believe that the Chinese society could do to change the possibilities for women's action in the society?

Appendix 3. Categorization of interests

Economy:

money, finance, jobs/career, nation economy, the ongoing financial crises

Family/Children:

family life, childcare, one-child policy

Healthcare:

medical issues, medical reforms, healthcare for elderly people, health

Culture:

culture, religion, traditions

Environment:

environmental issues, climate-change, agriculture

Education:

school-system, education possibilities, teachers

Nation/Foreign affairs:

different political issues appearing in China and in different parts of the world, infrastructure, situation for different people in China, work-safety, different things regarding migrant-workers

Social welfare:

development, inequalities among different groups of people (migrant workers, gender, age etc)

Media/Communication:

Internet, media of different types, freedom of speech, human relations