

1000 Women and a Dream **-- negotiating peace and gender politics**

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Introduction

That the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the IAEA and its director, El Baradei, at this 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War reminds us that the serious threat of mass destruction confronting humanity is far from behind us; rather, it is right before us. That the IAEA had frustrated the urge of the USA to wage its war against Iraq before evidence of Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons was collected reconfirms that the USA is itself a major threat to world peace, in possession of the most advanced weapons of science and technology, and ready to deploy them, with or without legitimacy, to safeguard its economic and strategic interests. At the same time, it must be noted that the IAEA, despite its occasional discordance with the military timetable of the mighty powers, is fundamentally an instrument of the powers to contain expansion of late-comers, as its support for sanctions against Iran shows.

The new millennium does not seem to have promised alleviation of the turmoil, misery, violence and madness of the last millennium. On the one hand, the issue of war and open conflict is a major preoccupation for humanity, and on the other hand, the characteristic of today's capitalism is speculation and rule of finance capital; of the "transactions" of over USD 1.5 trillion everyday, over 95% has nothing to do with substantial economy. However, this does not mean the end of the scramble over resources. The USA, 4.5% of the world population, consumes 2200 barrels of oil everyday, which is one quarter of the world consumption of oil. Such consumption necessitates the US state policy to assault and control oil-producing countries, despite all the excuses it presents to justify its military and economic hegemony.

The fear and sense of insecurity caused by the 9.11 incident has been manipulated by the USA; in the name of fighting terrorism, the defense budget has been boosted while social welfare has been drastically cut; the minorities and dissidents have been put to harassment or detention. The UN human rights report criticized US illegitimate detention and torture of prisoners in Guantanamo, and the UN Secretary-General stated his support to the recommendations of the Report, that the US should put the prisoners on trial or release them, and close the Guantanamo camp. As usual, such recommendations were ignored by the USA.

Indeed, it is an obvious fact that the achievements the USA prides itself on are built and maintained by modern colonizing means of bloody violence. The pledge of the United Nations after World War II to achieve the progress of mankind through economic development, and the so-called radical elimination of violence and war, are but promotion of a linear development paradigm of westernization. The dictatorship of the "free market" turns people and things into resources open to exploitation or elimination. It seems that in every country on the planet, the path of modernization to follow the example of Europe and the USA is the only alternative. One either catches up in the scramble for oil, commodity market and finance speculation, which

inevitably has to follow the logic of the US empire, or one lags behind and accepts the fate of abandonment. When social development and well being are primarily measured by per capita GNP, what such abstract indicators cannot cover – waste, destruction, injustice – become inevitable cost that everybody has to accept. Such indicators veil the injustices and harms in the everyday life lived by the majority of the population, and avoid the question: who have sacrificed their happiness and well being to pay for such development? How has this happened?

Faced with the increasing social differentiations, environmental degradation, exclusion of large numbers of people from livelihood safety nets, and the aggravation of conflicts, confrontations and wars, we need to probe into the question: what is the relationship between violence and “development”, and why is it that mainstream ideology still subscribes to confidence in “development”, and in the powers of “reason”? What are the alternatives in imagination and in practice that can help guide humanity out of its impasse and imminent annihilation?

In 2005, there was a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize that endeavoured to make visible to the world alternatives in imagination and practice. 1000 women from 150 countries, symbolic of the peace work of millions of women, were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. As a feminist endeavour, this nomination is collective and grassroots-based. It is a redefinition of peace by offering the multi-faceted dimensions of work for peace and security that the women are engaged in as interlinked and complementary, without which genuine peace is impossible. Their work not only manifests the resourceful and effective strategies taken up by the women to counter the negative impacts of development and modernization, it also demonstrates a different mentality and attitude in the efforts for transformation: that we go beyond “reason” which can only keep us captive of the grand logic of the rampant abuse of power, and through our persistence in being with and relating to the people in suffering and pain, we nurture the courage for life, act against the impossible, and carve out new possibilities that transgress the logic of “reason”.

The 1000 Peacewomen project was not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, yet it has received much recognition for its contribution in orientating towards a major shift in approach and attitude in understanding the nature of violence and war, and towards concrete connections and linkages of efforts forging peace and security. In April 2006, it was awarded the Guernica Peace Award.

The two co-authors of this paper have been involved in the 1000 Peacewomen Project in coordinating the nominations of peacewomen from the greater China region: mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and in other aspects of the Project such as documentation, publication, exhibition, networking, and research. This paper will examine the context and strategies of peace-building in the everyday aspects of livelihood, environment and culture by referring to the experiences of several peacewomen in the greater China region. It will also explore the implications of the Project itself in negotiating between the local and the global, and in negotiating tensions and differences in peace and gender politics. It is through being attentive to the tensions and differences that we can better grasp the environment in which we work, and the ways the self is implicated by the forces at work that shape subjectivities and collectivities. Such an understanding will better enable us in the search and practice of alternatives for self and social transformation.

Linking livelihood, environment and cultural work

In this section, we would like to draw on the experiences of several peacewomen from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, to explore how their work deeply rooted in the local negotiates with the effects of development and modernization, and how the issues of environment, livelihood and culture are intricately linked. Their work contradicts the usual assumption that environmental concerns are the prerogatives of the middle class, or can be attended to only after a certain economic level is achieved. The assumptions of such a discourse is predominant in a developing country such as China, where the impatience to “modernize” at the fastest pace and at any cost has resulted in not only environmental disasters but also hardship for a large section of the population who find themselves relegated to the margin in the process. The economic and social context will be examined, and the strategies, achievements and difficulties of the peacewomen will be discussed.

The four experiences are:

1. Wang Pinsong, a Bai minority living in the Gold Sand River region of Yunnan Province. She and her villagers have been striving to keep their home village and fertile farmland from submersion by the state plan to build a dam at the Tiger Leap Gorge; women’s cultural troupes combine cultural activities with the struggle to defend their homeland;
2. Zheng Bing, a rural woman inn Shaanxi Province actively working on the economic development of her village through peasant cooperative, cultural integration, organic farming, and producer-consumer linkages;
3. Kao Chin Shumei, a parliamentarian in Taiwan defending the rights of her indigenous people as well as negotiating the
4. Women Workers Cooperative, a self-help women workers group in Hong Kong experimenting on community currency, circulation of second hand goods, and responding to urban consumerism.

[elaboration of the four cases]

The above experiences allow us to see that the local is a site impacted by the complex effects of forces from the power centers, which include global forces such as the global market and global division of labour, nation-state’s priority policies, and urban-centred development with wasteful consumption of energy and commodity goods. While the local is at the receiving end of various effects of forces which seem to be beyond its control or influence, it is the site where the effects are negotiated. The engagement at the local level is by no means insignificant. It is through such engagement that the most important battles are fought. One such battle is related to the shaping of subjectivity and mentality.

From local to global

The 1000 Peacewomen Project has placed its emphasis on making visible and celebrating the work of the women in their practical, daily life engagements. They offer examples of negotiation with and challenge of the forces at work that shape not only their environment but also their subjectivity. By highlighting how they deal with

the tensions, contradictions and differences, the Project also goes beyond mere documentation, but is itself a catalyst for change, involved in the process of making sense of the problems, facilitating connections, forging solidarities, opening up spaces of activism, and creating new possibilities. Thus, engaged in a process for change, the Project goes beyond structural or policy changes, and touches important aspects of cultural and gender politics. In short, the Project itself is engaged in a politics and alliance of hope.

We would like to use the example of an incident in the Project to discuss the tensions and difficulties, and explore why an engagement with differences is needed, and how it could be possible. [Gao Yaojie Incident] We would also like to draw on another example to discuss the transcendence of the local and the potentials for global change. [Kunming Gathering]

At the Kunming Gathering, the participants are touched by the resonations of the philosophy of life they have lived out in their ordinary practices. Despite the diversities in their circumstances, they share a philosophy. If one is to find an expression for this, one can only find the most common, unimposing words: generosity and love. Embodied in the life practices of the peacewomen, the two words are guarded by blood and tears. The stories of the peacewomen may not sound spectacular, but in bearing over months and years with an unspeakable burden, they have lived their lives with wisdom and perseverance. They do not judge their efforts by “success” or “failure”. There are frustrations, there are new turns, there are no blueprints or clear indications of how to move forward, but they move on with creativity.

From a cultural perspective, today’s globalization is globalization of the American way of life, and has its effects on the most subjective level of desire. The body exists for consumption, and we are told this is the fruit of civilization, that advanced technology brings us comfort, health and innovative experiences. However, the peacewomen, through their efforts and practices, are saying “no” to such globalization. They have used their bodies to forge a different relationship with the earth, the body of the planet, the nature. They have surfed one after another obstacle and barricade, forged a different globalization, forged mutual respect and respect for the earth, and they have achieved the resonance of the heart that ask for no return but just give generously because one is capable of being affected. Such resonance of the heart brings new strength and new inspirations, opening up possibilities that were not imaginable or dared not be imagined in the past. They allow the present strenuous circumstances and suffering experiences not to crystallize into historical burdens of grievances, but to transform into the soil of hope for the creation of history.

Indeed, from the struggles in our lives, the joys and pains we go through, and our committed practices, from the histories of living persons and communities, from the uncertainties because there cannot be reasoned, premeditated, systematic plans for the future, from the complex, intertwined realities constituted by contingencies in daily life, but because we have the capacity for action, and the actions have the possibilities of drawing, impacting and inducing other actions, hence, we are nurturing the soil for hope to grow. Fragile sparks of fire apparently shimmer and shudder, and they are nowhere to be found when the prairie fires roar; yet, the sparks of fire insist on being

present, present to give themselves and their communities some light and heat. These small sparks of light and heat illuminate hope.