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Reclaiming the third space: spatial politics, moral economy, and feminist advocacy in Shenzhen

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Abstract. Across the globe, people are encouraged to increase their open-mindedness and acknowledge the diversity surrounding them. In response, efforts have been directed toward establishing safety mechanisms that protect socially marginalized groups and foster a communal environment where every individual, regardless of their identities, can access a genuine sense of belonging and inclusion. Through the authors' firsthand service engagement at an independent feminist bookstore and its community, this article articulates findings and insights that extend beyond what other commercial institutions typically capture. This essay aims to communicate the broad message of how feminism could be connected to space utilization, thus expanding the concept of the negotiation of gender-safe spaces among different individuals. The growing visibility of advocacy for marginalized groups is significantly raising people's consciousness and is fundamental to cultivating their inclusiveness and open-minded perspectives.

Keywords: feminism, spatial politics, gender anthropology, diversity and inclusivity

1. Introduction

Limited seating, cold air-conditioned environment, male-dominant voice in the audio default setting… The relationship between humans and the spaces they inhabit is never neutral. Physical environments actively shape identities and foster a sense of belonging. For women and other marginalized gender members, a gender-themed bookstore can function as more than a retail space—it becomes a comfort zone that restores dignity and challenges, rather than reinforces, existing social hierarchies. Therefore, in this context, establishing a third space for women is not merely desirable but necessary, a space that not only acknowledges women's power and agency but also recognizes it; a space that emphasizes their self-dignity rather than superficial validation; a space where they're permitted to exist on their own terms of life, instead of being invisibly constrained by social expectations, so-called people who "care" about them, and the built environment itself.

Ray Oldenburg defines the term "the third place" as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work". Beyond the first place (home) and the second place (work), the third place provides a supportive, nurturing environment for individuals desperately seeking a sense of belonging that

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mainstream commercial systems fail to provide [1]. Unlike mainstream commercial spaces that prioritize transactions and designs that appeal to consumers over individual and societal connection, a third space operates on a logic of care and hospitality rather than efficiency and market operations.

This is precisely what an independent feminist bookstore can offer to the public. Bookstores worldwide, especially in the U.S., already have existing bookstores that provide such sanctuaries (such as the so-called third space service and welcoming environments for women and minority groups—such as LGBTQ+ communities and people of diverse genders, different races, etc.) to engage in and form collective dialogues and share experiences.

Yet, the socio-political dynamics and cultural landscape in China differ significantly from the Western world, operating under cultural constraints and political pressures. Hence, this essay is going to focus on a currently operating bookstore in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China, and examine how its manager has successfully moved the idea of third space operation into localized practice. Daixuan Bookstore, opened in 2023, has been consistently operated by the founder alone. Although the idea of forging connections among diverse individuals is undeniably admirable, the community seems to silently resist this small space ideally built for women. Yet, instead of recognizing this as a significant failure, it exposes the gender politics embedded in its community and Shenzhen.

2. Methods

2.1. Research setting and researcher role

Fieldwork was conducted over 6 days (from 3rd July, August, to 8th July, August), in Daixuan Bookstore, located in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China. This duration, while brief and short, on the other hand, was also intentionally intensive for the community volunteers. The authors served as volunteers during that specific period of time to examine Daixuan Bookstore as a third space in the "ruralized" community; hence, they engaged in that small space that's deemed to be gentrified. Our responsibilities were not just organizing the shelves or setting up the community events for the formal opening day, but also long-term gentrifying the bookstore for the founder, Dr. Ren, and the citizens in the community.

2.2. Methodology

A qualitative approach will be used for understanding and interpreting the experiences and social contexts in this investigation. This will be achieved by analyzing empirical information that is collected through the means of interviews, questionnaires, and qualitative observations. Some confounding variables that may arise during the investigation are a limited sample size that may fail to capture a wide range of variance, selection bias, power asymmetries, and a mismatch between the experiences of the interviewer and the interviewee. To mitigate these potential errors, interviews will be conducted iteratively until theoretical saturation is reached, sample perspectives will be diversified via contacting different social networks, and participation will be detokenized through maintaining a neutral stance throughout interviews.

3. Results

3.1. Daixuan Books' business model

The term "third space" coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg posits that informal gathering spaces, distinct from domestic and occupational realms, act as a sanctuary for fostering communities. Third spaces, such as

that of Daixuan Books, are built on neutral ground. That is, there are no social indices that thwart entry; in third spaces, all attendees interact on equal ground.

In places like Daixuan Books, the public sphere, this spatial ethos is repeatedly echoed through its business model and interior design. Despite Daixuan Books being a formally commercial entity, it is not hemmed in by traditional strategies of revenue generation.

To begin with, Daixuan Books does not adhere to the market-oriented dogma, instead opting for a moral economy, where community values are championed over profit. The bookstore's mantra is "Women for All, All for Women" stakes out the case for decommodification by envisioning a system of moral transactions between both parties. That is, Daixuan Space provides a safe space for students to explore and express their interests, and in exchange, they seek to uplift, empower, and preserve such sanctuaries.

Furthermore, Daixuan Books is incongruous with traditional retail practices, where there is an overt focus on customer turnover and increasing the profit margin. Of course, capital contains a multiplicity of definitions, ranging from financial instruments to institutionalized capital. In the case of Daixuan Books, its primary value to the community lies in its accumulation of cultural capital and resistance capital. Cultural capital, in that it promotes social mobility through democratizing access to knowledge, and resistance capital, in that very knowledge pushes for critical rethinking of social norms [2].

Our research found that Daixuan Books charges a low admission fee, a practice that is inextricably linked to facilitating vertical movements through social strata. With drink prices being a low financial threshold (ranging from 8 to 15 RMB), it removes constraints on accessing the space. Daixuan Bookstore positions itself as a safe space for women, but it permits every community member to enter and share the space—regardless of biological sex, sexual orientation, race, or individual sense of belonging.

3.1.1. The spatial layout of Daixuan Books

The physical layout of the bookstore functions as a series of welcoming signals for readers and community residents alike. Although, at a perfunctory glance, it may be indiscernible from typical bookstores, with deceptively analogous traits such as stacks of books and posters, one characteristic deemed its hallmark sets it apart from the rest.

Suspended from the ceiling and hanging low at the back of the bookstore, a red banner exclaims the slogan "Books are the bridge that connects people" or "书是人与人的桥梁." Although the slogan mainly serves to appeal to those interested in books or those who agree with this statement, it also consolidates the founder's operational philosophy with her personal beliefs. This elevates the value of the space itself and establishes more opportunities to understand the founder—not only as a bookstore operator, but also as a human being.

Significantly, the banner does not merely address visitors—it also reveals the underlying layers of personality in the founder, Dr. Ren. In most conventional commercial environments—such as restaurants, cafeterias, or even grocery stores—operators and founders remain hidden to the public's eye, concealed behind corporate branding and anonymity. This may be due to it being viewed as unnecessary, diverting attention from the quality of the product and the product itself.

This deliberate depersonalization fosters a sense of disconnection; consequently, few individuals would discover anything noteworthy or substantial through the conventional lens of viewing such spaces. Daixuan Books, however, recognizes and rebukes this alienation of individuals from their environment. Through the display of a statement that transparently reflects the founder's personal convictions, the banner renders her presence to be felt within the space. Visitors are granted access not only to the books and the physical environment but also to the worldview that curated them—for when selecting the collection, the founder undoubtedly applied her own logic of sense and knowledge of the community.

This transparency functions as a form of cultivating trust: the space is run by a founder with her own set of beliefs and personal ideology, and those beliefs remain perpetually available for engagement and participation. It transforms the bookstore from an anonymous outlet into a space that is authored—shaped by intention, belief, and a recognizable human presence.

An additional detail is that interspersed between displays of books on third-wave feminism is a clear box filled to the rim with tampons. Tampons are rare in China, with a study showing that approximately 40% of Chinese women are oblivious to their mechanism of use. This is due to the majority preferring to opt for the sanitary pad, partly due to the lower cost and partly due to the enduring bodily taboos surrounding penetration of a foreign object [3]. While this is indeed indicative of the majority of Chinese society's preference for frugality, it is also a stark reminder of the importance of public awareness when it comes to the sexual education of new products, such as tampons. Tampons yield several benefits, such as a greater degree of freedom when it comes to performing sports during menstruation and lower risks of infection, but many are ill-informed about such benefits. Therefore, this highlights a vacuum in knowledge in state-sponsored sex education programs.

Visually, menstrual products, especially those involving insertion, are outliers: they provoke discomfort because they create cognitive dissonance, as they rupture illusions of purity. With female biology being privatized, this invokes stigma surrounding a natural experience. While digital platforms, such as Weibo and RedNote, do indeed provide a space for dialogue and discourse surrounding female reproductive health, the bookstore's tangible manifestation of the tampons rallies for its normalization in the public arena.

The instinctive reaction to a provocative display is discomfort, as is the case when one is exposed to raw, unsanitized reality. Ren's display doesn't shy away from adding a layer of nuance to dimensions of female autonomy that were systematically suppressed, instead interrogating the social norms surrounding menstruation in an aggressive campaign for change.

3.1.2. Sex education in Daixuan Books

In resource-deprived areas, the material consequences of reproduction choice—whether consensual or involuntary—are devastating. A single mistake can surge from a vexing problem into something catastrophic. Furthermore, environmental and social factors lead to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and morbidity rates being disproportionately concentrated in such settlements [4].

An unplanned pregnancy or a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STD) can permanently derail a young person's development process and education. Their needs are incongruous with the needs of the middle class, yet treated as tantamount to such by institutions. The existence of Daixuan Books serves as a remedy for those bureaucratic oversights. Daixuan Books offers books on sex education and gender, raising collective awareness of topics deemed taboo in the mainstream, encompassing topics such as reproductive health, domestic violence, and LGBTQ rights.

Nevertheless, most reading materials on sex education are often dense with obfuscation, which mars access to information. A key sociolinguistic dynamic is the gulf between institutional and vernacular infrastructure. Bridging the gulf is essential for restructuring linguistic visibility—and promoting agency through accessibility [5]. It would require translating concepts that were formerly the sole dominion of science into accessible language, hence promoting equal opportunities. To the outsider, there is a disconnect between Dr. Ren's high education and her career pursuits. In reality, Daixuan mobilizes her education to perform the unseen labor of mediating that gap.

3.2. Advocacy within Daixuan Books

There is often a stock of dichotomies regarding the field of feminism in mainstream media. Feminism often harbors negative connotations, with many equating feminism with its more radical strains—reactionary feminism. Further mischaracterization that conflates feminism as women-exclusive exacerbates divisions. This often alienates men, thus pushing them to rearticulate anti-feminist sentiments of the Manosphere[1].

Our research found that the influence of the Manosphere manifests itself at Daixuan Books through retaliatory negative reviews targeting its feminist themes, as well as parents actively barring their kids from entering. Thus, this reframes the formerly progressive space into a hotbed of vice, or, according to numerous parents, something adjacent to a *wang ba*—aninternet cafe.

However, feminist theory's liberation also, through challenging rigid societal norms, pertains to males as well. Research conducted in the European Union has shown that progress in gender equality would lead to an increase in GDP per capita of 6.1 to 9.6 percent by 2050[2] . The dismantling of systematic misogynist ideals furthermore promotes freedom of dress, expression, and bodily autonomy for men by challenging mass conformity to patriarchal gender roles.

Moreover, systematic inequality persists even within ostensibly progressive environments.Predicated on social psychology's notion of fundamental attribution error, this phenomenon arises in Daixuan Books as well. People within progressive spheres offer pungent criticism of external inequalities while failing to diagnose similar disparities within as "inequalities"[3].

In Daixuan Books, this is the primary reason why the burden of cleaning up after gatherings often falls to girls. Historically, work in the informal sector, such as domestic housework, regardless of value, is demoted to invisible labor[4]. This leads to an unequal distribution of work and income outcomes, contributing to gender inequality as society increasingly undervalues unpaid work. Even in an environment that opposes such practices, the students of Daixuan Books continue to default to traditional roles in which boys monopolize social resources of the space while leaving girls to fend for themselves.

The presence of such strong cultural hegemony being embedded in progressive spaces as Daixuan Books necessitates a counter approach. As opposed to confrontation, coercion, or threats, Dr. Ren discreetly dismantles traditional gender norms by showing that mere fulfillment of responsibilities does not diminish one's masculinity. Thus, this promotes domestic labor as non-gender-segregated, with boys soon joining in the cleaning effort alongside girls. Beyond challenging facile notions of masculinity, this also contributes to fortifying a greater cultural shift for feminism: one in which unseen labor will no longer be labelled as valueless.

3.2.1. Daixuan Books and the community

Daixuan Books, situated in a neighborhood still grappling with the waves of gentrification efforts coming from the city, tailors its offerings towards its audiences [6]. The social reality of neighborhoods characterized by

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1 Barchetti, Lisa. Why Feminism Scares Men. (2024). EURAC Research, https://www.eurac.edu/en/blogs/imagining-futures/why-feminism-scares-men-lisa-barchetti.

2 Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union: Report on the Empirical Application of the Model. (2017). European Institute for Gender Equality, https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/economic-benefits-gender-equality-european-union-report-empirical-application-model.

3 Gawronski, Bertram. (2007). Fundamental Attribution Error. ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281179007_Fundamental_Attribution_Error.

4 Why Are Women so Exhausted? Care Work and the Mental Load. (2026). UN Women, https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/why-are-women-so-exhausted-care-work-and-the-mental-load.

disorder—frequent debauchery, high crime rates, and substandard housing—is that it exposes young teens to traditionally "proscribed" topics at a young age.

Such social barriers can be incapacitating. Without formal framing, this premature exposure will continue to transmit inequalities from one generation to the next. Studies have shown that families growing up in similar environments transmit 60% of socioeconomic prospects across generations [7]. Recognizing that reproductive health literacy is vital to breaking cycles of early parenthood, DaiXuan Books offers education on safe sex to disrupt this trajectory.

In a way, parents harbor a plurality of conceptions when it comes to DaiXuan Books. That is, they simultaneously view it as an impediment to a child's development, yet continually harness it for its spatial utility.

Compartmentalizing, in which mutually defying thoughts are isolated, is a psychological defense mechanism against cognitive dissonance. Parents resolve the Daixuan Books paradox by treating the physical space as functionally distinct from ideological content through compartmentalizing, therefore defeating its core message [8]. Selective invalidation of the space appears as minimizing the space's political curation as superficial marketing of a *wang hong*—or a trendy, albeit transitory—store. The delegitimization of the space's commitment strips it of its core orientation and hence undermines its messages of social advocacy.

Michele Lamont's "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" interrogates these amorphous social boundaries and argues they are a social relations process used to reinforce social inequalities. The fluid boundaries enable parents to exploit the space while deliberately insulating their children from the so-called "ideological messaging" [8].

3.2.2. Cognitive reframing, mutual aid and informal youth support

To address this, Daixuan Books embraces the approach of cognitive reframing—a psychological technique in which ingrained thoughts are altered and transformed through exposure to different perspectives[5]. This is reflected in their spatial dynamics: the focal point of the store is a large banner proclaiming the quote "Women for All, All for Women."

The quote is Dr. Ren's rationale for her refusal to make Daixuan Books a for-profit space: in her contribution, she has played her role to curate, preserve, and pass down marginalized history. Now she hopes that the world would also reciprocate. To facilitate a circular model of mutual aid is a humanitarian duty, and resources are insufficient for Daixuan Books to operate independently. This is indicative of the necessity for the local community to build a symbiotic relationship, rather than a parasitic one in which unconditional aid is given by only one party, that being Daixuan Books; true community resilience requires continuous, multidirectional effort.

Of course, that is not to say that such support is absent in the community. On a microscopic level, our empirical evidence shows proactive assistance from patrons of Daixuan Books: visitors regularly engage in voluntary work in the maintenance of the space and mobilize personal networks to drive interest.

Emotional support is also one of many of Daixuan's "under the radar" services in which she decouples support from financial capacity by offering her services free of charge. The underlying reason behind this is that teens in these communities face heightened vulnerability due to higher incidence rates of challenges such as domestic instability, resource deprivation, and unstable parental relationships. For these teens, they exist in a state of liminality: constantly paralyzed between the impression of childhood experiences and the anxieties of being on the cusp of adulthood. Despite being a certified psychological counselor, Dr. Renhe

[5] Mohn, Elizabeth. (2024). Cognitive Reframing. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/cognitive-reframing.

curated Daixuan Books as an environment devoid of any clinical pretenses, offering a space where all interactions were initiated from the student side, instead of being coaxed and coerced from them.

4. Conclusion

This case study of Shenzhen's Daixuan Bookstore, the subject of the article, demonstrates the struggles and successes of feminist "third spaces" that exist within polarizing social and cultural contexts. Daixuan Books is a salient reminder of the importance of preserving cultural and resistance capital in a fight towards social change. Dr. Ren lives her way to discern and eventually understand these anthropological theories: providing sex education, offering mental health support, and challenging rigid gender norms as a solution to institutional deficiencies, all done by integrating small acts of change into the daily lives of Daixuan Books. Riven by ideological frictions, community stances towards Daixuan Books are divided. This indicates the futility of relying on single-party altruism alone and shows that the survival of Daixuan Books hinges on co-constitutive effort from both parties: Daixuan Books and that of the community. These findings highlight the necessity of evaluating feminist third spaces through a localized lens. For future practices, Daixuan's operational model may provide a framework for businesses with similar ambitions and situated in similar environments that are undergoing rapid gentrification. Future research should expand on these spatial dynamics by investigating how long-term community participation influences systemic shifts in parental attitudes, as well as tracking the quantitative and qualitative impacts of non-formal gender education on youth resilience across broader urban Chinese contexts.

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