Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers

Edited by Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Milwertz

With Red Chan

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women
Chinese Women Organizing
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Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers

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Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan

Oxford • New York
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Preface

This volume has developed from discussions and papers presented at the Workshop, Women Organizing in China, held at Oxford University in July 1999. It was sponsored jointly by the Institute for Chinese Studies (ICS) and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women (CCCRW). Cecilia Milwertz initiated plans for the Workshop while in receipt of a European Science Foundation Research Fellowship at the ICS. We are grateful to Glen Dudbridge, director of the ICS (and the sole male participant at the Workshop), who supported the Workshop from the very beginning. The idea would not have materialized if not first Ping-Chun Hsiung and then Maria Jaschok, and with her the CCCRW, had joined the endeavour. Our thanks to Stig Thøgersen of the University of Aarhus who brought together Ping-Chun Hsiung and Cecilia Milwertz, and to Li Xiaojiang of Dalian University, who inadvertently played a role in the meeting of Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford.

Once the three of us had joined together, preparations for the Workshop began to take shape. Despite our different backgrounds and positions we all three engage in studies of women and gender issues in China and specifically of women’s organizing. We all have engaged in fieldwork in China. Maria, moreover, worked for several years with a group of scholars and activists in central China on educational and research projects. Ping-Chun has taught feminist qualitative research methods in China and, as an activist in the Danish women’s movement, Cecilia has engaged in various exchanges with Chinese women’s organizations and activists. As a result we have many links to activists and women’s studies academics in China – women who were the subjects of our studies, or with whom we collaborated, or women we have met in connection with our research and other activities. Our work is tightly linked to these women and on the friendship and assistance they offer us.

In addition to sharing personal and academic interests, we three editors shared a feminist vision of creating a meaningful forum for open and equal dialogues between activists and academics from China and the Euro-North American donor representatives and academics who were also workshop participants.
Editors in Conversation

Ping-Chun Hsiung: Having a platform for Chinese scholars and activists to document and analyze women’s activism in contemporary China not only must challenge images of the Chinese woman as passive, docile, and victimized that continue to linger on in much of the Western literature and mass media. The discussion should also provide contextually grounded nuances that would bring the NGO debates beyond questions such as ‘whether or not there are real NGOs in China’ or ‘whether or not the Women’s Federation is an NGO’.

It is hard for me to recall exactly what my original take was, and whether or not I have changed over the period. But, if you really push me, I would say I never thought it would be possible to be ‘equal’ and ‘open’. It is a process and a negotiated process, with privilege, inequalities, and so on that continue to shape the outcome of the negotiated process.

Cecilia Milwertz: I cannot disagree – the Workshop, as any cross-cultural encounter, is a negotiated process of differences and inequalities. Nonetheless, regardless of the rationality and wisdom of theoretical understandings of difference and inequality and regardless of practical experience, my gut feeling, and an important driving force in my work, is a naive belief in equality and openness.

To me the aim of the Workshop was simply to bring together academics from China and other parts of the world. When interviewing activists in Beijing I was more than once told that they had already been interviewed by such and such a person or that such and such a person was engaged in similar research. I had met some of these colleagues and I wanted to bring us all together for academic exchange. As I remember the process – we realized that there were not many academics in China engaged in research on women organizing. This led to our decision to include also activists in the Workshop. What started out as a purely academic enterprise developed into a dialogue between activists and academics. It also led to problems in terms of how to combine the presentations, perspectives and approaches of activists and academics. Because donor organizations play a crucial role in relation to activists, the next step was that this group was also included.

Maria Jaschok: The process which led to the inclusion of donor agency representatives, something on which we decided halfway through preparations, was precisely the kind of feature which made this Workshop so unusual. That it became necessary to constantly revisit our objectives,
to ask whose objectives we were pursuing, to question the partiality revealed by the goals we had set ourselves, prompted all our awareness for the need to make these often painful and time-consuming conversations, sometimes among ourselves, sometimes with would-be participants.

I see the value of this Workshop/Text therefore in the continuation of the dialogue on multiple levels of interaction. Both ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’ to the other’s viewpoint move a dialectical process of challenge, response and counter-challenge. We have not resolved each and every impasse, but we hope that we have gone some way toward forestalling the stasis that comes with the ‘rhetorical gloss’, to use Elisabeth Croll’s term, of rigid political correctness in cross-boundary dialogue.
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Many individuals and institutions supported the venture. We thank colleagues at both the ICS and the CCCRW, especially Shirley Ardener, Lidia Sciama and Helen Callaway. The director of Queen Elizabeth House, Francis Stewart, took time out of her busy schedule to join the concluding celebrations. Thanks also to Liu Bohong of the Women’s Studies Institute of China, who took part in Workshop preparations. We thank Elisabeth Croll and Delia Davin (the lao dajie of China women and gender studies in the UK) for their support and mentoring during preparations for the Workshop. Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz would especially like to thank Gaynor Cohen for her support when we were drowning in the practicalities of Workshop preparations, and Alison Morris for her contribution to clerical and accounting tasks, and also during the Workshop.

We would like to express our gratitude to the sponsors of the Workshop: the Davis Fund for providing the seed grant and the CCCRW for support in kind, the Great Britain–China Centre, the Ford Foundation (special thanks to Joan Kaufman), the Reuter Foundation, the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and the Universities’ China Committee for grants that enabled fourteen activists and academics from China to participate in the Workshop. The Universities’ China Committee also provided a grant to support students to participate. The Ford Foundation also granted funds for simultaneous interpretation, which became a crucial factor in the success of the Workshop. Thanks are due to the two Workshop interpreters Red Chan and Lori Chen. We are deeply grateful to the many people who were involved in planning and effectuating the Workshop: James Branston, Oxford University; Maureen Marchant and her staff, Wolfson College; Anne Clayton, Queen Elizabeth House; the Sisters at the Cherwell Centre, which has sadly been closed; Dee Zhang, ICS; Huang Yan, for translation of abstracts; Shui Jingjun for bringing two gloriously red and beautifully written Workshop banners from Zhengzhou; Min Yu for helping out during the Workshop; Tais Milwertz for photocopying and Tabita Milwertz and Rachel Stern for receiving Workshop participants at Heathrow airport.
As editors we would especially like to thank the contributors for their cooperation, patience and hard work in the process of writing and revising the chapters in this book. A grant from the Ford Foundation and a general research grant from the Division of Social Sciences, University of Toronto at Scarborough College, covered translation of book chapters. Thanks are also due to Hap Bryant for assistance with Shui Jingjun’s chapter, to Qi Wang and Min Dongchao for critical comments to the Introduction, to Du Jie, Ding Ning, Bu Wei, Cecilia Lou and Qi Wang for assistance with the Lexicon, to Wendy Grist, accountant at Queen Elizabeth House and to Anne Schlanbusch, Marianne Espenheim Nielsen and Jens-Christian Sørensen at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen. Finally, thanks to Susan Young, who stepped in to copy-edit and language revise the manuscript. And to series editors Jacqueline Waldren and Shirley Ardener, for stamina and unwavering, enthusiastic support. Kathryn Earle, our publisher, we hope now feels vindicated when she made ‘a leap of faith’ so early in the production of the book!

**Note on Chinese names**

The majority of Chinese names in this volume follow the Chinese order of family name followed by given name. However, as some contributors living outside China have adopted the form of given name followed by family name, this also occurs.

**Translation**

Chapters Five, Six, Seven, Nine, Ten and Eleven have been translated by Red Chan. Chapter Two was translated and annotated by Susan Jolly.
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<td>ACWF</td>
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<td>CCCRW</td>
<td>Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women</td>
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<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television</td>
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<td>CCYWP</td>
<td>China–Canada Young Women’s Project</td>
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<td>CPPCC</td>
<td>Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference</td>
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<td>CSWS</td>
<td>Chinese Society for Women’s Studies, Inc.</td>
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<td>EMW</td>
<td>East Meets West Feminist Translation Group</td>
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<td>GMD</td>
<td>Guomindang – the Nationalist Party</td>
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<td>GO</td>
<td>government organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>GONGO</td>
<td>government-organized non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>ICS</td>
<td>Institute for Chinese Studies (Oxford)</td>
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<td>JASS</td>
<td>Jiangsu Academy of Social Sciences</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>NPC</td>
<td>National People’s Congress</td>
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<td>NWCCW</td>
<td>National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>YWCA</td>
<td>Young Women’s Christian Association</td>
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Notes on Contributors

**Xiaolan Bao** is an associate professor at California State University, Long Beach. She received her Master’s degree in China and her PhD in the USA. She was the chair of the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS) from 1989 to 1991/1992. Since then she has been a member of the Society and has actively participated in collaborative projects with China since 1993.

**Cai Yiping** studied history at Peking University for seven years and planned to become a feminist historian. However, since her graduation in 1995 she has worked for *China Women’s News*. In this job she is able to combine her interest in women’s history with working on women in contemporary society. Cai Yiping is secretary of the Women’s Media Watch Network.

**Red Chan** (BA, MA) is a translator and interpreter of the Chinese and English languages, and is currently reading for a doctoral degree in Chinese Studies at the University of Oxford. Her research examines the English translations of Mainland Chinese novels in the first decade after Communist China’s opening-up.

**Elisabeth Croll** is Professor of Chinese Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. For more than twenty-five years she has conducted frequent field studies in China and has written widely on women, women’s movements, gender, marriage, the family, family planning, girls and other facets of social and rural development in both historical and contemporary China. Her most recent books include *From Heaven to Earth: Images and Experiences of Development in China* (1994), *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China* (1995) and *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (2000).
Ding Ning is an editor at the Beijing Publishing House. An abiding feminist commitment led her to join the first group of counsellors attached to the Beijing Hotline. She also became a member of the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group. In 2000, Ding participated in a feminist reading group, which regularly congregates in Beijing. She is also actively involved with the Migrant Women’s Club and Single Mothers’ Group.

Du Fangqin is the Director of the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University and Professor at the Institute of Ancient Texts. Her major feminist endeavours include founding and organizing the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University, teaching courses in women’s studies and gender and development, organizing the 1993 workshop ‘Chinese Women and Development’, and being the principal investigator of two research projects: ‘A Study of the Influence of Cultural Factors on Peasant Women’s Behaviors in Northern China’ and ‘Developing Women and Gender Studies in China’. Du Fangqin is the author of many articles and books, including most recently Nüxing guannian de yanjian (Changes in the Concept of Nüxing) (1998), and Zhongguo shehui xingbei de lishi wenhua xunzong (Looking for the Cultural and Historical Roots of Gender in China) (1998). She has also edited several books including Dashan de niur: jingyan, xinsheng, xuqiu (Daughters of the Mountain: Experience, Hopes, and Needs) (1998) and Shehui xingbie yu funü fazhan (Gender and Women’s Development) (2000).

Feng Yuan is co-ordinator of the Women’s Media Watch Network (with Guo Yanqiu) and editor of China Women’s News online edition. Since 1986 she has written on women’s employment and women’s movement issues for many publications. She was involved in preparing the first Chinese Human Development Report for the UNDP Beijing office in 1997. She is also the co-author of a gender and development training manual and runs training courses all over China. She has been a member of the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group since 1995.

Gao Xiaoxian graduated from high school in 1968 and was sent to the countryside. She became a teacher in a factory-run school in 1971. In 1977, she passed the entry exam to study history at the Northwest University in Xi’an, Shaanxi. Upon graduation in 1982, she was assigned to work at the Shaanxi Women’s Federation. She began to be interested in women’s studies in 1983, and has ever since been focusing on rural women. She founded the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family in
1986, and has been playing critical roles in all its projects. Since 1994, she has concentrated on developmental issues of rural women and on organizing issues related to women’s popular groups in China. In 1996, Gao founded the ‘Red Phoenix Project’, the first non-governmental foundation that sponsors girls from poverty areas to attend universities. The Project has so far supported 500 female students of Shaanxi province. She has published many articles on rural women and development issues.

Ge Youli received her BA in English Literature in 1986 and a graduate diploma in Cross-cultural Communication in 1988. Between 1988 and 1993 she worked at the Ford Foundation Beijing Office. From 1994 to 1999 she worked at the UNDP China Office. In June 2000, she received a Master’s degree in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. In July 2000, she started a new job as China Country Director for the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities.

Guo Yanqiu is co-ordinator of the Women’s Media Watch Network (with Feng Yuan) and since 1987 a journalist with China Women’s News. She mainly writes on marriage and family issues and has organized several public debates on women’s rights and interests in this field. This experience made her become one of the initiators and core members of the network Domestic Violence in China – Research, Intervention and Prevention.

Han Henan is associate professor and deputy Director of the Centre for Women’s Studies, China Women’s College, Beijing. She has been engaged in teaching and researching women’s studies for eighteen years. She has edited books on theories of women’s liberation and on women’s political participation. In 1995, she took part in the NGO Forum of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. From 1996 to 1999 she was involved in the research project ‘Studies of Women’s Social Support System in Beijing’ and from 1997 to 2000, she was involved in the project ‘Studies of Women’s Tertiary Education in China: Facing the 21st Century’. Since 1998, Han Henan has been in charge of the research project ‘Positioning of Women’s Work in Urban Communities’. She is keen on reforming women’s studies courses so that their contents and methodologies are more comprehensive. To draw the Women’s Federation closer to women’s needs, she is studying how to change its thinking and mode of work.
He Xiaopei worked for a Chinese central government agency as an economist between 1988 and 1998. Since 1994, she has been involved in lesbian organizing in Beijing. With a few other sisters she set up the Queer Women Group (Nü tongzhi xiaozu) and organized the First National Women Tongzhi Conference in October 1998. After participating in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women she joined the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group (EMW) in Beijing, and began to engage in feminist politics. These interests brought her to the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, where she received an MA in Gender and Development.

Ping-Chun Hsiung is a sociologist at the University of Toronto, and currently the co-chair of the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS). Her areas of interest include feminist theories, methodology and epistemology, social change in Chinese societies, cross-cultural encounter. Over the years, she has given many lectures on feminist methodology and epistemology and been involved in various gender-related collaborative projects in China. She has published many articles and is the author of Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan (1996).

Huang Yan is an assistant professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, Henan College of Finance and Economics. She was an active participant in the activities of the Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University from 1992 until the Centre closed in 1995. Projects that she participated in include preparatory work for building a women’s museum, a women’s reproductive health project, and a project on the oral history of twentieth-century women. Huang Yan is now a member of the ‘Henan Research Centre of Community Education’. She has published extensively on the role and social status of Chinese women and she has translated several English books on sociology and feminism into Chinese as well as Chinese academic writings into English.

Maria Jaschok is located at Oxford University: as a research associate at Queen Elizabeth House and as a deputy director of the Centre of Cross-Cultural Research on Women. She is affiliated also to the Institute for Chinese Studies as a research scholar. She spends much of her time in Central China pursuing research projects. Most recently she joined the Dalian Women’s Studies Academic Committee set up by Li Xiaojiang at Dalian University. She has published on traditional Chinese institutions of female servitude and their modern reinventions (Concubines and
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Bondservants (1988), Women and Chinese Patriarchy (1994)) and also on the histories of marginalized women The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam (2000), co-authored with Shui Jingjun. She is currently writing in the area of gendered memory and religious feminisms.

Jin Yihong is Director of the Women’s Studies Centre, Jiangsu Academy of Social Sciences. Her research areas include: rural women’s development, women’s employment and poverty in urban areas, family and marriage. She is a member of the standing committee of the Jiangsu Women’s Federation and serves on the board of directors of the Chinese Women’s Association. She has been actively involved in feminist advocacy and training of local cadres.

Susan Jolly is currently a research officer at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, working on gender and poverty issues in China. She lived in China for a total of six years, first in Wuhan as a student from 1985 to 1987, and from 1994 to 1998 in Beijing, mostly as a United Nations Volunteer Programme Officer in Poverty alleviation. Feminism informs her life and work, because it seems to make sense to her, emotionally, politically, practically. She is also interested in ‘queering’ development, challenging dominant models of sexuality in development.

Liu Bohong, MA, is a senior research fellow and deputy director at the Women’s Studies Institute of China, and also Co-ordinator of the Chinese Women’s Health Network. Liu Bohong participated in the organizing work for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing. Her main research emphases are women and the mass media, and women and health.

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Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS) since 1990 and was the CSWS treasurer in 1992–1994 and co-chair in 1998–2000. She has been one of the organizers of the four collaborative projects between the CSWS and their counterparts in China in 1993–2001.

**Naihua Zhang** is an assistant professor of sociology at Florida Atlantic University. She received her PhD Degree in sociology from Michigan State University. The desire better to understand how contemporary Chinese women, including herself, are impacted by the official approach to the woman question led her to the study of the organizational relationship between women and the Party-state. She wrote her dissertation on the All China Women’s Federation and has published on the contemporary Chinese women’s movement. As a member of the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies, she is an active participant of this movement herself, through networking, cooperative effort in projects, and scholarly exchanges in the burgeoning field of women’s studies in China.
PART I

Chinese Women Organizing In/Outside
Introduction

Maria Jaschok, Cecilia Milwertz and Ping-Chun Hsiung

In July 1999 a group of about fifty scholars, activists and donor organization representatives met for three days at Oxford University to describe, discuss and analyse women’s organizing activities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1980s and 1990s. When we conceived of the Workshop, our ambition was to bring together a group that would present, and represent, the work of a diversity of women’s collective action. Whether secular or religious, formal or informal, small-scale or large-scale, rural or urban in nature, all these women’s organizing activities address social issues in Chinese society. Although the groups represented were varied in nature, the Workshop was by no means able to encompass all of the complex variations that pertain to women’s growing activism in contemporary China. But the organizing experiences shared at the Workshop, while not universally representative, do reflect and thereby provide an insight into some recent trends and tendencies in urban women’s organizing activities.

The organizing activities addressed in this volume have emerged in the post-Mao period of economic reform and of China’s so-called opening to the outside world that were initiated under Deng Xiaoping’s government in 1978. They have developed in reaction to contradictory effects that came with the gradual expansion of the market economy and in response to state withdrawal of employment security, as well as changes in provision of social welfare and education.¹

From the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards, the political leadership relaxed its control of the political sphere, thus allowing for the development of a wide range of (more or less controlled) activities in the sphere that has been theorized as civil society (White, Howell and Shang 1996) and public space (Yang 1999). Since these early beginnings, women’s popular organizing activities have multiplied. A new phase in the history of the Chinese women’s movement has taken shape in a context of political
and practical support and constraint, of progressive and regressive developments, and of a plurality of actors and activities. Urban women have exploited emerging spaces and have also created new political spaces to address gender-specific discrimination in relation to issues such as employment, education, and rural to urban migration. Activists have set up social services to support women in vulnerable situations related, for example, to prostitution, domestic violence and divorce. Over a period of ten to fifteen years, small discussion groups have reinvented themselves into psychological and legal counselling services, legal aid services, a Media Watch network, and rural development projects.

A vital, previously neglected part of the scholarship on political and social changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society, chapters in this volume contribute a series of in-depth descriptions and analyses of grass-roots activities which are at the core of processes of social and political change. The relationship between citizen and state, for example, is transformed as citizens expand their sphere of participation in social change, in turn affecting political change at other levels of society. This volume helps to close a gap in our understanding of the working of grass-roots democracy in China by exploring women’s popular organizing activities and their interaction with party-state institutions, including the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF). In the process of helping women to help themselves, these activists have assumed a decisive role in negotiating social and political transformations in Chinese society. The title of our Introduction – Organizing In/Outside – suggests the unique fluidity that has come to characterize Chinese women’s activism in relation to central structures of power: that is, situated both inside and outside the centre, yet sometimes preferring to negotiate in the interstices, the spaces in-between; working outward from the inside, but also influencing the centre from the outside; starting from positions of weakness and marginality and transforming these into mobility and strength. In the process these activists have been creating a borderland of social and intellectual movement which is leaving neither the centre nor the periphery unaffected and unchallenged.

As editors we reflect on the papers presented at the Workshop, the discussions that took place and the chapters that form the core of this book. Our aim is to revisit the Workshop to focus on issues that are developed in the chapters of this volume and to explore in greater depth issues only touched upon during the three days of debate. Our advantage as editors lies in the overall perspective we achieve by having an overview of the full set of Workshop papers and the full Workshop ‘conversations’. This means that we move beyond that which was explicitly stated and
discussed at the Workshop. We elaborate on the background and development of women’s organizing activities in the 1980s and 1990s, and we bring religious organizing traditions into the social history of all Chinese women.

The book has been divided into six parts, five of which discuss developments in women’s activisms. We have also incorporated Other Voices—Other Conversations, which consists of excerpts from Workshop presentations, comments and debates. The excerpts, organized under subheadings, are included to capture the lively debate at the Workshop, and to add diverse voices and perspectives to central issues addressed in the papers. In a few cases, we also include discussions of issues that were only touched upon at the Workshop. For example, the role of donor funding was not a central issue addressed in the papers presented at the Workshop. However, it was an issue that turned up again and again, an issue that due to its importance should be researched in the future. Throughout the volume reference is made to papers that were presented at the Workshop, and abstracts of Workshop papers not included in the volume are listed at the end of the book.

In the scholarship on Chinese women’s organizations and organizing processes, interesting and important shifts can be noted in the roles and identifications of local Chinese, Chinese academics in the Euro-North American diaspora and Euro-North American academics. In Chapter One, Elisabeth Croll describes the shift from predominantly English-language studies of women and gender in China written solely by this latter group, to the present multivocal community of international and Chinese scholars, with a significant number straddling Chinese and other cultures. The configuration of the fifteen authors of chapters in this volume illustrates this change. Ten authors are Chinese activists and scholars working in the PRC and three are PRC academics who have trained and now work in the USA. Two authors are British: one a first-generation scholar of Chinese women’s studies, and the other—illustrating that strict divides between women’s activisms in different parts of the world are being broken down—a researcher who has previously worked for a donor organization in Beijing and who was also during that time actively involved in local women’s groups (see Jolly, Chapter Three). The three editors, who were also Workshop convenors, consist of one Taiwanese/Canadian and two European academics.

In Part VII, the concluding section of the book, ten Workshop participants reflect on their personal experience of the meeting, adding voices of appreciation but also a note of critical appraisal of the facilitation and process of an ambitious undertaking that sought to provide a forum for cross-boundary dialog and exchange.
Women’s Organizing – a Process

Our central positioning in this volume of the term organizing reflects a feminist analytical approach as to how women organize themselves to address gender and other inequalities in society, and to improve their own and/or other people’s lives. The term organizing reflects a focus on the content and process of activities rather than on (fixed) structural features of organization. The typology of the many new forms of organization that have appeared since the mid-1980s in China, defined by Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan (1996), provides a useful insight into a range of organizational features. However, empirical studies, as well as examples of organizing modes presented at the Workshop, demonstrate a variety of activities that go beyond this typology. For example, The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinli zixun fuwu zhongxin) (see Wang, abstract) in Beijing is not registered according to the Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations (Shehui tuanti dengji guanli tiaoli), but as a private enterprise; neither are two other Beijing organizations, the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services (Beijing daxue falüxuexi funü falü yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin) (see Guo, abstract) and the Migrant Women’s Club (Daqongmei zhi jia) (see Xie, abstract), registered according to the Regulations. In Beijing the only one of those organizations usually included in the group of so-called ‘new women’s NGOs’ that is actually registered according to the Regulations, is the Jinglun Family Centre (Zhongguo shehui gongzuo xiehui Jinglun jiating kexue zhongxin) established by sociologist Chen Yiyun.

As Naihua Zhang emphasizes in Chapter Eight, the variety of modes of registration, as well as lack of registration for some groups, points to the need to shift our focus from the structures of organizations to a focus on processes and connections within and between organizations. As Xiaolan Bao and Wu Xu note in Chapter Four: ‘while institutional changes are important, they do not necessarily lead to cultural change’. Sharon Wesoky’s somewhat exasperated statement at the Workshop: ‘I am a political scientist by training and profession but today I am starting to feel more like an historian. I guess that this is the hazard of dealing with a rapidly changing country’, reflects the difficulties academics have in analysing women’s organizing activities because the object of our inquiry – the activities, the actors and their understandings of issues – are in constant movement and by their very nature difficult to grasp. By privileging the term organizing, this volume emphasizes the shifting and dynamic character of women’s organizing activities that aim to create
social change. It also redresses the problem noted among Workshop participants that organization rather than organizing had dominated presentations and discussion. This is a significant problematic that deserves more attention than could be given within the confines of this volume. It must also be noted that it is a problem for which there is no language. No verb for organizing exists in Chinese. (See Gao, reflections, for a revealing post-Workshop commentary on the relevance of such discussions.)

The term organizing furthermore indicates a focus on the process and movement of social innovation. The actors engaged in the process are related to many different groups and organizations. They are also, as demonstrated by several papers at the Workshop and chapters in this book, linked in networks that cut across groups and organizations and include or reach out to party-state institutions. Together they are involved in the ‘cognitive praxis’ of creating social change – a collective process of producing new forms of knowledge and practice. The ‘cognitive praxis’ defined by sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991, 1998) in their studies of social movements focuses on what activists think, why they think the way they do, and how they proceed to action. Eyerman and Jamison define social movement as ‘a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations’ (1991: 55). Defined as ‘cognitive praxis’, the full range of women’s organizing in contemporary China – including new forms of organizing within the ACWF, new women’s organizations, and professional and religious organizing activities – can be defined as a social movement insofar as all share an overall objective of working for justice and (gender) equality in society. Activists’ identity formation is central to organizing and is dialectically linked to social action. In the cognitive praxis of addressing issues of societal inequality activists are questioning, challenging and transforming dominant (gender) identities, consciousness, discourse and knowledge, and they are moving ideological and political boundaries. The distinctiveness of the cognitive praxis of organizing lies precisely in the process, in the movement, in the production of new knowledge and practice. In Chapters Two and Three activists describe their own experience of cognitive practice. Later in this introduction we discuss the impact of indigenous practices on the process of organizing.

The process of creating new knowledge is the cognitive praxis of social movements and it is through this practice, which includes both knowledge production and action, that a collective identity is formed and through which new forms of self-knowledge and social knowledge are produced.
Identities are ‘the motor of action’ (Camauër 2000: 302) and there is an ongoing interaction between action and knowledge transformation. In the words of Sasha Roseneil:

Feminist political action is forged through the construction of new consciousness and identities at the collective level. At the same time, new forms of consciousness and new identities, both individual and collective, are also the product and praxis of feminist political action. In other words, the challenging and reconstruction of consciousness and identity are both the medium and the outcome of feminist politics (Roseneil 1995: 136).

Although all chapters in this volume are to a large extent ‘successful cases’ of organizing, they also demonstrate how consciously and constantly shifting gears, evaluating directions, and balancing costs and effects of various initiatives have proven to be imperative (see Bao with Wu Xu, Chapter Four; Gao, Chapter Nine; Guo, abstract). Obviously, not all recent women’s initiatives have survived in such a complex political setting. More in-depth documentation and understanding of the activities that have not survived are needed before a more complete reality of women’s efforts to organize themselves is captured because it would be too simplistic to view these specific cases merely as ‘failures’. On the contrary, they constitute a ‘successful’ part of the overall cognitive praxis of women’s organizing in the sense that the experience accumulated by these activities forms part of the collective experience and identity and consciousness transformation that is at the core of collective organizing for social change.

Recent perspectives on and modes of addressing the issue of violence against women serves as an example of the role that organizing has played in the social shaping of knowledge. Domestic violence is an issue that was addressed by CCP revolutionaries in the 1930s. However, efforts to stem the violence against women waned after the early 1950s. Only in the 1980s did the Women’s Federation and the public press again focus public attention on violence against women (Honig and Hershatter 1988). Marianne Hester and Sharon Wesoky’s papers at the Workshop documented the issue of domestic violence (see abstracts; also see Hester 2000) and showed how changing perceptions of, and action against violence against women, have developed dramatically in the 1990s. Over the past ten years, the issue has been politicized, resulting in a shift from the private sphere of the family and also from the ‘private/public sphere’ of work-units and ACWF intervention, to the public sphere of media attention, policy-making and activist intervention.
Introduction

Women’s Organizing – a Mosaic

Chapters in this volume portray exchange, dialogue, negotiation, configuration, and transformation among and within three distinctive, yet often overlapping, groups of political actors – the ACWF, popular forms of women’s groups, and religious groups.

The All China Women’s Federation and Popular Organizing Activities

The majority of papers at the Workshop and chapters in this volume are concerned with the All China Women’s Federation, examples of the many popular forms of women’s organizing that have emerged since the mid-1980s, and the relationship between the two.

The ACWF was set up and funded by the party-state. On the one hand, its mandate is to disseminate party policy to its constituency, the entirety of China’s female population, from its headquarters in Beijing (Quanguo fulian). On the other hand, it represents women in policy decisions and programmes at all levels of administration (fulian): provincial Women’s Federations (sheng fulian) to local Women’s Federations (difang fulian) and funühui, see Lexicon. This twofold identity is expressed in its dual role as government institution (guanfang jigou) and federation of women’s organizations (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui). The ACWF has a historical mission of transmitting party-state policies to women in all sectors of society. For example, it plays an important role in implementing the government’s population policy. However, it also represents a more dynamic organizational identity in its advocacy of women’s interests, lobbying for policy change and the improvement of women’s lives in response to needs expressed at local levels. Also, in the early reform period of the 1980s, the ACWF played a significant role in representing the interests of women workers who were the first to suffer the social and economic consequences of privatization and rationalization of enterprises.

In public but also in scholarly discourse, many terms to identify the ACWF are used interchangeably with speakers/writers sliding from one to the other. The context provides for interpretation of a given meaning. But for the sake of clarity and in order to reflect our understanding of the unprecedented changes now taking place in the way women engage in action, we distinguish between the ACWF as government institution and women’s organization, accountability to government and to women, bureaucracy and ad hoc activities. Such a conceptualization of the ACWF also brings out its in-built strengths and weaknesses as the interests of government and women have to be negotiated and reconciled. It also
conveys the internal dynamic by which the ACWF’s effectiveness and continued relevance to women can be seen as contingent on given government priorities, support and constraint, as it is contingent on the growth of civic society with its concepts of citizenship and citizen rights.7

The changing roles and function of the ACWF in the post-Mao era, and its self-acclaimed NGO status, have been hotly debated (Barlow 1994; Howell 1994, 1996; Hsiung and Wong 1998). Around the time of the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, the Chinese party-state and ACWF began to define the Federation as the largest NGO in China, while women and activist groups from various countries questioned the legitimacy of such a shift in self-representation. Many activists and women’s groups in China, on the other hand, queried the Federation’s ability to represent women’s interests, and its relevance to women’s activism. Authors of this volume, and scholars and activists at the Workshop, contribute to the debates with analyses that reveal diverse standpoints and interpretations, demonstrating the complex discursive shifts and the fluid nature of an evolving Chinese civil society. While most writers conceptualize the ACWF as an organic, contested arena that is open to cooperation and negotiation with activists from both inside and outside of the Federation, other arguments also come to the fore. Thus, Naihua Zhang presents a strong argument (see Chapter Eight) that recognition should be accorded to the ACWF claim to NGO status. However, Zhang too maintains that essentializing the concept of NGO does injustice to multifarious historical and cultural as well as political reality of Chinese NGOs.

The editors have chosen to reflect the multi-vocal debate with its diverse standpoints and perspectives, and to avoid taking sides in what is after all an on-going negotiation over inclusion and exclusion from contested delineations of NGO criteria, and therefore membership. For example, many of the women’s groups established in the 1980s-1990s define themselves as NGOs using either the English term directly, its Chinese translation feizhengfu zuzhi, or the Chinese minjian zuzhi, meaning popular organization as opposed to party-state initiated and defined. Instead, we apply in this Introduction the term popular in preference to the term NGO to highlight the bottom-up, local non-party-state initiatives and activities that are situated outside or within party-state organizations and/or function in (close) cooperation with party-state institutions. The term popular is employed to emphasize these features of new forms of organizing addressed by the authors (regardless of their formal registration or lack of registration as discussed earlier).
The term *popular organizing* therefore connotes a deliberately ‘porous’ and undefined new phase of political activism, a site of transit for ideas and people in which new initiatives flourish, challenging hierarchical and pre-existing structures. At the Workshop, Huang Yan presented a case study of attempts by unemployed working-class women in Henan Province to provide a much-needed social service, and to sustain this service by creating a commercially viable enterprise. She countered criticism from established women’s activists that this initiative did not fit a core criterion for women’s NGO activism – its non-profit orientation – with an important question: Did not this ‘exclusionary’ attitude display the same rigid notion of political correctness they themselves had not infrequently experienced in negotiations with the ACWF (see Huang, abstract)? Were such responses to the diversity of locally-inspired projects not detrimental to aspirations for a more democratic and diverse public domain (see Huang, reflections)? If the movement is to preserve and develop its political momentum, women’s groups must not be kept outside waiting at the gate – still less be kept there by other women’s activists.

Positioning herself as an ACWF outsider, Jin Yihong (Chapter Six) points to the tension in her relations with a provincial Women’s Federation, and to her popularity among local Women’s Federations. Her experience illustrates how various levels of the Women’s Federation and different people within the organization have been more or less inclined to cooperate with the new forms of popular organizing that are contesting the position of the ACWF as sole representative of women in China. The authors in this volume generally agree that the Women’s Federations with their national organization and incomparable legitimacy, can and should be called upon to promote activist causes (see Chapters Six, Eight, Nine, and Ten). Well-known activists Liang Jun in Zhengzhou and Chen Yiyun in Beijing have given hundreds, if not thousands, of lectures on issues of marriage and family to women of all walks of life through the ACWF network, and many other scholars and activists have ‘smuggled’ in feminist concepts or ideals as they give lectures at the Federation’s training workshops for local cadres or when they work with Federation cadres on various initiatives.

Repeatedly, Chinese scholars and activists use the expression ‘being strategic’ (*celüexing*) to explain how they devise strategies to bypass and transcend the matrix of tensions and boundaries. ‘Being strategic’ implies conscious choices between yielding, reticence, and endurance on the one hand, and assertiveness, outspokenness, and combativeness on the other. For example, Gao Xiaoxian (Chapter Nine) touches upon strategies employed to bypass ACWF internal politics and bureaucratic control, and
points to steps needed to consolidate commonality among its members. One scholar/activist describes how she goes about finding out whether the feminist ideas she ‘smuggles’ into her public lectures are ‘approved, disapproved, ignored, or welcome’. ‘I also listen very carefully to the concluding remarks made by a Women’s Federation official who has sat through my lecture’. In case of disapproval, she would proceed to adjust her wording, use different examples, or sometimes simply drop the message for the time being. Du Fangqin’s Chapter Eleven title ‘Manoeuvring Fate’ and ‘Following the Call’ (Yunming, shiming) captures the seemingly contradictory but complementary strategic duality of action-inaction and proactive-serene. Thus, an essential aspect of Chinese women’s organizing entails a subtle choreography of exploiting opportunities, seizing new grounds, and floating with the current within as well as in-between Women’s Federation spaces. It also entails the employment of a language which at times transmits sensitive realities in a manner so indirect that translations cannot always do justice to what can only be understood in a context of embedded political meaning. What are known
and shared codes of sensitivity in Chinese writing, in an English rendering may appear frustratingly vague. Our challenge has been to convey meaning without losing the spirit of the original text.

Scholars and activists have re-energized and redefined the Women’s Federation with new initiatives and visions. For example, one Beijing City District Women’s Federation cooperated with activists from the China Women’s College (Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan) to reach out to single mothers in the local community (see Han, abstract). One of the links to the ACWF is found in the popular groups that have evolved from within the Federation. Employees at the ACWF newspaper China Women’s News (Zhongguo funübao) have set up the magazine Rural Women Knowing All (Nongjianü baishitong) and the Women’s Media Watch Network (Funü chuanmei jiance wangluo). Rural Women Knowing All has in turn set up the Migrant Women’s Club (Dagongmei zhi jia). At the provincial level, the Women’s Federations have set up research centres, women’s hotlines and legal service centres (see Gao, Chapter Nine). No wonder, at the Workshop, questions such as ‘What is the Women’s Federation role in this?’ and ‘What are the governing principles of the Federation?’ were countered by ‘When you said ACWF, to whom exactly were you referring?’ and ‘There isn’t just one Federation. Different localities and different individuals within the Federation often approach issues differently’. Chapters in this volume focus on the organizing role of the ACWF – that is, on the identity of a federation of women’s organizations – to supplement the more richly documented role of the ACWF as an official organ accountable in the main to the CCP state.

The most vivid evidence of this evolving process is provided by the newly emerged tensions and disjunction both within and between the Federation and popular forms of women’s organizing. It has been observed, for example, that lower levels of the Women’s Federation are less inclined to abide by the nominal supervision of higher levels of administration (see Jin, Chapter Six), and there has been recurring competition for funding between the ACWF and local Federations (see Gao, Chapter Nine). Under financial pressures, curricula at many Women’s Federation cadre schools have been adapted to embrace commercialized images of femininity (Tong, abstract), and the Federation’s conventional approach towards mass mobilization is considered outdated and ineffective (see Jin, Chapter Six). Attempts by the Women’s Federation to establish partnerships with popular women’s groups have been met with suspicion and heavy critiques for their bureaucratic execution and hegemonic mentality. But within the conflicts engendered by a dual mandate of policy implementation and representation of women’s interests, many popular
activists, have either once worked for the Federation, forged close professional relationships with it, or both (Hsiung 2001; Wang 1998; Zhang and Xu 1995). Many activist projects draw expertise from professional women from both inside and outside of the Federation. Institutional boundaries do not necessarily hinder collaboration and cooperation across the divide. In addition to calling upon the Federation’s political legitimacy, socio-political resources, and its extensive networks to advance women’s causes, many popular women’s groups continue to influence public policy through the Federation’s quasi-official status (see Liu, Chapter Seven).

Organizations such as the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services in Beijing (Guo, abstract) and the Huaguang Women’s College in Nanning (Guangxi Nanning Huaguang nüzi xuexiao) have a broad range of interconnections with party-state institutions. When these groups define themselves as NGOs they refer to the *sanwu*, that is ‘the three shortages’ – no funds, no personnel, no office space – as characteristics of NGOs. Furthermore, the concept of NGO is often used as a discourse that implies practices of innovative knowledge production, transformation of identities and new working methods and relationships between activists. For example, in Chapter Nine, Gao Xiaoxian uses the NGO discourse as an approach to addressing women’s issues rather than as a classification of organizational structure and relationship with the public sphere of government. Zhang Naihua refers to an ‘NGO spirit’. Similarly, chapters on both the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group (*Dongxifang xiangyu xiaozu*) and the Queer Women Group (*Nü tongzhi xiaozu*) discuss their activities with specific emphasis on the process of collective action. Moreover, due to the specific context of the introduction of the concept of the NGO to China as identical with small-scale women’s NGOs, the NGO is closely identified with Euro-American second-wave women’s movement characteristics of enthusiasm, commitment, and democratic decision-making.

Current discussions and reflections on how to change the deeply entrenched culture of hierarchical patterns of leadership suggest the need for a deepening feminist praxis of politicization of the ‘personal/organizational’ realm. Activists are forced to reflect upon, and respond to, critical issues such as elitism, representation, and accountability. Still others have come to acknowledge that the objective of feminist activism is not confined to critical analysis and action when it comes to rectifying existing gender inequalities. It must also aim to question the traditional cultural environment and socialization practices that serve to perpetuate deeply entrenched asymmetries and stratifications (Pye 1968). Thus, as the scope of women’s organizing efforts widens, they challenge systemic
inequalities in which gender inequality is also embedded. In this light, the frequently cited, anonymous observation that ‘a democratic revolution has quietly been set in motion’ speaks volumes about the significance and implications of popular women’s organizing in the 1980s and 1990s.

**Multiple Feminisms: Women Organizing as Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims – or, the beginning of a debate**

Organizational activities by religious women, whose central identity is that of membership of a given religious tradition, formed only a minor theme within the array of themes explored at the Workshop and in this anthology. However, the two presentations on religious women’s engagement in collective activism (see Shui, Chapter Five; see Zhu, abstract) demand a discursive space in our editorial comments for the variously situated perspectives they offer, and for the poignant issues they raise for scholars of Chinese women’s social history.

The questions arising from international feminist debates over the nature and constitution of ‘religious feminism’ (see cross-cultural studies in Brink and Mencher 1997) are important contributions to discussions on how we explore ‘female subjectivities’ and agency. It is only recently that international feminist theoreticians have begun to problematize the dialectical relationship of secular modernism with fundamentalist religious discourses, and of secular feminisms with religious feminisms (among others, see Ahmed 1992; Bauer 1997; Berktay 1998; Mernissi 1996). Constructions of the religious mind, of the individual believer, as steeped in ‘false consciousness’, as other-worldly, passive, and as less capable of worldly intervention, not only are evident in feminist and general social science theories, but also insidiously shape international discourses on the Other, whether as fundamentalist Muslim state or religious minority, its ‘past’-ness throwing into relief the evolved pluralism of the developed nations (Viswanathan 1998). In the case of China, competition with the USA for superpower status on the world stage entails a carefully propagated self-image of socialist-secular modernity as the heart of China’s drive for progress and sovereignty (Ong 1996). In this context, religions and religious identity mark various meanings, as the past (traditional culture wedded to feudalism), as semi-colonized power (when Christian mission made greatest inroads into Chinese society), or as peripheral (either defining of minority ethnicity, as in the case of Islam, or as ‘deficient’, outside a mainstream paradigm of secular rationality) (Brown 1996).

It is thus not surprising that the place of religion in Chinese women’s studies has only belatedly received attention (Pang 1997; Jaschok and
Shui 2000). In our Workshop, Shui Jingjun and Zhu Li played an important role by reminding us of traditions of organizing outside the binary of ACWF dominance and its complex and dynamic relationships with variously affiliated and non-affiliated women’s organizations, including the popular women’s organizing projects discussed in the preceding section. Shui and Zhu brought into the domain of public academic discourse their understanding of women’s activities steeped within local Buddhist and Muslim traditions, and in Christian organizations which, they maintain, must be considered side by side with other women’s activisms. Similar ideals, aspirations, and positive engagement in social change characterize religious women’s yearnings for equality and dignity, and for fulfilment.

Women’s mosques, Christian women’s associations and Buddhist women’s organizations have re-emerged, most markedly since the more liberal policies of the Chinese government in the mid-1980s, to contribute to the education (including secular education) of religious women, to provide sites of worship and congregation, to offer practical services, counsel and refuge. But they also function as conduits for change as women shift their understanding of spiritual and social justice, and of gender equality, in response to life experience.

How a close ethnographic study can illuminate the specificity of activist ideals, the source of women’s relentless and patient struggles to attain often seemingly hopeless objectives, was demonstrated by Zhu Li. Zhu’s presentation (see Zhu, abstract) on Buddhist women’s organizations that formed around the famous Xiangshan Monastery (Baofeng County, Henan Province), asked questions such as: How did women take initiatives to organize Xiangshan Monastery out of the ruins of past destruction, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)? How did women’s organizations separate and develop in the process of restoration? How did they turn a traditional, patriarchal system of management into an institution that now incorporates more egalitarian ideas of religious life? In the answers to these questions we are given glimpses of women whose faith and individual strength transgress gender codes and normative behaviours associated with women’s biological life cycle. They build on opportunities for collective action and social intervention to reinvent themselves in extra-domestic structures of solidarity. We also hear of women who are profoundly inspired by charismatic leaders to join in collective causes, and who organize themselves to preserve their faith during times of political repression, lead the movement for revival of monastic life in post-Cultural Revolution society and simultaneously infuse the site of their activity with a spirit that challenges traditional
notions of women’s subordinate state. This study tells us how ident-
ification with religious role models of strong and assertive women, around
whom are mobilized projects of collective action, makes ‘local cultural
ideals’ (as distinct from cultural, universalized world-views, see Bauer
1997: 28) attainable to all women. Local ideals which, because they
originate in the material and social constitution of women’s familiar
reality, already form an intrinsic part of the texture of their life rather
than an intervention from within alien meaning systems.

In the following brief exploration of some of the issues raised by Zhu’s
and Shui’s participation in the Workshop, we build on recent scholarship
in the area of gender and religion, on Workshop discussion over trans-
latability of feminism across linguistic and cultural borders, and on
conversations among the editors over the applicability of secular/religious
frameworks of feminisms to women’s activist culture in China. Apart
from granting visibility to religions women’s organizations relatively
neglected by scholars of contemporary Chinese women’s history (Gladney
1995; Overmyer 1995), it has also been one of the purposes of this volume
to start a debate among scholars about similarities, affinities, and differ-
ences between secular and religious forms of organizing.

A useful starting point is Pang Kong-Feng’s concept of ‘indigenous
feminisms’ (1997), by which she understands feminism as shaped by local
tradition and/or opportunities for attaining women’s aspiration for equality
and dignity. Such a definition of feminism acknowledges the multiplicity
of local feminist traditions, of both older and more recent origins. It also
facilitates a comparative approach, within the framework of our volume
that explores women’s activism in terms of self-initiated, women-centred
projects, embracing both the secular and the religious.

The case for ‘indigenous feminism’, one might argue, was advanced
also by a Workshop presenter, Min Dongchao, who discussed the complex
negotiations and heated debates between women in China, and Chinese
scholars abroad, over the translatability of ‘feminism’ into Chinese (see
Min, abstract). Min suggested that overseas Chinese scholars have spent
so much time on discussing what is lost in the translation of the term
‘feminism’ from English into Chinese that they may have ignored what
can also be gained. Referring to Simons (1996), Min Dongchao argued
that translation is a process of negotiation in which the central issue is
‘to what extent can we consider this concept equivalent or analogous to
one which we can frame in our own terms’. Furthermore, she maintains
that ‘By giving a name to something, we create a world; by changing the
name for something, we transform its impact, both emotionally and
intellectually’ (Overing 1987: 83, cited in Min’s presentation, see Min,
abstract).
A close reading of those chapters where scholars and activists interpret their existence, and activism, in relation to certain meaning systems, could indeed lend credence to the thesis that Chinese-specific cultures of activism make adoption of the term ‘indigenous feminism’ preferable to dichotomies between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’; that polarizing conceptual divides are not borne out by the writing before us. Is it possible to maintain that the time has come to transcend the artificial boundaries delineating the secular-religious antagonism? Can one detect in the work and language of those who presented and wrote on women’s projects in a seemingly secular paradigm of gender action, evidence of connections with religious and spiritual traditions? The writing by Du Fangqin (Chapter Eleven), Gao Xiaoxian (Chapter Nine) and Liu Bohong (Chapter Seven) suggests intriguing lines of inquiry, which deserve more space than is available here. Here we want to suggest only that it is possible to find in these authors’ self-representation, mingled with the influence from contemporary political ideologies, the influences also of Taoism and Confucianism, and of the tradition of Chinese intellectual remonstration.

The Confucian tradition of social engagement enjoins intellectuals to nurture self-cultivation (xiushen), fulfil immediate family obligation (qijia), ensure proper governance of the nation (zhiguo), and assume responsibility for the whole universe (pingtianxia) (Tu 1992). Various reform movements throughout the late Qing period, the May Fourth movement of the 1920s, and the so-called enlightenment period of the 1980s were initiated by intellectuals inspired by the sacred mandate to place their talents, even their lives, at the disposal of the collectivity (Cohen 1974; Huang 1972; Chow 1960; Jin 1992; Madsen 1990). Wang Xingjuan’s testimony at the Workshop (Wang, abstract), and many other activists’ personal stories that were told at the Workshop, all bring the remonstrative tradition alive. For example, Gao uses a sense of mission (shiminggan), a sense of responsibility (zerengan), and dedicated professionalism (shiyexing) to describe her initial interest in theory, and her current commitment to the applied/activist/non-academic aspects (Chapter Nine). Liu Bohong states that ‘it is the elite and activists who have taken up leadership roles to reflect upon the limitations of the traditional women’s movement’ (Chapter Seven). Positioning Chinese women’s studies, Du calls for ‘intellectual integrity and tradition’ in academic research, curriculum development, and educational training (Chapter Eleven). These scholars’ activism is inspired and sustained, albeit partially, by the intellectual traditions of Taoism and Confucianism. Explorations into these aspects of the contemporary culture of women’s activism must continue.
However, just as one might argue the case for shared sources of religious and intellectual traditions to inspire women’s collective engagement with society, a case can also be made for the presence of a similarly pervasive, political consciousness among activists, including religious women, of all women’s legitimate claims to equal participatory rights in society.

Indeed, in this insistence on linking personal faith with pertinent and meaningful social engagement that is increasingly infused with gender awareness (Jaschok and Shui 2000), religious women find themselves in the company of many secular women who are also shaping and re-shaping received wisdom from Maoist canons on the nature of women’s liberation. Like religious women, secular women insist that terms such as justice, equality, and women’s liberation are no longer shallow, illusive, abstractive rhetorical slogans. When religious women sit on secular committees, co-opt government departments into alliances for improvement of their rights in the religious sphere, and exploit the enforced ‘patriotic’ independence of churches and mosques to highlight their claim to an equal Chinese identity, they engage in the affairs of society at large. Furthermore, they do so in the role of a Chinese citizen.

Just as lesbian women have exploited opportunities in the public sphere to create tentative openings for social visibility, and acceptance, as queer women (He, Chapter Two), women members of China’s designated minority populations have utilized new avenues for participation in social change (see Bao with Xu, Chapter Four), and activists have learned to straddle variously situated identities inside and outside the ACWF (Chapter Nine), religious women too have honed their political skills. They are proving themselves subtle and careful negotiators of multiple identity; whether in political meetings, memos to government ministries, public tributes to government policies and appeals to women’s rights as due to all Chinese women.

Yet despite all the commonalities, despite the troubling ambiguity of the constructs we employ to explain, we must remember the realities concealed beneath these discursive shifts and meetings of minds. What distinguishes Zhu’s and Shui’s presentations on Christian, Buddhist and Muslim women’s activism from the writing by some of our other authors discussed above, is the naming by religious women of their given faith as a primary (even if not exclusive) source of identification.

It is still important to juxtapose the sharedness of spiritual ideals and inspirations we discovered, on the one hand, with, on the other hand, the regimentation and constraints to which religious believers are subjected. Discursive affinities between an acknowledgement of spiritual roots in
commitment to social change, and self-constitution within an explicit religious framework for action, do not erase equally weighty differences inherent in the manifold political and social consequences of a public identification with religion, especially when religion is sanctioned by the state only within the framework of extensive legislation, administration and registration.

The chapters in this volume provide moving testimony to the empowerment and energy that is experienced by women when they join forces. To the empowerment that comes from the telling of the history of social commitment. To the creativity of women who make a new language and identity for themselves, individually and collectively, and sow the seeds of social, cultural and political change. We would argue – daringly so, given the passionate views by scholars such as Li Xiaojiang (1999) to the contrary – that in the 1980s and 1990s religious and secular women in China are ever more firmly part of the international women’s movement. That this has become all our reality despite, even because of, pronounced and proud political, economic and cultural differences. All the varied national, regional, local women’s organizations, down to the most modest small-scale initiative, are joined in a process of social change that insists on respect for lived experience, and which resists a rhetoric, whether couched in political or religious language, felt to be alien from, and thus detrimental to, human development.

Notes

1. For analyses of the impact, especially on the lives of women, of the reform-period state withdrawal from earlier social and economic responsibilities, see for example Rai (1992); Jacka (1997); Honig and Hershatter (1988); Evans (1997); Rofel (1999); Li Xiaojiang and Tan Shen (1991); West, et al. (1999) and Croll (1995).

accounts by Chinese activists can be found in Wu Qing (1999), published in the English language; Liu Guanghua (1999) and Wong Yuenling (1995). A few publications may be noted on the development of a new phase of the Chinese women’s movement, for example Liu Jinxiu’s (1991) article in the series of women’s studies books published by the Zhengzhou Women’s Studies Centre. Academics in China have primarily written about the development of women’s studies from which various other forms of organizing have grown – importantly, the series of volumes published by the Zhengzhou Women’s Studies Centre, Henan Publishing House.

3. The full workshop was taped and the excerpts have been transcribed from these tapes. In the excerpts comments and questions are set in a different context than at the original Workshop and we have, for example, put together comments made on different days but referring to a common theme. We have asked each participant to confirm and authorize our use of her edited and reconstructed voice in the new context of this volume.

4. In Beijing, for example, laid-off women workers attempted without success to set up a formally registered organization in the mid-1990s. Other examples of initiatives that did not survive political opposition are the International Women’s College and Women’s Museum in Zhengzhou, Henan Province (Jaschok 1998) and the attempt of the Jinglun Family Centre in Beijing to set up a domestic violence shelter in 1994 (Milwertz 2000a).

5. See Davin (1976) and Croll (1978) for the establishment and earlier work of the ACWF. Howell (1997) examines some of the latest developments of the ACWF.

6. Exceptions must be made in the case of women as members of ethnic and religious minorities, where the role of the ACWF is more circumscribed.

7. We thank Qi Wang, Aarhus University, Denmark for helping to clarify our conceptualization of the ACWF.

8. Officially the Media Watch is set up by the Capital Women Journalists’ Association. The initiators are, however, journalists at China Women’s News.

9. There is no consensus on defining the sanwu. Liu Bohong refers to the shortage of funds, personnel, and appointed researchers (Chapter Seven), Gao Xiaoxian points to the shortage of funds, space, and personnel (Chapter Nine). Du Fangqin identifies siwu (four shortages): the shortage of funds, of personnel, of facilities, and of time for research (Chapter Eleven).

10. All religions are seeing a rapid increase in membership; however, precise statistics are hard to come by. In general, the Muslim population in China is estimated at between 18 million and 25 million. Buddhism accounts for about 50 million to 60 million members. The Catholic population is said to be between 4 million and 10 million believers, whereas Protestants have a membership of between 10 million and 13.3 million adherents – some estimates go as high as 35 million. The Chinese government acknowledges about 100 million believers of all faiths, out of a population of 1.2 billion (but it has used this same figure since the mid-1950s). Human Rights Watch/Asia Report 1997.
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PART II

Contextualizing and Transcending East–West Boundaries
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New Spaces, New Voices: Women Organizing in Twentieth-Century China

Elisabeth J. Croll

This volume aims at facilitating cross-cultural and cultural-specific understanding of women organizing and issues engendered by women’s organizations, networks and groups. It is, therefore, an appropriate occasion to reflect, assess and evaluate past attempts, initiated by an earlier generation of researchers, to ask and explore a number of relevant questions deriving from their cross-cultural and China-specific studies of women organizing. It is these issues, discussions and debates that have brought us to our present understanding of the issues relevant to the deliberations of this volume.

Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was a valuable expansion of the documentary and ethnographic data bases on women’s and gender issues in China, a questioning and refinement of old and the introduction of new research methodologies and an interest in concept and theoretical discourse originating within and outside of China. There is now an array of publications, in both Chinese and English, which take women and gender in China as their central theme and which embrace a variety of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches by economists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists. These, together with personal narratives and women’s literature in magazine or fictional form, have constituted a formidable array of new resources for research on women and gender in China. But as the editors of this volume point out in their introduction, interest in formal and informal women’s organizations, networks and groups has lagged behind and hence forms an under-developed component of more recent research on women’s and gender issues in China. It was not always so and this volume therefore seems to be an appropriate moment to remind ourselves of the research that has been undertaken on women organizing prior to the Reform period.
in China before proceeding to more contemporary studies. To do this I want to turn first to the research agendas of a generation of Euro-American feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines which, originating in the 1970s, were born of new cross-cultural and China-specific interests in women and women organizing. Indeed I have entitled this chapter bridging past and present analyses ‘New Spaces, New Voices: Women Organizing in Twentieth-century China’ in order to embrace both the experiences of women organizing throughout twentieth-century China, and the analyses by researchers in the 1970s and in the late 1990s.

For the 1970s there were probably two factors motivating the new research interest in women’s organizations in China. One of these factors was the renewal of the women’s movement in Europe and North America, which gave birth to new gender platforms, gender-specific awareness and an array of new women’s organizations and interest in organizational issues. Within this women’s movement, the key organizational issues were (a) what objectives of and structures for women’s organizations might unite and facilitate concern for the differing interests of women, and (b) how much new gender-specific organizations should separate from or overlap with joint men’s and women’s organizations. The second main factor was the new academic interest in women’s and gender issues, which gave birth to women’s studies and the incorporation of women’s voices and gender issues into academic disciplines and area studies including those of China. The academic focus on women challenged the conventions of the research process and rejected the emphasis on the quantifiable and male-bias in the means by which data was obtained and utilized.

It may seem surprising now that this was at that time a novel agenda. It was necessary to search for and return women’s voices and experiences via new documentary sources and new methods of ethnographic enquiry to generate knowledge previously hidden or absent from history and return or integrate her story to its rightful place in society and scholarship. As the anthropologist Rona Reitner noted in 1975: ‘We need new studies that will focus on women; it cannot be otherwise because of the double bias which has trivialised and misinterpreted female roles for so long’ (Reitner 1975: 16). To make good this omission in China studies, those of us involved in that field in the 1970s – and our number included such well-known North American and British scholars as Phyllis Andors, Delia Davin, Norma Diamond, Kay Ann Johnson, Judith Stacey, Marina Thorborg, Roxanne Witke, Margery Wolf and Marilyn Young – combined academic and political interests by focusing on women’s and gender issues in China and in particular on women’s organizations, the women’s movement or ‘woman-work’ to quote Delia Davin’s useful phrase (Davin
Behind our own interest in all forms of female solidarity in China lay a number of cross-cultural and disciplinary interests in old and new female activisms or efforts to exercise collective agency and assert a collective voice.

**Female Solidarity**

First there was a new cross-cultural and political interest in the theme of female solidarity and its variety of expressions, ranging from informal moral support and instrumental cooperative assistance, to formal organized activities specifically focused on defending or improving women’s concerns and/or an awareness of gender inequality and the desire to end it. What these activities, institutions and forms of association invariably had in common was an entry into new public spaces or domains, and research focused on the conditions that made for or contributed to female cooperation and consciousness as women came to constitute a significant, separate and social category of economic and political import with interests different from, or at least potentially different from those of the men of their households and communities. Cross-cultural research had drawn attention to the disadvantageous effects of female dispersal and domestic isolation, which seemed to be a major factor inhibiting the collective definition of women’s needs and furthering their common interests (Bujra and Caplan 1978).

Cross-cultural research in the 1970s also drew attention to the ways in which, across a variety of agendas, activisms and outcomes, it was the very act or process of organizing, regardless of agenda, that in and of itself posed an important challenge to gendered spaces, divisions and relations, and generated self-, gender- and political awareness on the part of both participant and observer. In her 1975 cross-cultural analysis of the position of women in society, Peggy Sanday found a high correlation between the presence of female solidarity groups devoted to the economic and political interests of women and women’s control of the products of their labour and their participation in political activities. She argued that female solidarity was one dimension of, and the route towards, high female status in the public domain (Sanday 1974, 1975: 1682).

This interest in finding and giving voice to women’s needs and making this voice heard in the public domain was influenced by research on women’s language and speech conducted in the 1970s by Edwin and Shirley Ardener in which they developed the theory of muting or muted group, which was not a condition of physical silence but an absence of a
social voice deriving from structures of male domination, discourse and utterance. These denied women a social voice by reducing their ability and right to speak publicly when, where and on what issues they chose, and forced women to appropriate dominant discourses in order to be heard (E. Ardener 1975; S. Ardener 1978). Both these factors had caused the omission of women’s voices from field and documentary research, and making up this omission dominated much of our research in the 1970s. Within this formidable body of cross-cultural research on women and organizing there were a number of more conceptual issues that were critically evaluated and debated, and I want to touch very briefly on two of the most relevant of these which exercised those of us working on women’s organizations at that time.

Conceptual Issues

The first question was whether women could be invariably treated as a singular or uniform analytic category either more generally in society or as the basis for their own separate organizations? There was a rejection of the idea that anatomy dictated a single destiny, but many still assumed that women might be a universal social category that is female and therefore a uniform analytical sociological category. Sandra Wallman was one social scientist who emphasized the variations between women. ‘The significance of being female . . . varies with technology, setting, class, context, task, work, race, age, professions, kinship wealth and economics’ (1976: 12).

In looking at how to unite women but take account of their divisions, Janet Bujra argued that women were deeply divided against themselves and that ‘it is clearly important that we resolve the analytic confusion that conflates women as an immutable biological category with “women” as a social category – historically, hierarchically, spatially, ideologically, and situationally varied’ (1978: 19).

Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley also challenged the assumption that female solidarity can be taken for granted and that women, as women, have a single unitary basis for solidarity by stating: ‘We do live in a hierarchical world; the women’s movement does not just combat structures of dominance, it is also surrounded by them and embedded in them’ (1976: 13). Hence they argued that there could not be instant and transcendent unification of women and that women’s organizations must to some extent respect the terms of women’s existing social relationships with one another.
It was not just women’s existing social relationships with one another that were of theoretical concern but also women’s relations with men. More generally within women’s studies an initial concern with the role and status of women in societies and sectors was giving way to the adoption of the broader analytic concept of gender, which not only encompassed a concern with women but also highlighted women’s roles, responsibilities and opportunities in relation to men. Feminist theorists had begun to take up unquestioned assumptions about sex and gender and draw attention to the way in which socially-constructed gendered hierarchies shaped the lives and activities of women within households, communities and societies. When it came to analysing the relations of separate and exclusive women’s gender-specific organizations to men’s or joint modes of organizing, then cross-cultural experience in the women’s movement in the 1970s had suggested a number of practical options centred around organizational separation and integration: that women should be separately organized in their own social spaces and movements; that women should form separate units within shared space or mixed organizations or be recruited directly into joint organizations or men’s spaces. Cross-cultural examples of these trends were critically evaluated for their record and efficacy in exercising the collective will and voice of women.

These two interests interrogating women and women in relation to men constituted the practical and conceptual context for initial interest in women’s experience of organizing in China and directed our analytical focus towards exploring three main questions. First the emergence of women’s agendas, activism and networks of organizations, groups and networks; second their effectiveness in crafting a collective identity and developing gender awareness; and third, their organizational relations with other social movements, political parties and the state. I will very briefly take each of these in turn.

**Relevant Questions**

In looking at the conditions which provide an impetus for female solidarity, the history of female solidarity and women’s organizations in China provided ample opportunities to explore variations in their development and in the contexts of new organizational spaces, agendas, activations, and outcomes. Feminist scholars in the China field in the 1970s took a great interest in the new public spaces and unprecedented channels for stimulating women’s own organizations and consciousness provided
at the turn of the century by girl’s schools, women’s literacy classes, the new media, welfare or charitable clubs, and patriotic, revolutionary and political associations or institutions. We explored their origins in and relations to pre-existing women’s communities in villages or secret society associations and we examined the role of inherited and imported ideologies of democracy or women’s suffrage and individualism or socialism in awakening and uniting women around collective agendas and activities.

In the 1970s most of us had to be content with documentary sources to study these agendas and activities for at that time there were few opportunities to visit China and there was little reflexivity, scholarship or investigation within China.

One of the most important questions was whether or not the formulation of such agendas and activisms involved a sufficient degree of gender awareness or consciousness to be termed feminist. Does female activism in and of itself entail women being conscious of their special or specific oppression as women? Certainly some of the activists in early organizations in China struggled to awaken different categories of women to their common situation and thus widen the social membership of women’s organizations. As for the activists themselves, what we found was that the very process and presence of women organizing in the public domain soon challenged gender stereotypes, spaces and boundaries and brought women into competition with female-specific restrictions and prohibitions that had segregated or excluded them from old and new public social and political spaces and participation. This soon had the effect of raising gender awareness of both participant and observer alike. What might begin as more social, patriotic or practical soon became political, gendered and strategic as the new women’s organizations attempted to openly define women’s rights to direct participation in public events and affairs. Not only was there a new-found collective confidence and energy evident which was exciting to observe and to research, but experiments were conducted and outcomes consciously self-monitored in such a way as to suggest that the very process of organization was in fact a necessary condition for visible and effective women’s participation. There was evidence too to suggest that women themselves felt that they were significantly disadvantaged and individually vulnerable without any form of separate organization, whether or not these organizations always protected their needs or furthered their interests. However, even where they organized, the collective fragility of women’s organizations was such that individual participants were very often left exhausted, disillusioned and persecuted as outcasts from family, community or party, and their organizations rendered ineffective or disbanded. The immense courage
and initiative was often awe-inspiring to those of us sitting in libraries here.

This organizational fragility led to an interest by both participant and researcher into the nature and conditions of the often uneasy alliances between women’s organizations and other social movements, political parties or the state. The varying histories of women organizing within and alongside patriotic, revolutionary, Guomindang and Communist parties and the party-state during the twentieth century provided ample opportunity to examine or explore conditions under which women’s organizations expanded and were sustained or alternatively circumscribed, or more conspicuous than widespread, were rendered ineffective or suppressed. Because of the longevity and importance of the relations between the Communist Party and the Women’s Federation, research centred on the history of this sole women’s organizational network and voice permitted and nurtured by the Party on the premise that women shared a special fourth oppression separate from those of class, kin and religions affecting both men and women. Practically too, the Party had argued that only via their own organization could women be mobilized to participate in war, politics and production and at the same time establish an organizational base from which they could begin to negotiate new rights and opportunities. Certainly early definitions included both general and gender-specific advantages to women in forming their own separate organizations.

When the Communist Party became the government in 1949, the party-state continued to encourage and develop a single women’s organization on the grounds that it was one thing to introduce new legal and other entitlements to enter the public and redefine the domestic but quite another to acquire the authority to claim them. The research of a generation of Euro-American scholars in the China field revealed that the role of the All China Women’s Federation in mobilizing women for production, mass campaigns and political participation in the public domain was very considerable. In addition, it had taken the lead in marriage and family reform; in challenging traditional gender stereotypes that were often reinforced by new political, social and economic structures; and in uniting the diverse interests and priorities of its different female constituents which it had to funnel into one public voice to express women’s separate needs. However, when it asserted or lobbied for women’s strategic interests, it also challenged male spaces and sources of power so that it frequently ended up on the defensive and having to protect its organizational separation and survival – largely because of the tensions which characterized its uneasy relations with the party-state.
One area of interest to researchers was the tension between gender and class identity and gender and class organizations, which in China was generated by the very legitimation of a gender-specific organization in a society in which class divisions, class organizations and class struggle took precedence. In these circumstances, the very rationale for women’s organizing into a separate women’s organization had required the Women’s Federation to act in a dual capacity – both as a medium for the state/party apparatus exerting its influence among a female constituency and as a mechanism encouraging women to take an active part in defining and asserting their own needs and demands. The conflict between these two goals could be greater or lesser depending on the degree to which government policies themselves took cognizance of women’s interests and the degree to which the women’s organization itself pursued activities that disrupted the gender relations of joint organizations, revolutionary movements or party-state agendas and thus were seen to threaten familial and community or party unity and stability. Both trends were evident in the history of the women’s movement in China and the question that came to concern us was, could these tensions between gender-specific and class organizations be reduced or resolved in such a way that women were not disadvantaged or their organizational integrity jeopardized? Our research on the history of the women’s movement in China showed that this tension had been resolved in two ways. It could be, as is now argued in China, that neither of these ways was to the advantage of women.

The first was the circumscription or bounding of women’s organizational spaces and activities – both imposed and self-imposed – so that activities were restricted to those which were not socially or politically disruptive. It is a general conclusion of that early generation of empirical investigations undertaken by Euro-American feminist scholars that the Women’s Federation, as a mass organization created by the state, had been more effective in soliciting women’s support for government policies than in getting them changed to take account of women’s needs. This was especially the case when those needs, such as freedom of marriage and divorce, either did not appear to contribute to, or actually conflicted with the prior goals of the government to increase production, and promote class or revolutionary struggle.

A second consequence was the muting of women’s collective voice by encouraging women to adopt the dominant language, modes of address and dress and skills to enter male spaces or ‘half of heaven’ on terms more male than female, which involved the silencing of gender identity and consciousness. Many women I have interviewed in the past few years
retrospectively identify the main legacy of the revolutionary years as the ‘coming out of women into society’, but at the cost of sacrificing something of their female selves. As Li Xiaojiang, a pioneer of the contemporary women’s movement, noted in 1988, ‘they knew that they were women, but they knew less the difference between themselves and men’.2

However, this suppression of gender identity and consciousness was not just the result of unequal male-female power relations. There were a number of common assumptions which influenced both women’s and revolutionary stances and movements. The most important was that there was some reductionism evident in theories of female status and revolution, in that gender was not a well-defined area of theoretical concern. It was commonly reduced to a few generalized slogans, with policies that women frequently perceived to be derivative of broader socio-economic and political strategies. In the final analysis, the problem of women was perceived to be ‘a revolution within a revolution’. And it was not so much the fact that the priorities of the broader revolution took first place that had jeopardized the achievement of gender-specific organizations as that the connections between the two had not been fully explored either practically or theoretically.

In looking at tensions between gender and class and their resolution, I do not want to devalue the role of the separate organization for women and the work of the Women’s Federation. I myself have the utmost respect for its nationwide network embracing women in even the most remote regions and for its continuous local and national efforts to negotiate and renegotiate a role for itself within China’s revolutionary history and socialist context. Moreover, there is sufficient field evidence that, in a variety of settings and situations, women time and again turned to the Women’s Federation for aid in exercising new rights and claims while documentary evidence shows that it attempted to publicize and implement policies promoting at least some of women’s needs and interests. When and where no such organization existed, through either neglect or suppression, then both documentary and field evidence suggest that women themselves and the government felt its absence and their loss.

The history of women’s organizations before the Reform period is both informative and instructive and constituted an exciting area for research in the 1970s in both Chinese and cross-cultural studies. What is so interesting in the new millennium is that many of the issues raised by the earlier agendas, activisms and outcomes of women organizing before the Reform period are still relevant and pose some pertinent parallels with some of the more recent developments discussed in the chapters of this volume.
Pertinent Parallels

Early twenty-first-century analyses have very much centred on identifying and analysing the new social spaces, new channels of communication, new social organizations and new voices that emerged, diversified and expanded in the years immediately before. These new organizational spaces and voices have parallels with those in periods preceding the 1970s, but they are also different in that they are not so much about entry into existing public spaces or arenas, and formal political organizations, as about the creation and development of the ‘social’, or that physical and conceptual space between the domestic and the formal political domain of the party-state apparatus. The reforms of recent years have not only redefined the spheres of domestic and state responsibility, but they have also redefined their relations – primarily by creating a space between the two which can be called ‘the social’ after Foucault and Donzelot, or the non-government public spaces of civil society which, whatever the label, constitute new forms of political engagement or participation for both women and men (Donzelot 1979; Foucault 1981). The new social organizations (shehui tuanti) have a multiplicity of aims which may be social, religious, recreational, academic, or professional. Many have been initiated by women who make up their membership and define their agendas which may be social or gender-specific in aim with the latter to do with women and health, law, family issues including violence, social welfare, education, the media and the environment. Others are more academic and have a women’s-studies agenda. Whatever the orientation, what has distinguished debates and discussions in recent years within and outside of China is the presence and participation of Chinese women’s academic and activist voices.

There has been much debate in China among women as to the importance of these organizations in offering new forms of political engagement and participation alternative to and more effective than formal political organizations and cadre representation. They depend on self-defined and individual and collectively generated effort rather than on state-quotas and sponsorship as had previously been the case. As one activist, Wen Ding,¹ has argued, social and political participation is no longer about being a cadre, it is about having your voice heard (cited in Wang 1999: 38). Nevertheless, the agendas and activisms may also challenge and conflict with competing dominant or hegemonic party-state agendas, thus raising many of the earlier questions to do with the relations of women’s separate organizations to other social and political groups including the party-state. I will deal very briefly here with the relations between these
new social or civil organizations and the party-state about which so much
has been written. Although it is generally agreed that the party-state has
withdrawn or retreated from many areas it engaged in before 1979, and
that there are now new spaces and forms for communication and political
participation recognized by the government, these organizations remain
under the supervision of government or party departments, with a number
of registration practices and controls ambivalently reflecting alternating
couragement and restrictions and the overall fragility of these new
political structures.

Another interesting relationship, and one discussed in the chapters of
this volume, is the variety of linkages between the new women’s organiza-
tions and Women’s Federation as new spaces and voices for women have
opened up, permitting new organizations initiated and developed by
women outside of the Federation. In this respect it is very tempting to
establish dichotomies between old and new women’s platforms and
organization based on differences in organizing from above or below,
and single versus diverse or multiple voices, but participant observation
and research also show how the Women’s Federation itself has initiated
and undergone several important changes to its own organizational brief.
First, its increased attention to the representation of women’s as opposed
to party-state interests has been noted by women activists in China, and
is apparent in its increasing demand for the formulation of gender-specific
needs and interests and legally-enshrined women’s rights. This shift in
emphasis can be clearly seen in the speeches and platforms of the national
women’s congresses. If examined in sequence, these reveal and record a
gradual increase in interest in female entitlements which, while not
resolving the tensions in balancing its support for women and the party-
state, does increasingly emphasize and call on the state to recognize and
validate women’s equal rights to education, employment, property and
person. This interest resulted in formulating a new law protecting the
rights of women in 1992, which was the first law entirely devoted to
women’s rights in China’s history. Secondly, the Women’s Federation
has also redefined itself as a non-government organization to allow for
new initiatives to meet its new needs and interests and provide it with
access to new sources of international funding alternative to the Chinese
party-state (see Zhang, Chapter Eight). Thirdly, the Women’s Federation
has itself become an umbrella organization, sometimes using its formal
privileged status to protect the new but still burgeoning informal and
more vulnerable new social organizations. Many of these have openly
admitted the debt they owe, at least in this respect, to the Women’s
Federation (see Liu, Chapter Seven).
It can be argued that there has been more space made available for women to organize than for other social categories such as factory workers and that changes in the Women’s Federation are in some respects unique compared to, say, the All China Federation of Trades Unions and other mass organizations. There is some debate both within and outside of China as to whether these new trends merely signify the weakness of gender-specific organizations and their perceived secondariness or overall unimportance in the political system or a genuine state recognition of the importance of women organizing variously to define their needs and forward their interests. A second point debated is whether old and new organizations, their political agendas and their activities reflect new forms of gender awareness and whether they are gender-strategic or feminist-conscious. An important criterion said to distinguish old from new forms of women’s organizations both in China and elsewhere is the degree of self-motivation, self-definition and self-awareness involved. This is seen to derive from the contrast made between previous forms in which women were deemed equal, organized from above or by others, and new forms of organization which involve women struggling for their own equality through self-defined actions. As Li Xiaojiang has noted, it is the self-awareness of women as women and their collective consciousness which ought to be the important component distinguishing past organizing from above and the new self-motivated, directed and determined women’s organizations (cited in Wang 1999: 38).

There are a number of factors which make for a new gendered awareness in post-reform China. First, there is a new awareness of problems and disadvantages specific to women as the mask of the revolutionary rhetoric of equality has given way to a new interest in women’s gender-specific experience and new problems deriving from the reforms such as new discriminations in job recruitment, new forms of unemployment, new illiteracy and new reductions in cadre and political representation. These have all been made visible by new forms of social investigation and debate. Second, the novelty of multiple initiatives and voices to address immediate and practical needs of women in society still means creating and entering new spaces from which women had been estranged, marginalized or excluded, thus generating gender consciousness. It is fashionable now to conceptually distinguish practical from strategic agendas, activisms and outcomes (Molyneux 1985: 227–54; Moser 1993), but the creation of new social or civil spaces has meant that the immediate and practical may at one and the same time be strategic as women create, develop and claim new political and gendered spaces and voices and repeatedly come up against the dual restrictions of politics
and gender. Again, as in earlier decades of the twentieth century, it may be that the very process of organizing generates or increases oppositional consciousness or gender awareness so that any practical aim or focus of agenda or activity soon overlaps with the strategic. Third, in recent years gender itself has become an increasingly visible area of investigation and analysis as part of the burgeoning interest in women’s studies and in gender-aware social investigation. And it is with a concern for the concept of gender and its relevance for women organizing, both in China and cross-culturally, that I want to conclude.

**Gender and Women Organizing**

Cross-culturally there has been much recent questioning of the assumptions about sex and gender; of the ways in which social constructions of gender shapes female bodies, lives and activities; and of the balance of the biological and cultural in defining men and women’s physical and social differences, similarities and relations in households, communities and societies. But there has been less questioning of the notion of gender itself as a singular analytic term and the ways in which different meanings ascribed to the notion of gender may influence and effect women organizing. It is an anthropological adage that meanings are born of contrasts between self and other, and perhaps nowhere is this more so than with gender, where it is the varying dichotomous definitions, understandings and interpretation of male and female that give rise to the binary oppositions with which we are all familiar in our own societies. However, just as we have questioned the unitary analytic category of ‘woman’ or ‘female’, so perhaps we should not assume that gender is a unitary category. We should question and investigate the semantics and meanings ascribed to gender and the ways or degrees to which cultures have constructed social differences between men and women and mapped or interpreted male-female relations.

In this respect one of the most interesting yet under-developed areas is the continuum of male-female difference subsumed within gender categories; how far gender divisions separate and segregate or overlap and merge male-female areas and activities, and whether gender categories are deemed competitive or complementary and hierarchical or equal. These questions have implications for women’s organizations, but there has been less emphasis on gender context and the linkages between the ways gender relations are conceived and the agendas, activisms and priorities of women organizing – either cross-culturally or within any
one society. Here again China today constitutes an interesting case study. In looking at the semantics and meanings attached to gender and gender relations in China, there are some observable differences from those of other cultures and particularly from those in Europe and North America. As a result of my own recent research I have increasingly come to the conclusion that there is a recursive theme of gender difference and complementarity rather than similarity and equality which pervades the discourses of women’s studies, the market economy and culturalism in China. This is true in government or women’s organizations both old and new, in consumerism, and in everyday practice in work units, schools, neighbourhoods and families. This coherent assertion of female difference derives from several sources: ancient religious and philosophic texts, in which gender difference underlies the male-female complementarity on which prescriptive wholeness or harmony rests; a re-emphasis on femininity, on women who knew how to be women as an adjunct to the new consumerism and market economy; contemporary reactions to the androgyny or gender sameness or blindness of the revolutionary years; and a culturally specific response to globalized images emphasizing Chinese women as different from an assumed androgynous, independent and feminist Western female ‘other’.

This emphasis on difference has implications for, and influences, the platforms, agendas and priorities of women individually and collectively, and has led to two trends characterizing present-day women’s organizations. The first is that there is an open assertion of female difference that distinguishes contemporary Chinese women from the men of their own culture, from women of the past within their own culture, and from ‘western’ women. This, I would argue, is characteristic not only of China but also of much of East and South Asia. It seems to me that this assertion, with its combination of elements of femininity and feminism, might be most appropriately termed in English ‘feminalism’, an archaic term meaning the womanly which can be translated as funü zhuyi in the Chinese language. Much as the term ‘culturalism’ is used to denote the strategic assertion of cultural difference, so it might be said that the term ‘feminalism’ best summarizes the strategic assertion of the womanly or female in China today. It continues to set definitions of femininity and feminism against male qualities or definitions of a ‘male other’ that are assumed rather than questioned.

Accompanying this assertion of gender difference is a notion of male-female relations that are based on the separation and complementarity underlying notions of social interdependence, cosmic harmony, wholeness, equanimity and stability. This also has implications for the platforms
and priorities of women’s organizations. As women activists have said many times, Chinese feminism speaks first and foremost for basic social justice in a socialist market situation. In their words, this includes moves against the abuse of women and children, including child labour, economic polarization and social disparity, corruption, money fetishism and the commoditization of cultural values. It includes moves for government accountability and open policy discussions, education (especially for neglected rural girls), equality in employment, a public medical service and women’s health care, and environmental protection. As they go on to note: ‘its rhetoric is feminine and its concern, also in the form of social criticism, is universal’ (Lin, Liu and Jin 1998).

Outside of China, there is both respect for and criticism of such universalist priorities. It is understandable that many of the issues which are of priority to women organizing in China affect both men and women, while there is no abstract reason why complementarity cannot be an apposite foundation for gender equality. However, it does have to be said that, cross-culturally, there is little evidence that difference or separation can ever be equal, whether it be gender-, age- or ethnicity-based. If very rarely, separation or complementarity can be maintained without stratification or hierarchy, then it may well be that assertions of female identity, gender difference and underlying notions of complementarity still inadvertently mute the quest of equity, underlie the persistence of sexual divisions of labour in China (despite decades of laws and movements) and most assuredly contribute to the cognitive unsubstitutability of daughters for sons – in my view, the ultimate test of female value and gender equality. However, it is debates around differences and similarities such as these that lie at the base of cross-cultural research and understanding. It is respect for our differences as well as our similarities that can help counter the dangers of the essentialized images and selective visions characteristic of both Orientalism and Occidentalism. It can take us also several steps further in our joint or cross-cultural endeavours to investigate and understand the practical and conceptual issues pertaining to the study of women organizing in China and elsewhere.

Notes

1. For analysis of women in China before 1978, see Andors (1975, 1980, 1983); Broyelle (1977); Croll (1974, 1978, 1979); Davin (1976); Diamond (1975);
Sidel (1972); Stacey (1979, 1983); Thorborg (1979); Weinbaum (1976); Wolf and Witke (eds) (1975); Young (ed.) (1973).


In the early 1990s in China, the word ‘homosexual’ (tongxinglian) simply did not exist in the laws or in the media. In medical materials and in dictionaries, homosexuality was explained as mental illness or sexual perversion. However, male homosexuals did exist in parks, mental hospitals and police stations. Some male homosexuals were ‘cured’ as ‘mental patients’, put in labour camps as ‘hooligans’ (liumang), or repressed and sentenced to prison.

Until the early 1990s no homosexuals revealed their sexual orientation publicly to society or to the media. The media maintained a silence on this issue. Openly published material did not directly provide this kind of information. Due to severe and pervasive discrimination, people dared not be open about their homosexuality, and because no one would be open, social prejudice and discrimination became even stronger. For example, my first girlfriend and I did not know what homosexuality was. We thought homosexuality was another word for sexual perversion. We advised each other: ‘We are definitely not homosexuals. We just love each other. Later we’ll both marry men.’ Later we both did get married, and then both got divorced. I remember the first time someone said to me ‘I am a homosexual.’ I thought, ‘Actually, I am too.’ But I did not dare to say it.

Homosexuals, especially lesbians (nü tongxinglian), did not know that other people, like ourselves, also had homosexual orientations. There was no one to share feelings with, and no place to find same-sex partners. Emotional and spiritual life were impoverished and full of suffering. Some homosexuals got married, and made great efforts to repress their homosexual orientations, or hide their same-sex partners from their family. Some people were not very clear themselves about their sexual orientation. For example, a woman living in Guangzhou who was already married
and had a child, had never heard of the word ‘homosexual’, and never thought about homosexuality. One day she came across the English word ‘lesbian’ on the internet, and understood what homosexuality was. She discovered that she herself originally was a homosexual. She told her husband, and asked for a divorce, but he not only beat and insulted her, he also hid their child from her at his relatives’ house. Some people who are clear about their sexual orientation do not dare be open about it, as they are afraid of being treated as sick or perverted.

I began to participate in some of the first homosexual activities in Beijing in the early 1990s. These were initiated and organized by a few homosexual activists. I once participated in a discussion meeting where mental health doctors, social workers such as volunteers from the Women’s Hotline\(^2\) and homosexuals discussed homosexual issues. There were no homosexuals who formally took part as homosexuals. The discussion was held in a factory on the weekend, under the title of ‘mental health research’. Mostly the attitude of the psychiatrists and social workers was sympathy, mixed with a lack of understanding and non-recognition. For example, one middle-aged woman from the Women’s Hotline said that a middle-school student phoned to ask advice on her special feelings for the same sex. She did not know what to do. The Women’s Hotline volunteer advised this young woman to think about society’s views, her parents’ expectations and her own future. She patiently explained the suffering and difficulties faced by homosexuals. She even pointed out that if she did not get married in future, her work unit would not assign her housing, so where would she live?\(^3\) This girl agreed on the phone to go away and have a good think about it, and phone again at another time. However, she never phoned back.

The psychiatrists often told of the homosexuals who came to hospital to be cured, who were unhappy and sometimes suicidal. In this discussion atmosphere, one man ‘came out’ about his homosexuality. Afterwards, he and I together started to use a different language, experience and feelings to demonstrate that not all homosexuals live lives of tragedy and suffering. Unhappiness, suffering and suicidal tendencies are not inherent to homosexuality, but are social problems created by prejudice, discrimination and pressure. Without such prejudice and pressure from public opinion, homosexuals would not have to hide, would not need sympathy, and even less would need to be cured.

A few homosexuals also began to realize that we should organize our own discussions, in our own circles, in environments without discriminatory language, and free from this misunderstanding and lack of recognition.
Only in an environment where the language is encouraging and supportive can people share their experiences and help each other.

In the 1990s, two or three homosexual activists started to organize activities. However, openly organizing activities in the name of homosexuality attracted government attention. Homosexual activities and activists were often visited by the police. Many times a fully prepared activity would be cancelled at the last moment. Once, in 1995, a discussion on AIDS had been organized in the park, and people had been informed. However, on the day before, the police told the organizer to cancel the activity. He did not have time to inform everyone, so found some friends to wait at the park entrance and at the bus stops to tell participants that the activity had been cancelled. Some plain-clothes police were also waiting at the park entrance, which made everyone feel that his or her security was not guaranteed.

Another activist, Wu Chunsheng, also received a visit from more than ten police to his home, because he had organized a party for forty homosexual men in a friend’s home. The police ordered him to stop organizing this kind of activity. Wu Chunsheng later organized a foreign and Chinese lesbian disco during the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It was held in Nightman disco, a disco where many homosexuals like to go. Two coachfuls of women came from the Women’s Conference, and over a dozen Beijing women came. That evening, the disco was full of plain-clothes and military police. Afterwards Wu Chunsheng was detained. The second day of his detention he was flown back to his home province of Guangzhou, where he was put in prison for two weeks, after which he was released without charges. The police told him he was not permitted to return to Beijing, but he flew back to Beijing the next day.

In 1998 and 1999 two homosexual activists were searched by customs when entering China, and materials they were carrying related to homosexuality were confiscated. In this environment, the Chinese homosexual movement developed gradually, step by step. In 1997 we organized a women and men’s homosexual Pager Hotline (BB ji rexian). In 1998 we organized a Queer Women Group (Nütongzhi xiaozu). Many homosexuals call themselves tongzhi (see Lexicon). This label came from Hong Kong. To start with in Mainland China revolutionary Communist Party members would call each other tongzhi (comrade), to express common interests and a common path. During the Cultural Revolution it was especially popular, and almost all other titles were abolished, to express revolutionaryariness. Hong Kong activists and published materials borrowed this
word and its meaning to describe homosexuals. After the two Global Chinese Tongzhi Conferences held in Hong Kong in 1998 and 1999, more and more mainland homosexuals adopted this label. In summer 1998 the First National Men and Women Tongzhi Conference (Quanguo diyi jie nannü tongzhi daibiao dahui) was held in Beijing, attended by thirty women and men homosexuals from several provinces, and from Hong Kong, Taiwan and foreign countries. In the autumn of 1998, the First National Women Tongzhi Conference (Quanguo diyi jie nütongzhi daibiao dahui) was held in Beijing. Twenty people from several provinces came.

The Tongzhi Pager Hotline

In the summer of 1997, six tongzhi living in Beijing (three foreign women, one Chinese man, one foreign man and myself) met together to discuss the potential and need for setting up a Tongzhi Pager Hotline (Tongzhi rexian). Some people suggested we should find a way to organize everyone. However, we all agreed that the time was not yet ripe for setting up a tongzhi organization or publishing tongzhi books.

Establishing a tongzhi organization at the time entailed a relatively high political risk. Organizing tongzhi activities was risky, not only for the organizers but also for participants. Because of the tense political environment, even if the activities were simply entertainment-oriented, police often interfered. For example, police observed and sometimes interrogated people at Dongdan park (a male homosexuals’ cruising ground) and also at tongzhi bars. According to news from the web, the police visited and arrested several people in Southern Nights, a bar in Guangzhou patronized by homosexuals. Publishing tongzhi materials would be even more difficult, as the government maintains tight control on this area. Even in the mid- and late 1990s, very few materials researching homosexuality have been openly published. A pager is relatively discreet, so less easily stopped than a telephone line. The pager could be used for both publicity and organizing. So everyone contributed to buying the pager, and the Tongzhi Pager Hotline (henceforth Hotline) started to operate.

By 1997 there already existed some tongzhi spaces, such as bars and discos, but many tongzhi did not know where to find them. Others did not dare go, because going to such places meant showing oneself to be homosexual, or because they simply were not used to bar culture, and thought that respectable people do not go to bars. For most women tongzhi, going to a bar was even more difficult for several reasons. Not
knowing about the bars, the bar culture of smoking and drinking, economic reasons, and fear of revealing their sexual orientation, all inhibited women. For the first year or two after the tongzhi bar started, only about five or six women went there. The tongzhi bar was the first public tongzhi space. Having a space for tongzhi activities was very important to the tongzhi movement. Only if everyone comes out into the open can we move from 'non-existence' or being a 'phenomenon' to being visible living people. Only if everyone gets together can we move from being pitiable, solitary people to being an organized political body with an agenda, and struggle together for just treatment from society. The Hotline could provide information about the tongzhi scene, spaces and activities, and encourage more women and men to come out, particularly women. Women tongzhi especially need to know where to find other women tongzhi. The Hotline could become an early organizing, information and networking method. Compared with a telephone line, the pager was more mobile, and even if discovered it would not be so easy to close down.

To start with the Hotline was run by women and men together. Women were particularly enthusiastic, signing up to answer the Hotline and take part in training discussions. To start with the Hotline was not organized or systematized. There were no fixed volunteers to answer the Hotline, no fixed working times or locations, no financial resources, and no training for people who answered the line. Often one person would take the pager for a week or a few weeks, but if he or she happened to be at work when it beeped, and were busy, or were afraid colleagues or bosses would hear, he or she would not be able to return the call. Some volunteers did not have a telephone at home, so would go to a public phone to reply to calls. Some people used their own mobile phones to reply to calls. Later we moved from having no fixed times to answer the pager, to setting three periods of four to six hours a week, after work and weekend times, to respond to pages. Each time one or two people answered calls.

We publicized the Hotline on the internet and by printing cards which we handed out at the tongzhi bar. The most successful publicity was the advertisement of the Hotline number in a 1998 edition of the magazine Hope (Xiwang), a Guangdong province popular magazine which is sold all over the country. This magazine was criticized, but the edition was not withdrawn. That edition published a special feature on homosexuality, with articles by experts, scholars, and doctors, as well as some pieces by tongzhi themselves. This special feature consisted mostly of heterosexuals' commentaries or research. An advertisement for the Hotline number was also printed. In the week after the advertisement was printed, the numbers
calling the Hotline increased to over a hundred. However, the leaders of the magazine were subsequently criticized. The Hotline could not be advertised openly in publications, so the numbers calling gradually decreased.

**Hotline Training Sessions**

We began with irregular training. Because we had never worked on hotlines before, initially we invited people from the Women’s Hotline and AIDS hotline to introduce hotline basics, and we bought some materials which we passed around. More important was self-training. We began holding discussions on Sunday afternoons. Often the content consisted of questions or difficulties we had come across when answering calls. Because these discussions were held during the daytime and on the weekend, and were discussions rather than smoking and drinking activities in the bar, they attracted many women tongzhi. Often Hotline volunteers would raise issues they had come across while answering calls: for example, ‘What kind of organization is the Hotline?’, ‘Is falling in love with someone of the same sex a sickness?’, ‘How should I deal with parental pressure to get married?’, ‘Where can I find friends with same sex orientation?’ Everyone would discuss together, and through group discussion look for answers, although not supposedly ‘correct’ answers. Through discussion, we also summarized some guidelines for Hotline workers. For example, to prevent interference from police, we should not agree to meet with people who call. We should listen patiently, not make any moral judgements, and so on.

Once during discussion I raised a question that I had found difficult to answer. A married heterosexual woman had called to ask: ‘My husband is a homosexual, so what should I do?’ She was only 24 and had never heard of homosexuality. After her husband had told her he was a homosexual she was very unhappy. She loved him very much, was afraid to leave him, and did not know what to do. She asked ‘Can homosexuals change?’ I sympathized with this woman, and with her husband, and did not know how to reply to her question. So I brought this up at the training to see if anyone had any suggestions. Some people said, ‘Are we sick?’, ‘Why should we change?’, ‘Can heterosexuals change?’ And some people told of their own experience, and of the suffering they went through in pretending to be heterosexual. Everyone had much to say, and was bursting to say it all at once. I felt that actually our experience provided the best answers. Through this kind of training, we taught ourselves.

We held trainings in private homes, in the bar, or in cafés. Everyone would raise questions, everyone would discuss, everyone would answer.
There were no standard answers or correct answers. Our training was largely self-training, we did not invite experts or professors. It was our business as tongzhi. However, neither did we intend to exclude experts. In China, some experts can publish research on homosexuals in open publications. For example, Zhang Beichuan from Qingdao Medical College edits an open periodical about homosexuality called Friends (Pengyou). The first edition published an article called ‘Homosexuals are humans too’, which thought it was speaking out for homosexuals. We once had a discussion with about thirty people about Friends. Many homosexuals were happy that at least they could have this magazine, and some homosexuals thought we should be grateful for being treated as human. Others thought this was discrimination. Some experts have written books about homosexuals, for example Their World by Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo (1992). However, taking homosexuals to be ‘human too’, calling homosexuals ‘they’, and heterosexuals ‘we’, is the discourse of the culture of heterosexual hegemony (yixinglian baquan). The experts themselves, as well as many homosexuals, did not realize this was discrimination, and many homosexuals were happy enough just to be seen as human. But if I were to say ‘heterosexuals are human too’, would heterosexuals be as happy? As an activist organizing activities, I welcome heterosexuals to join in our activities, and support research on homosexuality, but I oppose heterosexual hegemonic culture and discourse in the tongzhi movement. I also do not accept that people who use the discourse of heterosexual hegemony can become experts on homosexuality. The real experts are not these people, but ourselves.

We ran a few safer sex training sessions, to which we did not invite any so-called experts. However, there was a doctor who often participated. He was a heterosexual, and indeed often announced that he was heterosexual, but was interested in researching homosexuality. He often came to participate in our training discussions, and raised questions. He never thought he was prejudiced against homosexuals. Once he brought some questionnaires for us to fill in, which included a question on the colour of our faeces. Everybody thought this question was ridiculous. I thought that researching the colour of homosexuals’ excrement shows both prejudice and ignorance. He asked me to fill in a form, but I said ‘I am colour blind, I can’t differentiate the colours. Next time I’ll just bring some faeces for you to examine.’ However, many people diligently filled in his questionnaire, wanting to help him gain a correct understanding of homosexuality.

Although callers had never asked questions on AIDS, we had already realized the importance of this issue. Not only should we understand this
knowledge in order to answer questions, but also to protect ourselves. We once did some safer sex training where everyone had to suggest one sexual behaviour, write it down on a card, then arrange the behaviours in order of risk. When it came to the doctor’s turn, he said he was heterosexual, and had come to study homosexuality, not to participate in the training. Everybody said it did not matter, heterosexuals are people too, they also have sexual behaviour. Finally he proposed ‘heterosexual intercourse’, and suggested that safety was not an issue. In ordering the different sexual behaviours by risk, he kept trying to put heterosexual intercourse as the safest, and homosexual sexual behaviours as the most dangerous. After our training, he finally understood that safer sex is about ‘how you do it’, not ‘whom you do it with’. Is it inadequate medical knowledge or social prejudice that makes a doctor completely ignorant about safer sex? After continuous self-training, we realized even more strongly the importance of helping ourselves in the tongzhi scene.

Our aim in starting the Pager Hotline was to encourage more friends to become more visible, and to provide help to those who needed it. After the Hotline was established, and after regular training and some experience in answering calls, we cultivated a core group, especially of women, who came out into the open, to take part in volunteering and training and to exercise and teach ourselves. We tongzhi use our own and other’s experience to encourage other tongzhi to bravely face society. This kind of help is much needed by the tongzhi scene.

Through the Hotline, we further understood the problems we faced. Through helping others, we sparked our own political consciousness. For example, many tongzhi from outside Beijing asked: ‘We don’t know if there are any tongzhi near us, we don’t know where to find them.’ After discussion, everyone agreed that if callers wanted, we would take their contact details and pass them on to other tongzhi in the area, so tongzhi circles could be formed in every town. Through the Hotline, we would ask callers who knew about places where tongzhi met in those towns, and would pass on this information to other tongzhi who needed it. The Hotline training was the best way for us to organize and teach ourselves. Through the Hotline we could work together, understand our own issues, and help ourselves and others.

**Problems, Issues and Future Development of the Hotline**

One of the problems we have faced is that those who staff the Hotline are few in number. Sometimes we cannot find anyone to answer the pager. Some people do not respect the agreed principles of the Hotline. Volunteers have different views on training, and different motivation levels
in taking part in the training. When answering the Hotline, it is hard to avoid a certain randomness and casualness. In 1999, women tongzhi rented their own office with a telephone line, and the Hotline divided into a women’s and a men’s hotline, so organizational strength was divided. The numbers volunteering at the men’s hotline were reduced. The women’s hotline office engaged a full-time worker, who was in charge of answering calls and informing people about activities. However, this has not become a functioning hotline.

Another problem concerns the pager itself. It is discreet, and not easily detectable by authorities. However, if several people call at once, the person on duty can only reply to one caller at a time, and other callers cannot be answered promptly. Some people call from public phones and cannot wait. Because the pager station requires people to leave their name and number, some people are afraid and do not dare page. Some people feel unsafe when asked their name, number and area by the pager station. Lack of funds is also a problem. When the Hotline started, there was no fixed place, no fixed telephone, and no fixed workers. The pager was bought jointly by a few initiators. Calls were only answered at very limited times, and phone bills were paid for by the volunteers who answered the calls. To start with, because not many people paged, we volunteers could afford to pay. Later, when the number of calls increased, especially long-distance domestic calls, it was very difficult for ordinary volunteers to meet the costs. One foreign tongzhi offered his house from which to reply to calls. Some volunteers continue to use their own home telephones or mobiles. We all work voluntarily. We are very motivated, but because of the increase in number of calls, the Hotline urgently needs funds and a fixed place from which to respond to pages.

Finally, because publications are strictly controlled, finding open publications which can advertise the Hotline is difficult. The Hotline can only be advertised on the internet and in the bar. Those who are in greater need of the Hotline are those who have no access to the web or who do not know where the bar is, especially women. How to let these people know about the Hotline is a big problem.

Despite these obstacles, through the hotlines, tongzhi in other areas can be put in contact with each other. Contact details of tongzhi in the same place who wish to leave their details can be passed on to each other, so networks can be set up outside Beijing. When the conditions are right they can also set up hotlines in other towns. In future a Beeper hotline bank account should be opened, and funds raised. Some individuals and work units have already indicated they would like to provide support for the hotline work. However, opening a bank account requires organizing
management responsibilities clearly, and may have to wait until the political environment is more relaxed.

**Women Tongzhi Organizing**

**How We Started**

Beijing tongzhi activity spaces first appeared in the summer of 1995. Wu Chunsheng (Chinese man) and an English woman organized tongzhi get-togethers every Wednesday evening in a non-tongzhi bar, called City Pub. Each time they told all the tongzhi they knew to turn up. The bar owner was happy to have some business. She would often chat and flirt with her new customers, and employed a gay waiter to cater to her growing tongzhi clientele. However, due to pregnancy, she sold the bar. The new management was hostile, so the Wednesday night gatherings had to keep changing bars. To start with only men joined in, because women tongzhi faced more obstacles in taking part in homosexual spaces and nightlife. Women tongzhi had less information, and were not used to a smoking and drinking bar atmosphere. Thus it was harder for women tongzhi to get to know each other, and even harder to get help and support. Because they lacked means to get to know others with the same sexual orientation as themselves, the psychological pressure was greater for women than for men.

In the 1990s, several materials about research on homosexuality were published. In addition to *Their World* (Li Yinhe & Wang Xiaobo 1992), there appeared *Homosexuality in China* by Fang Gang (1995), and Zhang Beichuan’s magazine *Friends*. Some women tongzhi wrote to these publishers, who introduced them to each other. They then started to write to each other, and set up a letter-writing network. Nevertheless, very few women tongzhi knew each other. Women tongzhi activities began with a few small-scale private get-togethers, with a few people eating together and dancing in someone’s home. This developed into several people going out to eat and dancing. We were very relaxed about who could participate. Some were women tongzhi, some were their relatives, friends, and not tongzhi. We did not stipulate sexual orientation. As long as people wanted to come, they were welcome. To start with, the activities mostly were organized by an English woman in her house in a foreign residents’ compound. Later, she moved to a student dormitory where her roommate was a Christian and thus opposed to holding homosexual activities in the dorm. We then started holding activities in Chinese people’s homes, and these were organized by Chinese.
Organizing Activities
The first time we organized a politically related activity was in a small bar, to commemorate the American Stonewall homosexual movement anniversary. In 1996 in Beijing, there was still no tongzhi bar. This time, we learnt from past experience, and told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, to take part in a ‘birthday party’. We bought a birthday cake and little presents. Sixty people came, among them eight women. This was the first time this many women took part in a get-together. Wu Chunsheng quietly told me that there were plainclothes police in the bar. We thought of a way to get around the police.

First we sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and cut the cake. Then I said to everyone, ‘Can you guess whose birthday it is today? Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you will get a present’ (which were condoms and sweets wrapped up). Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. People who knew about Stonewall told those who did not, who then came and whispered to me. Everyone one by one came to me and said ‘Today is the American homosexual movement commemoration day’. One boy when he heard the story ran over to me and said ‘I know! I know! Today is the birthday of all of us!’ When I heard his words, I was very moved, and my heart skipped a beat. I whispered what he said ‘Today is the birthday of all of us’ to other tongzhi. I thought, that’s probably what the tongzhi movement means. We unite together, we have a common birthday. From that day, this bar became the first homosexual bar in Beijing. This backstreet bar was always empty, so we decided to make it our hang-out. The owners were never fully welcoming, but needed the clientele. It became almost 100 per cent tongzhi every night.

Through the letter-writing network, the Tongzhi Pager Hotline, the internet, the tongzhi bar, tongzhi discos, and also through an Asian lesbian e-mail network set up by a Chinese woman in America, an increasing number of women tongzhi got to know each other. Activities also gradually increased, and became more regular. From just going out to eat and dancing together, they developed into sports, mountain walking, watching videos and discussions. The organizing seemed to start from an activity in a park. Ten or so people went to the park together, three boy tongzhi and the rest girls. One of the girls was a middle-school classmate of one of the boys. She was not a lesbian. Another non-lesbian girl came, who was the older sister of one of the lesbians. After we had walked in the park and had a picnic, everyone sat on the grass in a circle, and discussed what game we would play. Someone suggested that everyone should take turns sitting in the middle and answering questions. Everybody asked
questions about homosexuality. For example ‘When did you first realize you were a homosexual?’ Or, ‘As a heterosexual, how do you see your classmate/sister?’ We shared experiences, and understood heterosexuals’ attitudes to homosexuality. I felt relaxed and happy in a way I never had before. Everyone had the same feeling. We said we should do this kind of discussion again!

Later we had several political discussions. After one discussion, we elected a ‘Discussion Commissioner’, a ‘Publicity Commissioner’, an ‘Eating Commissioner’, a ‘Sports Commissioner’, a ‘Parks Commissioner’, etc. and divided organizational responsibility for different activities, such as eating, dancing, outings, going to the bar, and discussing issues. Once when a dozen women were eating together, someone said that our activities and organization should have a name. After extensive discussion, we decided to call ourselves ‘Women tongzhi’ (nü tongzhi). But this did not really mean we were organized. Women tongzhi did not have a fixed leadership, or fixed participants in activities, or a fixed place. The elected commissioners were just in charge of informing everyone of where to meet for activities, and finding out what activities people wanted to do. Whatever activities people wanted, the commissioners would organize. When commissioners got fed up, went away on business, or left the country, we would change to new commissioners.

Subjects we discussed included sexual relations and films. The first time we formally sat down together to have a discussion was in a woman tongzhi’s home. The subject of discussion was ‘sexual delight’. Through discussions I discovered that not everyone thought that sex and sexual delight were important. What people emphasized in the discussion were deep emotions for the same sex. Some people asked: ‘What is sexual delight?’ Some people had never experienced this. Some people cried while they talked, because they were thinking about someone they loved. At the end of every discussion, we all felt we understood each other better, and were more intimate, and felt we were no longer alone.

The topics of discussion were always decided by everyone jointly. Everyone took turns being chair. We tried to give everyone a chance to practise being chair, and to feel that these were our own organization and activities, and that we were all organizers, not simply participants, so everyone could feel equal and free in this atmosphere. Although we were not a formal organization, the activities made us all feel we were not alone, and that we belonged somewhere. Women tongzhi activities made us feel we were a collective, not just independent individuals. In women tongzhi discussions, the atmosphere was free, relaxed, with no tension or pressure. One could say what she liked. Each time after
discussions, everyone felt very happy and relaxed. Often organizing activities made us more united, and stronger. When having tongzhi discussions together with men, women tongzhi seemed braver, and would speak out more boldly, and express ourselves more clearly. Many men tongzhi envied our women tongzhi circle.

Once we had a joint discussion with men tongzhi; the topic was previously set as ‘Women Tongzhi’, and I was to chair. To start with I felt uncomfortable discussing ‘women tongzhi’ with men tongzhi. But my sisters said: ‘Don’t worry, we are here!’ So I suggested we should have no fixed agenda but that instead the discussion would start with men tongzhi asking questions and we women tongzhi answering. One man asked ‘How do you women make love to each other?’ In my heart I thought ‘Oh No! How are we going to answer this one?’ But my sisters were not at all shy in replying, because they felt what we do is natural and beautiful. But even so, one male tongzhi listening said that he could hardly bear it, and felt as if his intestines were turning over, hearing women talk about sex like that. We were very happy to hear this kind of reaction. My sisters and myself, and other men tongzhi all told him: ‘The problem is not with women’s sex, or with your intestines, but with your head. You are prejudiced against women tongzhi, and against same-sex love.’

Another man asked, ‘Do you women face parental pressure to get married?’ We discovered that both women and men tongzhi all face this pressure. Some people suggested we should organize some marriages between women and men tongzhi, so we can take on this pressure together. Other people said doing this would be giving in to social pressure and traditional conceptions. Most women tongzhi said they did not want to get married. However, after this meeting some women and men tongzhi did indeed marry each other.

We also once organized a successful fund-raising event, to raise money for the First National Women Tongzhi Conference. In the summer of 1998 after the First National Men and Women Tongzhi Conference had finished, I asked a few women participants from outside Beijing to come to my house for a meal and a chat. Everyone was still very excited, they all felt there was much more to say, and they did not know what they would do when they went back home. Women from outside Beijing were envious that so many women in Beijing had come out. They hardly knew of any women tongzhi in their cities, and felt very lonely. We all felt we should have a good discussion together about what we should do for our future, and what we should do to help our sisters, and also to understand our own needs. I asked everyone, would it be possible to organize a national
women tongzhi meeting in the near future? Agreement was nearly unanimous. After that, we got together a few more times, and did a serious study of the feasibility, discussed the location, time, participants, and most importantly the meeting agenda. Through discussion, we decided the conference should focus on three themes: editing a women tongzhi periodical; building a national women tongzhi network; and setting up a women tongzhi telephone hotline. At the time we thought these were our greatest needs. Two people were responsible for each topic, writing up an outline for discussion in the meeting.

I suggested we should establish a leading group for the meeting. Originally a six-person leading group had been set up at a meeting at my house. Then two people withdrew, and someone new joined. Because at the time I was about to leave the country, I did not become a member of the leading group. About ten women came to that meeting, and we also invited some men tongzhi to give us some suggestions. One Beijing woman had a list of thirty women tongzhi living outside of Beijing throughout the country. These were contacts she had collected through a letter-writing network over a period of a few years. Women outside Beijing faced even more difficulties. They had no information channels, no support networks, nowhere to find same-sex partners. This Beijing woman had rented a postal box with her own money, and written letters every day over several years to these women, to help and support them, and introduce them to each other. We decided that we would invite these thirty women to our meeting. However, it would be difficult for these women to afford to travel to Beijing, and in any case we would need money for the meeting. So we decided to look for and apply for funding, from organizations and individuals in foreign countries and Hong Kong. I was in charge of organizing a fund-raising party in a club in Beijing. In name it was my going-away party. We meticulously designed and printed invitations which we gave out in all tongzhi spaces. On the invitation it said ‘collecting donations for the First National Women Tongzhi Conference’.

After careful organization and division of labour, nearly all women tongzhi we knew and some men tongzhi were mobilized. Tasks were divided up. Different people took responsibility for giving out the invitations, making the banner, organizing the raffle, and doing the auction. We invited other women NGO representatives. People from women’s NGOs such as the All China Women’s Federation, the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group, the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, the Women’s Hotline, and the Huaguang Women’s College all participated. Some women tongzhi were responsible for ticket
sales. Some were responsible for handing out red AIDS ribbons to every ticket buyer. Some sold raffle tickets. I was the MC, and was responsible for auctioning the goods we had collected, all donated by tongzhi. We wrapped these up ahead of time, then used some as prizes, and auctioned off the rest. After everything had been sold, I auctioned myself. I wore a ripped black dress with only two buttons, one of which was missing, and an old straw hat, and wiggled about on stage for ages, until finally I managed to sell myself for 300 yuan. I was very happy that before I left China I was able to use my body to make a contribution to the women tongzhi movement.

We raised precious funds from different sources for the First National Women Tongzhi Conference. The fund-raising activities united us women tongzhi, working together for a common goal, and also exercised our skills.

**Goals and Functions of Our Organizing Activities**

To start with, our goal in organizing activities was to attract more women tongzhi to become more visible. We started with entertainment activities. Because the political element was not so strong, people were not afraid to join in, so we could attract many participants. Because it was not political, it would not be interfered with or stopped.

After a certain time, when everyone was more familiar with each other, they were not so scared. It was important to meet together regularly, so we would no longer feel we were alone, and would also dare to organize activities that were not simply entertainment. We started just privately talking to each other, and telling friends about the problems and difficulties we had come across, and gradually, everyone felt it was necessary to discuss some common issues. We needed to understand some common problems, and together think of ways to solve them. Even if we could not solve them, we could support each other, and lessen the pressure. Through discussions, we understood that there were many more sisters who also needed support and help. Through further discussion, we could suggest ways of helping each other. Through this kind of organizing, many sisters received help, emotional support and understanding. In this heterosexual-dominated society, we could find the understanding and support we needed in our own organization. Our organization and activities also educated and cultivated a core group of activists.

Through organizing discussions and activities, activists exercised their skills, and understood our own needs, and what we could do to support and help ourselves. These activists made possible the First National Women Tongzhi Conference. If we had not had three to four years’
experience of organizing activities, and had not developed and exercised ourselves as a core group, we would not have been able to put together this meeting. This meeting set the direction for present and future development of the women tongzhi movement.

Problems and Issues of Women Tongzhi Organizing Activities
To start with our activities mostly took place in foreigners’ homes, because foreigners are not afraid of coming out, they have the material conditions to provide a place for activities, and also experience of organizing, so they often took the initiative in organizing activities. That is how women tongzhi activities started. But our activities were criticized by some for being centred round foreigners, imperialist-led, etc. I am happy to hear such criticisms, because we do indeed need our own Chinese women tongzhi organizations and leadership, but we also welcome help and support from foreign ‘imperialists’ with experience and enthusiasm. I believe that without the help of these foreign imperialists, sooner or later we would have established our own organization, but because of their support, the women tongzhi organization emerged a few years earlier than we might have otherwise, and our sisters received support a bit sooner. I am also happy to see that the present organization does not have foreigners as leaders, but instead local leaders.

Outside of Beijing, homosexuals only have activity spaces, they have not organized. Women tongzhi are basically in a state of hiding. For example, in Shanghai, the second largest city in China, women tongzhi have no organization, and no collective activities. In Shenzhen, women tongzhi meet over the internet, and make friends, but still have not formed an organization. For women who do not have internet access, especially women living in small towns or in the countryside, life is still very closed. They are in even greater need of help. A woman from a small county town in Shandong province phoned and said there were no women tongzhi near her. She had had a girlfriend before, who had already been forced to get married. She herself had tried marriage, but had been very unhappy. After her demand for divorce had been refused, she had no alternative but to reveal her sexual orientation. After divorce, her work unit and family all looked at her differently. She said she would have to marry again in future, and that in her town, single women were the target of gossip, and homosexuality was called perversion. Not only would her family and parents not tolerate her sexual orientation, she had trouble accepting it herself. When I hear such stories, I wonder if we should not be grateful to the ‘early imperialist leadership’ of the women tongzhi
organization. If not, then maybe we should even stop using the American imperialist internet.

I have heard some criticisms that, because our organization is not strongly political, it cannot be called a movement, and can only be seen as activities. I do not believe it matters if it is called a movement or activities, as long as we are happy with the content. In the present situation in China, if we do not begin with entertainment activities, it will be very difficult to get many tongzhi together. Many tongzhi will not join in because they are scared. Even now, some activists will take part in discussions and entertainment, but do not want to take part in organizing. This is due to many political reasons. I have heard some activists say, ‘If it is a formal activity, I will not take part’. So, in organizing activities we have to consider the national character and political climate.

Men tongzhi are often invited to our activities. For example, before holding the national meeting, we asked for their opinions. We also asked some to come speak at the national meeting. This caused some dissent: why do we need men tongzhi? What’s wrong with us women? I feel the same way about this issue as about welcoming imperialist women tongzhi. If we can even welcome imperialist support, why can we not accept support and help from men tongzhi? In the tongzhi movement, our common enemy is heterosexual hegemony and domination. Men tongzhi face the same kind of problems here as women tongzhi. Why can we not join up and cooperate with them? Actually men tongzhi in China envy our women tongzhi organization. They also want to learn from women tongzhi organizing. In this way, our strength will be greater.

We did not choose to cooperate only with men tongzhi, we also cooperate with other women’s NGOs. This cooperation was developed over time. In 1990s China, most people still did not recognize or understand homosexuality. In 1994, some Women’s Hotline staff would advise a woman tongzhi not to be homosexual. In 1997, East Meets West, a group for raising feminist consciousness (see Chapter Three), still lacked recognition for homosexuals. I remember during a discussion on homosexuality, the chair said ‘I am not a homosexual’. In another meeting a journalist talked about how rural women migrating to the city have difficulty finding suitable husbands when they return to their village. This journalist felt so sorrowful that these young women would lose their chance to find husbands because they migrated to earn money, that her eyes went all red. When homosexuals hear this kind of talk, we do not feel belonging or recognition, but instead feel some pressure. In our work, society, and families we have already heard enough of the discourse of the heterosexual hegemony and experienced enough of the culture of
heterosexual hegemony. As homosexuals, in other women’s organizations we hope to find a space in which we are accepted, and can gain understand- ing and help, instead of again having to argue and struggle with our sisters. However, in the early 1990s in these women’s NGOs, we certainly did not meet with understanding and recognition, nor find a space for joint opposition to heterosexual hegemony, so some homosexuals were disappointed. In the last few years, following society’s progress and the development of the homosexual movement, the consciousness of women’s organizations and feminist activists has been continually raised. They have taken the initiative in ridding themselves of the discourse of heterosexual hegemony, and are active participants in all kinds of women tongzhi activities. Women tongzhi, through participating in feminist group activities, have also raised their feminist consciousness.

Now women tongzhi activities invite women’s NGOs to attend. Their participation is both a support for us and, at the same time, a chance to increase their understanding of women tongzhi. All Beijing women’s NGOs were invited to participate in the First National Women Tongzhi Conference and the preceding fund-raising activity.

Conclusion

In October 1998 we held the First National Women Tongzhi Conference. Since then, women tongzhi activities have had clearer goals. After the meeting, the first five-person leading group was established. Although this leadership group later split up, women tongzhi activities continued. An internal magazine Sky (Tiankong) was published: by September 1999, the third edition had already been distributed. In addition, various activities are often organized that have encouraged many women tongzhi to become more open. Women tongzhi have also used international and national funding to rent an office, and engage a full-time staff member to answer the phone and inform everyone of activities. By September 1999, up to thirty people participated in women tongzhi gatherings. In 1999, the first open engagement ceremony between two women was held in a Beijing club. About 100 women and men tongzhi attended their engagement ceremony. A woman tongzhi couple from Shanghai came especially to congratulate them. Women tongzhi have emerged from obscurity. We have moved from being alone to helping each other, from struggling for survival to seeking liberation, from rescuing ourselves to liberating others. As people’s consciousness is raised, and social progress continues, our organizations will grow, and we will in future attain equal rights to existence.
Notes

1. Tongzhi in this context can be roughly translated as queer, lesbian, gay. See Lexicon.
2. The Women’s Hotline at the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre in Beijing.
3. Work units often assign housing only to married employees. Under the reforms, the work unit system is changing, and it is promised that housing will be marketized, rather than assigned by work units.
5. On 27 June 1969 Police raided the ‘Stonewall Inn’, a popular gay bar in New York City. Raids were common at that time, and conducted regularly without much resistance. However, that night the street erupted into violence as the crowds in the bar fought back. The backlash and several nights of protest that followed have come to be known as the Stonewall Riots. This is seen as a pivotal moment in American lesbian and gay history. The anniversary is now celebrated every year as ‘lesbian and gay pride’ in street demonstrations and other forms in many cities around the world.
7. Following the Conference the name Beijing Sisters (Beijing jiemei) was adopted by the group.
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Susan Jolly: This is a story of the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group (Dongxifang xiangyu xiaozhi) – a women’s group that meets in Beijing. Originally when Ge Youli and I wrote this piece, we tried to write it together and come up with one version of what went on. Ge Youli produced a draft, which I developed. However, even though I love Ge Youli and I agree with most things she says, I found that her experience of what went on in our precious little grouping was different from mine. This led to two results: first, we have rewritten this chapter as a conversation between the two of us with our two different voices instead of one unified ‘we’; and second, I realized that if Ge Youli couldn’t represent me, then how could either of us represent anyone else in the group? So I want to say loud and clear right at the beginning, that this is not the story of the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group, but two points of view on the subject. We do talk about our perceptions of what happened to others in the group. We will run this piece by a few members before we finalize it. Both Ge Youli and I were consistently involved over several years. Ge Youli usually chaired the meetings, and for a couple of years East Meets West (EMW) met after hours in our office space (Ge Youli and I were colleagues for a while at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Beijing). However, neither of us is living in Beijing right now, and anyway, we can’t represent the other members and produce an authoritative official history of EMW because it is unofficial, has no explicit structures of authority, and no elected representatives. It’s a fluid, vibrant and live grouping, moving between organization and disorganization, even existence and hibernation, and with a fluctuating membership often consisting of who turns up on the night. Here I am emphasizing the
fluid nature of the group, but I don’t want to lose how special it was, not just to me and its other participants, but to the context, and also in terms of wider impact. We hit a particular moment in Chinese history – a political opening coinciding with the holding of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. These created a space in which we could function as an unregistered independent women’s group. This space, in combination with the enthusiasm, commitment and resources of several women, both Chinese and foreign, enabled the birth and continued existence over several years, of our feminist translation group. Such an organization would be meaningful anywhere, but was especially so in China where NGOs and this kind of feminism are a recent phenomenon.

How We Got Started: The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and Us

GeYouli: I don’t claim to represent the group either, and this year I cannot participate as I am studying in the USA. However, I was there at the beginning, so I’ll tell how it started. I first heard the term ‘United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women’ from Lisa Stearns in Autumn of 1992. I got to know Lisa through a Chinese woman friend of mine and soon we became good friends. Lisa was finishing her assignment as a Fulbright Professor of Law at Peking University and getting ready for her new position as consultant at the Ford Foundation carrying out a programme of activities assisting China in its preparation for the Women’s Conference. At that time I was an administrative assistant in a foreign company in Beijing. Lisa was excited about her new job and I was basically curious about everything she had to say about the Conference. Although I was working in the private sector and my job had nothing to do with women’s issues, my interest in the subject was high and I maintained close contact with feminist friends, both Chinese and foreign. We met at various social gatherings for women. When the news came that China was to host the Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995, the discussion of its possible impact on Chinese women become a common theme at these gatherings. It seemed to me that most of my foreign feminist friends were quite well informed about the women’s issues frequently discussed at international forums. However, for many of us Chinese women, despite our interest in women’s activities, terms such as ‘United Nations Conference’, ‘Non-Governmental Organization’,
‘Platform for Action’, ‘women’s NGOs’ or ‘NGO lobbying the government’ still sounded very new. Many of us were also unfamiliar with the substantive issues such as political and economic empowerment of women, feminism, activism, gender analysis or gender mainstreaming. As an English-speaking Chinese, too often when engaging in discussions with my Western sisters on feminist issues, I had to struggle to find meanings and equivalent expressions in my own language. In most instances I either failed to find the words in Chinese, or found them to cover only partial meanings of a particular term. I was shocked at the enormous differences existing in theories, concepts and approaches adopted by the Western and Chinese women’s movements due to different social, cultural and political structures.

In late 1992 and early 1993, I had no idea that I would have anything to do with a UN Conference. In my mind it was only attended by government officials. I was too ordinary a person in China to have any connection with it. However my association with people like Lisa kept putting it in front of me. One day eating in a small restaurant in Beijing, Lisa and I were once again talking about how Chinese women could get the most out of this major event, given the differences in discourse, issues and approaches associated with the Chinese and Western women’s movement. ‘How about setting up a translation group?’ Lisa suggested. Great idea, Lisa! Since we knew a group of bilingual women (both Chinese and foreign) in Beijing who cared about women’s issues and who were keen to contribute to the preparation process for the Conference, why not get together to start by translating English articles on the Western or international women’s movement into Chinese? By introducing the history and issues of the movement to Chinese women, bit by bit, we hoped we would help to bridge the cultural and terminological gaps created by the different social and political structures in China and the West.

Thus the group was formed in 1993. We started with about ten Chinese and Western women. We were young professionals in our mid-20s or early 30s including journalists, researchers, lawyers, businesswomen and graduate students. We hoped that by the time the Conference arrived, our work would have softened the barriers to communication arising from different terminologies and concepts. With increasing exchange envisaged in the two to three years to come, culminating in the Conference, we believed that our translation work would facilitate the creation of a common language and common conceptual framework between Chinese women and women internationally, so that substantive learning, sharing and networking would be possible.
Finding a Language to Express Ourselves

Ge Youli: Although EMW was to be a translation group, we did not start our translation work immediately. In the first few sessions, we mainly reflected upon who we were, what in our lives had made us realize we were women, and why we were attracted to feminist issues. These sessions were mainly conducted in English. They were important for me because they helped me begin to see a pattern in women’s lives. Regardless of who we were and where we originated, East or West, almost all of our awareness of being female was associated with some degree of discrimination and humiliation. When I shared my childhood story of my grandmother letting my brother go and play outside, while shutting me in to sew or help cooking, I remembered how unfair it felt, and realized that I was still unhappy about it. I vaguely felt that my experience of being treated differently from my brother in my childhood was still making an impact on my life, but I did not have the words or expressions to say clearly what it was and how it worked on me. I also remember a Chinese woman in the group telling the story of the pressure she felt at the dinner table in her parents’ home that she start with eating the leftovers while her father started on the freshly made dishes. She could not tell where this pressure came from because nobody in the family had ever told her to do so.

It was through the discussion sessions that I came to acquire words and concepts such as gender discrimination, gender stereotype, gender roles and gendered structure. I began to put things in perspective, a gender perspective. I was amazed at the effectiveness and forcefulness of these English words in describing and deconstructing women’s secondary position in families and societies. These discussion sessions also guided our selection of literature for translation. Through the process of seeking self-expression of our life experience as women, we began to see which were the more critical concepts and terminologies that did not exist in Chinese but would greatly help women in China (including myself) to better express ourselves and position ourselves once these concepts were translated into Chinese. They should become a part of a common language for women seeking liberation across the boundaries.

Who Came to the Group and How I Got There

Susan Jolly: When I arrived in Beijing in 1994, Ge Youli, Lisa Stearns and others had already launched EMW, and it was well under way. I was
thrilled to meet this group of fifteen to twenty women who talked a language of feminism I could relate to. I had studied in Wuhan for a couple of years in the 1980s, and was now returning to China after seven years away. During this time, I ended up in Brussels, working for a politician. When she lost an election in 1994, I lost my job. So I decided to go back to Beijing and look for work. I was also hoping to join in the preparations for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. A few months after my arrival in Beijing, I met Lisa Stearns, and she introduced me to EMW, which by then had been meeting for over a year.

I immediately felt at home with this group of mainly Chinese women about my age. Some were as committed feminists as myself, and took on the label ‘feminist’. Others adopted a more ‘Girl Power’ style, as young flashily dressed professionals with a self-confidence and consciousness of their status, wanting to be strong successful women and have a lively intellectual discussion about the issues. These were women who were quite like me, young, professional, articulate, bilingual, definitely at the empowered/elite end of society. However, we nevertheless faced very definite constraints from the patriarchy. These ranged from the very concrete to the intangible but no less discouraging. Many had achieved some career success in spite of put-downs by family and at school. Recent university graduates in the group had been surprised to see the boys in their class go on to better job options even if they had worse grades. One girl working in a multinational company had to contest with sexual harassment from her Nordic male boss.

There were usually one or two women who didn’t seem to notice it was a feminist group, and would naively reiterate gender norms. Some of these changed their views enormously over time, for example the health official who initially failed to see any relevance of gender issues to health-care reform. ‘It’s just health care, nothing to do with gender’ she declared in bewilderment as other EMW members clamoured to enlighten her. Now that same woman is doing a Masters degree in the UK in Gender and Development, and the subject of her first term paper is . . . ‘A gender analysis of health-care reform in China’1 Some continued to participate, perhaps out of affection rather than any common values, but remained stoically resistant to the zeal of their more feminist sisters. One girl declared her intention of earning the money in odd jobs to support her artist boyfriend, so that when he gets famous they will both rise together. Although never remotely convinced by the attempts of some of us to warn her of the dangers of her ways, she still came along to the group for several months.
There were always a couple of foreigners in the group, sometimes up to half a dozen, mostly Western Chinese-speaking feminists, both students and professionals, living in Beijing. Some participated consistently for several months or years, often the same time-span of participation as the Chinese members. I took part from 1994 to 1998, throughout my four years living in Beijing.

What We Did Before the Fourth World Conference on Women

Ge Youli: In the first year we translated into Chinese short feminist articles selected from English-language journals and magazines. They were then published in the Chinese women’s media, primarily in Women’s World Vision (Shijie funü bolan). This new magazine had an impressive circulation of over 100,000, and a readership made up of largely urban professional and working-class women. As its title suggests, the mandate of this magazine was to reflect a broader view of women from different parts of the world. In some ways it was presented as a fairly mainstream women’s magazine, for example the cover invariably sported a photo of a blond white woman. However, it also ran a special column on the international women’s movement and its impact on the world conferences. We found the magazine appropriate for our pieces and its Editor-in-Chief found our translation interesting. We also put our translations into Chinese Women’s Movement (Zhongguo fuyun) and China Women’s News (Zhongguo funübao), the newspaper associated with the All China Women’s Federation. The connections with these publications were made through EMW members, including Lisa Stearns and journalist members of the group.

What was unique about our translation was that with the translated articles, we also put up a ‘Translators’ Note’ which explained our cultural and social interpretation of particular feminist terminology. For instance, the word ‘feminism’ can be translated into either ‘nüquan zhuyi’ (woman-rights-ism) or ‘nüxing zhuyi’ (woman-ism). In cases like this, in our ‘Translator’s Note’, we would explain why we chose a particular expression and the nuances of the words chosen. In this period, our translation covered subjects of women’s reproductive rights, sexuality, violence against women, balancing work and childcare for women and men, and so on.

One day I was talking to a friend from Yunnan province travelling in Beijing. We were talking about her daughter and she suddenly said to me
‘I have decided not to raise my daughter to be a traditional obedient woman. I just read an article talking about how an American mother taught her daughter to fight back when the boys in her kindergarten tried to beat her. I thought this is the right thing to do. I don’t want my daughter to be beaten by anybody in her life’. Hearing this, my heart was filled with a secret joy. Do you know who translated this article? It was translated by EMW and published in World Women’s Vision. I never asked her or told her who translated the article. I knew this was not important. What was important for her and women like her was that they were exposed to a different perspective.

In early 1995, the group undertook two new major translation projects. We translated into English both a series of seven booklets on the 1992 Chinese Law on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, and Reflections and Resonance (Wong Yuenling 1995b), a book of articles by Chinese women activists who had taken part in the preparations for the 1995 Women’s Conference, reflecting on their participation and what it meant for them personally. This latter, we translated in cooperation with members of the China-Canada Young Women’s Project (Zhongjia nü qingnian xiangmu), an initiative aiming at empowering young women in China and Canada through cultural exchanges. Until that time, we had focused on introducing Western feminist ideas to China. Now we were redressing the balance by translating Chinese women’s voices into English for an international audience at the conference.

When I look back today, I realize we were not in any simple way translating language. Rather, through our translation, we searched for, in our own language, words and expressions that can be expanded and redefined so that they lend themselves more readily to women’s self-expression and empowerment.

Language

**Susan Jolly**: I agree that our translation of Western articles into Chinese was no simple process. Translation rarely remains a purely technical process anyway, and the choice of words and the transition between one linguistic culture and another usually carry some political implications. In EMW, the politics were explicit. We were aiming to formulate a feminist language in Chinese. However, we did not mean to slap on clumsy Western labels and concepts. That is why the discussions and ‘Translators’ Note’ were so important. They provided a means to appropriate the Western texts and understand, select and adapt the parts relevant to a Chinese
context. As a voluntary group working without deadlines, we could spend several pressure-free meetings translating just one short article, and pleasurably discussing the merits of this or that word. Initially, we were process- rather than output-oriented.

Discussion started in English and changed into Chinese sometime around early 1995. I don’t know quite how the transition was made, but it seemed fairly natural, as most participants were Chinese, and after the translation stage, some non-English speakers joined. Personally, I encouraged the change, as I wanted to practise my Chinese. I already spoke a fairly fluent, but still limited Chinese, having studied it for years and years. In EMW, with deliberations over the nuances of different words in translation, and discussions of issues and feelings in Chinese, I learnt how to express my political views and personal beliefs (which are inseparable anyway) in the primary language of my personal, social and professional environment. As with Ge Youli, for me EMW was tremendously empowering in a linguistic sense.

Coinciding with the shift in language, and as Ge Youli describes above, the important changeover from translating Western to translating Chinese texts, we underwent another major change: We had a deadline. Suddenly, instead of translating a few pages over several weeks at our leisure, we were committed to completing a whole book in a few months. While many of us felt pride and joy at the book launch of *Reflections and Resonance* in both Chinese and English versions, the group also suffered total burn-out and collapsed into non-activity after the frenzied efforts to finish this project.

**What We Did After the Conference**

**Ge Youli:** As Susie said, many of us were totally exhausted after translating *Reflections and Resonance*, but also after the hectic of the Women’s Conference. Because we never registered as an NGO, we were not able as a group to participate in the Women’s Conference. We remain an informal group with no official status or recognition. There are pros and cons to this position. We are able to remain low-profile and avoid unnecessary attention and interruption. We also enjoy relative freedom and flexibility in the form of our group and work agenda. However, EMW does suffer a high turnover rate and occasional low membership, and we were unable to organize any activity at the Women’s Conference. However, several of both Chinese and Western members did manage to participate in other capacities, particularly in the NGO Forum.
When the group reconvened again in late 1995, it grew into a women’s discussion forum on feminism and contemporary political issues. The focus shifted from translation to gender-awareness-raising among a larger group of women. Instead of a core of ten to twelve people as in the past, the new forum sometimes attracted as many as thirty women from different professional backgrounds. Topics discussed included women and art, violence against women, women’s labour and employment rights, women and the state, sexuality, lesbianism and feminism. We ran workshops for each other on safer sex, self-defence, and how to flirt. Speakers came from other local organizations such as the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Service and the Women’s Media Watch Network. It became a regular stop for Western, and some Third World, feminists visiting Beijing, and Chinese feminist scholars and activists who had returned from abroad. The group also gave some attention to the women’s movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Since mid-1997, EMW discussions also attracted more local journalists. Some came with other members and others just heard about our group through word of mouth, and came by themselves. Some members thought
it would be a wonderful idea to exert feminist influence on media people, who play a significant role in shaping the discourses, values and perceptions of the general public. How women are portrayed and positioned in the media has a tremendous influence on hundreds of millions of women and men, girls and boys in China. EMW members began to invite media people into the group discussions and to expose them to feminist thinking. So far journalists have attended from ‘Half the Sky’ (Banbianjian) (a programme on China Central TV), ‘Life Hotline’ (Shenghuo rexian) of Beijing Radio, and a number of newspapers and magazines such as Rural Women Knowing All and Cosmopolitan and China Women’s News. Impressed by the viewpoints aired in the group, some journalists started to write related stories.

In February 1998, Ding Ning, an EMW member, learned from her TV producer friend that Beijing TV was to produce a special Spring Festival edition for its women’s feature programme ‘Today’s Women’ (Jinri nüxing). She suggested that her friend invite members of EMW to speak in the programme. Feng Yuan, another EMW member, and I were invited to the TV Station. There was a panel discussion among five women on the roles and status of contemporary Chinese women (basically of urban women). We adopted a strong gender perspective in our analysis. The producer of the programme became so impressed by our discussion that she decided to double the programme time for this issue. Because the programme was aired during the Spring Festival Season, it reached an exceptionally large audience. A few days later I received a phone call from a woman viewer. She said she was very angry when she heard the other panellists on the show say that a woman’s primary role should be mother and a wife. ‘Look at what happened to me. I was made to believe that a woman should be a mother and a wife and I tried so hard to be one. But now my husband has abandoned me, and has taken my daughter away. Because he is much more resourceful than me, he won all the court cases. Now I have nothing left. I was really happy to see you debate. Your participation made the programme more balanced.’

How EMW Changed Me

Ge Youli: It is not possible to exaggerate how much my involvement with EMW has changed me. For a start, my career path was changed. In September 1994 when a Programme Officer position was opened up at the UNDP in Beijing, especially when I learnt that a good part of its job description included assisting the Office in Women’s Conference preparation and promotion of gender integration into its development
programmes in China, I applied immediately and got the job. By that time I felt I had learnt so much from EMW group discussions and from our translation work that I hoped to apply it in my work. With my new role in the field of development, I called myself a professional feminist. I became more confident. I did not know why I was never confident in myself before. Maybe because I was not a favoured child at home, in comparison with my brother in the eyes of my grandparents. Neither was I a favoured student at school in the eyes of my teachers. I still remember my school days checking homework against that of my classmates. If my answer was different, I always thought I was wrong. I am a different person now. I am more assertive.

As Susie explained, the composition of the group varies. As the group is open to new members and has remained relatively informal, the level of exposure and commitment to feminism differs, a cause of tension at some moments. We often disagree and argue. However, none of this stops us from feeling a sense of community. On the contrary, through our discussion and debate our views as women were greatly enriched. It is in EMW that we can talk and be heard, support and feel supported. To me, it was a home outside the home. I enjoyed every gathering of EMW no matter how exhausted I was after a long day’s work. I did not have to hide in the group, because I sensed it was the only place in my world I could feel free from the label of ‘a bad woman’. EMW was the place where I could be myself.

**Being a Foreigner/Being Myself**

*Susan Jolly:* Like Ge Youli, I derived immense support from the EMW ‘community’. For me, starting on a new life in Beijing, the group was an emotional life-support system. It was for me both social life and my own special space. I did not at first encourage either my new girlfriend or my closest friend to come along because I wanted it for myself (not very sisterly I know).

My position was both easier and more difficult than that of some of the Chinese participants. I was a privileged white Westerner, with a great deal of freedom and possibilities economically, politically, and geographically. But, for the first eight months, I was also a job-seeker, scrounging short-term contracts and visa deals. I was insecure economically, visa-wise, housing-wise, yet willing to put up with the situation because I was young, in the mood, wanted to make a go of it in Beijing, and didn’t have any ready alternative options set up back ‘home’ or elsewhere. In
mid-1995, I found a longish-term job as United Nations Volunteer Programme Officer at UNDP Beijing, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. However, job or no job, as a white girl in Beijing I remained constantly conspicuous, and culturally misunderstood. Of course I was — many people I engaged with had never known a foreigner before. I say foreigner because that’s what I clearly was, as I was reminded by the looks and comment of many a passer-by ‘laowai’ (foreigner, or literally ‘old outsider’). I don’t mean to complain. It was my choice to go to China, and I was lucky to be able to do so, but life was stressful in certain ways that I avoided admitting at the time, even to myself.

EMW was a haven, a respite from being challenged for holding feminist views, and a place where foreigners belonged – East Meets West, a site of political activism where Chinese and foreigners came together to seek social change. The question always came up for me as an activist (and development worker) in China – What right do I, as a Westerner, have to interfere with local norms? What right do I have to challenge ideas that some people see as their traditions? Here, in East Meets West, I was working with people who did not claim the patriarchy as their tradition, and who wanted me to work with them. Neither did they uncritically swallow Western influence, but instead selected and translated some bits of Western knowledge into something meaningful to them.

In one of the last discussions I attended in 1998, we read an extract from Post-Colonial Queer, a book by Zhou Huashan (1997b), a Hong Kong male writer, deconstructing the term ‘nation’ in relation to Hong Kong and the mainland. I had suggested this text, as it expounded ideas I had never heard expressed in Chinese before. Zhou challenged the very idea of the nation as a solid, real, unchallengeable construct on which the sacred religion of patriotism was rooted.

I had never stopped being amazed at the level of patriotism in China. I felt this patriotism was connected to my new identity of foreigner, an identity partly imposed, partly even embraced by me to show that I was fitting in, playing my part, being as ‘Chinese’ as I could be by recognizing that white people were alien, foreign, laowai. Perhaps perversely, or perhaps in a ‘queering’ of the label, I used to refer to myself as ‘laowai’. I remember a holiday visit to the Fragrant Hills in the Beijing suburbs. A few white faces could be spotted among the crowds. I started to call out ‘haa-low laowai!’ (hullo old outsider) to the non-Chinese. They turned their heads away in annoyance, refusing to look at me, not realizing that in fact I was a foreigner too. With this silly game, I was pretending to adopt a local perspective by treating those with my own skin colour as foreign to me.
So I was over-excited to read *Post-Colonial Queer* deconstructing the Chinese nation. I photocopied the chapter, handed it out ahead of time for people to read, then presented it at the meeting where we had agreed to discuss it. I suggested that Ge Youli read out certain bits of the text, as I feared my accented Chinese might sound clumsy, especially reading out original characters which I was not so used to. She said to me (as I remember) ‘I’ll read it if you want, but I think you should go ahead and read it yourself, I think it’s important for you.’ I was moved. She was thinking about my empowerment. I was being recognized in my dual position in the group, not just the foreigner privileged with information, NGO organizing experience, economic resources, etc. but also as the foreigner linguistically and culturally disempowered in a Chinese environment. Maybe it’s the imperialist in my head which made me think I had the upper hand, and had to worry so much about imposing, taking space from other people, talking too much. Different dynamics were going in opposite directions simultaneously. And that is why I loved EMW so much. Not only did I see other women become stronger over the years, I myself also gained power and ease.

**Reflection on Patriotism**

**Ge Youli:** I did not realize how strong Chinese people’s sentiment about the nation/state (*guojia*) was until I met Western feminist colleagues like you, Susie, in the EMW group. Your constant criticism of your government and their policies as being gender-biased or blind always shocked me. I was brought up to believe that I should never, ever, doubt the ability of my country to represent my best interests in every sense, until I encountered feminist theories challenging the existing political and economic institutions as representing the interests of male members of the society. I became convinced that there has been no single country so far in human history that was made by and for women, so I began to admire the courage and echo the insights of Western feminists on the relationship between the state and women that: ‘Women have no country, women belong to the world.’

I appreciated Susie suggesting this subject for discussion in EMW. I still remember vividly the strong opinions expressed by the participants, especially those given by my Chinese sisters. It was one of the most forceful and educational sessions that I have ever attended at EMW meetings. It shook something held so deeply inside me and helped me review the relationship between me and my state from a totally new perspective. It was really powerful.
Marital Hegemony and tongzhi Possibilities

Susan Jolly: Although I felt EMW was a space where I could be so much myself as a foreign feminist, I was not so sure about coming out as queer. My first time in the group, when I introduced myself, I wondered, shall I say I’ve a long history in queer activism? But then I thought, No, I’ll wait and check out the climate.

EMW was mostly straight to start with; however, most members were not particularly happy about the heterosexual norms on offer. The unmarried majority felt under pressure from the marital hegemony (hunyin baquan) still pervasive even in Beijing. Some people were married, but not all of them liked it very much. One participant had exceptionally managed to marry a man she loved, but her parents judged him inappropriate and she did not dare tell them for two years. One member was reduced to tears thinking about the migrant women from the countryside who come to the city, earn a bit of money, learn new ways, then return to their village to find there is no one to marry, as the boys back home just don’t understand them any more.

In 1997 we held a discussion on ‘Lesbianism and Feminism’. I invited several Beijing women tongzhi (‘comrades’, rough equivalent to queer: see He’s Chapter Two and the Lexicon) to come join in. To my surprise they were all totally open and told stories about how it’s great to be gay, lovely to be a lesbian, brilliant to be bisexual. EMW members were receptive. It was a propaganda success. The woman so concerned about migrants suggested bisexuality could be a solution for them. She declared that she used to think homosexuality was problematic, and failure to find a husband left you miserable, but now after meeting these tongzhi who were all so ‘young, positive, pretty and well-adjusted’ she’d changed her mind. The next weekend one of the married women kissed a girl at a party! Some of the tongzhi continued to attend the group. EMW had become a space where I could be both foreign, feminist and tongzhi.

Where We Are Now

Ge Youli: Susie, do you remember that when you were in Beijing you always advocated more equal distribution of responsibility among the members? You said EMW would be more sustainable if people took turns organizing and chairing the meetings. You were right. Now both of us have left Beijing to study abroad, I am happy to let you know that other members of the group are still committed and continuing to hold
discussions. I hope when I rejoin EMW in six months’ time, we will hear new stories about the group, and new inspirations on Chinese feminist activism.
PART III

Ethnic, Diaspora and Religious Perspectives
4

Feminist Collaboration between Diaspora and China

Xiaolan Bao with Wu Xu

This paper is not a collective evaluation of the work done by the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (Haiwai zhonghua funü xuehui, CSWS) over the last few years. It is a retrospective reflection of only two of us, members of the society. Based on our experience as both major organizers and active participants of the three projects jointly undertaken by CSWS and various institutions in China, we would like to ponder over the characteristics of feminist organizing in China, the importance of exchange among feminist scholars and activists with different backgrounds, as well as the meaning of feminist organizing in general.

The Chinese Society for Women’s Studies: A Brief Introduction

The Chinese Society for Women’s Studies is a US-based feminist organization. It was formed in 1989. Today it has a membership of more than one hundred feminist scholars and activists living and working in North America, Europe and Greater China (Hong Kong, Taiwan and China). From its outset, the goals of the society were clear: to promote the study of Chinese women in the international scholarly community; to promote scholarly exchange between women in China and their counterparts in other parts of the world; and to collaborate with feminist scholars and activists in China to promote women’s studies in China. In recent years, promoting the study of women and development in China was added to its goals. To achieve these goals, CSWS has undertaken a series of projects in China and the United States. It has successfully built up an extensive transnational network for communication about issues of concern to Chinese women. Defined by the theme of this volume and limited by the space given, this chapter will focus on the three CSWS collaborative projects in China.
Tianjin and Nanjing: The First Two Collaborative Projects in China

From its beginning, many members of the society, particularly those who left China after the mid-1980s and who had been actively involved in women’s studies in the country, had strong ties with feminist scholars and activists in China.¹ Over the years, these ties and bonds were strengthened and expanded, and new ones were also established. These relationships proved to be one of the most important factors that contributed to the success of the three CSWS collaborative projects in China.

The first CSWS collaborative project was envisioned in 1992, when the conference ‘Women, Gender and the State’ was held in Boston, co-sponsored by the Harvard Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies and Wellesley College. This conference not only provided feminist scholars in China with an important opportunity to meet and discuss issues of common concern with their counterparts in Hong Kong, Taiwan, North America and Europe. It also served as a hotbed for the first CSWS project
in China. Acting on a strong desire to promote women’s studies in the
country, several members of CSWS, and Du Fangqin from Tianjin Normal
University in the north-eastern part of China, approached Mary Ann
Burris, who was then Ford Foundation Beijing Program officer, for
funding possibilities and, in the meantime, engaged in an intense discus-
sion to explore the ways to pursue a collaborative project in China. With
Burris’s encouragement, Chinese feminist scholars on both sides of the
Pacific began putting their heads together to work out a compelling fund-
raising proposal. Meanwhile, Du and her colleagues at the Tianjin Normal
University lobbied for the endorsement of the school authorities and
prepared for hosting the conference. The result was the First Chinese
Women and Development Conference (Diyi jie Zhongguo funü yu fazhan
yantaoban) co-sponsored by CSWS and Tianjin Normal University, in
the summer of 1993.

At the conference, scholars in China presented the results of their
research and CSWS members discussed the concept of gender and its
operation in various aspects of life, ranging from the labour market and
health to demographic studies and development theories. The discussions
were poignant and the reactions were exuberant. With the two collections
of essays published before and after the meeting, the impact of the
conference reached a population well beyond those who participated in
it. Although the far-reaching impact of this first project will only be fully
appreciated in the years to come, the responses thus far have been
overwhelmingly positive. The success of this first collaborative project
infused mutual understanding, trust, and confidence between CSWS
members and their colleagues in China. It was this understanding, trust
and confidence that compelled them to engage in future collaboration.

In 1996, riding the high tide of interest in women’s studies in China
spurred by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held
in Beijing a year before, several CSWS members met with a number of
Chinese women’s studies scholars who were visiting California for another
programme. The group explored the possibility of pursuing another
longer-term collaborative project in China. The outcome was an ambitious
three-year project aimed at laying a solid foundation for developing a
women’s studies programme in China. To explore the diverse experience
of women in China, this three-year project was envisaged as composed
of three workshops in a period of three consecutive years. The first
workshop was to focus on issues of concern to women in general and the
impact of economic reform on women in China. The second was to focus
on women in the Chinese poor, rural and ethnic areas. The third was to
summarize the findings of the previous two projects and develop a
women’s studies programme in China that would be informed by and responsive to the unique situation of women in China.

Jin Yihong volunteered to undertake the gruesome organizing work for the first workshop of this three-year project. It was recommended that the Jiangsu Academy of Social Sciences (JASS) in the south-eastern city of Nanjing, where she worked, should host the conference. Lisa Stearns, who then worked at the Ford Foundation, and other colleagues in China recommended Liu Guanghua, director of the Huaguang Women’s College (Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi xuexiao) in the city of Nanning in Guangxi, in China’s south-east, to be the co-ordinator to explore the possibility of pursuing the next project in the Guangxi area and help locate a hosting institution there.

Once the institutional partnership of the first project was decided, both sides began their efforts to crystallize it. As in 1993, Chinese scholars and activists on both sides of the Pacific collaborated in the fund-raising process and in developing a viable programme for the meeting. Meanwhile, like Du in 1993, Jin with her colleagues at the JASS and her feminist network in China resourcefully mobilized the support of the authorities at various levels in Nanjing and completed the preparations for the conference.

The Second Chinese Women and Development Conference (Dier jie Zhongguo funü yu fazhan yantaoban) was held in Nanjing in 1997. More than a hundred people came from various parts of China, Hong Kong, North America and Europe to attend the meeting. At the request of the conference organizers in China, most of the CSWS members continued to discuss recent developments of Western feminist studies relevant to the Chinese context and scholarship on Chinese women, and participants from China focused their discussion on China. However, issues addressed by both sides covered a much wider range of topics than the one at the Tianjin conference. New areas of cultural studies, such as the impact of the mass media on women and the gendered configuration of popular culture, were tackled for the first time. The scope and depth of the presentations from China reflected the rapid development of women’s studies in China following the 1995 Women’s Conference.

Ideologically and organizationally the Nanjing conference laid the groundwork for the next project. Issues in relation to women in poverty in the rural and ethnic areas were first raised by the presentation of Xu Xianmei, a researcher of Yi ethnic decent, on the poverty-alleviation projects in the remote minority areas. The discussion of gender and ethnic issues was continued at an evening group session, which further alerted many conference participants to the growing feminization and ethnicization of poverty in China.
A planning committee was formed by CSWS members, scholars of women’s studies in China and the pro-women’s studies administrators at Guangxi University by the end of the Nanjing conference. Since the new project was aimed to understand the experiences of women in remote and poor areas, the committee decided to use the poverty-alleviation programmes in these areas as a powerful lens through which to inspect how gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to shape the lives of women. This decision was made on the understanding that although a series of such programmes had operated in China in recent years and some were even nominally aimed at assisting women, women – particularly those in the ethnic communities – continued to form the majority of the poorest population in China. The major problem, as many members of the planning committee shrewdly observed, was the lack of gender and ethnic perspectives in implementing these programmes.

To encourage various social groups to join efforts to redress the situation, the planning committee decided to bring together participants from different social groups and adopt a participatory approach for the meeting. The programme was tentatively designed to consist of two major sessions: the first focusing on the discussion of theoretical issues, such as the concept of gender as a category of analysis and the feminist perspectives on developmental theories, and the second offering training in feminist practice of the participatory approach. Since the focus of this workshop was to promote women’s studies in local areas and the schedules of the participants were all very tight, the first session of the programme was scheduled for attendance by all participants and the second by mainly those from the Guangxi area.

Guangxi University was chosen to host the conference because the university has a strong ethnic studies programme and many of its women faculty members had expressed their strong desire to participate in the project. Rongshui County was selected as the training site because it is a poor, rural and ethnic area, and Liu Guanghua and CSWS member Song Yiqing were familiar with or had done extensive research in that area. The organizational groundwork for the third CSWS project was thus completed in the summer of 1997.

Our determination to pursue this project was also reinforced by our experience at the Nanjing conference. Like many members on the CSWS team, we were struck by the unevenness of the development of women’s studies in China, which was suggested by the strikingly disparate demands for information on feminist scholarship the Chinese feminist scholars and activists made to the CSWS members at the meeting, and by the evidently insufficient communication among them. This understanding was, to some extent, confirmed by a few critical comments the conference
organizers received at its end. Although the overall reactions remained very positive, some participants sharply pointed out that the right to define discursive issues to be addressed at the conference was unequal, or lopsided (huayuquan qingxie). Others pushed for more discussion and equal exchange of ideas in future meetings.

Our awareness of the need to further explore the diverse experiences of women in China and to change the format of future meetings was further heightened when the two of us visited different parts of rural China after the conference for our own research. We came to see that many issues raised by women we encountered in our field trips had barely been touched by the first two CSWS projects in China. How to collaborate with our colleagues in China to deepen the influence of women’s studies and feminism in China and bring up the democratic values of feminism became our major concern.

In truth, from the outset, we who were on the CSWS planning committee were apprehensive about our ability to undertake such a project as the one envisaged for the third CSWS collaborative project. Our feminist studies and practice in a transnational context had shown us the importance of understanding the diverse experience of women in our feminist pursuits. However, we were also constantly haunted by the fear of ‘violence of representation’ and the latent unequal relations of power in feminist interaction. Although all members on the CSWS team for the new project had experience of living in China, most grew up in urban China, came from a relatively small social segment, and all but one were of Han ethnicity. Despite the fact that the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had put most of us through years of labour in the countryside, few had sufficient experience in interacting with members of ethnic minority groups. Our diasporic location further undermined our ability to keep up with the rapidly changing situation of the country.

Besides the limitations of our background, there were political concerns. Issues in relation to ethnic communities are always politically sensitive in China, particularly in recent years with reports of ethnic unrest mounting in the country. Not surprisingly, even though this new project received support from the majority of CSWS members and our colleagues in China, not everyone on both sides of the Pacific saw its significance and was optimistic about its outcome. Concerned that people in local areas did not have the culture of speaking out for themselves, some doubted the practicality of the participatory approach adopted by the project.

We felt torn by our determination to pursue this new project and the awareness of our limitations in doing so. However, it was not only our
training and practice in the past that led us to see the significance of pursuing such a project. Our own experience in the United States as members of a minority group also made it easier for us to empathize with the status of women in minority communities in our native land. It was this understanding and emotional ties, as well as our belief in feminist activism, that finally led us to overcome various forms of obstacle and persevere.

The Chengdu Workshop – the Third CSWS Collaborative Project

The third CSWS collaborative project was the society’s first attempt to extend its network beyond scholarly circles in China. It turned out to be the greatest challenge we had ever encountered. The process was not smooth sailing, even though the committee continued to rely on collaboration with long-time colleagues in China, briefing them on every move and seeking advice from them for almost every further action.

In the months that followed the Nanjing conference, the CSWS continued to develop contacts with individuals at Guangxi University and other institutions in Guangxi by phone, while Liu Guanghua and CSWS member Wu Ga visited the area. Problems began to emerge, however, when the major contact person for the project at Guangxi University was transferred. To finalize the preparation for the project, two CSWS members made a formal visit to Guangxi in April 1998. For reasons that remain unclear, the leadership of Guangxi University veered away from its support. Although the two CSWS members tried their best to develop new contacts in the area and signed an agreement at the end of the trip, two weeks after they returned to the United States the planning committee was informed that ‘authorities at a higher level’ had declined to endorse the project.

Despite the setback, this first formal visit yielded important lessons for our future efforts. In addition to the preparation of documentation and the strategies to assist pilot projects in China that the two CSWS members managed to develop with their Chinese partners during their visit, the most important legacy of this trip was its revelation of the overarching institutional power in China, which had been somewhat underestimated by the CSWS members on the planning committee. This was partly due to the fact that the institutional pressure had tended to be borne by our partners in China for the previous projects. The planning committee thereby decided to revise its strategies.
In the following months, on the recommendation of Wu Ga, a native of Sichuan Province and a member of the Yi minority group, the planning committee decided to choose Sichuan, one of the most ethnically diverse Chinese provinces, to be the site of the project. Despite its large population, Sichuan’s per capita income remains the lowest of all provinces in China and most of its population live in rural areas. This province was chosen not only because it was one of the major provinces in southwest China that had not been significantly influenced by any major feminist projects in the country. Most importantly, it was because the planning committee found a very supportive leadership in the Sichuan Women’s Federation (Fulian). The Chair of the Sichuan Women’s Federation pledged her support to the project, which provided not only political legitimacy but also crucial organizational assistance to the project. Our later experience shows that for a grass-roots-oriented feminist project like the one designed for the third CSWS project, a supportive local Women’s Federation, with its influence branching down to the village level and its members’ impressive organizing ability, can be particularly helpful.

Drawing on the lesson it had learned from its abortive efforts in Guangxi, the planning committee officially invited Gao Xiaoxian, a women’s studies scholar who has a long history of working in the Women’s Federation and is renowned for her speciality in studying women in rural China as well as women and development in China, to be the project consultant. Her advice and support proved to be crucial for the success of the project. In August 1998, another two CSWS members visited Chengdu and signed a contract with the Sichuan Women’s Federation. To guarantee the success of the workshop, they, along with Gao and members of the Sichuan Women’s Federation Women’s Studies Institute (Sichuansheng fulian funü yanjiusuo), held a number of meetings about the basic concept and format of the workshop with grass-roots women activists as well as scholars and practitioners in the Chengdu area who were experienced in rural development projects. Consequently, several aspects of the original plan were altered. The workshop was revised to focus on discussing gender and ethnic issues in relation to poverty and to end with a visit to a nearby ethnic community.

Members of the Sichuan Women’s Studies Institute, headed by Xu Ping, played a leading role in co-ordinating with various concerned parties in China after the CSWS members left the country. They attended to every detail of the preparation for the workshop and made important suggestions for the final programme. As with the Tianjin and Nanjing projects, the contributions of Xu and her colleagues were crucial for the successful outcome of the third project. The Chengdu workshop ‘Gender, Poverty
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and Rural Development Participatory Workshop’ (Shehui xingbie, pinkun yu nongcun fazhan canyushi yantaohui) was finally held in December 1998. It brought four kinds of people to the meeting – Chinese scholars of women’s studies at home and abroad, researchers and practitioners of the development projects in China, members of the Women’s Federation at various levels, and a number of grass-roots women activists from various ethnic groups and areas in Sichuan. To ensure a productive dialogue among participants at the meeting, their number was limited to about fifty. Ninety per cent of them were women and more than a quarter were from various ethnic groups in the Sichuan area.

Rather than following the conventional way of holding conferences in China, in which scholars’ and officials’ presentations remain the centre of attention, the Chengdu workshop featured discussion and promoted equal exchange of ideas among all participants. The entire programme was divided into four sections, each centring on a major theme. Although there were presentations by scholars, members of women’s organizations, and grass-roots activists in each section, these presentations were aimed at provoking thoughts about relevant issues rather than at imposing any resolution. After the presentations of each section, participants were divided into several smaller discussion groups. The facilitators of each section and each discussion group, chosen from both members of the CSWS team and participants from Sichuan and other parts of China, made special efforts to encourage full participation of their members. Everyone was encouraged to take the initiative to challenge each other’s perceptions and to identify issues in relation to poverty in his or her local area from gender and ethnic perspectives.

This new approach generated enormous enthusiasm among participants in the workshop. Despite its long and intense programme, few participants missed any part of it. The exuberant discussions led to encouraging results. Placing women in a subject position, many participants began to question the state definitions of ‘poverty’ (pinkun), ‘poor households’ (pinkunhu), and the various approaches adopted by many poverty-alleviation programmes in the country. As some participants incisively pointed out, many poverty-alleviation projects in China, including those nominally aimed at assisting women, did not mitigate the plight of women in poverty. Apart from the incompetence, irresponsibility and corruption of some project implementers, gender and ethnic issues were very much at the crux of the problems.

As these participants contended, female-headed households with children, particularly those in the ethnic minority communities, tend to form the majority of poor households in the poor rural and remote areas.
Since they were traditionally regarded as the group least able to improve their situation, many project officials and functionaries, anxious to see a return on their investments to impress their superiors, were most likely to cross them out from their list of ‘poor households’ eligible for financial assistance. Although there were state welfare programmes aimed to assist the most impoverished families that had lost all means of production, the quotas for these families were very small and the eligibility criteria were difficult to meet. As a result, many poor female-headed households were left out of both aid systems and remained as poor as ever.

In analysing causes of feminization and ethnicization of poverty in China, many participants also began to question the State or even the Women’s Federation’s authoritative rhetoric that blames women’s inability to rise up with the tide of economic reform on their own weakness, defined as women’s lack of ‘qualifications’ (suzhi). Based on their working experiences in the local areas, many scholars, grass-roots activists, and Women’s Federation members challenged this victim-blaming approach. They argued that, subjected to the condemnation of this kind of rhetoric, women in poverty were relegated to a hopeless and thus helpless position. While poverty-stricken Han women had only themselves to blame, the ethnic minority women had one more reason to condemn themselves: their ethnic cultures. Together, the Han as well as the minority women were left very much on their own.

Participants believed that given an equal opportunity, women in poverty, like anyone else, could successfully bring changes to their lives. Instead of asking whether it was women who lacked the ability to catch up with a rapidly changing and highly competitive society, these participants turned the question around and asked whether society had provided equal opportunity to its members. Their question pointed to the heart of the gender-and-ethnic stratification of the society.

In exploring social inequalities, ethnic issues surfaced. While discussing how ethnic cultures had been misrepresented by some Han scholars, many minority participants also pointed out differences between and within their communities. In their analysis, intra-ethnic tensions could be caused by historical factors, as in the case of the Yi community where the lingering impact of the historical differences between the black Yi and white Yi remained a reality. They could also be caused by differential state policy, as in the case of the Tibetans in which Tibetans in Sichuan suffered ‘third-class’ status in receiving state aid, as compared with ‘first-class Tibetans’ in Tibet and the ‘second-class Tibetans’ in its nearby areas. This was, some participants asserted, largely caused by the pressure on the state exerted by the international community, which focused its attention on
Tibet. Nevertheless, differential state policy could also cause tension between different ethnic groups. As the state concentrated its resources on the largest or most vocal minority groups, the smaller and less vocal ones were left out in the cold.

In challenging ethnic inequalities in the country, participants at the workshop also explored the prospects for inter-ethnic collaboration in women’s studies and ethnic studies in China. As the Han scholars discussed their difficulties in understanding and getting access to the minority communities in their ethnic studies, minority scholars of ethnic studies candidly admitted that familiarity with the community could also blind one to the problems in one’s own community. The cordial exchange between the Han and minority scholars led them to ruminate on the possible ways in which they could collaborate with each other in promoting ethnic and women’s studies in China.

In summarizing their experience at the workshop, almost all participants felt that they had learned a great deal from interacting with people from social groups other than their own, and were, in one way or another, empowered by participating in the workshop. Many feminist scholars and researchers began to question their previous perceptions of Chinese reality and emphasized the need to develop a new approach that could encompass the diverse experiences of women in different social and ethnic groups in their research. Others began to contemplate how misconceptions of a social group could be formulated by various institutional forces. Impressed by the democratic atmosphere of the workshop, many participants also began to question various forms of institutional inequality in the society. One of the strongest challenges was posed by those from the local Women’s Federation. As one of them put it,

This is the first meeting that led me to understand the true meaning of ‘grassroots participation’. I have worked in the Women’s Federation for more than ten years and have attended numerous meetings. All that I have learned is how to listen to the leaders when they talk, and how to not talk unless my superiors assign me to talk. This workshop is indeed an eye-opening experience for me. Now I see what equal rights for everyone in a society can mean.

Many of her colleagues agreed. As they concluded, without a gender perspective and a democratic style of work, a women’s organization does not necessarily represent women.

The most visible behavioural change took place among the grass-roots activists. One Di Wu Ge, a Yi minority participant, is a case in point. Since most participants spoke Mandarin, she at first faced a language
barrier. To make things worse, intimidated by the eloquent and forceful arguments of other participants, she found it difficult to express herself. Many other Yi minority participants warmly offered to serve as her interpreter, but she refused to speak, no matter how much encouragement she received from other participants and her group leader. However, as the workshop progressed, motivated by the issues raised by other participants and encouraged by the egalitarian atmosphere at the workshop, she finally spoke out. Impassionedly, she called attention to the geographic and ethnic variations of China by using similes in her unique way. As she put it, ‘places that can be reached by cars cannot be reached by horses; places that can be reached by planes cannot by reached by trains’. Her vivid remarks left no room for any attempt to homogenize the experiences of women and development in China.

Members of the CSWS team shared many similar feelings with other participants at the workshop. They also had their own reactions, however. Li Zongmin in her reflections after the workshop called it a real ‘home-coming’. As she related, unlike in any of her previous experiences, there was no feeling of being alienated that frequently reminded her of her identity as ‘one from abroad’. Like everyone at the workshop, she felt welcomed, needed, having something to offer and many things to learn about.

The Chengdu workshop energized everyone who participated in it. The participants shared a common concern about the increased economic polarization in China and a commitment to redress it. This commitment bound them together and encouraged them to examine the issues of gender and ethnicity in China, regardless of the differences in their social, geographical, ethnic and gender identities, and the potential tensions embedded in these differences. The organization of this workshop was not perfect. There were many aspects yet to be improved. However, as an attempt to initiate a genuine dialogue among people of different backgrounds on issues of concern to women in poverty and to infuse its participants with a democratic vision, this workshop fulfilled its mission.

Some Retrospective Reflections

Identity, Subjectivity, and the Importance of Feminist Interaction

Our feminist practice in China, particularly our participation in the Chengdu workshop, has first of all led us to reflect on the feminist theories we had been exposed to in the US prior to our involvement in the CSWS
projects in China. Like most of our cohort who received training in women’s studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s, we had been influenced by the ‘theory of difference’, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences of women in feminist interactions.14 In identifying differences and analysing issues in feminist practice, we also had been exposed to a series of discursively constructed categories, such as the putative axes of social stratification – gender, class, and ethnicity – and those dichotomies simply based on individuals’ political, cultural or geographical locations – ‘the West’ vs ‘the East’, ‘the global’ vs ‘the local’, ‘the foreign/diasporic’ vs ‘the native’, ‘the elite’ vs ‘the subaltern’.

Our feminist practice in China led us to see the importance of ‘the theory of difference’. Without realizing the importance of understanding women’s diverse experiences, we would not have persevered in organizing a workshop like the one in Chengdu, for all the setbacks and difficulties we experienced. Discourses that proffer various categories of differences were also powerful. They warned us against the lurking unequal relationship of power in feminist interactions and the limitations of each location and position. It was this awareness that led us to constantly re-examine our relationship with our partners in China throughout these years of collaboration, and consciously create an intersubjective ‘contact zone’ at the Chengdu workshop for all participants to bring up the strength of their positions.15

However, our practice also led us to see more and more clearly the limits of the theory and the inadequacy of the discursively constructed categories for analysing the complex human relationship in feminist practice. There is no denying that today there are still many social groups whose voices are continuously silenced in feminist discourses at almost every location.16 However, the terms of ‘silenced’ and the ‘silencing’ can also be relative. Influenced by various competing, or even conflicting or self-contradictory, discourses, relations of power have never been stable. Feminist interactions could be marred by Euro-centrism that universalizes women’s experiences in the West and thus silences other feminist voices in the world. It could also be undermined by nativism that essentializes differences between the local and the global, and homogenizes feminist voices in other parts of the world, including those in the West.

In addition, for reasons that vary with different contexts, the ‘native’ may uphold the universality of Western experience with all sincerity, and the ‘foreign/diasporic’, saturated with the fear of the potentially unequal relationship proffered by their discursively defined location of power, may also zealously endorse nativism. Further complicating the situation
is that in this era of ‘globalizing feminism’, language and discourses developed at one location could be employed to an entirely different effect at another location. It should, therefore, come as no surprise if the already privileged claims to have been ‘muted’, and the muted continues to be muted in the discourse of ‘speaking for the silenced’.

The complicated reality is largely caused by the complex formulation of identity and subject position in daily life. As recent feminist scholarship has pointed out, not only is an individual’s identity multidimensional, but the various dimensions of one’s identity are also relational, contested, and constantly shifting in response to the changing context. In addition, differences are as much socially determined as determined by individuals’ desires and their projection and introjection of images of self and others. Influenced by one’s training, experience, interest invested or, simply, fantasized power subsequently obtained, one does not necessarily take up the position offered by the dominant discourse, nor is the taking up of subject position always a conscious choice. This complex reality indicates that it is difficult to identify an individual with one stable subject position over time, nor should one be surprised to find differences among those who share the same social or geographical location.17

This complexity has been fully demonstrated by our feminist practice in China. Neither group of Chinese feminist scholars and activists on either side of the Pacific has been a monolithic entity. Different opinions occurred not only between the two groups but also within each of them. It was the constant interaction of different positions within and between groups that led to a better understanding of each other and the situation on both sides.

Although the complex formation of identity and subject position created difficulties in organizing, our feminist practice also demonstrated that it was exactly this complexity and individuals’ agency that have created possibilities for forming cross-boundary coalitions among women. The successful outcome of the Chengdu workshop proved that forming a cross-class-ethnic-and-gender-boundary feminist coalition is not entirely impossible, even in the culturally and institutionally constraining environment of China. Operating in a congenial environment and addressing issues of mutual concern, feminist practice can not only alleviate tensions among people of different social backgrounds and enhance the potentially collaborative elements among them, but can also exert a much stronger political influence on challenging the institutional inequalities that are well beyond the confines of ‘gender’.

What has to be pointed out is that the outcome of the three CSWS collaborative projects in China was, in fact, not simply the result of the
joint effort between Chinese feminist scholars and activists on both sides on the Pacific. Although CSWS and a Chinese institution were always listed as the major sponsors in the fund-raising proposal for each project, they were not the only players. Many non-Chinese citizen CSWS members (whose formal participation was regrettably barred by the particular situation of China during each collaborative project) and the individuals who worked at various overseas funding organizations in China also extended their support to these projects. Without their support, these projects could not have succeeded.\(^{18}\)

The Ford Foundation was the financial sponsor of all three CSWS collaborative projects in China. Like all donees, the CSWS also, time and again, felt constrained in its attempt to pursue a wider range of activities in China due to the funding priorities of the foundation.\(^{19}\) However, without the funding granted by the foundation and the enthusiastic support and constructive suggestions offered by many of the individuals who worked at the foundation, Mary Ann Burris in particular, it would have been very difficult and almost impossible for the society to initiate and carry on its collaborative effort. Given this understanding, one can surely say that the successful outcome of the three CSWS projects in China is an example that illustrates how feminism can thrive with the joint effort of women from different parts of the world.

Differences among women, therefore, should not hinder us from engaging in interaction with each other. For those who essentialize differences and are too anxious not to create unequal relations in interacting with social groups different from their own, the ‘theory of difference’, if not intentionally used to justify their political inertness, will only have an immobilizing impact.

**The Meaning of Feminist Organizing and the Importance of Practice**

The enthusiasm generated by the Chengdu workshop also led us to rethink the meaning of feminist practice in the world. It indicated that feminism appeals to social groups other than academics not simply as new concepts or terms introduced by feminist scholarship. What appeals to them are the democratic visions held out by these new concepts and terms and crystallized by the feminist activities in which they have participated. The implication of this understanding is that theories and concepts, developed in a specific context, are likely to have contextual constraints and may not necessarily be shared by women of different backgrounds and in different contexts, but the democratic value embedded in feminism and suggested by those new theories and concepts that respond to the
particular context can bring together people of different genders and social backgrounds to fight for a common goal in transforming society.

To obtain the goal of feminism and create a democratic future, revolution should start with feminists themselves. It requires feminist scholars to properly situate themselves in relation to social groups other than their own, learn from them, and recognize the inputs of women from different social groups and the important contributions made by feminists of all parts of the world. Interestingly, while many feminist scholars in the West have recently concerned themselves with ‘violence of representation’ in feminist practice, few have bothered to question the notion behind the self-designated ‘speaking for’ or ‘representing’ position that they have taken for granted. Without being aware of the need to learn from other social groups and feminists at various locations, interactions among feminists will only create new forms of social hierarchy in the world. Feminist practice is, therefore, an effort to transform society as well as feminists themselves.

It is in this context that we feel the need to re-examine the diasporic position of the CSWS and the society’s role in feminist organizing in China. Indeed, despite all our differences, many of us in the organization have incomparable advantages in facilitating exchange between women in China and the West. In addition to our bilingual ability, our close ties with China, our lived experience and systematic exposure to the development of women’s studies on both sides of the ocean, the critical perspective on the situations in both China and the West, generated by our marginalized position in both societies, also places us in a better position to add new dimensions to feminist studies in the two countries. It is this critical perspective that has fostered our commitment to the cause of feminism and led us to actively participate in various feminist activities undertaken by the society on a completely volunteer basis.²⁰

However, our diasporic location also has its innate weakness. Having chosen to live outside China, the issues we face cannot be the same as those of our counterparts in China. Physically separated from China, it is also not easy for us to keep up with the rapidly changing situation in China. No wonder that even though CSWS members could always join efforts with their colleagues in China to formulate new ideas for collaborative projects in China, it was our colleagues in China who played the major role in crystallizing these projects. Without their resourcefulness, none of the CSWS collaborative projects in China could have been conceived.

The collaborative projects in China did not only contribute significantly to the development of Chinese women’s studies. They also benefited
CSWS members by providing them with important opportunities to keep abreast of the rapidly changing situation in China and maintain their critical perspectives. Like all social groups, members of the CSWS are not immune to issues in their host country. Problems feminists face in the West will also affect the perspectives of and relationships among members of the society. Engaging in boundary-crossing feminist practice in the transnational context of China and the US will allow us to constantly re-examine our subject positions, better understand ourselves and the world around us.21

In examining the strength and weakness of our diasporic location, we also feel the need to re-evaluate the CSWS role in China. Most of what CSWS members did over the last few years, either initiated by ourselves or requested by our colleagues in China, was to introduce the current development of Western scholarship on feminist theories and on Chinese women through publications or conference presentations. The intention was sincere. It was to promote scholarly exchange between women in China and their counterparts in other parts of the West by representing the developing, multi-dimensional and heterogeneous nature of feminist scholarship in the West and clarifying some misunderstandings about it in China.

However, particularly after our experience at the Chengdu workshop, we cannot help asking the following questions: In our representation of scholarly development in the West, did we ourselves fully realize the latent parochial and hegemonic elements embedded in these studies? Although well intended, did our efforts wittingly or unwittingly essentialize the originally unstable nature of these theories, privilege one theory over another, or theories in general over practice, or Western theories in general over the Chinese empirical studies? In challenging the essentialization of various categories, did we ourselves create new forms of essentialism? And, above all, have we adequately emphasized the democratic value embedded in feminism, which is important in the Chinese as well as in any other context in the world?

Since actual practices vary individually and there are only fine lines between issues raised in these questions, it requires further engagements to answer them. Nevertheless, just as the relatively successful strategies that the planning committee developed for the Chengdu workshop were based on the society’s years of experience in collaboration with its colleagues in China, we are confident that the CSWS, as a feminist organization, will become more and more sophisticated in its future pursuits.
NGO or GO? – A Counter-Discourse in Feminist Organizing in China

One major controversy, ignited by the international feminist community since the 1995 Women’s Conference, has been the validity of applying the concepts of ‘government organization’ (GO) and ‘non-government organization’ (NGO) to gauging the nature of women’s organizations in China. As many of our colleagues have correctly pointed out, the dichotomy of GO vs NGO does not fully reflect the reality of women’s organizations in China. Not only are there more than two kinds of women’s organizations in China but many of them cannot be simply defined as either GO or NGO. In addition, individuals who have been actively involved in women’s studies work in all types of organizations in China.

Our experience in China has further pointed to the fallacy of the liberal notion underlining the concepts of NGO vs GO in China, which privileges the former over the latter. Our experience in organizing the Chengdu workshop has brought us to terms with the fact that institutions outside the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) system are not necessarily more women-friendly than some of the ACWF branches. Neither within nor outside the ACWF do we find homogeneity. Situations vary, contingent on the attitude of the authorities of the institution, the inclination and capacity of the individual who undertakes the project, and her relationships within the institution.

This is not to deny the potentially revolutionary nature of the women-initiated organizations outside the ACWF system in the particular context of China, nor do we intend to deny the entrenched conservative forces embedded in the traditional vertical control over the women’s movement in the country. It is but to caution readers not to simplify or homogenize the situation in China and thus lose sight of the potential alliances of feminist organizing in China, particularly when there is still no significant number of autonomous women’s organizations in the country. Fixing our eyes solely on the research outcomes of feminist scholars and activists in China without understanding the operation of the important institutional forces behind, we would not only be doomed to fail in our feminist organizing in China but would also omit a very important part of the experience of these scholars and activists, who have been very resourceful in resisting the unfriendly institutional forces and enlisting the supportive ones for their feminist pursuits.

Given the above understanding, as well as our understanding of several abortive efforts to establish new independent institutions in China, we came to realize that while institutional changes are important, they do
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not necessarily lead to cultural change. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, feminist scholars and activists in China are not immune from cultural constraints either. Without an emphasis on democratic values embedded in feminism and a conscious effort to initiate innovative change in organizational principles to sustain these values, the old form of hierarchical relationship risks being replaced by new hierarchies. We therefore would like to propose a counter-discourse in this stage of feminist organizing in China, which stresses the importance of fostering democratic values in feminist organizing, rather than simple institutional change.

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Notes

1. For example, Du Fangqin, the major organizer of the first collaborative project co-sponsored by CSWS and Tianjin Normal University in China, is a former colleague of Wu Xu, who joined the CSWS in 1990. The two have a history of working together to promote women’s studies at Tianjin Normal University in China.

2. One of the publications was a translated volume of selected Western feminist writings, and the other was an edited volume of conference presentations. See Du Fangqin (1993). This combined publication of a translated volume and an edited volume of conference presentations and discussions has become a pattern of publication for the CSWS collaborative projects in the following years.

3. For example, in their edited volume Jin Yihong and Liu Bohong define it as marking ‘the first time the concept of gender as a category of analysis was systematically introduced to China’, and Du Fangqin believes that it had laid ‘a solid theoretical ground’ for bridging East and West in China prior to the UN Women’s Conference. See Jin Yihong and Liu Bohong (1998: 3), and Du Fangqin (1996: 228).
4. Although about 95 per cent of the Chinese population belongs to an ethnic majority group called Han, the rest of the population is formed by more than 50 ethnic minority groups.

5. For example, some participants who were experienced in studying women’s issues in China and had opportunities to engage in scholarly exchange with feminist scholars in the West were more interested in learning about the most updated information on feminist scholarship in the West, while others were more concerned about issues in China. In addition, there were quite a number of participants who were still at the stage of trying to figure out what the basic concept of gender as a category of analysis meant and what feminist methodology was. Interestingly, these groups did not seem to have much communication with each other.


7. Like most Chinese students who left the country to study abroad, most CSWS Chinese members came from a narrow social segment. Almost all had received at least a bachelor degree before they left China. Only a very small fraction of Chinese women over age 20 were fortunate enough to receive a degree in the 1980s.

8. Sichuan’s population is composed of 52 ethnic groups, and 80 per cent of its population lives in rural areas.

9. In this chapter, we use ‘grass-roots’ both in relative terms, as in the case of this ‘grass-roots-oriented feminist project’, to distinguish it from the previous scholarly oriented ones, and in its original meaning, defined by Webster’s New World Dictionary as ‘the common people, orig. those esp. of rural or non-urban areas’. See Guralnik (1979: 610). We use its original meaning particularly when we refer to those ‘grass-roots activist’ participants who were from local and rural areas and were not working for the Women’s Federation or any government institution.

10. For example, members of the Sichuan Women’s Studies Institute suggested devoting a special section to the presentations of the grass-roots women activists. This session turned out to be one of the most exciting sessions at the meeting.

11. For example, historian Du Fangqin emphasized the need to overcome Han chauvinism in historical writings and the importance of including ethnic women’s experiences into Chinese women’s history. Social scientists Wang Jinling and Jin Yihong called for the need to reconceptualize the reality of China to include the experiences of all social and ethnic groups. For this, as well as the quote and information that follow, see the transcription of the discussion compiled by the Sichuan Women’s Studies Institute after the end of the workshop. Since this is an internal document, no citation is available.

12. For example, male scholar Wu Shizhong recalled how his misconception of Women’s Federation cadres as narrow-minded and without long-term vision had been fostered by the press and mediated over years, and concluded that ‘the press and media coverage could not be more inaccurate’.
13. By feminist interaction, we refer to all forms of interaction between people (particularly women) of different social backgrounds and political and cultural locales for the cause of feminism.

14. We borrow the term ‘theory of difference’ from Heidi Hartmann and her colleagues. See Heidi Hartmann et al. (1996).

15. We borrow the term ‘contact zone’ from Arif Dirlik, who in turn borrowed it from Mary Louis Pratt. We, however, use this term in a sense completely different from both of theirs. It is used to refer to a space of subjectivity for equally exchanging experiences with each other, purposely preserved by all parties involved who are conscious of the limits of their own positions. For Dirlik’s discussion of the term, see Dirlik (1997: 118–19).

16. For example, in late twentieth-century China, women in many minority groups still had no opportunity to have their voices heard in scholarship on Chinese women by feminist scholars in and outside China.

17. For an excellent discussion of the relational, contested and shifting nature of the differences among women, see Scott (1996) and Moore (1994).

18. For example, Lisa Stearns, James Harkness, and Joan Kaufman at the Ford Foundation have all, at different points of time, made constructive suggestions to the three CSWS collaborative projects. Chor Fong Wong, who then worked as the UN Volunteer Gender and Development Specialist, actively participated in the Chengdu workshop and helped to run a training session on gender.

19. For example, for years the CSWS had to postpone its plan to collaborate with feminist scholars and activists in China to theorize the findings of women’s studies in China, due to the difficulty of securing funding from the foundation, which focused on developmental projects in China.

20. Many CSWS members, particularly Yue Mei, Ma Yuanxi, Kang Hongjin, Zhong Xueping, Wang Zheng, Song Yiqing and Wu Ga, have been involved in organizing the three CSWS collaborative projects at different points. Without their involvement, these projects would not have been successful.

21. We feel particularly so after years of engaging in the study of the working class and ethnic issues in the United States: over the last ten years, Xiaolan Bao has been interviewing and studying the history of Chinese women garment workers in New York City, and Wu Xu has been studying ethnic issues in the US healthcare system.

22. For a good discussion of the characteristics of women’s organizations in China, see Naihua Zhang with Wu Xu (1995), Wang Zheng (1997) and Du Fangqin’s Chapter Eleven in this volume. For a discussion of such a case, see Jaschok (1998).
In China, religious women form part of a special minority. But their number has been growing since the 1980s. One after the other, women’s organizations within the traditional religions have resumed their activities, with religious women beginning to exert a concomitantly greater impact on the domains of religion, family and society. However, scholarship on the whole is focused on religious restoration in the wake of economic reforms or on the fact that women form the majority of religious believers in China (Changchun Academy of Social Sciences 1994; Xu 1990). Much less attention is given to religious women’s organizations or their communities.

I come from a Hui Muslim family, a background where ethnic tradition is intimately related to religious culture.¹ To us, religious communities are an immediate concern, and thus between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, I took part in research related to religious development in Henan Province. From the late 1980s onwards, I began to shift my interest to a unique women’s organization in China: women’s mosques (qingzhen nüsi). I met Maria Jaschok at the end of 1994, and we worked together to study the history and development of Muslim women and their mosques in China.² The experience of working with a Western woman scholar has increased my understanding of women’s studies and has prompted me to do similar studies. This particular chapter forms part of my research into the restoration and development of women’s religious organizations, in which I compare a Protestant women’s organization in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan, with Muslim women’s organizations in the same area.

To the Muslim women, I was a researcher and a member of the same ethnic group. To the Protestant women, however, I was an outsider who did not belong to the Church. But after two years of interaction, I have
become a trusted friend of the woman pastor (nü mushi) who set up the Protestant women’s organization. My multiple identities as insider, outsider, researcher and friend have offered me different perspectives from which to study the organizations that religious women are setting up for themselves.

Currently, the communities of religious women, and their organizations, remain peripheral to the women’s movement in China. They have few chances to participate in mainstream discussions of women’s issues. However, this study contends that their organizations and their practices offer an alternative within the women’s movement in China, an alternative that presents a model characterized by democracy, equality, freedom and harmony.

**Protestant Women’s Organizations – Women’s Assembly and Outreach Groups**

The Protestant women’s organization in Zhengzhou is attached to Renmin Road Church, the most important one of the four churches in that city. The so-called ‘Two Christian Associations’ (consisting of the Christian Association and the Three-Selves Association) and the Patriotic Church of China have their offices in this church. The neighbourhood where the church is situated is administered by the Guancheng Hui Autonomous District. This area, traditionally inhabited by Muslim people, is adjacent to the church. It is also near to the most prosperous commercial area in Zhengzhou. Not far from Renmin Road Church can be found six men’s mosques, one Protestant church and one Catholic church.

**Traditions of Protestant Women’s Organization**

Christianity was introduced to Henan in the late nineteenth century. A total of sixteen different denominations, foreign and Chinese, set up churches in this province. Some churches established women’s groups (divided into Young Women’s Group and the Group for Middle-Aged and Older Women) or women’s Bible classes (funü xuedaoban) in important cities like Kaifeng (the old capital of Henan), Luoyang, and Shangqiu, among others. The wife of the American Baptist pastor, known under the Chinese name of Helishi, used to organize a women’s Bible class in Kaifeng (Henan Sheng Zhi 1994: 171). The Canadian Anglican Church set up not only a women’s group, but also women’s proselytizing and welfare groups (which were comprised of women’s literacy classes, women’s schools, women’s outreach groups, and religious
affairs committees). Members of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Christian schools taught in such women’s literacy classes. All these women’s groups came under the management of the Church and existed until the early 1950s.

The Church in the Post-Denomination Period and changing Ideas of Gender

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Christianity underwent a series of changes. In the early 1950s, due to a number of factors, all religious denominations severed their relations with fellow Churches abroad and took part in a nationwide campaign advocating love of the country, known as ‘Three Selves’ (self-rule, self-nurture, self-preaching). The Three-Selves Associations and patriotic movements – hereafter ‘Three-Selves Associations’ in short) – were set up all over China. In 1958, a reform of religious institutions saw different Churches joining together in assemblies, with representatives of different denominations taking turns in giving the sermon. This is referred as the ‘post-denomination period’ (zongpaihou shiqi).

Christian activities came to a complete halt during the Cultural Revolution. Even the Three-Selves Associations stopped working. In the early 1980s, religious life was restored, and the Christian Association came into being. It was then that Churches searched for a meaningful role in society, that issues came to the forefront ranging from indigenization and contextualization to the propagation of new theological ideas. Under the leadership of Bishop Ding Guangxun, a famous theologian, the work of Churches changed from ‘Three Selves’ to ‘The Three Goods’ (good rule, good nurture, good preaching). Gender then came to the forefront of debates and active developments.

Churches in China are concerned with gender for the following reasons. First of all, the idea of gender equality features prominently in the larger social context where women were eulogized as occupying ‘half of the sky’, that is, as being equal to men in capability, responsibility, and rights. The many oppressive experiences religious people went through between the 1950s and the end of the 1970s had made them judge social reality in a new and harsher light. Leading thinkers began to rethink many theological issues, including gender. Secondly, the influence of new theological thought, such as feminist theology that originated outside China, was introduced to China through exchanges between Chinese and foreign Churches (Peng 1994, 1996). Faced with the mainstream idea of gender equality in society, Chinese Churches are more ready to accept feminist theology. The third factor is related to the increase in the number
of religious women and the rise of religious women leaders. From 1982 to 2000 about twenty female pastors were ordained in Henan Province, and about 4,000 women served in a proselytizing role (chuandaoyuan). Many religious women kept their faith even during the Cultural Revolution; some of them met in secret assemblies. When religious life returned to something like normality, many women activists set up churches where needed and assumed leadership positions. The fourth reason lies in the impact of certain major Church leaders: Anglican Bishop Ding Guangxun, the influential head of the Two Christian Associations, is one example. Anglican believers respect the indigenous cultures and social values of the country and of the locality in which their church is based. Their theological ideas, in conjunction with traditional Chinese thought, have made it easier for Anglicans like Ding Guangxun to engage with Chinese society and its culture (Whyte 1995). They are seriously concerned with gender inequalities as part of the heritage of traditional Churches, and they work hard to initiate changes in gender relations.

From the early 1980s onwards, Chinese Churches began to ordain women pastors; attention was given to gender discussions; theological schools started classes on feminist theology; journals like the Jinling Journal of Theology developed special columns for feminist theology; and Churches became actively involved in the mainstream women’s movement and its facilitation of gender equality and gender awareness. For example, to prepare for the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women, the Two Christian Associations set up a Working Committee on Women in December 1993. After its first meeting in March 1994, the committee requested that Churches in China establish working committees on women wherever possible. The purpose was to improve the educational level of Christian women, to increase their awareness of participatory rights in the organized Church, and to strive for equality and freedom (Mai 1994: 114). At the end of 1994, some 387 female pastors had been ordained nationwide in China, among them also principal pastors (Peng 1996: 38).

Nevertheless, there are sizable differences among denominations in their concepts of gender. Particularly, the relatively conservative fundamentalist Christians (fuyinpai) believe that every word in the Bible is absolute and unalterable. They adhere to St Paul’s idea that men are better than women, and are the masters of women; that women should not preach, should not be in control of men, and so on (Peng 1996: 37). The radical social changes of the last thirty years of the twentieth century do not seem to have altered appreciably their idea of gender.
Profile of a Christian Activist: Pastor Wang Shengcai

Women’s assemblies such as the traditional Christian Women’s Association are subordinate to the Church organization. Christians believe that the Church is the backbone and women’s assemblies its limbs. Rebuilding the Church therefore took priority over rebuilding women’s organizations. Wang Shengcai, in her capacity as a pastor, led Christian women in Zhengzhou to restore and rebuild their churches and assemblies.

Pastor Wang is about 75 years old. She is a member of the Standing Committee of the National Association of Three SELVES, Vice President and Deputy Head of the Henan Two Christian Associations, President of the Zhengzhou Association of Three SELVES, member of the Standing Committee of Zhengzhou Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC), and also a member of Zhengzhou Women’s Federation. She was born into a rich family in Shangqiu, Henan. She was sent to Christian schools, and developed into a devoted (Anglican) Christian. She joined the Anglican Women’s Association and the Young People’s Association while in high school. She taught Christian women how to read and understand the Bible. In 1948 she enrolled in Jinling Women’s Theology College (Jinling nüzi shenxueyuan), after which she began work for the church in Henan in 1952. She settled in Zhengzhou where she has spent all her life, except for a few years during the Cultural Revolution when she was sent to the countryside.

In her youth, Wang Shengcai was gentle and reserved. In her own words, she was more ‘feudal in her thinking’ than most people. She had no contact with the opposite sex. Apart from buying necessities near her school, she hardly ever went out. She only wanted to preach God’s word in remote areas and lead a quiet life. But societal changes and her superior theological education kept her deeply involved and at the forefront of social activities. In the late 1940s, when war interfered with communication and transport activities on the Yangtze River, she lost contact with the Christian mission, her source of finance. Instead she had to rely totally on local school funding. But the schoolmaster, a foreigner, proved very kind and helpful. It was because of this association that, in 1950, she was pressurized to make accusations against foreign priests.

From 1954 onwards, in her capacity as a religious professional, she acted either as representative or member of the CPPCC (both provincial and local level), of the National People’s Congress (NPC), and of the Zhengzhou Women’s Federation. In 1980 she played an instrumental role in the rebuilding of churches. In 1981 the Christian Association of Henan was established; she was elected the Deputy Head and became one of the five main leaders. In the early 1980s, Christianity was developing...
quickly in Henan, but there were not enough pastors. Therefore in addition to her work in Zhengzhou, Wang Shengcai also assisted in the development of Christianity in the whole province.

She was ordained a pastor in 1982. When Bishop Ding Guangxun led a delegation of Chinese Christians to India, she was a member of the group. She visited Hong Kong by invitation in 1996. During her trips to India and Hong Kong, she received special attention. She used her personal interpretation of the Bible to answer questions from reporters and Christian women, who showed a great interest in women pastors. Wang agrees with Bishop Ding Guangxun’s idea of theology, and is concerned that Chinese Churches take feminist theology seriously. While the core of her belief is unchanging, she maintains that theological thought can be innovative. She argues that the real messages of the Bible must be distinguished from thought influenced by culture or convention. She is inspired by Bishop Ding Guangxun’s ideas on divinity (shenxing) (see ‘Women, Motherhood, and the Divine’ in Ding 1998) and is critical of legacies of sexual discrimination and gender inequality in Christianity. As a woman and a supporter of feminist theology who also fully understands the actual situation and needs of Christian women, Pastor Wang was quick to start rebuilding Christian women’s organizations. Before the National Two Christian Associations promoted the establishment of women’s organizations all over China, Pastor Wang had already set up a Christian women’s assembly in Zhengzhou.

After the Renmin Road Church was built and consecrated, pastor Wang and other Christian women set up the Women’s Assembly in the year of 1989. According to her, it was in consideration of women’s practical needs. Women and men have different attributes and problems; therefore, only an education that matches the needs of women can raise women’s religious awareness effectively. She had also wanted to organize women to make handicrafts to raise funds for the Women’s Assembly, but her plan encountered opposition from male colleagues. They contended that women should not have their own ‘little gold safe’, and the plan came to nothing.

Another woman in charge of the Women’s Assembly is the presbyter Sun Zhongxiu, also a native of Shangqiu, Henan. Both of her parents are Christians. She went to a Christian school and studied accountancy in Zhengzhou in 1949. She was working in a bank when she became a supporter of pastor Wang in her endeavour to restore and develop Church work. After Sun retired from the bank in 1984, she began working solely for the Church, and was placed in charge of the Women’s Assembly with its commencement. In June 1998, the Women’s Assembly was transferred
to three young graduates of the Women’s Theology College employed by the Two Christian Associations as preachers. They set up a women’s outreach group (tanfangzu) in July 1998.

The Assembly and Outreach Activities

The Women’s Assembly belongs to the Two Christian Associations of Zhengzhou; it has no relations with other organizations such as the All China Women’s Federation or the government’s Bureau of Religious Affairs. The Two Christian Associations appoint people to take charge of the Assembly, and also administer the affairs of the outreach groups. The Women’s Assembly has no fixed venue but can use facilities in the church, and meets every Friday afternoon. The choice of location depends on the membership, but in recent years events have taken place in the small chapel adjacent to the church.

This Assembly is mainly for women of middle age or older, although in theory women of any age can join. Non-Christians interested in the religion, or male Christians interested in the Women’s Assembly’s activities, are also welcomed. The number of participants is quite stable, but recently the group has seen increase in its membership. When the Women’s Assembly first started, there were only twenty or so people gathered, but gradually it has grown to over a hundred, filling every seat in the small chapel.

The main purpose of the Women’s Assembly is religious education. Reading the Bible, singing hymns, sermonizing, giving testimony to faith, all are central to the tasks of the Assembly. Preachers have to be graduates of theology or have received some theological training. The subject of a sermon varies with the needs of a given audience. In its first few years, the Women’s Assembly focused on enlightening its participants on the basic rules of the Church and the core beliefs of Christian faith. Later, women were led to study the Bible, step by step, and they also learnt hymns and prayers and how to testify about their faith. In the last two years, sermons on family life and the religious conduct of Christian women have become important. Emphasis is placed on female role models taken from the Bible. Christian concepts of marriage, family, and the status and role of women in the Church and in society, are explained with relevant Biblical passages. Readings are led by Christian women with a relatively longer history of devotion or better understanding of Christianity. Participants are encouraged to develop a Christian spirit of mutual support.

Usually the preaching involves about one hour, during which the Bible passages are frequently cited, and incidents familiar to Christian women
are used as illustrations of more abstract ideas. Explanation or interpretation of Christianity is always blended with traditional Chinese moral concepts and ideas current in secular society. From what I heard in the sermons, some ideas are pertinent to today’s society, some are consistent with traditional Chinese morality, but some notions are extremely conservative. For example: The idea of filial piety in Chinese tradition is linked with relevant parts in the Ten Commandments to exhort believers to engage in filial acts. In the light of high divorce rates and common pre-marital sex in cities, Christian ideas of marriage and chastity are put forth as a panacea. However, the attitude towards conjugal relationships and divorce seems rather conservative. The husband is the wife’s head, and he should love her in the same way as he loves his eyes. The only reason for divorce is promiscuity; therefore even if the couple is no longer compatible, they should not divorce. No matter how abusive the husband, the wife must always treat him with forbearance. Offering kindness to combat his evil, a wife never initiates divorce. Pre-marital sex is absolutely forbidden, and only after the religious ceremony witnessed by the pastor, not after the civil ceremony, is the couple entitled to consider themselves married. In short, such Christian social morality asks believers to lead lives both as good citizens, in harmony with society, and as good Christians, eschewing evil and sin.

Gender relations, however, are presented in terms of equality from interpretations of Genesis in the Old Testament in which Eve is created directly by God, totally equal with Adam. Adam’s reference to woman as flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone, is not degrading of Eve. Both of them stand equal before God. Many stories from the New Testament are used to emphasize the message of their equality and that women are dear to God (Luke, 7: 36–49; 8: 1–3; Galatians, 3: 28) and that Jesus Christ in his human incarnation was closely associated with women.

The attitude expressed by female religious leaders towards women’s participation in church and social activities is a progressive one. Women preachers appeal to fellow Christian women to learn from Biblical heroines who are presented as active, self-motivated, and self-sacrificing. Christian women should learn from them, give all they have to the Church, and give testimony to Christ through their personal conduct in family and in society.

Soon after religious life was restored, Christian activist women began their voluntary visits. They group together of their own accord and pay visits to Christians who are sick, or in difficulty, or are considered not firm enough in their belief. They bring comfort, help when necessary with domestic chores, and where belief is weak, they read the Bible, sing
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hymns or engage in other similar activities. Thus the Christian way is spread from Church to society. The voluntary outreach groups are informal organizations, their membership is not fixed and their activities are spontaneous.

A formal outreach group was set up in July 1998 and is administered by women preachers. Members are chosen from volunteers, on the basis that they are free and willing to serve, supported by their families, devoted to Christianity, engage in good deeds, and are keen to help others. Each outreach group has twelve members who are divided regionally into four small groups. Groups in each region visit mainly Christians, but the women also offer help to others if it is needed. Decisions as to who is to be visited are based mostly on information provided by other Christians. The formal outreach groups have not replaced the voluntary groups, which continue their activities as before. They are usually joined by women who are older or busy with housework, but still devoted Christians and ardent in their desire to help others. These flexible, informal arrangements allow for ad hoc activism, which suits both organizers and recipients.

Despite their simple organizational format, Christian women’s activities are enthusiastic, progressive, and flexible. With its Church foundation, the Women’s Assembly propagates Christian belief and helps Christian women to understand and apply theological concepts so that they may find spiritual comfort in religion and the strength to cope with the harshness of life. Outreach groups extend the influence of the Church outside its physical boundary to women who are suffering, giving them much needed warmth and practical assistance. This enhances the relationship between Christian women and the Assembly, and promotes a caring image of Christians and Christianity. Protestants believe that every Christian has the duty to propagate the gospels, and that every Christian woman forms a basic unit on which the Church must build to be grounded in society. The Two Christian Associations, the Women’s Assembly, the women’s outreach groups and ordinary Christian women are all interlocking entities, and together they form a dynamic and flexible organism that extends the influence of the Church to society.

Muslim Women’s Organizations: Women’s Mosques

Organization and Features of Women’s Mosques

The women’s mosque is a traditional organization of Muslim women’s site of worship in China with a history of over two hundred years (Jaschok and Shui 2000). Originally set up by Hui Muslim women, it is a collective organization with the following functions: it provides a venue for Muslim
women to perform communal prayers, to acquire religious knowledge, and to come together for celebrations; it provides necessary religious and ritual support for Muslim families and religious education for children, and also ensures training of religious women leaders. Women’s mosques in China are unique in international Islam in their independence from men’s mosques. They are not involved in conflicts between different Islamic schools, and they may be said to have transcended the boundaries of the parish, instead giving rise to a tradition of interconnectedness of women’s mosques across Islamic China.

Like their men’s counterparts, women’s mosques are managed in a democratic way: a female ahong, that is, a female religious leader usually resident at and in charge of a women’s mosque, is appointed on recommendation of a mosque’s management committee. Religious matters are handled by the ahong and daily matters are left to the elected representatives (usually called committee members) of the mosque congregation. The mosque’s financial operation is open to public scrutiny and its religious independence is absolute. Except for certain older, highly respected ahong (who are made permanent ahong), both ahong and the mosque’s committee members are employed on a contract basis. The ahong’s salary is determined by mutual agreement negotiated between the mosque’s appointment committee and the ahong herself. This is perhaps the only historical organization in China that bears features of modern democracy and is created by people from the lower ranks of society. This mechanism of mutual inspection and control guarantees that ahong and management committee positions are always held by the most capable and reliable women. This helps to avoid problems of corruption, waste, nepotism and unfairness, and makes for a stronger mosque organization.

**Mosque Restoration and Challenges**

A mosque allows Muslim women to demonstrate fully their ability and imagination. However, the restoration or rebuilding of women’s mosques, which started during the 1980s, has been an extremely difficult process. Not only did buildings require extensive repairs, but traditions of religious organization had also to be reactivated and believers reorganized. All this takes a vast amount of human, material, and financial strength, as well as competent organizers and leaders. However, women’s mosque congregations can rely on nothing but themselves and their local parish.

There exists an intrinsic and symbiotic link between women’s mosques and Hui Muslim women; personal religious belief and the traditional Muslim way of life has made this link hard to break. However, in an
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urban environment of multiple cultures, fluid social interaction and the freedom granted by anonymity, Muslim traditions have also been affected. Consequently, one may note a gradual distancing between Hui Muslims and their mosques. However, as long as Muslim practice is continued in some form or other, believers’ relationship with the mosque continues. Even Muslims who are no longer practising their faith may need occasional help from the mosque; for example, even Hui Muslims who are Christians are still buried with Islamic rituals. It is true that many Muslim women go to mosques only when they have problems, but for reasons of ethnicity or religious sentiment, they still support the development of women’s mosques in one way or another. Women who have a close link with the mosque tend to have strong faith, often living nearby the mosque, and these are the women most likely to frequent the mosque in order to fulfil their religious duties. They care about the development and construction of women’s mosques and are their most important source of support. Ahong, committee members, and devoted believers work together to restore women’s mosques. The eight historical women’s mosques in Zhengzhou City were back to normal after the early 1980s, and new women’s mosques emerged from some communities as well.

But construction work is not the only important concern for members of women’s mosques. Challenges also come from changes taking place in the Muslim community and in society at large. Many men’s mosques started educational reforms after the 1980s, placing a strong emphasis on modern Arabic and new Islamic co-educational schools. Some men’s mosques have kindergartens and organize holiday classes for primary school children, employing young women as teachers. Other men’s mosques develop their academic facilities: for example, Islamic intellectuals and young professionals (both women and men) who have been educated abroad are invited to give special lectures on academic issues and general matters concerning the international Muslim world. Traditionally, women’s mosques have been responsible for the education of women and children, but now those men’s mosques that also provide this service threaten to become a strong challenge to the very purpose of a women’s mosque.

Ordinary Muslim women, under the influence of open-door policies and a more liberal atmosphere in cities, also bring new demands to bear on women’s mosques. Traditionally, women’s mosques have used mostly Persian-language scriptures and teaching materials (called the ‘Women’s Koran’). Traditionally the emphasis has been on teaching women the basic knowledge of Islam, of norms, rules, and worship rituals;
the doctrines of Islam were not part of women’s curriculum. Many contemporary religious women, more cultured and better educated than earlier generations, have learned about Islamic religion by reading the Chinese Koran, and often they find themselves frustrated when faced with shallow interpretations or traditionalist moral convictions still offered by older women ahong.

Some ahong are themselves challenging the education offered by women’s mosques. They consider replacing ancient Persian with modern Arabic. Added urgency is felt by many young female ahong who believe they have no choice but to learn the Arabic Koran from a male ahong, undermining the authority of older women ahong and the place of women’s mosques in Muslim communities. The changing urban environment, the multicultural reality of cities, the temptation presented by global modernity, the growing apathy of Muslim believers, and the demands on organized religion that come from converts to Islam, are all calling for innovative responses from male and female ahong. The greater strides made in educational reform in men’s mosques have become a source of pressure for women ahong and a question of credibility for women’s mosques.

But developments among some of the most influential women’s mosques do give cause for hope. One encouraging example is the work of the leadership of the Beida Women’s Mosque in Zhengzhou (see Jaschok and Shui 2000). The great campaign to rebuild the women’s mosque was started in the early 1980s. Under the leadership of the most capable and reformist ahong and her management committee, Muslim women of this mosque restored their site to unequalled splendour, and without any outside finances. They also acquired modern facilities such as refrigerators, air-conditioning and heating systems. They have succeeded in creating a tranquil, clean, comfortable, convenient and cosy environment. I made my first visit to the mosque around 1989, and I have witnessed its changes in the intervening years: its courtyard has grown more beautiful, its membership is more consolidated, and the number of visitors is increasing steadily. During Ramadan in 1998, more than hundred women came to the Mosque to worship. To those in charge of Beida Women’s Mosque, however, success does not lead to complacency. Aware of pressures from Muslim communities and mainstream society, and of reforms taking place in men’s mosques, they have shifted their attention to internal reform. They have adopted a more open attitude, which means that all kinds of visitors and public activities are welcomed by the Mosque; for example, it was here that the first sermon competition for ahong, organized by Zhengzhou Islamic Association, was held. Beida
Women’s Mosque also started twice-weekly Arabic classes in July 1999, which attracted more than one hundred students (including a few men). The Mosque’s extensive facilities are available to Muslims for certain functions, thus generating funds for the maintenance of the Mosque.

The women’s mosque, as argued above, displays many democratic features, but historical, ethnic, and religious factors have made it also a confined and closed system. Every women’s mosque is like a self-enclosed circle: the mosque is the centre, the ahong lives in its innermost corner, and ordinary Muslim women live on, and around, its periphery. The faithful keep a loose or close contact with the women’s mosque and its ahong, with relations mainly based on religion and tradition. Although a few Han Chinese women have been converted to Islam, Hui Muslim women constitute the dominant mosque population. The development of women’s mosques depends on the quality of believers and leaders, among other factors. Capable ahong and management committees are able to work together in uniting Muslim women, hence facilitating consolidation of the mosque in society and the self-confidence of its women members. On the other hand, the absence of such qualities compromises the very survival of a given women’s mosque.

Relations with other Mosques, the All China Women’s Federation and the Government’s Religious Affairs Bureau

Relations among women’s mosques are based on historical and personal links. Regardless of size, every women’s mosque is independent and equal, and they keep on friendly terms with each other. Whenever there is an important festival or celebration, all related women’s mosques will be invited – it does not matter if those affiliated mosques are nearby or located in remote areas.

The relationship with the men’s mosque of the same parish is the most important relationship for a women’s mosque. Historically, because Muslims in China are poor and members of a minority, women’s and men’s mosques of the same parish are related like a family. If a women’s mosque encounters difficulty, it will seek help from the men’s mosque of the same parish first. But since the 1980s, the relationship between women’s and men’s mosques has undergone changes. Where women’s mosques act in the traditional way, that is, taking care of religious and daily matters, all financial and political issues are left to men’s mosques. But some women ahong and their management committees are displaying a strong sense of independence. Their insistence on self-reliance in managing financial, educational and religious affairs has strained relations with patriarchal Islamic institutions.
Shui Jingjun

Since women’s mosques are registered as places of religious activity (enforced first in 1993, then again in 1995, in order to place sites of worship under tighter official control; see Jaschok and Shui 2000), they come under the administration of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. But Muslim women are aware of their multiple identities (in which are embodied ethnicity, religion, and gender), and they would wish the ACWF to recognize women’s mosques as Muslim women’s organizations and to take their work seriously, whether ideologically or politically. Dan Ye, who is a committee member of Beida Women’s Mosque, is also a member of the Guancheng District Women’s Federation in Zhengzhou City. She took the initiative to report to the Federation the work of the women’s mosques, including mediation in neighbourhood and domestic disputes, family planning and legal rights education. Dan Ye appealed to the Guancheng District Women’s Federation to establish a working relationship with the women’s mosques. Despite the praise this report received, Beida Women’s Mosque is still waiting for the Federation to act on its assurances.

Another Voice: Unique Features of Religious Women’s Organizations

While gender issues are no doubt an important factor in the organization of religious women, their real concern is the ultimate purpose of life, that is, preparation for the afterlife, a belief which sets them apart from secular women’s organizations. Religious women not only have to cope with sexist prejudices in the society at large, they also have to confront sexist ideas embedded in traditional religious doctrines and their restrictive gender role definitions. Moreover, religious women’s organizations are subject to greater political controls than is the case with secular women’s organizations. For example, activities must be confined to the religious site designated by the authorities.

Religious women have multiple identities, but the All China Women’s Federation and relevant Government bureaus focus solely on their religious identity and categorize them accordingly. Since the 1950s, the ACWF has been following the policies of other government institutions such as the National People’s Congress or the CPPCC in selecting only those religious women considered ‘politically reliable’ or ‘non-controversial’ as committee members of the Women’s Federation. Yet the Federation has set up no objective standards by which women in the committees should conduct their work, nor does the Federation appear
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to consider establishing relations with religious women’s organizations. The Bureau of Religious Affairs administers these women’s organizations in accordance with official guidelines on the relationship between government and religious believers. Despite Chinese society’s prejudice against religion, and despite believers’ history of political ostracism, religious women harbour a strong desire to merge with mainstream social life. Some religious women’s organizations would like the support and recognition of institutions such as the ACWF, and a number of religious women intellectuals seek to join the women’s movement at large, but they are ignored and their demands neglected.

Differences between religious believers and the secular mainstream culture, a general lack of understanding when it comes to religious minorities, and the low status of religion in modern and contemporary Chinese history, have contributed to frequent negative criticism of religious women and their organizations. Popular stereotypes depict them as backward, uncultured, primitive, stupid, or even superstitious. Yet their survival and development rely on qualities of devotion, sacrifice, courage and persistence, qualities which make religious women activists stand out among women activists in general.

Tradition has an inordinate impact on the style, objective and content of the activities that mark religious women’s organizations today. Although leaders of religious women’s organizations do take into account the actual situation of women members, their preferred way of doing things still prioritizes the traditional style of organization over others. It must be noted that adherence to tradition is endorsed by the government, which favours status quo over reform, and continuity over change. Furthermore, the composition of membership (many members are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds) and other factors, have created a tendency for religious women’s organizations to stick to traditional boundaries of activity. This confinement to boundaries may then result in unfortunate situations where individual religious women of the same street or area can have cordial personal relations, but the organizations to which they belong do not connect at all.

Faith and heartfelt spontaneous initiatives are the mainspring of the motivation that sustains the relationship between religious women and their organizations. For Christian women, the closeness to their organization is totally dependent on their belief and the motivation generated by that belief. For Muslim women, the relationship with women’s mosques derives from both personal piety and a customary way of life. However, this relationship is changing: the impact of tradition is weakening, and the concept that Islam is the sole choice for Hui people is changing as
Personal choice has become important even in the religious sphere. But it could be argued that by this same token, choice and the individual autonomy it gives may make participation in a given religious organization the stronger for being a personal act of faith rather than a legacy of collective identity.

Religious women from the lower levels of society use action, rather than verbal discourse, to voice their beliefs and demands. They search for a space within their organization as a way to affirm their position in secular and religious life. The insurmountable difficulties faced in getting support from secular society have forced them to rely totally on their own efforts. Thus they have developed a spirit of self-reliance and self-confidence. It is their hope that society will endorse and support their preferred way of life, but they do not intend to depend on society. They have no unrealistic expectations either.

The influence of religious culture means that religious women have a more complex idea of gender equality and women’s emancipation. They advocate equality between women and men not only in this worldly life, but in the religious sphere as well. More importantly, it is an equality between women and men in the face of God. Thus, liberation of women embodies multiple layers of meaning: a liberation in secular life – to be set free from restrictive social practices and traditional biases on women; and a liberation on a theological level – to understand religious precepts from a woman’s perspective, resulting in a new interpretation for gender relations unfettered by patriarchal tradition of religion. A total liberation of human beings entails the quest for a more enlightened humanity, for the uplifting of the human spirit and for a profound liberation of women. This liberation can be achieved through understanding of their spiritual world and elimination of whatever it is that makes women suffer. A totally free spirituality means respect for one’s self and for what it means to be a human being. It creates the foundation for unprecedented personal strength and courage, for a liberation from dependency, and for new forms of human relationships.

Faced with a relatively difficult environment for survival, religious women have learnt from actual experience that for their organization to survive and develop they must work towards general freedom, democracy and equality. Expectations of their own religious leaders are high, whether they are appointed or elected by members in the organization: they are to cultivate the highest spiritual quality and an ability to propagate religious knowledge. A religious leader must also stay in harmony with fellow religious women, and she should help them to resolve problems, whether related to spiritual or to secular life. Other leading women must be equally
willing to give and serve, be capable of assisting fellow religious women, have strong organizational management and social skills as well. Due to religious belief and religious morality, leaders treat members of the organization like sisters, and members also expect to relate to each other as equals. Everything within the organization is done by collective consultation. Despite the respect shown for religious leaders (due to their more advanced knowledge of religion), what accounts for the absence in many religious women’s organizations of the fetters of patriarchy, of hierarchy, or of inequality is the trust and care nurtured between members and leaders. This sentiment, an atmosphere that generates spiritual comfort, is rarely encountered outside such organizations.

Modern urban environments leave us with both a challenge and the possibility for diverse models of women’s organizations. ‘Cosmopolitan cities have always been the furnace in which different ethnic groups and cultures mix and function. The city is the centre of those lively, subtle interactions, which produce new ethnic groups, new social forms along the way as well’ (Park, Burgess and Mackenzie 1987: 41). In cities, information comes together from different sources, different cultures learn to co-exist, contacts between people from diverse backgrounds are a part of life; individuals also have more freedom of choice. The intertwining and mutual impact between religious and secular cultures, and between different religions, prompt people to think more individualistically, engendering different life-styles. For religious women’s organizations, this is a time of challenge and of development. But it is also the time that questions must be asked about how religion can continue to be a source of fulfilment not only for the downtrodden and the oppressed but also for the more cultured women of our modern cities!

Notes
1. China has 56 minorities, 10 of which constitute the country’s Muslim population. The Hui Nationality is the most populous of the 10, according to the 1990 Population Census totalling 8,602,978 members. See Gladney’s seminal work (1991); for a recent study of Hui Muslims in Henan Province, see Allès (2000).
2. For a more comprehensive treatment of women’s mosques in China, see Jaschok and Shui (2000).
4. Ahong is a Persian-derived term used widely in Islamic China to refer to women and men religious professionals whose given status, functions, mosque-based and societal duties depend on local Muslim conventions and the ahong’s personal abilities.

5. The Women’s Koran, known as nürenjing, is a Persian text which consists largely of extracts from the Koran, and of various Islamic commentaries, considered pertinent to women’s morality, family life, and conduct as citizens. See Jaschok and Shui (2000).

6. Guancheng Hui Autonomous District is situated in the centre of Zhengzhou City. For a more detailed profile of Dan Ye, and of the Beida Women’s Mosque, see Jaschok and Shui (2000).
Faith and Social Change

Jin Yihong: Zhu Li mentioned [the concepts of] ‘huo’ [a stove-centred eating hall, exclusively for Buddhist nuns] and ‘wuzi’ [nuns’ independently-run temple hall]. I wonder if this should be regarded as a ‘women’s organization’ within a religious context, or is it simply that women form the majority of this religious institution [that they play a significant role]? I think there is a big difference between the two situations. I’d like to know on what grounds you consider these cases to be ‘women’s organizations’? Are they gender-aware? Is it simply because women played such a huge role in re-building Xiangshan [Monastery] that they naturally became its centre? Even though, as you mentioned, women contributed most to the Monastery’s reconstruction, when a monk becomes the abbot, who is the decision-maker here? Who has the real power? You can’t assume that since women did a lot in rebuilding the temple, they are holding the leading roles as well.

Zhu Li: Women are indeed the actual leaders of the Monastery. From the start, they were the only people at the Xiangshan Monastery [during the Cultural Revolution]; men did not dare to go [audience laughter]. The abbot is only responsible for religious affairs, that is, for the spiritual side. He is in charge of religious ceremonies, but decisions regarding Xiangshan Monastery are made basically by the nuns. For example, who’s responsible for building which temple, how to build it, how to raise funds and how to use them, whom to choose to build the Monastery . . . all these questions are decided by women.
PART IV

NGO Discourse and Deconstructing the Women’s Federation
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First let me say something about my background and my connection with the subject I discuss in this chapter. I am a social scientist and have been engaging in women’s studies since 1988. In my research and in my activist involvement – whether they are concerned with the historical or contemporary development of Chinese women – I always come across the biggest women’s organization in China: the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF). The unavoidable reality is that the development of Chinese women is influenced by the operation, development, past, present and future of the Federation. To care about the fate of Chinese women means also to care about the change and development of the Federation. As a researcher, however, I am bound to look at it from a special perspective. My focus is always on the difficult survival of Chinese women and their disadvantageous situation during social changes and the redistribution of social resources. More often than not, I am critical and sceptical about the ACWF’s public policies. In the cultural and ideological realm, I tend to condemn, rather than praise, its misleading or even sexist messages. For a long while, I have been more like an unpleasant messenger who has only had bad news to announce. My acceptance and advocacy of gender perspectives (shehui xingbie shijiao) has also made the Women’s Federation cautious of me, thinking that I am somewhat ‘Westernized’.1 But I have gained support from the lowest levels of the Women’s Federation. For many years I have been involved in training local-level women cadres: I give ten to twenty lectures each year, both small- and large-scale, at village, town, county, city or even provincial level.

With time I began to receive general acceptance by local levels of the Women’s Federation: they see all I have been doing in past years as ‘for the liberation of women’. Even though my gender perspective is still
different from that of the Federation, mine is ‘the closest’ to theirs. Now I am having a ‘honeymoon’ period with the leaders of the Jiangsu Women’s Federation. The subtle changes in my relationship with the Women’s Federation can only be understood in a larger context: 1995 saw a big change in the Women’s Federation of China. As an attempt to ‘connect track’ (jiegui) with the international communities, it became more receptive of the theoretical concept of gender equality, and its ideological system became more open. In terms of organizing, it became more conscious of uniting all groups or individuals fighting for gender equality. In other words, it became more embracing and forbearing. Of course, since I have always been positive about the Federation’s irreplaceable roles, and have always been active in cooperating with them, we finally found a common ground to build up a good cooperative relationship: ‘working for women’.

As someone outside of the Women’s Federation, my knowledge of its internal operation is rough and limited. My observation and analysis can thus be inaccurate, wrong or misleading. But by the same token, as someone outside of the system, my view has its objective, sensitive, and incisive character – an advantage for me over those inside the Federation. This is one of the reasons why I have the courage to write on this topic.

**Challenges of Today and Tomorrow**

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in China in 1995, provided the Women’s Federation an unprecedented opportunity of development. First and foremost, there was an increase of overall resources available, and an expansion of the Federation’s organizing system. In her report *Writing at the Fiftieth Anniversary of All-China Women’s Federation*, ACWF deputy chairperson Gu Xiulian proudly summarized the excellent organizing work of the Federation: grass-roots organizations, women’s committees at government institutions and work units and various group members have established complex networks. Funds have been set up for women and children, economic enterprises of production and service established, and community centres built for women’s activities, all of which has given a solid foundation for the Federation’s development. Moreover, there are women’s newspapers, magazines and other publications that give the Federation its own public forum. All this demonstrates that the total amount of the Federation’s resources is expanding and it has developed from depending solely on government funding to multiple channels of finance. The Women’s
Federation in the 1990s is effectively better off than any other mass organization.

Secondly, the Federation is now in a stronger position to hold dialogues with upper-level Party committees. Due partly to government promises on women’s development and due to the growing influence of women’s organizations in society, the Federation now has more legitimacy to speak up in government and Party institutions. Another factor is that in its interaction with international communities the Federation has also acquired more skills in negotiating with decision-making bodies.

But opportunities for development also bring new challenges. The Women’s Federation began to feel the pressure for change as early as the 1980s, and calls for reforming the Federation have remained constant since then. But it is only today, amid institutional reform and downsizing of the government, and when the future is full of uncertainties, that the pressure has been felt as a crisis. Although most of this pressure comes from challenges external to the Federation system, it is nevertheless inseparable from its internal structural conflicts.

**Internal Structural Conflicts**

For a long time, the Women’s Federation has suffered from two kinds of internal conflict: one relates to its organizing system, the other has to do with its role and positioning. The structure of the ACWF is similar to that of other national organizations. Like the All China Federation of Trade Unions (Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui), All China Youth Federation, Association of Science and Technology (Kexue jishu xiehui), or Disabled Person’s Federation (Canjiren lianhehui), it runs from national level down to provincial, municipal, county, district, town and village levels, forming a hierarchical, tree-like network. But again, like many other Chinese organizations, this structure only functions as a ‘nominal hierarchical system’ (xingshixing cengji jiegou) because the upper-level Federation does not have real administrative power over its subordinate. Instead, every level of the Women’s Federation is under the direct leadership and financial sponsorship of the Party organization at the level above. Furthermore, the hiring, promotion, demotion, and dismissal of the Federation’s personnel are decided by Party officials. The upper level of the Federation has the right to recommend on cadres of a lower level, but it has no power to offer appointment, nor does it supply any financial resources directly. In this sense, the Women’s Federation is within the Party system where a ‘substantive hierarchical system’ (shizhixing cengji jiegou) is in place. Although the relationship between upper and lower levels of the Federation is only one of supervision and being supervised,
for a long time, local and regional levels of the Federation have been rather compliant and obedient to instructions or orders from the upper level, taking orders from the upper levels as if they held direct leadership power over them. In this sense, the Federation is under dual leadership, one from the Party and the other from its superior Federation. Thus, one could say that even though the tree-like system of the Women’s Federation is just a ‘nominal hierarchical structure’, it has displayed the efficiency
and consistency of a ‘substantive hierarchical system’. What has made this nominal hierarchical structure function like a substantive one is borne by the powerful vertical control system and its corresponding Chinese culture. However, this inconsistency of structure and form is the feature most likely to be challenged – especially since the vertical structure of society is likely to grow weaker in the future. Figure 6.1 shows the difference between a substantive (continuous lines) and nominal (dotted lines) hierarchical structures.

Here I should also add a few words on the difference between ‘supervision’ (zhidao) and ‘leadership’ (lingdao). In a leader-subordinate relationship, the leader exercises absolute control over its subordinate. That is, with administrative power, leaders send mandatory orders to those under them, who then must accept unconditionally and fulfil their duties to the best of their ability. The control of a supervisor on a supervisee is weaker. A supervisor may recommend certain actions, give guidance or even offer a proposal, but there is no hard rule whether or not the supervisee should follow through any of the supervisor’s instructions or suggestions. The supervisor may evaluate or award the supervisee afterwards, but never plays any role in the latter’s actual management. Nevertheless, when the hierarchical mode of control is so pervasive, the relation between a supervisor and a supervisee may well become one between a leader and a subordinate. Orders from supervisors would then be accepted and undertaken just like those from leaders. This is why I stated above that for a long time, the Federation has operated under the dual leadership of the Party and Federation.

The second structural conflict faced by the Women’s Federation lies in its role and positioning. Before China began its reforms, there was only one clear, definite role for the Women’s Federation: as an assistant. Thus, it carried out work on women in line with the Party’s central work. Its role as a representative and protector of women’s interests was vague and never defined until the 1980s. Since then it has become a tricky question as to how the tension between these two roles should be handled. At present, the Women’s Federation faces pressures from two sources. The first one comes from higher levels of the Party, which expect the Federation to help protect, and ensure the stability of, the social system in the middle of social changes, rather than doing anything else. But there are also pressures from women’s groups, who want the Federation to be a real representative of their interests, and to speak for them, strongly and powerfully. The former would have bearing on the Federation’s legitimacy, while the latter has to do with its representative authority. And the Federation must justify its existence in both domains. Sometimes
such double identities are consistent and compatible with each other, but there are times when they are not, to the extent that they might even bring out internal conflicts and tensions. For example, a grass-roots cadre of the Federation once told me that, considering her role and the function of the Federation, she should have put emphasis on protecting labour, for example the rights and interests of migrant women workers. But her leader, an upper-level local Party cadre, warned her that it was then a difficult time for many town and village enterprises. Therefore, there should be no mention of labour protection to give them further troubles.

The lower the administrative level, the more concentrated resources of development are in the hands of grass-roots Party organizations, hence the more pressure for the Federation to ‘think for the bigger issues’ (guquan daju) and the weaker its role as a ‘speaker for women’s interests’ (funü quanyi de daiyanren). When it comes to the village level, which is at the far end of the whole organizing system, cadres of the Women’s Federation can only work as ‘assistants’ who help to incorporate women into various central projects of Party branches. This is due to the reality that every role must have legitimate supportive resources, and for the grass-roots organizations of the Women’s Federation, their supportive resource basically comes from upper level Party organizations.

Inside the System: a Weakening of Hierarchical Control

As analysed above, the hierarchical structure of the Women’s Federation is sustained by a specific background and a specific system. Even though Women’s Federation at a given level does not provide direct managing resources to the level below, it does provide other important resources, such as theoretical guidance, ideas, information and professional knowledge, and the training and recommendation of women cadres. In recent years upper levels of the Women’s Federation have even offered projects or fought for projects for lower levels. However, if we look at the composition of resources received by a certain level of the Women’s Federation, it is obvious that provision from the higher-level Women’s Federation is far less than that from the higher-level Party organization. Take organizational resources as an example: the higher-level Women’s Federation can control the lower-level Women’s Federation primarily by providing cadre training, activity supervision, task assignment and internal appraisal. But the control of higher-level Party organizations is stronger and their cadre training, evaluation, appointment and allocation of financial resources are far more significant. This is because cadre training at the Women’s Federation is only for the propagation of certain ideologies and the acquisition of practical knowledge and skill; recommendations
made by the Federation for cadre appointment are not authoritative, nor is its evaluation considered vital for cadre appointment. On the other hand, cadre training by the Party is usually directly related to promotion. Many capable women cadres may have been trained and recommended repeatedly by the Women’s Federation but still remain in the same position, while those who have been trained by the Party get promoted very quickly after the training session, as long as nothing else goes wrong.

With the general trend in China of decentralization and localization, grass-roots levels of the Women’s Federation have to observe the interests of the local Party and stay in line with the Party’s central work, they cannot just focus on tasks assigned by their higher-level Women’s Federation. And when tasks from both authorities ‘flood in’, the lower-level Women’s Federation tends to accomplish mandatory duties from the Party level above it first and leave those from the higher-level Women’s Federation aside – as much as possible. Once a grass-roots Women’s Federation branch I knew was faced with this kind of dilemma – in that year, the Municipal Party Committee wanted to transfer one of the Federation’s presidents to an enterprise to participate in ‘enterprise reform’, and the Federation was also asked to follow examples of other ministries in ‘soliciting business and investment’ to attract several hundred thousands of dollars of investment – as a ‘contribution to the development of local economy’. That Federation was also planning to cooperate with the Municipal Party Committee by helping laid-off women find new employment. However, their senior-level Women’s Federation had instructed them to organize a series of large-scale campaigns around the slogan of ‘ten thousand households learning law, ten thousand households giving good education [for children], and ten thousand households caring about environmental protection’. The notion of ten thousand households implies that women from all walks of life had to be called upon to take part. Such a large-scale project could not be accomplished by only a few members of a local-level Women’s Federation. Instead, it would have required major organizational and mobilization effort to get many local levels of Federation involved. According to my friend of that Federation, usually the solution to that kind of never-ending task is to be ‘perfunctory’ (hunong). While such complaints from lower levels against Federation levels above are rather common nowadays, the rationale of their behaviour is that a failure to obey orders from upper levels of the Women’s Federation only makes them less favoured in the Federation’s internal evaluation of progressiveness. However, a less than competent handling of mandatory orders from the Party can cause harm to future allocation and distribution of human, financial and material resources to the extent
that personal promotion can even be put in risk. On another occasion, I witnessed that a lower-level Women’s Federation was conspicuously absent from an appraisal activity organized by an upper-level Women’s Federation, and yet this non-compliance did not cause any strong reaction from the upper level. This was unimaginable in the old days.

Although it is still not obvious or common for lower levels of the Women’s Federation to show their independence or non-compliance in handling the supervision of higher levels of the Federation, this is a growing tendency. In the past, the lower and upper levels of the Women’s Federation were totally consonant; now, lower levels of the Women’s Federation may choose not to carry out orders from above. This illustrates that the Federation’s nominal hierarchical system of control is weakening. The upper-level Federation is gradually losing any substantive power of control over the lower level. Their relationship is changing toward a genuinely network-like partnership between the supervisor and the supervised.

At the same time as control from above is weakening, we see an increase in lower-level Federation’s financial power and its strength to engage in dialogues with upper levels of the Federation; the activities of the Women’s Federation increasingly involve various local offices and groups in order to reach wider communities; and every single grass-root level of the Federation is actively in search of social resources outside of its system. Today grass-root levels of the Federation enjoy more autonomy and self-determination. Their operations are becoming more flexible and diverse as well. Above all, they have various ways to ‘go astray’ from the main theme. Those grass-root levels of the Federation that do not carry out orders from their upper levels tend to have wider support of social resources from outside the Federation’s system, and they also tend to be more competent. The need for survival and development has prompted the Women’s Federation to encourage grass-root levels of the Federation to participate actively in the market economy. Ironically, it is this very hand of the market that is now disintegrating the hierarchical mechanism of the Federation’s control.

**Challenge from Outside the System**

Generally speaking, multipolarization of women’s interest groups and the rise of popular women’s organizations (*minjian funü zuzhi*) are turning relationships among women’s organizations into sets of horizontal networks. The Women’s Federation is now faced with the problem of positioning. Before the reforms of the 1980s, the Women’s Federation was the only women’s organization in China. Reform has caused the
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emergence of various interest groups and there is a demarcation by gender, which makes women feel strongly the existing difference between ‘my group’ and ‘other groups’. Driven by the need for gender recognition, popular women’s organizations have sprung up. Starting from 1984, in Shanghai, and then in other big or middle-sized cities, women began to organize themselves into groups on the basis of occupation, profession, or age. By 1989, there were over two thousand women’s associations of this nature in China (Liu, 2000).

1995 was another peak year for the formation of popular women’s organizations. Before then, women’s organizations in China could be said to be united under the leadership of the Women’s Federation. But those organizations founded right before or after the Women’s Conference are sometimes totally independent of the Women’s Federation. The increase of resources from outside the system was particularly impressive. Many newly established popular women’s organizations received funding from all kinds of foundations and enterprises – they have learned, rather rapidly, the way to canvass for ‘money’. This marked the end of the monopolized supply of resources by one institution. The Women’s Federation thus faced a new choice: should it separate itself from those women’s organizations that were independent of it, or should it enter into a network with them? To put it more figuratively: should it incorporate them into its system, should it walk shoulder to shoulder with them, or should it just turn a ‘blind eye’ to their existence? In terms of actual power and influence, there is still no women’s NGO in China today that is comparable to the Women’s Federation. Nor is any popular women’s organization presented as a real threat to the Women’s Federation’s authority. But in the long run, the increasing de-politicization of women work (funü gongzuo) is going to bring forth a big, new space of development, which will certainly be shared and enjoyed by large and small NGOs. In other words, it is inevitable that women’s organizations are heading towards networking. The situation of the Women’s Federation is that, on the one hand, the total amount of social as well as organizing resources for women’s organizations is increasing; on the other hand, resources are being distributed diversely. The particularly tough challenge comes from the future and the upcoming reforms in government departments, mass groups and organizations (qunzhong tuanti/zuzhi). These imply a rather major change in resources allocation within the system. In the future, relationships and positioning between old and new NGOs, big and small NGOs will be constantly changing and adjusting. Following the logic of network development, the Women’s Federation will need a new positioning. It has to answer questions such as where will the
Federation fit into this emerging network and how can it sustain its authoritative existence.

**Challenges to the Traditional Mode of Operation**

At the level of actual operation, where reform is most likely to take place, the unadaptability of the Women’s Federation becomes most obvious. In the old days, the Women’s Federation survived by organizing different events. It united, motivated and subsidized the mass of women to participate in certain kinds of activity. The Federation would then be able to create a widespread social influence, prove its function, and acquire general endorsement of its ideologies. Its activities started every year from Women’s Day on 8 March to Family Day on 14 May, Children’s Day on 1 June, and moved on to campaigns such as quit smoking, environmental protection, love and care for birds, respecting the elderly, and other events. These activities took place all year round and kept the Federation very busy. Its operation of those activities was basically like a Party campaign, where initiative and instruction always came from the top, and with a few models selected as exemplars for the mass to follow. This is a typical old-fashioned mode of mass movement in communist China. But now Chinese women are very divided, every interest group has its own need and its own objective of social life. Using just one slogan, one appeal or one mode of motivation is unlikely to get ‘the whole mass of women’ motivated and involved. Besides, the development of civil society and the decline of the work unit system (the danwei) have made it harder to organize and motivate women through administrative measures. Mobilization through various administrative levels is surely out of date now. The way women participate in society is also changing. As a result, the conventional mode of mobilizing women can no longer truly ‘move’ women – the various events and activities may be splendid in appearance, but no substantive progress is made at all. In fact, more often than not, before the high tide of one activity is evaluated and appreciated, waves of the next event have already pushed it away. In real-life situations, this mode of operation and mobilization is showing more and more its poor adaptability to the changing reality.

Another dislocation of the Women’s Federation is shown in its relationship with the mass media, which it has to cooperate with and monitor at the same time. Development of modern mass media, such as television, means that ideology and cultural concepts are disseminated in a new way. But the Women’s Federation still engages in its old method of propaganda, making its campaigns ‘loud and grand’, rather than seriously studying modern media and the psychological reception of its women audience so
as to adjust itself accordingly. Even though it is possible to make use of the mainstream ideology and achieve a superficially mainstream status, the commercialized media can always cut time slots to marginalize the voice of women. For example, positive images of women can only be seen around 8 March or in programmes of limited coverage or outside the golden time slots. In other times of which the Women’s Federation has no control, women are presented just as a problem or as a selling point for the media to use. Consequently, even if the Federation’s propaganda ‘invasion’ is made loud and grand, it hardly gets disseminated outside the circle of women. On the contrary, the so-called ‘soft programmes’ (ruanxing jiemu) that commercialize women, and advertisements that brazenly advocate patriarchy, are everywhere – and we seldom hear the Women’s Federation criticize them for the imbedded male chauvinism. Whether this is a matter of insensitivity or a lack of grip on the balance of cooperation and monitoring between the Women’s Federation and the media, or it is just that the Federation has given up its principles for some reason, we cannot tell. But one should bear in mind that some women’s magazines of the Women’s Federation have already given up feminist (nüxing zhuyi) principles in the quest for commercialization.

The Challenge to Conceptual Systems
There are four aspects of the challenge to the conceptual system. First of all, there is the question of what the relationship between the Marxist view on women (Makesi zhuyi funüguan) and the mainstream ideologies should be. This is an important puzzle for the Women’s Federation, today and tomorrow. The Marxist view on women still exists officially as a mainstream ideology, but it is being ‘marginalized’ continuously, so that now it is on the periphery of the mainstream. Among the five basic national policies, achieving equality between men and women is the weakest one, with the least stringent evaluation and monitoring mechanism in place. For example, policies such as birth planning and environmental protection are hard-set directives. During national appraisal and evaluation of Party and government institutions, if one of those hard-set directives is not fulfilled, the institution will be penalized by not being considered for awards. In the case of an individual, he or she might be fined and denied promotion, salary increase, and any possible award. This is called ‘veto on one count’ (yipiao foujue). But a substandard achievement of equality between men and women is not lethal. The official strategic goal of incorporating the concept of gender into decision-making sectors becomes weaker as the level goes lower – the more grass-roots the institution is, the harder it is to realize gender equality. By the time it reaches the lowest
administrative level, that is, the village, the goal has vanished completely. At present, local levels of the Women’s Federation are not happy to be marginalized, but they have not found any appropriate way to engage in dialogue with the mainstream discourse. Maybe it is wise, as a strategy, ‘to achieve status by making contributions and to seek development by being competent’, but to a certain extent this is also an attitude of retreat. Should the Women’s Federation insist sternly on gender equality or should it sacrifice women’s interests for partial development? A different choice will lead to a different fate.

Another challenge is how to handle the relationship between the Marxist view on women and the international trend of feminism (nüquan zhuyi). It goes without saying that no system of thought can ever establish itself without its own origins or being influenced by external forces. Since the 1990s, the promise our government made to the international community on realizing gender equality has motivated Chinese women’s movements to link up further with international women’s movements. With Chinese feminist scholars’ introduction and dissemination of gender concepts, and with new ideologies that are imported to China with international development projects, there are now dialogues between different systems. On certain points they have even merged together. As Huiying Li has written, the concept of gender – the central issue of Western feminism – is now being disseminated in China. To some degree the Women’s Federation welcomes that, and it has repeatedly emphasized that gender should be incorporated into mainstream decision-making, and that the concept should have equal significance and value as that of environmental protection, birth planning or human rights (Li, 1998). This makes today’s Marxist view on women more open and forbearing. In today’s China it is impossible to ignore the existence and impact of feminism. However, the Women’s Federation has to keep a clear line between itself and feminism, because historically, it has been sceptical about feminism, and more importantly, there is a traditional blind spot in the Marxist view on women. Sometimes the Federation even goes as far as denying it has ever borrowed or absorbed anything from feminism.

The third challenge comes from the crisis of identification. Now that women as a group have become stratified, who does the Women’s Federation represent? On whom does it depend? Some grass-roots cadres of the Women’s Federation have commented that the Women’s Federation (pronounced as fulian in Chinese) should become the ‘Wealth Federation’ (also pronounced as fulian in Chinese) as it should be led by successful female entrepreneurs who might bring in financial resources for the Federation. Campaigns initiated by the Women’s Federation in the 1950s
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were targeted at ‘the whole mass of women labourers’, as in the campaign for ‘diligent and frugal running of the country, diligent and frugal running of the household’. Since class was the main political focus in the 1960s and 1970s, the Federation surely only represented the working class and poor peasant women. In the 1980s the Federation began to acknowledge differences between occupations, therefore organizing campaigns for ‘double learning, double competition’ (shuangxue shuangbi) in villages, ‘exemplary women, significant contribution’ (jinguo jiangong) in cities and the industrial sector, and ‘exemplary units, exemplary performance’ (jinguo shifangang) in the service sector. Later, the Federation acknowledged geographical differences, setting different targets for women of different development areas.

But how does the Women’s Federation cope when social changes continuously divide women into different interest groups and spectrums? This question has yet to be explored. Traditionally, the Women’s Federation only paid attention to ‘women labourers’, but now that there are women entrepreneurs and a new spectrum of housewives, how should the Women’s Federation react to that? The Federation is an advocator of

Figure 6.2 Women’s Federation cadres in Weihui, Henan Province, 1994. The large display-board records the progress of the ‘double learning, double competition’ campaign.

Photo by Kirstine Theilgaard
the ‘Four Selves (sizi)’, i.e. self-reliance, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-improvement (zizun, zixin, zili, ziqiang), and whether or not a woman has demonstrated the qualities of ‘Four Selves’ becomes a label in the Federation’s discourse. It is not then clear where the Federation stands in dealing with those women who are said to have no self-reliance, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-improvement. For example, there are those ‘third parties’, i.e. those having affairs with married men, who are said to have destroyed the families of other people, and the ‘bad women’ who work in the sex industry. Are their interests being considered and protected by the Women’s Federation?

Finally, there are conflicts between the critical and the conservative on family issues. Women’s organizations taking a critical position are becoming more outspoken. This is activated by a disgust of the ‘big money-spender culture’ (dakuan wenhua) that reduces women to men’s playthings, and by a thrust at domestic violence. On the other hand, there is a return of conservatism. Entrusted by the Party with the important tasks of protecting community interests and repairing and consolidating the social structure, the Women’s Federation has been very serious in making the reconstruction of moral order for ‘maintaining social stability’ its primary duty. In the process of restoring moral order, conservatism revives as well. For example, in discussions on amending the Marriage Law, some people want to increase the difficulty of divorce, some want to make ‘destroying other people’s family’ an offence, and some want to punish ‘the third party’. In Wang Donghua’s article Discovering Mother (cited in Zhu 1993), men chant with one another in accusing women for failing to fulfil their duty of motherhood by giving birth or breast-feeding. All this has evoked different responses within the Women’s Federation. What qualifies as protection of women’s interests? When the conflict in a marriage is due to two women, who is the one to be protected? Views are varied, ranging from the most radical to the most conservative even within the Federation. There used to be only one voice in the Women’s Federation; now, this monophonic period is obviously over.

Response and Trend of Development

It is fair to state that different levels of the Women’s Federation have been reacting actively to those challenges. For example, the new positioning is to ‘have one hand on economic development, and the other on protecting women’s rights’ (yishou zhua fazhan, yishou zhua weiquan) (Zhongguo funübao 1998). The strategy for survival and development is
organizing, training, advocacy and carrying out different activities, which will extend the Federation’s organizing of women to all sectors. It has also made the so-called ‘improvement of women’s quality’ a major project of women’s development, and wants to turn the Federation into an institution known for having outstanding women cadres. It is active in organizing activities; in that way, it can increase its social influence and legitimize its discursive power.

The rise of popular women’s organizations has consequently made the Women’s Federation more forbearing after 1995 than in the 1980s. It has also established horizontal contacts with the community of women, taking the initiative to become a key organizer of the building of a women’s network. Apart from that, the Women’s Federation is actively searching for social and financial resources from outside the government. We see that many local levels of the Women’s Federation have started preparing for the worst, by setting up their own economic enterprises. If the government reduces or even cuts off funding and subsidies in the future, they can still survive and develop. However, all those responses are not enough to solve the many internal conflicts mentioned above, neither can they cope with the external challenges discussed here.

Based upon my reading, the predictable trends of the Federation’s future development are twofold. The first is that as women’s organizations begin to form networks, the Women’s Federation will be the most significant network knot. Institutional reforms will more or less change the mapping of women’s organizations. Divided women’s interest groups bring about more differences and variables in both the organizing of women and their principles of development. We will see more organizations being founded for professional, occupational, mutual support or leisure-oriented purposes. But due to its particular background and system, the development of popular women’s organizations in China will be under control. That is, their organizing effort will not be stopped, but none of them will grow into an institution as big as the Women’s Federation either. As a result, the Women’s Federation will co-exist and form into networks with various small women’s organizations, both inside and outside its own system, and position itself as the most important knot in these networks.

Is it possible then, for the Federation’s vertical, hierarchical system to be transformed into horizontal, non-hierarchical structure? Even though the overall trend is for horizontal networking, the extent of such formation and whether it can finally replace the hierarchical system will depend on the degree of institutional reform at the macro, national level. Generally speaking, the basic hierarchical structure of Chinese society will continue, but the need for survival and development will push the Women’s
Federation to rely more heavily on external social and financial resources. This will consequently weaken the institutional control exerted by the political system. The fate of a women’s organization is becoming more of a societal choice. Whether or not it can develop and survive will depend more and more on how much it represents the interests of the mass of women, and how much service it is able to offer. Another point of note is that there is a tendency of weakening vertical relationships and strengthening horizontal relationships within the system of the Women’s Federation. Departments are no longer consolidated by administrative power. Relationships between upper-level/leader and lower-level/being led are weakening, and are being replaced by one resembling a supervisor-and-supervisee relationship, or even better, an equal partnership. Of course this trend of moving toward horizontal partnership will depend on how much power the grass-root level Federation has in its dialogue with its superior. When different levels of the Women’s Federation have matured and have formed operation modes specific to their own features, the trend of horizontal networking may eventually turn into a reality.

The second predictable trend is that the operational mechanism of the Women’s Federation will become more adaptable. The impact of state reform and opening up has made the Women’s Federation more aware of the diverse interests and choices of the community of women. It has thus made corresponding adjustments to its operational mechanism. Much effort has been expended on the mode, depth and breadth of its participation in society. In recent years, as a particular move to prove its own value, the Women’s Federation has introduced the strategy of ‘establishing one’s position through merit’ (youneng caineng youwei). Apart from keeping guard on its traditional territories, such as organizing women into household management and industrial and agricultural production, the Federation is also carefully broadening its horizon of participation to areas such as women’s health, re-employment, and environmental protection. The phrase ‘carefully broadening’ is used here because ‘territorial’ conflict is almost everywhere in China – if there is overlapping or crossing over in one area of concern with another administrative system, there will be frictions of ‘trespassing’. Besides, as I have discussed earlier, to advocate women’s rights can sometimes be taken by some ministries as causing trouble. Therefore, the Federation has to avoid sensitive territories while at the same time actively expanding the horizons of its concern.

In terms of organizing activity, although the Federation has gradually tried to set up different goals of development for women of different geographical regions, sectors, urban or rural backgrounds, how to motivate
women of different spectrums is an unsolved problem. Nor has the issue received enough consideration. Perhaps the most effective reaction for the Women’s Federation is to be more embracing and forbearing, and to fully utilize its co-ordination function, rather than taking up every task and being all-rounded. It should strive to create larger space of development for women of all levels. Through organizing and coordinating, it can increase mutual recognition among women of various groups, background, and sectors – and by so doing it can also make itself the most active and important knot of the network of women’s social organizations. This might be the best positioning for the Women’s Federation in the future.

Notes

1. See Lexicon, *shehui xingbie*.
2. In 1998, during the Jiangsu Congress of Women’s Representatives, I was elected to the Ninth Provincial Standing Committee of the Women’s Federation and became the ‘cover figure’ of its women’s magazine.
3. Editor’s note, the term ‘connecting tracks’ (*jiegui*) has been used since the mid-1990s to emphasize Chinese scholars’ and activists’ willingness to engage, and effort of engaging in dialogue with the international community. For a discussion of the nature and politics of such interaction and exchange, see Hsiung and Wang (1998).
4. In April 1983 the CCP Central Committee set the policy for work on women, which is ‘to protect, firmly and resolutely, the legal rights of women and children; to nurture, educate children so they can grow healthily; to bring into full play the importance of women in constructing a socialist material and spiritual civilization’. Hu Yaobang, the late General Secretary of the CCP, made it even clearer in his report to the Party’s Twelfth National People’s Congress: ‘The Women’s Federation should become an authoritative mass organization which represents women’s interests, protects and educates women and children.’
5. I should point out here that the Women’s Federation provides training to its own personnel. If it wants to train cadres of other institutions, it has to obtain permission from the Party. The Federation also has its internal awards such as an award for progressive members.
6. Examples are centres of Women’s Studies in various research institutions, associations of women intellectuals, associations of women journalists, etc.
7. Editor’s note, see Chapter Ten of this book for a discussion on the Women’s Media Watch Network and its critical assessment of mass media portrayals of women.
8. These are campaigns and awards organized by the Women’s Federation. They mainly take the form of selecting a few exemplars, publicizing those exemplars through articles, radio/TV interviews, and/or various public events. The campaigns run across various levels of the Federation which means that lower levels send up their list of exemplars as candidates for the higher level. Prestige increases as the level goes up. However, some of the awards, such as ‘March 8 Red Carrier’ (*sanba hongqishou*), are recognized by the government. There are substantive benefits or treatment awarded to the recipients. Others, such as the ‘Five Good Family’ (*wuhao wenming jiating*) do not have any attached fringe benefit.

9. Editor’s note, see workshop excerpts for a discussion on the Four Selves and issues related to the discourse of ‘women’s quality’ (*funü suzhi*).

10. For example, in 1996 it carried out a nationwide campaign on building family virtues.

11. For example, a woman cadre at a local level Women’s Federation wrote to the *China Women’s News*, demanding that ‘adultery’ as an offence should be reintroduced (Lin 1997).

12. The growing trend is for the Federation to set up private enterprises.

13. Editor’s note, while the source of this slogan is unknown, it has often been cited by the Women’s Federation in recent years as an official rhetoric. The underlying argument of this strategy is that one has to earn recognition by proving oneself. The rhetoric can be used either by individual women and/or women’s organizations to press for deserved recognition or by the establishment as an excuse for not granting due recognition.

14. The Chinese bureaucratic system is organized both vertically and horizontally. Horizontally, there are for example ministries of education, labour, civil affairs, personnel, etc. Vertically, each one of the ministries has branches on national, provincial, city, county, and township levels. The same axes of structure apply to the various offices of the CCP and mass groups. Territorial frictions can happen between offices/groups along the horizontal and/or vertical axes. For example, for a long time, the Women’s Federation has not been able to reach women in industrial and business sectors because these are considered by the Trade Union as ‘their territory’. Community work is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Civil Affair. As well, the environmental issues are under the State Council. If the Women’s Federation gets too involved or active in community work or environmental issues, it will be considered as trespassing on others’ territories.
The All China Women’s Federation and Women’s NGOs

Liu Bohong

When China was chosen to host the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, thirty women’s organizations in China, among them the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF), took part in the preparation for the NGO Forum. This gave them the opportunity, from the early 1990s, to join in a series of influential United Nations conference NGO forums, thus introducing and developing both the concept and the mechanism of non-governmental organization in China, leading to the success of the Women’s Conference NGO Forum. Moreover, this also helped to encourage local women’s NGOs to develop. Approached from this background, an analysis of the process and characteristics of women’s NGOs in China affords constructive interpretations of the following three aspects: first, the structural changes in social organizations (shehui zuzhi) under China’s new and changing economic situation; secondly, the development of political democratization in the wake of China’s emerging market economy; and thirdly, the women’s movement and modes of organizing under new historical conditions.

A Personal Note

At present I hold a post at The Women’s Studies Institute of China (Quanguo fulian funü yanjiusuo). Established in 1991, it forms a specialized research unit under the auspices of the ACWF. I commenced work in September 1993; later I set up and participated in the work of a women’s NGO known as The Women’s Health Network (Zhongguo xinli weisheng xiehui funü jiankang yu fazhan zhuanye weiyuanhui). In November 1993, I attended the preparatory regional meeting for the Women’s Conference in Manila. It was at this meeting that I began to understand the concept of a women’s NGO and its relevance to the international women’s movement.
Because at that time staff of the Women’s Federation had little exposure to NGO activities, the Federation was in urgent need of people familiar with NGO activities. Therefore, shortly after I returned to China, I joined the China Organizing Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Disi ci shijie funü dahui Zhongguo zuzhi weiyuanhui). I remained in this Committee until the end of the Conference in October 1995.

During that time, I attended the NGO Forums at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo (1994), the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995), and the Women’s Conference in Beijing (1995). Apart from those interactions and contacts with women’s NGOs from other countries, I also organized and participated in Chinese internal workshops at the NGO Forum. This not only gave me the chance to establish a relationship with women-related NGOs (including new ones) in China, but also showed me the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign NGOs.

On the one hand, I was working for the Institute (which enjoys a certain degree of autonomy within the ACWF) and for the China Organizing Committee (comprised mainly of staff from the Women’s Federation, and from representatives of more than twenty NGOs in China). On the other hand, I was directly participating in the work of another NGO: The Women’s Health Network. Furthermore, I held posts or joined in new forms of women’s NGOs in order to discover similarities and differences between newly emerging and already existing forms of women’s NGOs. The new NGOs I characterize as self-initiated organizations; the old NGOs in contrast are other-initiated (either by the Government, or by governmental, administrative and professional units). The ACWF and its affiliated members (tuanti huiyuan) belong to the latter type of NGO.

Background of the Establishment and Development of Women’s NGOs in China

Women’s NGOs in China: the Impact of Preparing for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women

The hosting of the Women’s Conference was the historical moment for the development of women’s NGOs in China. It was due to this conference that the concept of NGO was introduced to China. In March 1992, the United Nations confirmed that its Fourth World Conference on Women would be held in Beijing, and that a simultaneous ‘NGO Forum’ would be held. On 28 August 1993, the Chinese government set up the China Organizing Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women, together with five sub-committees which included the ‘NGO Forum
The ACWF and Women’s NGOs

What is an NGO? What is the NGO Forum? Those were the questions the China Organizing Committee had to clarify before it could mobilize Chinese women to participate in the Conference. Our country has no tradition of NGOs, but because of the Conference, we had to familiarize ourselves with it and develop relevant mechanisms.

What do we understand by an NGO? At the beginning, the only authoritative interpretation in China came from promotional materials put out by the China Organizing Committee, which stated that non-governmental organizations can be compared to governmental organizations. They are non-profit groups or organizations set up voluntarily by people who are concerned with particular problems. They must register with the government of the country in which they are located, and they carry out independent activities in line with their codes of practice (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui guojibu 1994b). What is the Women’s Conference NGO Forum? It was a parallel meeting of the Conference, a regular feature in other, similar kinds of UN conference. Its main function was to provide an appropriate forum for popular or non-governmental organizations (minjian zuzhi) and for individuals concerned with women’s issues. Its recommendations could be submitted to the Conference through governmental representatives or non-government observers attending the Forum.

NGOs occupy a legitimate place within the UN system. The NGO Forum serves both in controlling and initiating functions in the decision-making mechanism of the UN. Its presence has also led to considerations as to whether Chinese mass organizations are similar, or even identical, to non-governmental organizations. It is against this international background that Chinese mass organizations are defined and classified.

In November 1993, Huang Qizao, then the ACWF Vice-President, Deputy Director of the China Organizing Committee for the Fourth World Conference, and Director of the NGO Forum Committee, addressed the Asian Women’s NGO Forum in Manila on China’s preparation for the Women’s Conference (especially in regard to the women’s NGO Forum). She also spoke of women’s NGOs (in particular the ACWF) in China as actively involved in preparing for the NGO Forum. Huang’s identification of the ACWF as an NGO caused uproar among Forum participants. Some questioned its identity as an NGO, others offered evidence to prove its NGO status. The twenty-four representatives of the China Organizing Committee and further nineteen Chinese women representatives witnessed this historic incident. I am fortunate to have been one of them. Thus the whole world came to know of the existence of women’s NGOs in China, and for us it became possible to envision NGOs and GOs as partners rather than as political opponents (although of course that would take
time to realize). In February 1994, the Chinese government also proclaimed in the Report of the People’s Republic of China on the Implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women that ‘the All-China Women’s Federation is the biggest NGO to improve women’s status in China’. Here the identity of ACWF as a women’s mass organization and an NGO was officially confirmed (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui guojibu 1994b: 7–8). Before then, many Chinese had thought of non-governmental organizations as anti-government, hence the avoidance of the word ‘NGO’ and the lack of recognition of its positive functions. Acknowledging to the whole world its NGO identity, the ACWF was propelled to learn more about the work, standing and role of NGOs. I would argue that although prior to the 1990s, the concept of ‘NGO’ did not form a conscious part of Chinese political discourse, the Federation historically can be said to have fulfilled the role of such an NGO.

China was actively preparing for the Women’s Conference. The Organizing Committee (especially its NGO Forum Committee) sent members to attend women’s preparatory meetings and NGO forums in Latin America, Europe, Africa and West Asia in order to observe as well as study their strategies and issues of concern. They also joined the NGO forums of the UN International Conference on Population and Development, and the World Summit for Social Development. On a local level, the Chinese NGO Forum Committee organized mass organizations that qualified as NGOs to discuss ‘proposals’ for the draft of the Platform of Action of the World Conference. Chinese participants joined 47 workshops, part of the 1995 NGO Forum in Beijing, in order to learn from the experience of women’s NGOs in other parts of the world. These learning opportunities improved Chinese women’s knowledge and understanding of the function of NGOs, and helped them adapt NGO advantages to suit China’s specific social conditions and environment. This made possible the creation of a public sphere for women and other citizens to participate in social development and decision-making.

Through our contact with NGOs in the international women’s movement, we came to realize that NGOs had already become an indispensable part of contemporary international society. Thus the Report of the 52nd United Nations General Assembly, listing eight major factors that influence contemporary global developments, notes the growth of transnational popular organizations (minjian shehui zuzhi) and the effectiveness of non-governmental organizations (Xin Chunying and Zhang Hua 1998). In order for human beings to solve their common problems, not only should governments work together, but ordinary people
must also cooperate. The power and reputation of NGOs are based on their responsible and constructive function in society. Governmental and non-governmental organizations must build up suitable systems and mechanisms for carrying out constructive dialogues on state policies and understanding of each other’s respective functions, duties and actual abilities. The definition, establishment and development of women’s NGOs in China form an active response to what are international currents of development.

**Changing Society and Demands on Women’s NGOs**

Current reforms and China’s open-door policy offer women’s NGOs an unprecedented historical opportunity to develop. In a way, the emergence of women’s NGOs in China is a natural consequence of structural and social change in general.

First of all, reforms of governmental institutions and the establishment of a market economy make NGOs possibly one of the most dynamic forms of social organization. The market economy is centred on profit-oriented enterprises, which demand efficiency. At the heart of any state system, on the other hand, must be a government that aims to promote the national economy and orderly social progress. But a market economy, by pursuing efficiency over all else, inevitably brings about the sacrifice of social equality and of social justice. Moreover, where a state seeks to represent the public interest and national causes by use of force, such a system often results in the sacrifice of equitable distribution of social resources. Its drawbacks are, therefore, low efficiency, bureaucracy, waste of resources, and the like. In view of the seemingly contradictory states of social organization and social development, the need arises for a transitional form of organization that embraces characteristics of both and yet also makes up for their disadvantages. This is a socio-economic system within which non-governmental organization emerges as the most effective, dynamic actor. It is against these societal conditions that the development of women’s NGOs must be understood.

Another factor is the decline of the work unit (danwei) system. This made it possible for people to use their initiative or organize themselves voluntarily as an NGO. The ‘work unit’ system was a special administrative feature of China’s planned economy, performing extended government functions that placed members’ political, economic, cultural, social and private spheres under its control. Consequently, neither individuals nor organizations could pursue interests outside of the official social system. But since the introduction of reforms and liberalization, the work unit has changed its functions. First, a clear tendency for
decreased administration (feixing zhenghua) may be noted. Secondly, its focus is increasingly on occupational or professional functions. Thirdly, traditional social functions are considered less important. Fourthly, in line with developments outlined above, integrative functions have weakened. The administrative relationship between citizens (gongmin) and the work unit is weakening. With the gain of personal space, however, individual citizens must do without many administrative services originally provided by the work unit as an extension of the state. Hence, the public sphere has new demands for self-organization and new modes of self-organization. This new form is the non-governmental or community-based organization (shiqu zuzhi).

Moreover, women’s growing needs and demands call for a range of women’s NGOs. The socialist market economy has engendered social stratification or disintegration (fenhua) which affects all spheres of life. As a result, women’s own issues and gender differences, not visible under the planned economy or administrative system, have now surfaced. Problems related to marriage and family emerged first into the public domain, then other issues gradually became a matter of popular concern. Women lost their jobs and were compelled to return to the family; women cadres suffered losses in elections; female university graduates experienced difficulties finding employment; girls were denied the chance of education; the rights of migrant women workers were abused; women feared abduction. And then we were confronted with prostitution, laid-off women workers, violence against women, rural women suffering discrimination over land use, the deteriorating physical and mental health of women. And so on. And so on. Under the planned economy, women received protection. Nowadays, the joint effects of the market economy, the shortage of resources, and an enduring patriarchal culture cannot but be harmful to the interests of many women. Identifying the causes of these problems, implementing legislation for their resolution, providing women with the opportunity and environment to participate in social development, all these pressing tasks suggest that new problems require new solutions. The ACWF can no longer represent an increasingly diverse array of women’s interests. Efforts can no longer be simply confined to the Youth Federation, to the unions, or even to the Government. Different kinds of NGO are needed to respond to demands from women from varied backgrounds and circumstances.

Lastly, it must be said that the individual and collective consciousness of educated women, shaped by reform and the open-door policy, supplies the subjective conditions from which women’s NGOs (especially new, what I call self-initiated, organizations) have developed. ‘Social changes
are having a double impact on women, and have mobilized Chinese women into a movement of self-liberation’ (Lin Chun 1998). It is among the educated women that we find those who have taken the initiative to rethink the drawbacks of the traditional women’s movement, to study women’s issues raised by reform and opening-up to the outside world, and to redefine women’s theories. They have gone forth into society, even into the poorest regions, to promote and practise humane ideals, which are sustainable and helpful to both women and men, with the intention of helping women break away from illiteracy and poverty. They have organized different kinds of structure to satisfy women’s varied needs and to provide practical help. Women’s NGOs have just started their work; their influence may not have yet entered mainstream society or may still be minimal, but they have made the first move to start a grass-roots, self-initiated group. If it were not for women’s self-awareness, the social changes that exerted influence and pressure on women would have shaped women’s collective responses into more traditional or limited directions.

**Historical and Political Foundations for the Development of Women’s NGOs in China**

The development of women’s NGOs in China must be attributed to their historical and political foundations. As the nation’s largest women’s NGO, the ACWF has been ‘a mass organization of Chinese women from all ethnic backgrounds and sectors who join under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party to fight for continued liberation; it is the bridge and the conduit between the Party, the government, and the mass of women’ (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui 1993). The nature of the ACWF as a women’s mass organization, its history of carrying out women’s work under the leadership of the Party, and its close relationship with both the Party and the government, have earned it the trust and support from both the Party and the government – even after its identity as an NGO was confirmed. Under its umbrella belong women’s NGOs which have gained legitimacy, rights and protection by giving recognition to ACWF rules and regulations, by performing their duties and responsibilities, by accepting ACWF instructions, and by preserving a close relationship with it.

The NGO identity of the ACWF and its basic functions to ‘represent and maintain the interests of women, and to promote equality between men and women’ (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui 1993) serve as a model for all other women’s NGOs. As long as NGOs adhere to the aforesaid principles and set up their organizations in accordance with the proper legislation relating to their establishment (shetuanfa), then their
existence is reasonable and legitimate. Thus a realistic approach to
development for women’s NGOs of different strata or communities must
put to good use the legitimate status of the ACWF, its NGO identity, and
its good relationship with the government.

The evolution of women’s NGOs in China is connected also with a
deeper cultural phenomenon: the subordinate nature of women’s roles
and the marginalization (biyuanhua) of women’s organizations. This
subordination makes for a preference by women’s organizations for a
distancing from political — that is, governmental — spheres, and it accounts
for their preference for a non-confrontational mode of action. Under the
existing political framework, and through close cooperation with the
government, women’s NGOs take measures to protect women’s interests
and promote women’s development. The subordinate, marginalized role
of women, the apolitical and non-confrontational approach of women’s
activism (xingdong), have earned women’s NGOs the government’s
confidence and trust, and have secured them the social space to develop.

Development of Women’s NGOs in China since the 1990s

Development of the All China Women’s Federation

The policy of reform and openness pursued by the Chinese government
since the 1980s has presented a severe challenge to the ACWF’s functions
and mode of work. The old, strict division of labour between the
Federation and women’s branches of trade unions — that is, trade unions
take care of women in industry, while the Federation takes care of women
in cities and rural areas — no longer sufficed to meet the needs of women.
But, as it happened, the Women’s Conference took place in China. This
gave the ACWF an unprecedented, historic opportunity, eagerly embraced,
to raise women’s status. For example, it recruited young, highly-educated
and talented women whose managerial experiences and professional skills
improved the popular image of the Federation as a garrulous, fussy and
interfering ‘mother-in-law’ (popo mama). The Federation set up women’s
and children’s centres, including the China Women’s Activities Centre in
Beijing (Zhongguo funü huodong zhongxin), to enhance its service,
presence, economic and social power. To nurture talented women and
women cadres, as well as to facilitate the development of all women and
women’s organizations, it has been building tertiary educational insti-
tutions, including The China Women’s College in Beijing (Zhonghua nüzi
xueyuan) and women’s cadre schools at various levels. It works actively
with government departments in training and selecting women cadres. It
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improves women’s participation and ability in making political and economic decisions, as well as increasing the role and influence of women’s organizations. Also, it extends its activities to all kinds of organizations, work units, institutions of tertiary education, and central government organs, where it carries out activities to raise women’s status and protect women’s rights and interests. According to the latest statistics of the ACWF, the Women’s Federation extends to 52,807 branches at various provincial, regional, county and village levels (Ma Yanjun 1999). Grass-roots representatives in cities and villages total 830,869 women, and 68,000 women’s committees are active at provincial level or above, present in the Party, in government, in private organs, or in work units in science, education, culture, and health.

The Women’s Conference also advanced the development of the Federation’s institutional membership. The China NGO Forum Committee (Zhongguo feizhengfu luntan weiyuanhui) collaborated with mass organizations such as the All China Federation of Trade Unions (Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui), All China Youth Federation (Quanguo qing lian), the China Association for Science and Technology (Zhongguo kexie), and the China Family Planning Association (Zhongguo jihua shengyu xiehui) to prepare for the NGO Forum. It also co-ordinated with both national and local women’s groups, professional associations, societies, religious groups, various mass organizations, and individual women from all walks of life to help with preparations. According to UN regulations, workshops or seminars at the NGO Forum must be hosted by at least one women’s NGO. This greatly encouraged the establishment and active participation of women’s NGOs in China. One after the other, ACWF affiliate institutions were set up, such as the China Association of Women Judges (Zhongguo nü faguan xuehui), the China Association of Women Prosecutors (Zhongguo nü jianchaguan xiehui), the Capital Women Professors’ Association (Shoudu nü jiaoshou lianyihui), the Beijing Society of Women Architects (Beijing nü jianzhushi xiehui), and the Association of Women Technical Staff of the Chemistry Industry of China (Zhongguo huagong nü keji gongzuozhe lianyihui). The majority of these affiliate institutions are still active in promoting gender equality long after the 1995 Conference. At the end of the twentieth century, 6,386 women’s associations or recreational clubs were listed under the Women’s Federation, and 200,000 group members of women staff committees made up the various levels of trade unions (Ma Yanjun 1999). The Federation’s affiliate institutions were by then much more numerous than before the Cultural Revolution, when it had only two affiliates (the YWCA of China, and the Women Personnel Section of the Trade Union).
Development of New, Self-initiated Women’s NGOs

Both China’s reform policy and the Women’s Conference helped different women’s NGOs to form outside of the Women’s Federation system. These ‘new forms of women’s NGO’ (xinxing funü feizhengfu zuzhi), which I characterize as self-initiated, can be classified according to their functions.

Women’s NGOs Devoted to Research  These emerged after the reform and open-door policy, especially before and after the Women’s Conference, and are initiated by women intellectuals or professional, technically-skilled women from higher educational institutions or the Academy of Social Science (see Du in Chapter Eleven). They set up cross-disciplinary research units that are attached to research departments of their institution, often without specific funds, without assigned and regular staff, and without full-time researchers. Their funding comes from either international funds or state grants, but also from provincial, municipal, or the home institution’s grants. Their findings may be applied to teaching, academic study, discussions or social education; a few may be used as consultation papers for legislative and decision-making purposes. At present, there are more than eighty women’s research organizations, including those jointly set up by the Women’s Federation and the Association of Social Sciences (Shehui kexue lianhui).

Women’s NGOs Dedicated to Social Service, Entertainment, or Both These women’s NGOs, mostly originated in Beijing, aim to provide services, entertainment, educational training, or other integrated functions. Among them, the more influential ones are The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinli xizun fuwu zhongxin) which includes The Singles’ Weekend Club (Danshen zhousheng julebu) and The Ark Family Centre (Fangzhou jiating zhongxin). Equally well-known are the Jinglun Family Centre (Zhongguo shehui gongzuo xiehui Jinglun jiating kexue zhongxin) and the Rural Women Knowing All magazine (Nongjianü baishitong), which includes The Migrant Women’s Club (Dagongmei zhi jia), The Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, Peking University (Beijing daxue faxulixuexi funü faxila yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin), The Chinese Women’s Health Network, The East Meets Feminist Translation West Group (Dongxifang xiangyu xiexue xiaozu) (see Ge and Jolly, Chapter Three), The China-Canada Young Women’s Project (Zhongjia nü qingnian xiangmu), The Women’s Media Watch Network (Funü chuanmei jiance wangluo) (see Cai, Feng and Guo, Chapter Ten), The Tongzhi Pager Hotline (Tongzhi rexian), and more. Outside Beijing, women’s hotlines have been organized in many provinces, among them The Shaanxi Women’s Hotline (Shaanxisheng funü
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rexian) and The Huaguang Women’s Hotline in Nanning, Guangxi (Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi rexian). Most key figures associated with these organizations were present at the Women’s Conference NGO Forum. Their contact with women’s NGOs from other countries brought opportunities to acquaint themselves with international forms of organizing activities. They facilitated empowerment. These women activists may still be few in number, but their strategies are innovative, coherent and flexible.

The Role and Function of Women’s NGOs in China

Different types of women’s NGO in China play different roles and operate differently. Their main functions can be summarized as follows.

Women’s NGOs as Participants in Decision-making, Legislation, and as Watch-dogs

Women’s NGOs in China – among them most importantly, but not exclusively, the ACWF – directly influence and promote the implementation and enactment of laws on women (see Zhang in Chapter Eight). Over sixty laws and regulations pertaining to women’s interests have been introduced since reforms began (Guan Tao 1995), among which the most significant are: the Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (Zhongguo funü quanyi baozhangfa), the Regulation on the Labour Protection of Women Workers (Nü zhigong laodong baohu guiding), the Notice on Reprisals Against Trafficking in Women and Children (Guanyu jianjue daji guaimai funü ertong fanzui huoqiu de tongzhi), and more. The introduction of these laws and regulations are without exception a testimony to the impact of women’s studies and women’s activism. A new women-centred emphasis, different from the economic adjustment period of the early 1960s, can be directly linked to the Women’s Federation’s role. Through interventions in employment policy, the Federation came to represent the basic interests of ordinary women when it strongly resisted recommendations by mainstream economists or government organs in the 1980s and 1990s to terminate the employment of women or let women ‘be employed in line with different phases’ of economic development.

Women’s NGOs as the Organizers and Motivating Force of Women’s Participation in Social Development

Women’s emancipation in China has been achieved through the liberation and social participatory rights of the proletariat. Hence, to unite and inspire women to work toward a modern, socialist, economically strong as well as reforming society have become the main tasks, and strategy of development, of women’s NGOs in China. In the wake of the reform and open-door policy, the ACWF
Liu Bohong started a series of campaigns, such as ‘double learning, double competition’ (*shuangxue shuangbi*), or ‘heroines’ meritorious deeds’ (*yingxiong jiangong*) in cities and villages, motivating women to take part in politics and in social administration. Women were also mobilized to participate in social development and to carry out development and ‘poverty-relief’ projects. By raising women’s profile in active social development, improvement can also be effected upon women’s status, power, and capability.

**Women’s NGOs in the Service of Women** The basic function of the ACWF is to represent and maintain the rights and interests of women, and promote equality between men and women. One of its traditional functions has been to serve the needs of women and children wholeheartedly. After the reforms, the Federation established activity centres for women and children to provide kindergartens and nursery schools, to start up funds for women and children-related projects, and to make available a large number of relevant services. More importantly, the Federation uses legislative means, its networks of information and communication, as well as legal aid institutions to protect women’s rights and interests, and help them resolve problems. In order to serve the needs of vast numbers of women, new forms of women’s organization are created to make help more accessible to women. They focus on also helping and solving problems for marginal women – and in empowering these women, the organizations also strengthen their own credibility.

**Women’s NGOs Promoting Global Interaction** In November 1949, the ACWF organized the First Congress of Asian Women. That was the beginning of its contact with women abroad. But the reform policy in the 1980s and the hosting of the 1995 Women’s Conference have ushered communication between Chinese women’s NGOs and foreign organizations into a new phase. International networks of the new forms of women’s organizations have extended into academia and grass-roots level activism. The Conference of 1995 increased their ability, resources, and communication channels to participate effectively in international dialogues. They have built a bridge for the international women’s movement and Chinese women’s movement to interact with and motivate each other in multiple domains and on many levels.

**Women’s NGOs Improving Their Own Working Mechanism** Organizational modes and principles such as are characteristic of women’s NGOs in the international women’s movement have their impact also on the nature of Chinese NGOs. Indeed, they are like a refreshing breeze,
especially those new forms of women’s NGOs that aim at young people
(such as the China-Canada Young Women’s Project and the East Meets
West Group). Advocating democratic participation, the respect for
difference, and the right of voice for every individual regardless of
background and circumstances, they excel through strong affinity and
cohesion.

But it should be noted that NGO-related organizational modes and
principles have also influenced the Women’s Federation. During the
Women’s Conference, everyone was allowed to participate, different
voices were heard, all NGOs were given equal opportunity, regardless
of their size, and efficiency of work was emphasized. Then, after the
conference, more substantial discussions over the implications of the
NGO identity of the ACWF raised crucial issues. These included anti-
bureaucracy, anti-patriarchy, earnest work for grass-roots women, protection
of women’s rights and interests, improvement of work procedures, and
the like. Incorporating principles such as democratic participation, sharing
and transparency of power relations inside a women’s NGO poses a
challenge to the Federation. But it is not only important for women’s
NGOs to connect with the mass of women and enhance their own
organization, it also carries positive implications for political demo-
kratization in China.

**Challenges Faced by Women’s NGOs in China**

In a time of rapid changes in Chinese society, both women’s NGOs
working within the traditional political system and what I call new forms
of women’s NGOs face challenges. The Women’s Federation might be
said to confront these main challenges:

1. How to carry out independent, autonomous and effective work to
   satisfy the needs of the majority of women who face the rigour of a
   market economy – and how to receive in turn real recognition from
   these women?

2. Faced with ‘signs of regressive developments during the period of
   transformation from a planned to a market economy, and with it, the
   relaxation of state intervention’, how should the Women’s Federation
   utilize its influential functions within the present political system to
   ensure government’s centralized guidance, administrative support, and
   integrated policy reforms on issues such as gender equality (Han Jialing
   1998: 24)?

3. Traditional modes of activity associated with the Women’s Federation
   are being challenged. How should it move from an old-fashioned, level-
to-administrative-level mode of mobilization, to one that ‘empowers’ women, one that raises women’s ability to develop in their totality? 3

4. Based on the premise that women’s interest groups are growing on multiple levels, and popular women’s groups (minjian funü tuanti) are developing apace, how should the Women’s Federation position itself? And how should it handle an equal working relationship with other women’s organizations?

5. The Federation’s core concepts are being challenged. It has to interpret and clarify the relationship between Marxist views on women and indigenous gender paradigms, as well as international feminist thought.

As regards the challenges faced by new forms of women’s non-governmental organizations, most of them have to do with ‘survival’:

1. Society’s limited understanding means that it is used to organizational modes and operations characteristic of official institutions only; it is still not mentally prepared to accept new, popular organizations. That is why NGOs often attract attention and are taken to be ‘sensitive’.

2. The lack of protection from existing social mechanisms means that legal status, management, function, roles, financial resources and other necessary institutional devices required in public affairs have to be defined by policy, legislation and regulations. In the course of this development, some popular women’s organizations feel besieged, feel that there are too many constraints, that their work is becoming an obstacle ride. All this is related to the lack of forceful laws and mechanisms that could protect popular organizations.

3. Then there is lack of funding. At present, organizations under discussion here do not receive material support from the State. Some women’s NGOs get foreign funding, but are limited by conditions attached to sponsorship; they also suffer from structural instability and the often transitory nature of their (subsidized) project.

4. Another issue is personnel. Society does not protect the livelihood of people who devote themselves to public causes. The enormous pressure that comes from doing this kind of work also acts as a deterrent. Moreover, people’s mentality in today’s China is beset by conflicts between ideals and pragmatism, between sacrifice and acquisition, and often reflects differing levels of awareness of public interest. 4

The appearance of women’s NGOs in Chinese society is part of an inevitable trend of social development and progress, challenging the work of government. Although the government offers NGOs the space to
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co-exist, although it recognizes, to a certain extent, the functions of NGOs, it has not granted sufficient conditions for NGOs to develop. Improvement will come through a long and gradual process. Also, societal appreciation of the role to be played by such self-initiated organizations will need time to mature. The social and material infrastructure that popular organizations need for survival must await improvement of the nation’s general economic situation. During this transition, it is particularly important and pressing that the government’s attitudes and policies are seen as active, positive, encouraging, supportive, trusting and generous.

Chinese Women’s NGOs: Self-construction and Trends

As far as the present situation goes, there are three directions toward which all women’s NGOs in China are developing:

1. A growing tendency may be noted for more extensive organization of women to facilitate their participation in social development. The power of the market has disadvantaged ordinary women, forcing them to take action in order to acquire equal rights of development and participation.

2. They tend to become more specialized, regionalized, and diverse. Diversification of women’s needs is bringing about diversification of women’s organizations. There will not be just one or a few women’s organizations to ‘take care of the whole world’.

3. It will also become more common for women’s NGOs in China to join and develop together (both internationally and nationally). Women’s common interests, shortage of resources, and advancement of information technology will give rise to cooperation and sharing of resources among women’s organizations.

Economic structural reform and future political structural reform will create more space for non-governmental organizations to develop in China. Women’s NGOs should seize this historical opportunity to strengthen their organization and play their role fully in order to make women’s NGOs an important force in social development. In this connection, I would like to draw attention to three relationships that women’s NGOs should handle well to further their own organization and development.

First, women’s NGOs must build up new kinds of partnership with the government. Autonomous, self-reliant women have a mutual need for each other. This is the realistic base especially for any new women’s NGO, built on consensus among its individual women as subjects of the organization. Women’s participation in NGOs has always been one of
self-management, self-service, self-education, and self-development. Their nature is popularly described as ‘managing together, sharing together, and possessing together’. This fundamental autonomy implicit in participation gives women’s NGOs the opportunity to be subjects in the wider domain, and to realize their progressive, innovative spirit. At present, China’s social environment is in flux, and it is therefore very important that women’s NGOs establish new forms of good, helpful partnerships with the government, that they work in accordance with laws and regulations, that they elaborate ideas and handle problems that are within the government’s threshold of acceptance. In China, there is a conceptual misunderstanding that non-governmental organizations are naturally anti-government, hence they are thought of as politically untrustworthy and in need of surveillance. Women’s NGOs in China must transcend this misunderstanding by becoming models for partnership and alliance with the government, serving social development and progress.

Secondly, new forms of cooperation between the new women’s NGOs and the organizations of the Women’s Federation must be found. After all, even new women’s NGOs have an interesting ‘blood relationship’ with the Women’s Federation – some new NGO members are of dual affiliation in that they also work for the Women’s Federation. On the one hand, this may mean that the Women’s Federation has not utilized the full potentials of its members; on the other, it also means that the membership of the Women’s Federation is itself an important asset for mobilizing women and gaining social recognition. The status, power, and resources enjoyed by the Women’s Federation in the current political system of China are a product of history. This, however, also generates structural and bureaucratic drawbacks. The style developed by new forms of women’s NGOs, their sharing of resources and assets, their constraints on the exercise of power, all constitute a challenge to the Women’s Federation. Whether the Federation can transform this challenge into impetus for reform and motivation for cooperation, instead of viewing it as an obstacle, will be an important condition both for the ACWF to gain more comprehensive authority and for the new forms of women’s NGOs to develop still greater effectiveness.

Thirdly, important also must be the construction of new, equal relationships between women’s NGOs and ordinary women. Given the process and the ideals that women’s NGOs adopt in fighting against sexual discrimination and in realizing gender equality, it is a vital principle that the ideals and the spirit of democracy and equality are incorporated into the organizational culture. This is how NGOs should unite women and fulfil their own mission. When the Women’s Federation and new forms
of women’s organizations denounce gender inequality, or even inequality that exists between small and large women’s NGOs, they should themselves set up a mechanism of democracy and equality. At present, new forms of women’s NGOs in China tend to be led and organized by a few members of the elite, or by one individual, following traditional patriarchal modes of leadership. How to use new forms of organizational conduct to achieve democratic management and self-discipline will be an important principle of organization for women’s NGOs in their relationship with the women at large, and it will also be the basis for their triumph. In this country of ours, which has a long history of feudalism, what ideals and organizational principles can we use to develop non-governmental organizations? How can we change or reform this reality of powerful hierarchies which have existed for so long? These are the current issues for the ACWF and for other women’s NGOs in their process of self-construction.

Notes

1. My views are basically drawn from personal experiences and represent my own observations only. This article is an extremely simple, preliminary description, not even close to an elaborate study. A thorough understanding will take much effort and analysis. Nonetheless, this is a subject that interests me immensely. It gives us a glimpse of the development and changes in contemporary China. I hereby treat this article as the start of my study of women’s NGOs in China.

2. The process by which the United Nations resolved to hold the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing was as follows. In May 1990, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations passed the resolution to recommend that a world conference for women be held in 1995. Our Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, then wrote to the Secretary of the United Nations on 28 January 1991, suggesting that the conference be held in Beijing. In March 1992, the 36th meeting of the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women expressed appreciation of the invitation by the Chinese government and accepted. It was then decided to hold The Fourth World Conference for Women between 4 and 15 September 1995. See Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui guojibu (1994a).


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Chapter eight

Searching for ‘Authentic’ NGOs: The NGO Discourse and Women’s Organizations in China

Naihua Zhang

This chapter explores the discourse of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and its impact on women’s organizations and the women’s movement in China, in particular its impact on the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF). In relation to women’s organizing activities the concept of non-governmental organizations entered China with China’s hosting of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and its concurrent NGO Forum in 1995. It caught the attention of the government and those who had their first direct encounter with the concept in an unexpected way, at the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the NGO Forum held in Manila in November, 1993. The vigorous, spontaneous interaction and exchange among the participating NGOs was a challenging and eye-opening experience for the Chinese delegations. The ACWF delegations also found themselves at the centre of a debate over the validity of the ACWF’s presence at the conference as some participants charged that it was not a ‘real NGO’. To counteract the rejection and claim the ACWF’s legitimacy in its involvement in the organization of the Beijing NGO Forum, the Chinese government formally termed the ACWF ‘China’s largest NGO that aims at raising the status of women’ in the Report of the People’s Republic of China on the Implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo 1994: 4). The ACWF has since used the NGO title when attending international functions concerning women. Yet, this self-designation has not stilled the debate on the authenticity of the ACWF’s NGO status among international organizations and scholars. Domestically, the ACWF faces a more delicate situation. It has not formally adopted the NGO title for itself in domestic politics – in its most recently revised constitution adopted at its
Eighth National Congress held in 1998, the ACWF continues to define itself as ‘a mass group’ (qunzhong tuanti) and there was no mentioning of the impact of the NGO spirit and concept on the Chinese women’s movement in its congress documents, despite the fact that the term NGO has frequently appeared in ACWF publications and has inspired many of its most active cadres since the time of the Women’s Conference.

The ambivalence toward the NGO concept is not limited to the official stand of the ACWF only. While the NGO title is freely and frequently used by many individual women activists to refer to their organizations when dealing with international organizations, there does not seem to be much interest among Chinese women activists and scholars in the further exploration of the NGO concept or in the debate over whether the ACWF is an NGO. At the ‘Women Organizing in China’ Workshop held in July 1999 in Oxford, reflecting on the 1993 debate over the ACWF and NGO, several participants expressed the opinion that the debate over whether China has NGOs or not, or which organizations are NGOs and which are not, or who are big NGOs or small NGOs is not important, and could even be harmful for the Chinese women’s movement, because it could cause division and friction among different organizations. This disinterest in the NGO debate, and more so the disinterest in defending the ACWF as an NGO by its members, is an interesting contrast to the international concern over the ACWF’s status as a women’s organization.

How should we understand this phenomenon? What is the impact of the NGO concept? What does this tell us about the interaction between local and global feminisms? These are the questions that this chapter intends to answer. The chapter has three parts. It will first engage itself in the current academic discussion on NGOs and related issues. The debate over whether the ACWF is an NGO is important, as it reflects the criteria on which the ACWF is measured and judged, for as Fisher notes ‘Discourses about NGOs create knowledge and define sets of appropriate practices’ (1997: 2) and thus have a direct impact on the organizational behaviour of women’s groups in China. This chapter will first point out three misconceptions about NGOs in the dominant NGO discourse. Using China, and the ACWF in particular, as an example it will show how an analysis of NGOs based on generalizations about essentialistic organizational features ignores the specificity of the Chinese context and thus hinders rather than facilitates our understanding of women’s organizing in China. While criticizing the essentialized approach to understanding NGOs, the chapter does not want to discard the NGO concept all together, nor does it want to dismiss its relevance to China and Chinese women’s organizations. In the second part, it will discuss how the NGO concept
and practice, encountered by Chinese women in their contact with the global women’s movement, has impacted on the ACWF and forced it to face the embedded contradictions in its dual function of representing both the state and women. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how the NGO debate can be used to promote the women’s movement and social change in China and how it can shed light on the interplay between global and local feminisms.

The NGO Debate and the ACWF: Issues, Approaches and Questions

According to Fernando and Heston (1997), the term ‘non-governmental organizations’ was first used by the United Nations (UN) in 1949 to apply to a broad spectrum of organizations that were granted consultative status to be involved in UN affairs. These organizations were known as public associations, voluntary associations, social welfare organizations, charities, and missions and some have existed for over a hundred years. The term ‘non-governmental’ was used to distinguish them from the national governments – representatives of the member states of the UN. Later on, alternative terms were used in the place of NGO (Lingscheid 1995); however, NGO as a term remains albeit loosely defined. The number of NGOs has expanded dramatically since the mid-1980s, fuelled by the volume of funding from development agencies (Yadama 1997). NGOs have developed in the political space created by the opening up of Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 (Feldman 1997). Globalization of capitalism and power, and the decline of the state have also supported the development of NGOs (Fisher 1997). Within the United Nations, NGO participation in UN conferences has increased significantly, especially since the early 1990s, through the phenomenal NGO Forums that are held concurrently with the world conferences (Lingscheid 1995). As a result of the dramatic increase of NGOs in number, size, scope and function, and in particular in their visibility and impact in the past decade, ‘a large literature has been produced on NGOs and many claims have been made concerning their role, as if there were a true and authentic NGO, consistent over time and context’, ‘despite the lack of consensus about the meaning of the term NGO’ (Fernando and Heston 1997: 10). William Fisher (1997), surveying the literature on NGOs, also recognizes the tremendous diversity within NGOs and the contradictory claims made about what they do by people from opposing political camps. He, too, is concerned that the NGO discourse is dominated by an essentialized
analytical approach that focuses on NGOs as fixed and generalizable entities with essential characteristics. He proposes an approach that contextualizes NGOs within evolving processes of associating.

This chapter adopts Fisher’s approach to analysing NGOs and applies it to women’s organizing in China, beginning with a critique of how the debate over the ACWF as an NGO is influenced by the dominant approach in the NGO discourse. Specifically, I will discuss three pitfalls or misconceptions coming from this approach (1) the essentialized notion of NGOs and the assumed universality of the cultural, economic and social context in which all NGOs operate; (2) the ‘autonomy fetish’ assumption that delinking with the state is the only and most effective strategy that all organizations should take; and (3) the assumption of the undivided, unchanging identity, subjectivity and connections of NGOs. It is worth noting that these misconceptions, though situated in the new context of the NGO debate, actually touch on many identical, unresolved issues concerning the ACWF and the Chinese women’s movement. The women’s movement is defined here as an active, organized effort by women to promote gender equality and the advancement of women’s interests.

The Quest for Authentic NGOs: Blurred Boundaries, Complicated Status and Roles – the Chinese Context

Criticism of the ACWF for not being a ‘real NGO’ comes from the belief that there are true and authentic NGOs, consistent over time and context. In substantive terms, NGOs are generically defined as the opposite of the state and for-profit organizations. They are considered non-bureaucratic, voluntary, flexible, effective, and representing only the interests of their constituency. This idea is similar to the perception of what constitutes the women’s movement in the Western, and typically the American, model: autonomous, bottom-up, with goals for women only. Anything short of this model would not be recognized as a women’s movement.5

The problem is that if judged by this NGO model that assumes the oppositional positions of state and society based on the Western experience, there would hardly be any NGOs in China at all because of the various connections all organizations have with the state and their new connection to the market. The ACWF, for example, is closely connected to the Party and state in funding, personnel and functions. Even the new women’s organizations established in China in the reform era would not quite measure up to the yardstick of ‘authentic NGO’, because all social
163 organizations are required to register with the government and as an associate or subordinate of a formal institution. Moreover, all organizations have to operate within the boundary set by the state and are subject to various laws and regulations that are still restrictive in nature.

Yet, if we follow the UN definition of an NGO as a ‘non-profit citizens’ voluntary entity organization’ (UN Department of Public Information, cited in Lingscheid 1995), we find that these organizations possess the defining features of NGOs as non-profit, voluntary, citizen-based organizations with shared interests. Most important, they were initiated by women themselves. Before the term NGO came to China, they called themselves ‘non-official’ (fei guanfang) or ‘popular’ (minjian) organizations, in contrast to the ACWF, which is organized and supported by the state.

Even the ACWF cannot be simply regarded as just a part or an arm of the state, as believed by many, because first, to be exact, it is NOT a governmental organization (GO) despite its strong ties to the state. In the Chinese political and administrative structure, it is clearly defined (formally registered as well) and positioned as a ‘mass organization’ (qunzhong zuzhi). As such, it is an intermediate structure and does not, unfortunately, have the authority of a government agency to issue orders or directly enforce policies on women. Second, the ACWF was set up as a women’s organization with a history of its founding members striving for women’s equality and advancement. It was set up for all women, every woman a member by virtue of her sex. In the reform era, it firmly declares that its ‘basic function’ is to ‘protect women’s rights and interests and promote equality between men and women’ (Zhonghua quanguo 1988a). This defines it as an interest group and compels it to work as such so as to maintain its legitimacy – a job it does better in the reform era. Third, in its organizational structure, the ACWF is connected not only to the state, but also to local communities, through Women’s Federation leaders at all levels and the millions of women activists working at the grass-roots level. These women are the real assets of the ACWF, making it a mass organization in its true sense. This is referred to as ‘having legs’ (you tui) – a feature that distinguishes it from its counterparts in Eastern European countries and a reason why many organizations, international or domestic, choose to work with local levels of the ACWF to reach women in villages and urban neighbourhoods. It should be further pointed out that the ACWF’s reach to the grass-roots is also the result of a concerted effort by the organization to maintain such a connection when this link was twice in jeopardy in the post-1949 period.

The organizational characteristics of the ACWF mentioned above (in particular, its nature as a women’s group) would qualify the ACWF as an
NGO, even though GONGO (Government Organized NGO) might be a more precise designation for its structural/organizational features, if we borrow one of the acronyms used to distinguish the diverse NGO groups. Discussion later in this chapter will illustrate the complex and changing relations the ACWF has with women and the state that cannot be fully conveyed by the label of GONGO.

The ACWF holds a unique position in Chinese society, as an organization with both official and non-official characteristics and functions. This dual status and role of serving the interests of both women and the state is the result of the Chinese political system under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) where there is a lack of distinction between the functions of the Party and the government, and between the government and non-government agencies. It is embedded with contradictions and ambiguities, but can also be used to serve women’s interests, as will be shown in the following. The ACWF position in the Chinese system does not fit neatly into the GONGO category nor into the predominant NGO concept, as both ignore the complexity of the situation and its implications.

The insistence on the separation between non-profit and for-profit organizations in the NGO discourse is equally erroneous, because it fails to recognize that the lines between the two can also be blurred and that market influences can have a positive impact on women’s organizations in China. For one thing, the proliferation of women’s organizations occurred during the era of China’s economic reform and opening up, which helped expand the very social space and conditions for them to thrive. Moreover, in the reform era, the ACWF has actively engaged in economic activities (in what is called ban shiti – establishing economic enterprises), to raise operational funds, to help unemployed women workers in urban areas and poverty-stricken rural women, and in general to exert greater control over its finances and to prepare for the future when political and administrative reform may force the Federation to be financially independent of the party-state. Besides, to switch from registration as a non-profit to a for-profit organization may be a smart political move. The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinli zixun fuwu zhongxin), formerly the Women’s Research Centre (Zhongguo guanli kexue yanjiuyuan funü yanjiu zhongxin), led by Wang Xingjuan, did just that to get around the official registration requirement while continuing previous activities. These examples show that the complete separation of NGOs from the market not only is impossible in China, but also may be undesirable, depending on the circumstances.
Another key assumption which dominates the current discussion about NGOs is the emphasis on autonomy. This point is a spin-off of the first point but with special focus on an organization’s practice and strategy rather than on its structure and function. Bishwapriya Sanyal uses the expression of ‘autonomy fetish’ to describe the belief that ‘an NGO’s autonomy is best protected and nurtured by avoiding institutional linkages with state and market institutions’ (Sanyal 1997: 21). The question to be asked is: would this delinking strategy work if applied to China, especially to the ACWF?

Given the historical context and existing system and situation in China, the quest for disconnection from the state would in fact not enhance but damage the effectiveness of the ACWF, for two reasons. First, due to the historical incorporation of the national women’s movement into the national revolutionary movement, involvement of women’s organizations with the central power is not a negative thing but a reflection of the perceived importance of women’s issues on the national agenda and the strength of the women’s movement. Scholars have recognized that the women’s movement in modern China developed alongside the national movement for social change and national independence (Witke 1970; Gilmartin 1995; Wang Zheng 1999). Women were not treated as the Other, but rather were included in the nationalist movements by their organizers (Wang Zheng 1999). Radicalized by the patriotic explosion associated with the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement of 1919, Chinese women also adopted the nationalist goal as part of the mission of the national women’s movement. They fought for the inclusion of women’s organizations into the national revolutionary movements and formed a broad coalition among themselves to push for both national and women’s issues. This made women a force no political party attempting state power could ignore, and attention to women’s issues a source of legitimacy. This was especially true for the CCP, which had women’s liberation as part of its revolutionary goals and set up a department specializing in women’s issues in its central committee in its founding years. Due to these circumstances, there is a legitimate place for women’s organizations in the central power. Even though this space is not always actualized, it is potentially an arena for political struggle. This is a place that women need to claim and expand.

Secondly, as there has not been any government agency in charge of women’s issues, the ACWF has actually played the role of the national
policy mechanism for the advancement of women in China. At present, as such a role is expanding in significance, the ACWF should not forgo the opportunity to exert its influence. In China’s report on implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo 1994) the Chinese government identified three national policy machineries for the advancement of women, structures that are required by the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies. They are: the National Working Committee on Children and Women (Guowuyuan funü ertong gongzuo weiyanhui NWCCW, originally called Co-ordinating Committee), established in February 1990; the Special Group for Women and Children of the Committee for Internal and Judicial Affairs under the National People’s Congress (Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui neiwu sifa weiyuanhui funü ertong zhuanmenzu), established in April 1989, and the Committee for Women and Youth of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Quanguo zhengxie funü qingnian weiyanhui), set up in April 1988. The ACWF was also listed after these three organizations in the same section of the document under the subtitle ‘National Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women’ even though it was noted as ‘China’s largest NGO that aims at raising the status of women’. It is obvious that the ACWF is treated by the state as a national policy mechanism for gender equality, and before these three organizations came into existence in the late 1980s, the ACWF was in reality the national policy mechanism.

It should also be pointed out that the ACWF ought to take credit for the establishment of the NWCCW, because it was the ACWF leaders who first wrote to the CCP Central Committee and the State Council in 1988, demanding that China answer the call of the UN to establish a government agency for women. After over a year of pushes and pulls by the ACWF, the NWCCW was finally established, with State Council member Li Tieying as the director (Huang Qizao 1991). This was short of ACWF’s original plan of having a full power governmental body in charge of women’s affairs with a vice Premier as its director (Zhongguo funübao 1988: 1), but with leading members from sixteen departments of the State Council and four mass organizations sitting on the NWCCW, the Committee has more power and authority than the ACWF in co-ordinating efforts to craft laws and government programmes, and in engaging in cross-sector action to identify issues and mobilize resources for protecting the rights and interests of women and children. It also covers a broader range of issues than the other two policy machineries which, as sub-committees within the state legislature and its consultative body, focus on legal matters.
However, this does not mean that the ACWF can forgo the national policy mechanism function that it has been playing. First, the ACWF is the pillar sustaining the daily work of the NWCCW, which is housed in the headquarters of the ACWF. It is also designated as the leading or pulling unit (qiantou danwei) within the NWCCW and thus is expected to take the lead in initiating and co-ordinating activities among Committee members.

Secondly, besides helping the NWCCW fulfil its main functions, the ACWF also plays roles that the Committee and the other national policy machineries cannot. For one, while all three national policy machineries target both women and children (or youth), the ACWF is specified as an organization for women only. This function of political representation of women and declaration of feminist beliefs and goals is what the other state structures lack. Another strength the ACWF has over the Committee and other designated policy machineries is its ideological and discursive power. The Women’s Federation system now has 49 newspapers and magazines. Major debates on women’s issues are carried out in the ACWF journals and newspapers, especially in the national ones – Women of China (Zhongguo funü), Chinese Women’s Movement (Zhongguo fuyun), China Women’s News (Zhongguo funübao), and Collection of Women’s Studies (Funü yanjiu luncong) – rather than in the People’s Daily (Renmin ribao), the CCP organ. In the pre-reform era People’s Daily used to carry editorials, especially on 8 March, International Women’s Day, to set the tone and guidelines for the women’s movement and work concerning women for the year. While ACWF publications continue to reflect the official ideology and are inevitably affected by market forces, the changing site of public forums on women’s issues from the Party organ to women’s printed media reflects a retreat of direct Party control in this area. These publications are also being utilized by the ACWF and other women’s organizations to empower women and to advance women’s causes. For example, China Women’s News is perhaps most accessible to independent and diverse perspectives while Collection of Women’s Studies, a quarterly journal, is the only journal in China that is solely devoted to women’s studies. The growing women’s studies community has an unusually important role in the development of the women’s movement and in the public discourse on women’s issues. All these are examples of how the ACWF has played the role of official feminism, defined as ‘activities of government structures that are formally charged with furthering women’s status and rights . . . (to the extent that) these agencies are effective in helping women as a group and undermining patterns of gender-based inequalities in society’ (Stetson and Mazur 1995: 1–2). It is still unclear
how the state policy machineries and the ACWF will evolve in future. However, as long as the political and social system remains in China, as long as alternative channels are still lacking, for the ACWF not to play this top-down role is to leave a vacuum unclaimed by feminists.

**Varied History, Multifaceted Identity and Fragmented Actor: ACWF in the Past and Present**

Still another problem with the dominant NGO approach is the static view of NGOs, assuming each has a unified and unchanging subject and identity. From this perspective, the ACWF could best be regarded as a GONGO, but even this categorization reveals very little of what the ACWF is and what it has done. It overlooks the ACWF's multifaceted identity and the complicated and changing relations it has with the state and women.

If we look closely at the history of the ACWF, we will find that even though it was initiated by the CCP and organized to support the newly established regime, it has never been static. On the contrary, the ACWF has gone through three stages of development. The first was its beginning as a coalition of different women's groups with a clear mission of building new China and striving for women's liberation and equality in 1949. The second stage began around 1957 when it was formally incorporated into the state administrative hierarchy and identified itself as a 'women's mass organization', following the CCP's terminology. The third and most recent stage has been the reform era when the ACWF prioritizes its function as a women's organization again, with its 'basic function' being 'representing and protecting women's rights and interests and promoting equality between men and women' (*Zhonghua quanguo* 1988a: 25). This zigzag road travelled by the ACWF reveals much more than can be conveyed by the simple term of GONGO.

While the ACWF gives its loyalty first to the party-state and subordinates itself to party-state control, it also identifies with women, from whom it derives its legitimacy and strength, as seen in its effort to preserve the ACWF as a women's organization connected to the grass-roots as mentioned above. This may seem to be self-serving because preserving the Women's Federation also means preserving the positions and the power base of its leaders. However, given the fact that whether to maintain separate women's organizations in the CCP-led revolutionary cause has always been an unsolved issue, preserving the strength of women's groups is in the interest of the women's movement.
The ACWF is also by no means a unified actor with an undivided subjectivity. The fragmentation and multifaceted subjectivity of the ACWF is especially obvious in the reform era, coming from individuals with varied backgrounds and commitments to women’s causes, working from ‘within the system’ (Li Xiaojiang 1995). It is also seen in the discrepancy between the local and subordinate ACWF units and the ACWF headquarters in some of their positions. This kind of discrepancy has occurred more often in the reform era as the local and subordinate units are acquiring greater autonomy and independence with more diversified resources available from outside the Federation system, and as the gripping power of the central Federation is further weakened by the changing relations between the Party and the state. Still another source of fragmentation and multifaceted subjectivity is found in the various kinds of connection and association that are made inside and outside the ACWF, between local and global feminisms. The frequent cooperation and collaboration among women has given birth to new women’s groups and affected the identity of those involved in the multiple connections and associations. Individuals engaged in new forms of organizing activities are termed by some as ‘amphibious persons’ as they are both Women’s Federation cadres and core members of newly established women’s groups. In these cases, whether they belong to the Federation or another organization is no longer important. The organization concerned can also adopt different forms of status and move freely between these so as to best utilize support and resources from different sources, as illustrated by the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family led by Gao Xiaoxian (see Gao’s Chapter Nine of this volume). The organization presents itself as affiliated to the Women’s Federation when engaging in domestic poverty-alleviation projects and as an NGO when dealing with foundations from overseas. This shows how the organizational categories are in flux and how there is a social space allowing for both to operate, even though such a space is far from adequate and institutionalized. It also shows that the women mentioned in these cases are not confined or bound by the category designation of their organizations, but rather are using a variety of organizational formats to advance the cause to which their ultimate loyalty lies.

**The ACWF Renegotiating Position and Space: NGO as an Arena and Process**

Does all this mean that the NGO concept is irrelevant to the Chinese case and the Chinese women’s movement? Does it mean that the ACWF should
uncritically play a dual function and maintain its current relationship with the state and women? The answers to these questions are both negative. As a matter of fact, the NGO concept did have a visible impact on China and the women’s movement. ‘Non-governmental’, a concept that did not exist in the Chinese language, aroused some amusement and bewilderment when it was first introduced, but soon gained popularity among newly founded women’s organizations and the ACWF as well, due to its association with the UN Women’s Conference and as the result of China’s desire to ‘connect tracks’ (jiegui), i.e. link up with the international women’s movement. It gave legitimacy to NGO groups in China and raised their status. The opportunity to participate in regional preparatory meetings for the NGO Forum in various parts of the world and in other Conference-related activities allowed some Chinese women activists to have direct contact with women and their organizations from outside China for the first time. They were greatly inspired and empowered by this encounter, impressed by the enthusiasm, passion, and a strong sense of participation displayed by their overseas counterparts and by their varied, effective organizational format and activities (Wong Yuenling 1995; Hsiung and Wong 1998). The inspiration and empowerment those women felt came from their direct encounter with the spirit and practice of the international women’s movement. As these were experienced in activities surrounding the NGO Forum, they were also attributed to the ‘NGO spirit and practice’ by the Chinese participants, as reflected by this statement:

Women’s forums promote a spirit of exploration, encouraging women not to mind difficulties but to strive to realize their dreams. Women’s forums encourage women to act, no matter how different their social position and lives are, in the political, cultural, economic and technical spheres – to strive for equality, peace and development at all times and everywhere in order to achieve their goals (Yang Jingwei 1995: 195).

As a result, the NGO concept has acquired an unusually high status in China among women activists that may not be found in other countries. The NGO concept also brought in fresh ideas, challenging the CCP state-centred, top-down organizational approach to women’s issues and social change through party-led mass organizations. The official designation of the ACWF as an NGO is thus no small matter, either. It reflects the strength of global feminism, which has now become another force shaping the public discourse on women and the women’s movement in China. A leading article written by the Editorial Department of the
ACWF magazine Chinese Women’s Movement in October 1997 illustrated very well how the ACWF was inspired by the NGO concept and its new NGO title. The article admitted, ‘Maybe we should be grateful for the convention of the Fourth World Conference on Women, because it popularized the concept of NGO to an extremely broad scope and degree’ (Zhongguo fuyun 1997: 12). The article displayed some new thinking of the ACWF about its function and relation with the government – discussing the governmental function played by the National Working Committee on Children and Women while emphasizing the social function the ACWF plays as a women’s organization; and, most notably, describing itself ‘as an NGO’, that has a ‘good partner relationship’ with the government (1997: 18). The new wording ‘partnership’ – a parallel rather than hierarchical relationship with the government – is significant. It indicated the ACWF’s resumed effort to tackle the contradiction embedded in its dual position and dual function and to reposition itself and renegotiate its space in Chinese society and in the women’s movement in the reform era, taking advantage of the incoming NGO concept.19

However, none of these new ideas mentioned above, not even the term NGO itself, got into the documents of the ACWF’s Eighth National Congress held a year later. This shows that the formal, official front adopted by the leading body of the ACWF at this most formal occasion is still more conservative than what is presented by its rank-and-file activists in its publications, and that the ACWF as a whole is still very much under the control of the Party in major policy matters. From the point of view of the party-state, the NGO concept carries with it a potential threat insofar as it implies a move away from the government. It still seems to be too radical for the officially desired relationship between the ACWF and the party-state.

Yet, this incident reveals another gap in the ACWF’s position and rhetoric; that is, the discourse used domestically is distinctively different from that for international occasions, revealing the dynamics of the interaction and exchange between Western and local ideas and the challenge China faces in dealing with the incoming ideas. With a desire to ‘connect to the international tracks’, the Chinese government embraces incoming concepts, such as NGO and gender, taking them straight over into the official rhetoric, even at the risk of distortion, yet resisting and postponing further engagement with them. Thus the chasm between these ideas and domestic politics in China remains. Chinese scholars and activists have been actively interacting with feminist ideas from outside China, but face many obstacles in international communication and have refrained from bringing the debate of sensitive theoretical
I was told by some Chinese scholars that the reasons for the omission of NGO in the Eighth Women’s Congress was that it did not fit the Chinese context and that this could also be a deliberate strategy to avoid using a politically sensitive word to avoid unnecessary troubles. While I agree that the essentialized notion of NGOs, especially with its focus on an organization’s structure and connection, is inappropriate to the ACWF and the Chinese context, and while I understand that when the issue of whether or not an organization could be allowed to attend the NGO Forum and other international activities related to women was at stake, no organization could afford not to adhere to the dominant discourse and be bound by its terms, I don’t think simply adopting the NGO title for international occasions is the solution. I am also beginning to question whether detachment is the best strategy in dealing with controversial ideas from overseas. On the contrary, I believe Chinese scholars and activists should actively engage themselves in the NGO debate, for two reasons.

First, this can help change the dynamics of interaction between global and local ideas on women’s organizing and gender theory, which is still at its initial stage and is not an equal two-way flow. The Chinese perspective and experience can enrich the NGO debate and facilitate full inclusion of Chinese women’s organizations and ideas in the international women’s movement and activities.

Second, this will benefit the women’s movement in China. An active participation in the NGO debate and a critical examination of the NGO discourse will reveal the complexity and diversity of NGOs and their activities, the contrasting views of their functions, and in particular, the critique of the limits of NGOs. This will help Chinese women’s organizations to avoid pitfalls into which other NGOs have fallen and to dismiss the prevalent notion in China of NGOs as a monolithic group with definable qualities, and as everything that is ‘progressive’ – an ideal that has led to the practice of privileging the newly established women’s organizations over organizations directly associated with the government, especially in the context of working with individuals and organizations from outside China. Such biased notions of NGOs have made some Women’s Federation activists feel inadequate and ambivalent about the ACWF and, due to its connection to the government, some are hesitant in acknowledging the ACWF as a feminist organization. This warrants concern because the ambivalence towards and distancing of ACWF’s most active members from the organization will weaken the very prospect of making the ACWF into a strong feminist organization.
Paying attention to the NGO debate also means recognizing the positive impact on China of the NGO concept, especially in terms of its focus on the relationship between women’s organizations and the Party and government – the centre of political and administrative power. One important factor that sets the various Chinese women’s organizations apart is their proximity and access to the centre of power. The ACWF is undoubtedly in a more powerful position than its counterparts, and has been seen to act as a spokesperson for the government when there were frictions between other women’s organizations and the state. It still regards itself as *the* women’s organization in China and has not opened its arms to embrace all women’s groups and treat them as its equal partners. How the ACWF positions itself in relation to the state and other women’s organizations will determine its identity and future, as well as the fate of the women’s movement. An engagement in the NGO debate, including the debate over ‘big’ and ‘small’ NGOs, will help all organizations in their search for proper relationships with the Party and government and with one another.

**Conclusion: Using the NGO Debate to Promote the Women’s Movement in China**

The above discussion of the ACWF illustrates that in order to fully understand the role and function of NGOs in China we should look at the impact of the NGO discourse and practice seriously, and following William Fisher’s model, perceive and approach NGOs as ‘an arena within which battles from society at large are internalized . . . and by focusing on fluid and changing local, regional, national and international processes and connections, which both potentially support and suppress ‘an insurrection of subjugated knowledge’ to reveal the rich ideological and functional diversity of NGOs’ (1997: 7). This approach provides us with several insights in our exploration of the relationships between NGOs, Chinese women and society.

First, instead of applying a universal, ‘genuine and pure’ NGO model to the ACWF and other women’s organizations to see whether they measure up, we should ground our research on the specific histories and processes from which the ACWF and other NGOs emerge and within which they operate in China. By doing so we can explain why, as a product of the Chinese political system, the ACWF is playing the function of both NGO and national policy mechanism, and why it has a multifaceted identity. Treating NGOs as an arena for struggle, we can see how major issues of the women’s movement and social organizations are played out
in the NGO debate with regard to the CCP’s organizational approach to the woman question and organizing strategies of various women’s organizations.

Second, there is a need to shift our attention from institutions to processes. Specifically, the emphasis of analysis should be shifted ‘from a set of organizations to a fluid web of relationships’ to reveal the connections of NGOs at numerous levels and in different fields and direct attention to the ‘flows of funding, knowledge, ideas, and people that move through these levels, sites, and associations’ (Fisher 1997). In China, the complicated formal and informal connections existing between women’s organizations and the government and Party, among women’s groups, and with the emerging market are further expanded by the enlarged social space legitimized by the incoming NGO concept and the opportunities to form new contacts, linkages, and networks with international funding agencies and international NGOs. These have created new and innovative possibilities for organizational practices and provided a basis for social change. Any organization’s (including the ACWF’s) future opportunities, as well as constraints, will be shaped by these multiple and translocal connections.

Third, this emphasis on processes and connections will lead to a different notion of civil society and the state. Here, again, the emphasis is not merely on the institutions of civil society, but on the processes, to conceptualize civil society not as a sector that contests the will of governments, but as a ‘vector of agonistic contentions over governmental relations’ (Gordon 1991: 23). Society is viewed as an entity that repeatedly tears itself apart and endlessly remakes itself. The transformation of civil society thus leads to transformation of the state, not the other way around (Ferguson 1990). The state is theorized as a complex set of interrelated but distinct institutions, relations, hierarchies, discourses, interests and players. It is seen as an arena where different interests are actively constructed in the process of the demands being made and the state’s responses. ‘Thus, in the process of responding to some demands and not others, or to some interests and not others, the state is involved in actively constructing theses demands’ (Watson 1990: 7). These notions of the state and civil society have serious implications for the strategies and agenda of the women’s movement. Since they do not presuppose the separation of sectors and the existence of a coherent set of interests inside or outside the political and bureaucratic arenas, this dictates that active involvement of women’s organizations in the arenas of the party and the state, as femocrats and as grass-roots NGOs, is not only necessary but also inevitable. This also indicates diversity of discourses and practices among
NGOs, which cannot be reduced to a simple case of good NGOs con-fronting the evil government. The process of making demands and responding to them affects both sides and the outcome depends on how it is played out.

Last, this leads to the issue of social change in relation to the NGOs and their future. Here I want to look at changes taking place at two levels – macro-economic, political and social changes China is going through, and micro changes within the NGO discourse and practice – and their implications. All NGOs are going to be affected by the macro-level changes taking place in China. One such change that affects NGOs and in particular the ACWF, is the issue of Party vs State and the process of state-building, a crucial and thorny matter in domestic politics in China (Zheng 1997). For the ACWF and other ‘mass organizations’, such as the Trade Union and the Youth Federation that are under the direct control of the CCP Propaganda Department but with their full-time cadres on the state payroll, this had not been a major issue in the past because of the dominance of the Party. In the reform era, despite the absence of a more radical political reform, administrative reform is underway to make the state apparatus more effective in leading China’s modernization programme. As a result, the state is gaining strength. The position and the role of the intermediate mass organizations in the government is one of the major issues for the administrative reform. On this issue, a technocrat-led developmental state may have a different agenda from a Party prioritizing ideological and other concerns, as shown in some local governments’ reform plan to cut funding to mass organizations to make them self-reliant. This may make the ACWF reposition its relationship with the Party and government, complicating its original women vs party-state relations.

As shown earlier in this chapter, women’s NGOs have had a great impact on domestic politics and social change in China. I want to argue further that while in many other countries NGOs are closely connected to development agencies, due to the context in which the NGO concept was introduced to China, NGOs became important players in the women’s movement. I would also say that the women’s movement and women’s organizations, including the ACWF, have a special place in social change in China. Because of the perceived safeness of women’s issues to the regime (also an indication of marginality of women’s issues and organizations), the ACWF is left with greater autonomy and responsibility to deal with women’s issues; and women’s groups also have larger social space to conduct their activities. China’s hosting of the Women’s Conference not only made the government reaffirm its ideological commitment
to gender equality, but also helped ‘internationalize’ women’s issues, forcing China to adhere to UN documents and facilitating China’s connection with the international women’s movement. As a result, Chinese women’s groups have become the only social groups in China that have such broad, direct connections with their counterparts in foreign countries. All these aspects will create added leverage for the ACWF and women. Thus, I take an optimistic view on future social change in China and the role of ACWF and other NGOs in this process. I hope the discussion on the NGO discourse will further impact the micro-practice and discourses within women’s NGOs, so they can better position themselves in their relations with the state and work together with one another to contribute to social restructuring around and under the state and the market.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the complicated relationship the ACWF has with the party-state and women, and the dual role it has played in Chinese society and the women’s movement. The ACWF and the other NGOs have grown out of the specific historical, social, and political context in China. They may fall short of the criteria of ‘authentic’ NGOs in the minds of some people, and we may find it hard to categorize the ACWF. That is why this chapter calls for close examination of misconceptions about NGOs and the ACWF and for grounded research rooted in the Chinese context to understand the complexity of women’s organizing in China in order to find directions and strategies for the future women’s movement.

Notes

1. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women was the final document of the United Nations World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women held in Nairobi, 1985. Unanimously adopted, it was a declaration of women’s views on world affairs and plans for action.

2. As reflected in the debate over whether China should be the host of the 1995 Women’s Conference. The opponents focused on China’s poor human-rights record and restrictions on associations and expression, and portrayed Chinese women as passive victims of an authoritarian state, and their agency and their organized effort to strive for equality was overlooked in the debate. See Hsiung and Wong 1998 and Li Xiaojiang 1997.

3. Du Fangqin, closing remarks at the Workshop and remarks by some other participants.
4. The pertinent UN definition is found in a 1968 resolution: ‘Any international organization which is not established by intergovernmental agreement shall be considered an NGO for the purpose of these arrangements, including organizations which accept members designated by governmental authorities, provided that such membership does not interfere with the free expression of views of the organization.’ The UN Department of Public Information gave the following definition in 1985: ‘NGO refers to a non-profit citizens’ voluntary entity organization nationally or internationally. Thus, professional associations, foundations, trade unions, religious organizations, women’s and youth groups, cooperative associations, development and human rights organizations, environmental protection groups, research institutes dealing with international affairs and associations of parliamentarians are considered NGOs’ (cited in Lingscheid 1995: 4).

5. For a critique of misconceptions on the Third World Women’s movements, see Jayawardena (1986) and for critique of misconceptions on China, see Hsiung and Wong (1998).

6. For a typical view of this, see Mosher 1983.

7. For domestic cooperation with the ACWF, see Li Xiaojiang 1996. For ongoing cross-national projects the ACWF is involved in, see Meng Xiaoyun 1999. The ACWF has received several awards from UN agencies and is praised as ‘ideal partner for cooperation’ (see Fu Guoxuan 2000).

8. Once was around 1955 when neighbourhood committees were set up in urban areas, and another was in 1958 when the establishment of communes threatened rural Women’s Federation organizations below the county level. For the 1955 incident, see Zhang Yun (1955) and for the 1958 incident, see Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui dangzu (1958).

9. This prospect is real rather than imaginary. During the short-lived political reform around 1988 and 1989, some local governments made attempts to cut funding completely off from all mass organizations, an act that shocked the ACWF. See Wang Shupo (1992).

10. As seen during the first alliance between the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD), and the CCP, 1924–1927. Different groups of women (GMD and CCP members, Christian women activists and women suffragists) were drawn together by the campaign to include women’s organizations in the First National Congress held by the Nationalist Party and to support the Northern Expedition – a joint GMD-CCP military effort to destroy warlord power and unify China under a single national republic. They were under the leadership of the Women’s Bureau within the Central and local GMD organizations. This signified the structural integration of the women’s movement into the national movement. Such a coalition also repeated itself during 1937–1945 when the two parties allied again in the anti-Japanese war.

11. For a more detailed discussion of relationships between women’s organizations and the CCP and women’s presence in the Central CCP and the CCP-led government, see Naihua Zhang (1996).


14. A case in point is the treatment of a prominent women’s studies scholar in China who was criticized for her views by a senior ACWF theorist in Beijing but had a Women’s Federation cadre from her province as her most loyal supporter and partner and launched many of her projects there; see Li Xiaojiang (1995). For the complicated relationship between various levels of the Women’s Federation and other organizations, also see Jaschok (1998).

15. See Jin’s Chapter Six in this volume on the challenges the ACWF faces as a result of changing political and social context.

16. See Wong Yuenling (1995) and Wang Zheng (1997). I myself witnessed the changing attitude towards NGOs. When I was in China in 1992 talking to a leader of a women’s group (who also has a formal appointment within the ACWF), she emphasized her group’s connection to the ACWF and the ACWF’s role in providing service to women and promoting women’s interests. When I met her again in 1995 her emphasis was on the independent NGO characteristics of her group and its activities. The same happened to other ACWF cadres. Many of them originally wanted to emphasize their connection to the state, because the official status gave them authority and a sense of superiority over other women’s groups. When the government issued ‘Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations’ after the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and required all social organizations to register, the ACWF (and also the Trade Union and the Youth Federation) refused to do so, arguing that they had already been approved by the government and existed long before the regulations were enacted. So the Civil Affairs Bureau had to do the registration for them. The ACWF did not realize at the time that this would come in handy when it was to organize the NGO Forum because now it could claim itself a registered mass organization (conversation with ACWF cadre, 1995).

17. A case in point was the Women’s Research Institute. At the time it was involved in the preparation of a workshop for the NGO Forum, it was not officially registered. Yet as the Institute had already become internationally known, and since its leader was to organize a workshop at the NGO Forum entitled ‘Women’s Groups and Social Support’ to discuss the work of her group and other Chinese women’s organizations like hers, nobody bothered them about the ‘legitimacy’ of this group at that time (conversation with ACWF cadre, 1995).

18. I am indebted to Cecilia Milwertz for her insight on this matter.

19. In 1986 the ACWF carried out an internal debate over the functions of ACWF (see Wang Shupo 1992), and in 1988, it mapped out a plan for its own reform to deal with the problem of itself acting more as a bureaucracy rather than a woman’s organization (see Zhonghua quanguo 1988b). It was unfortunate that the structural reform plan, as well as the country’s attempt at a more
radical political reform at the time, was aborted due to the changing political climate after the Tiananmen incident of 1989.

20. In a prepared speech to a conference on theories on women in 1996, the Chairwoman of the ACWF claimed that ‘the Marxist view on women analyzes the woman question from a gender perspective. Its essence is equality between men and women’. Some scholars who were asked to comment on the draft spotted the inaccuracy of her statement but decided not to point it out, so that the concept of gender could be used more freely by scholars. For this incident, see Li Huiying (1999: 2).

21. These two responses were from conversations with women from China at the Workshop.

22. This includes a critique of NGO’s subservience to donor resource flow and policy agenda (Lewis 1997), competition among NGOs for funding (Sanyal 1997), institutionalization and bureaucratization of NGOs (Fisher 1997), some NGOs’ depoliticized service role which is geared toward individual needs rather than broader social change and the assumption that conflates NGOs with civil society (Feldman 1997), and the unequal relationship between the Northern and Southern NGOs (Jhamtani 1992). For a more detailed summary of NGO debates, see Fisher (1997), and Fernando and Heston (1997).

23. At the Workshop, some Women’s Federation scholars and activists emphasized the ACWF as ‘resources’ to be utilized. This was in contrast to the affirmative answer given by some Western scholars at the Workshop when I posed to them the question of whether the ACWF is a feminist organization. Granted this could be due to different interpretations of the term of ‘feminism,’ or due to disappointment at the ACWF’s inability to take a strong stand for women. However, it is hard to deny that the dominant NGO discourse played a role in making the ACWF scholars and activists feel inadequate.
Other Voices – Other Conversations

Defining the Women’s Federation

Harriet Evans: My questions are about the functions of the Federation [addressing Irene Tong]. You indicated in your paper how women’s cadre schools are apparently devoted to the promotion of serious skills and techniques for female cadres, in fact reproducing very conventional images of femininity and female gender. This is what we see in prevalent displays, in any women’s journal you can pick up from newsstands in Chinese cities. Many of these journals are published by provincial and municipal branches of the All China Women’s Federation; in one sense you could suggest that these journals potentially represent one dimension of the space between state and market. And yet it seems from the kind of images, narratives and dominant representations in these journals that they very much tend toward the market side of that equation. Now, the question I have concerns the role of the Women’s Federation – however you want to define it – in reproducing certain views or certain approaches to female gender within this kind of space. I’ll give you one very obvious example. Until, I think, just two years ago, one of the main journals, in which serious issues, feminist issues, were discussed, was Women’s Research (Nüxing Yanjiu), which you probably know. It has completely changed in the last 18 months or so. It has become the Women’s Monthly (Nüxing Yuekan); it is glossy, full of images of fashionable young women, and the number of articles in the journal which really deal with serious issues of prostitution, of domestic violence, of unemployment, of migrant women workers, and so on, are fairly minimal. This [journal] is published by the Women’s Federation in Beijing. So my question is: what is the Women’s Federation doing? What are the principles, what are the criteria governing the work of the Women’s Federation, in producing certain narratives and images of female gender, rather than other ones which would seem to present women with serious alternatives and serious possibilities in their understanding of themselves, and of their lives as women?

Irene Tong: I’d like to know too! Actually the same question struck me when I was thinking about this paper. I think this is also a contradiction between a long-term goal of gaining equality – in the substantial sense for women, and the short-term goal of survival. As I mentioned in my paper, I think there are so many forces at work that make the cadre schools or the Women’s Federation itself cater to the market demands and the economic viability of their enterprises. And therefore in even producing
a magazine they were thinking about the economic viability of the magazine. So this contradiction pushes the theorizing of women’s studies within the Women’s Federation way ahead of the other organs of the Women’s Federation. And I would also like to hear from persons from within the Women’s Federation [as to] how they theorize this phenomenon.

**Liu Bohong:** First of all, we have to ask to whom we are referring when we mention the ‘Women’s Federation’. For example, I’ve said that many of us here are ‘amphibians’, that is, we work both inside and outside the system of the Women’s Federation. So when you ask questions regarding the Women’s Federation, are you addressing me, or Xie Lihua, or Gao Xiaoxian? There is ambiguity as to who represents the Women’s Federation. If we’re talking about promoting traditional roles of women, or commercial sex, or market-oriented portraits of women, then I believe none of the three of us wants to see that happening. Yet we have seen in many women’s magazines such profiles and such tendencies. We’ve carried out a specific study on mass media, and we found that commercial promotions are most serious in those women’s magazines which include advertising. So I think this issue is also reflecting the different voices within the Women’s Federation. For example, how to carry out women’s education in cadre schools? Is it to increase women’s traditional femininity, or to increase their gender awareness? This remains a very big debate.

**Gao Xiaoxian:** I’d like to add a point from my experience in Shaanxi. I think that the Women’s Federation is not one [monolithic] unit. I think that whoever is studying Chinese women or their organizations should be aware of this. There is no single standard. Different localities and different levels of work of the Women’s Federation are dependent upon individual leaders or their understanding of the work of the Federation, as well as upon the internal cadre system, and their links with those outside of the system. So I think that when we discuss the Women’s Federation we should also remember that the Federation is changing as well, there is a development towards internal diversity. So if we try to ascertain the standards of the Women’s Federation, I think there won’t be an answer. This [response] can be applied to magazines of the Women’s Federation as well. While you can see some magazines making concessions towards market demands and viability, you can also see some people trying hard to improve or reverse the situation. In one single magazine you can find different articles that reflect different voices, efforts and goals.
Challenges to the Centre and its Prerogatives

Liu Bohong: To some extent, I’ve helped the three organizers in their preparation for this Workshop. I have had the feeling that there is an equal chance of participation here [for various organizations]. The key question is whether the issues raised now are related to the Workshop’s themes, such as the organizing of women and women’s organizations in China, their relationship with international women’s organizing [activities], the human rights of women, public and private rights of women – the Workshop is designed around those issues. As far as I am aware, there is no hierarchical divide. It is not as if the large Women’s Federation, or as if those from Beijing, have more representatives. That’s what I think, I’m not sure if I’m right or not.

Gao Xiaoxian: I don’t quite agree with Liu Bohong’s view. I’m from Shaanxi. I have a double identity. First, I’m a cadre of the provincial Women’s Federation in Shaanxi; second, I’m involved in a large women’s NGO, the Shaanxi Research Centre of Women’s Theory, Marriage and Family. We have about 100 theorists and activists at the Centre, who carried out enormous amounts of work in the last few years. But most of those people don’t have any opportunity to share their experiences with others. I’m the sole exception. For example, I have been able to discuss with international women’s organizations our work and experiences regarding domestic violence. We have carried out very useful surveys, but we don’t have many opportunities to share that. So I don’t think the chance is equal for everyone. As regards this Workshop, I talked about this with Ping-Chun [Hsiung] last year. I said that Chinese representatives in international conferences are always the same old faces. Every time there’s an international conference, it’s always the same old group to take part, other people hardly have any opportunity to show their faces. So what’s the difference between attending a conference here and having it in China, apart from meeting some foreign scholars? Some people are always invited whenever there’s a conference; I think that should be changed. Beijing is the centre, the capital, its financial resources are richer. I think sponsors should pay more attention to developing areas instead. Chinese women show different possibilities for mobility in different localities and cultures; their organizing varies accordingly. I feel international conferences should have a wider vision, should try to involve women from different areas, and include more diverse voices [clapping from the audience].
Liu Bohong: I’ve presented a paper on behalf of Director Ma Yanjun [Department Head, ACWF administration]. My answer to this question [from Du Fangqin] can only represent my own opinion, not Ma’s. As far as guidelines and general principles are concerned, the Women’s Federation have stressed that large and small NGOs are equal; this is the case since 1995. It is something I heard directly from the mouths of leaders of the Women’s Federation. But in real collaborations, can this be realized? I think we can use the example of the American president’s wife, Mrs Hillary Clinton, inviting a delegation of leaders of women’s organizations in China to meet with her. Here we can see a certain inequality. Can the Women’s Federation, as well as representatives from government departments, nurture an equal, democratic, mutually-respectful and open relationship with women and organizations outside the system of the Women’s Federation? It doesn’t seem so. So I think what’s laid out in terms of guidelines or rules still reveals a big gap with actual practice. We discussed this morning, when we were thinking about dismantling inequalities between women and men, whether we are at the same time reproducing another form of inequality? I think the majority of members of the Women’s Federation are not aware of this problem. We’re discussing how the Women’s Federation has reproduced a hierarchical system in its efforts to rid the old system of inequality. For example, the notion of official ranks. Some people think about themselves in relation to the office they hold; for example, on the level of a bureau, or the ministry, and the like. This sense of hierarchy is still deeply rooted in the system. I think it is a very important and huge issue that various women’s organizations consider how they should regard each other. This is also a major challenge. Recently, the Women’s Federation talked about the ‘Three Talks’ [audience laughter], which means: ‘talk politics, talk study, talk integrity’. This is almost like a political study to rectify adversity in the system. The strongest reaction from lower levels of the Federation is directed against its bureaucratic red tape. There is a strong opposition to bureaucracy in the Federation. This is actually an opinion shared by both those inside and outside the system. I think this is a challenge, and it also relates to the roles of the Federation, and how it should function in the future.

Liu Guanghua: So far we’ve spent our day discussing various organs of the Women’s Federation. Liu Bohong also told us a lot about the ‘inside and outside’ of the Women’s Federation system. I found this whole talk particularly hegemonic [audience laughter]. The Women’s Federation has been conventionally used as the only standard of reference [canzhao...
biaozhun]. This reminds me that I had talked similarly about marriage before. I had also used ‘inside and outside’ the marriage system as reference points, then I was challenged by some gay sisters, who stood up and asked: why do you use ‘marriage’ and the monogamous wife-husband relationship as the standard? Why regard the homogenized [yiyuanhua] norm as the standard? A notion that truly embraces diversity should be something like this: as long as there is love, anything goes.

**Popular Organizing – Strengths and Constraints**

**Guo Jianmei**: Our Centre [The Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, Peking University], compared to other government institutions, appears to be rather small and weak. It doesn’t come with any taken-for-granted resources. But there are advantages we enjoy over government organs. We must recognize these and use them in order to bring out the best of our functions. We believe that popular organizations enjoy two general advantages: first of all, since they are not under the control of any government bureau, they are much more flexible and free in operation. This offers popular organizations a very good environment for self-management, self-organizing and self-development. In our development of the Centre, we’ve consciously made use of this advantage. The second aspect is that popular organizations are formed by professionals who are motivated by mutual ideals and have come to organize themselves voluntarily. This gives their organizations very strong professional merits. They can effectively make their way through different social networks and communicating channels, while building up widespread influence. This kind of relationship network is very crucial for carrying out work in China. In the last three years since our Centre’s opening, we’ve made use of our strengths very effectively. We have established close links with relevant government departments, as well as women, legal, media and academic circles. This provides a work basis for our Centre to develop. We have therefore built up a name in our country, as a rather influential legal popular organization. Over thirty news media institutions have reported our activities. We are also known overseas. In June 1998, Hillary Clinton came to visit our Centre. In October last year, when the British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited China, his wife Cherie Blair also had a meeting with members of our Centre. I feel the success of our Centre in establishing itself over the last three years is largely a result of its effective use of its position as a popular organization. The significance of our Centre, which is the very first legal popular organization in China, has less to do with the
number of cases it handled or legislative recommendations it made, and more to do with its demonstration to society of a new model for popular organizations to exist and develop. Traditionally, legal issues are managed by the state, but through the work of our Centre, we have proven that a popular organization can be an important social power that participates in the state’s legal aid activities – not only is this participation necessary for our contemporary social context, it’s also full of development potential.

Liu Guanghua: My organization [The Huaguang Women’s College] doesn’t have a fixed structure nor any solid, supportive attachment with any government or commercial organization. That’s what makes it very ‘NGO’. We have four unique features: first of all, our organization is called ‘women’s school’. There is no address, no walls, no campus. We have no single enrolled student. But we have about fifty thousands sisters who have attended our lectures where we talk about ourselves and our health. Secondly, our school conducts research. No one assigns us to a particular topic and we receive no funding for such research. Third, our school has been doing some community work. But, we don’t work within a particular administrative entity. We go to women’s prisons, we go to drug rehabilitation centres, we go to secondary schools to meet the teenage boys and girls, and we reach out to many sisters. Fourth, we do public education on radio and television stations. We do lots of programmes on women’s health, women and AIDS and other related topics. But, we don’t have any certificate. If you ask in what qualification we carry out this educational work, the answer would be ‘we have none’. I myself, in particular, have no status or formal title, no special background of this or that, at all. Such is the kind of NGO that I’ve organized, as an individual, free cultural person who has organized some volunteers together.

Our school was started in June 1994 and has now existed for five years. But recently we’re facing the danger of closing down, because we have no campus, no formal teaching staff, no registered students, and no funding. Before I came to this Workshop, I was working very hard to ‘legalize’ my school, lest it be forced to close down. This is the NGO I’m currently in charge of. We are what the Chinese public call a ‘briefcase school’ – all I need to do is to put my official seal in the briefcase and off I go to start my work! When I go to Beijing to do research, my ‘school’ also leaves with me to Beijing, literally. Of course, even when I’m in Beijing, my women’s school still has lots of volunteers who continue their work with classroom education to adolescents, or with the service of the confidential women’s hotline.
Targets and Subjects – the ‘Quality’ of Women

Harriet Evans: How do the female subjects of the Women’s Federation’s organizational activities perceive those organizations themselves? In women’s journals we are aware of the criticisms made of the ACWF, and what is perceived by many, especially younger, Chinese women as the Women’s Federation’s distance from their own experience. I think it might be interesting to try through our discussions about organizations, to begin to look at the way in which those structures are perceived by the ‘Subjects’, or the ‘Targets’, that is the audience that those structures are trying to reach. We should focus on the issue of perception, that is, how those structures are perceived – are they perceived as being an impediment, or useful, or appropriate, or empowering to women? This question of perception is central to the issue of efficacy. An organization can’t be efficient or effective in any terms unless it is seen by its subjects to be so.

He Xiaopei: We heard from the introduction just now of the notion of raising women’s psychological and cultural qualities (suzhi). It was explained that training courses are given to raise women’s cultural qualities, but not much was said on the psychological side. I’d like to know what do you consider as women’s ‘psychological quality’ and how do you provide training on this?

Xie Lihua: The main objective in terms of psychological quality is to raise women’s confidence. The migrant women workers move from rural villages to urban cities, they suffer a lot from discrimination, and they don’t have self-confidence. When they first join our Migrant Women’s Club and whenever they make a public speech, they dare not raise their head. It is extremely difficult for us to get someone to speak. When they are on the speech platform, their hands shake and their legs tremble. But in our three years of running the Club, we keep telling them they’re no less capable than other people. Louise Beynon, who’s here today, had joined our activities at the Club as well. I have been inspired by her views and wrote an article, ‘As a matter of fact, you’re truly amazing’. Migrant women workers have low self-esteem, they encounter a lot of discrimination, and the lack of confidence is indeed their main problem. Now our main goal is to tell them ‘You’re really great already, you’ve achieved much more than your counterparts in the cities. You come to the city, face a world of strangers, and on your own strength you’ve stood on your own feet, and made money that you send back home to improve the livelihood of your family. Some of you even support your brothers to go
to school’. I think their contributions to family and society are higher than those of urban women of their generation. We as organizers must first of all remember that those migrant women workers have enormous potential, but that they have not been motivated, and they are still suppressed by society.

Louise Beynon: . . . a general question about the idea of power, and how this idea could be linked to what Xie Lihua mentioned about ‘suzhi’ (quality). Xie Lihua knows how I hate the word ‘suzhi’ . . . but given that ‘suzhi’ is the word we use constantly in every kind of discourse regarding the Women’s Federation and NGOs, maybe we can use it as an exploration to see the tension between the interests of the Women’s Federation, or the interests of the NGOs, and the subjects they are dealing with. So let’s go back to the Migrant Women’s Club and the idea of ‘raising suzhi’. Why do you need that? Is that something they want? Do they have a choice? Can they say they want to learn about something else? How are we going to link the interests within the NGOs and the Women’s Federation, and the interests between the organizations and the subjects?

Xie Lihua: I don’t know any better word in Chinese to replace ‘suzhi’. I don’t reckon that the migrant women workers’ quality is low, not at all. But they need training to raise their self-confidence, as well as acquiring new skills. That’s what is raised. What word should we use here? I can’t think of a better one. But I never think they’re of low quality.

Maria Jaschok: Has the increased confidence on the part of members of the organization been translated into the way the organization is run? In a way that would determine the nature of its projects, particularly of educational projects? That is, do ordinary women members have a voice in how the organization is changing?

Xie Lihua: I think training is what the women need. The Migrant Women’s Club is still growing, and embarking on work that has never been taken up by other people before. There is a growing desire to make the Club a home of migrant women workers themselves. From management to sharing of information to allocation of resources, we want more participation of the women workers. I told them we’re only doing back-up service, and that they are the ones who should run the show. We’re just building the stage for them. They should learn to take more responsibility in running the organization. We should train them to produce leaders or organizers.
Han Henan: We [teachers and researchers at the Social Work Department of the China Women’s College] believe the cadres and networks of the Women’s Federation are important assets for promoting gender equality. We also realize that the ideologies and methodologies of the Women’s Federation have to be changed. So we decided to move our women’s studies research from the classroom into the Women’s Federation, and from the ivory tower of our Department into the mass of women. Hence, we have been collaborating with the Women’s Federation in Beijing’s Chongwen district since 1997. It was not only our side which sought that collaboration, the Chongwen Women’s Federation also had a mutual interest. The reason being that they are faced with many challenges during the transitional period of society. . . . So our union was a perfect match of each other’s interests and needs. We try to influence them in their ideologies and approaches of work. In our discipline, which is sociology, we have specific approaches to our work. We use case study, group study, or community study. We attempt to use those approaches to give professional services in communities so that women’s needs can be better catered for. So from 1997 onwards, some teachers of our Department, including our Department Director, Li Hongtao, and Director of the Women’s Studies Research Centre, Yang Jing, have carried out a ‘Support Group for Single Mothers’ project in Chongwen district. During this cooperative work, we faced a common problem: the positioning of organizations of the Women’s Federation in communities, as well as their future development, are theoretical and practical problems of urgency. So we carried out a research project together, the title being ‘Positioning of Work of the Women’s Federation in Urban Communities’.

The ideology of the Women’s Federation requires changing as well. For example, Chongwen Women’s Federation organized a musical gathering for single mothers, who didn’t turn up at the end. This tells us that the organizers had treated themselves as the subject of their work, while neglecting the women participants, who should have been the subject instead. The right attitude should be: you come to join my activity, not we give you the service. The Women’s Federation very much wants to get close to women’s needs, but their administrative approach and ideologies are stubbornly old-fashioned, and they are not aware of that. So we talked to them, and they quickly understood. After that, their notion became: we bring you together to ask what you need and what we can do for you.

Another thing is that they don’t quite know what consequence or influence their work could have on women. For example, through the support group for single mothers, the Federation came to understand that
many single mothers wanted to get married again. So the organizations of the Women’s Federation were actively helping those women find a second husband [audience laughter]. Then we challenged them and asked: have you considered the ideological basis of this work? Is it possible that when you’re doing this kind of work, you’re also giving them the impression that only by remarrying will they live a better life? [audience laughter] . . . after that, the Women’s Federation realized that instead of jumping into the well to rescue someone who has fallen in, they should instead throw a rope down. They said they also are concerned with addressing and facilitating women’s needs, but that there are administrative blind spots that they are not aware of.

Louise Beynon: It is very important to make a comparison between the very confident and able-to-organize groups in Beijing and other key grassroots groups who find it difficult to organize. My experience at a labour market in Chengdu in Sichuan province with migrant and laid-off women workers makes me realize that they were divided, not united, and they were divided because of family. It was difficult for the laid-off women to organize because their family didn’t want them to be at the labour market or didn’t know. The rural and laid-off women had no time because they have so many family responsibilities. Rural migrant women workers find it difficult to organize because, as they said, ‘you cannot trust anybody except your husband’, or because they had to go home. So, they are too mobile, they had no time to organize . . . maybe we should not be too optimistic, maybe the divisions between women are very strong at this grassroots level.

He Xiaopei: I’d like to offer a suggestion to women’s organizations: when they try to help other women to solve problems, it’s very good. But, from my experiences in two groups [The Queer Women Group and East Meets West Feminist Translation Group], we have no difficulty discussing our own problems. The way those larger organizations help other women is much like what’s been mentioned in other discussions before: giving those women in the well a rope. Speaking from my experience in the two groups I have been part of, the approach has been that ‘we are our own rope’. We’re saving our own lives, we discuss our own concerns, whereas other organizations have this attitude of ‘I come to help you’ or ‘I think you have this or that problem’, or ‘I’m here to help you raise your quality’. Actually, there are people in our groups who think we should ‘raise our quality (suzhi)’. But we tend to think that it’s not we who have problems or ‘quality’ problems, rather, the problem is that society holds a bias
against us, and we should not turn that into our own problem. What I want to say is this: if other organizations want to help women, would it be possible to mobilize those women, so they could organize themselves instead? That might be more effective and focused.
PART V

Pockets of Space
Strategies and Space: A Case Study of the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family

Gao Xiaoxian

Differentiation is an important concept in post-colonial feminist theory. Any analysis of the diversity of women’s organizations must recognize the differences among women, since different forms of women’s organizations are products and examples of diversity in feminist movements. Such an approach not only allows us to reflect upon the experiences of feminist movements in different countries and cultures, it also demonstrates the creativity and agency (nengdongxing) of women from different geographical regions in response to different politics, history and culture. I believe this is the foundation for understanding the differences of women’s organizations in various countries. In this sense, I wish to analyse the popular women’s organization (minjian funü zuzhi) in which I have been involved – the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family (Shaanxisheng funü lilun hunyin jiating yanjiuhui). Looking at its development over a ten-year period gives us a glimpse into the space and strategy of popular women’s organizations in China.

Establishing the Association

The Association was established in June 1986, under two favourable external conditions. Firstly, the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) was concerned about research on various women’s issues. The process of reforming urban economic structures since 1984 had brought about many new problems relating to women. For example, enterprises had been unwilling to recruit female workers, and female university graduates had difficulties in getting employment placement. This stimulated the rise of women’s studies in China and forced mass organizations such as
the Federation to pay more attention to women’s studies. In 1984, we saw the first Forum on Women’s Theory and the establishment by the Women’s Federation’s headquarters in Beijing of a Research Office to examine problems women encountered in the reform era. This move was followed by other provincial, municipal levels of the Women’s Federation in establishing research centres, where individual staff members were assigned to conduct research on women’s issues. In this climate, the Shaanxi Women’s Federation established its own research office, the Research Office of Shaanxi Women’s Federation (Shaanxisheng fulian funü yanjiuhui) in January 1985.

Secondly, research in social sciences was very active in the 1980s. In the early 1980s, Chinese social science research recovered from the impact of the Cultural Revolution, and there was a resurgence of all sorts of associations and research groups. This gave people interested in women’s issues an opportunity to organize themselves into groups. Due to limited research capacity within the Women’s Federation, it was more viable and effective for it to work with academia in promoting women’s studies; this approach was widely adopted by the Federation in various provinces. In 1981, academics and researchers formed the China Society of Marriage and Family Studies (Zhongguo hunyin jiating yanjiuhui), which was affiliated to the Women’s Federation’s headquarters in Beijing. After 1985, associations of women’s studies and research centres of marriage and the family, set up by either academic institutions or the Women’s Federation, were established in many provinces.

As these research centres and associations are civil in nature, the government does not fund them, nor is there regular staff. Whether such organizations are organized to begin with, and how active they are once established, depend largely on whether this is a core of dedicated, committed and enthusiastic activists. I do not deny my role and contribution in the process of setting up the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family. However, given that social context, there would have been others, if not me, who would have initiated similar organizations.

Perhaps some might wonder why I am putting in so much effort and energy to promote a popular women’s organization, as I am already in the system of Women’s Federation? This is a complicated question, relating to both personal experiences and the larger social context of China in the last ten years – especially the impact of the women’s movement in China.

I was a high school student during the Cultural Revolution, as people usually call us ‘lao san jie’ (old three lots). The unique experience of my generation has cultivated in us a great sense of mission, responsibility
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and career-mindedness. The ten years of upheaval unleashed by the Cultural Revolution ruined my dreams for a university education, but it cultivated my great interest in social science research. In 1977, the university entrance examination was reinstated and after a lot of hard work, I passed the exam and entered university as a mother of two daughters. Unexpectedly, when I graduated in 1982, reform of the Party and government departments was taking place. In view of the ‘four requirements’ of cadres, i.e. to be revolutionary, knowledgeable, professional and relatively young, most of arts and sciences graduates were assigned to work in Party or government departments. I was therefore sent to the Shaanxi Women’s Federation and was thus part, historically, of one of the first batches of graduates directly assigned to work for the Federation. My job was to draft reports and speeches for the Federation’s leader, and I was also involved in writing briefings. This type of work looked important to the leader of the Federation, but it was a far cry from what I originally intended to do, which was theoretical research. After a period of adaptation and thinking, I found an opening within the Federation for doing research – by selecting and focusing on marriage and family, which is closely related to the work of the Federation. In 1983, using the data collected during my visits to the villages, I finished my first thesis, entitled ‘A Brief Analysis of Young People’s Marriage in Rural Areas’. The paper was selected to be presented in the first national Research Forum on Family Theory in Guangzhou, organized by Family magazine. After that, I took the initiative to join the study group for writing and editing university teaching materials, organized by the China Administration College for Women Cadres (Zhongguo funü ganbu guanli xueyu). I also attended the methodology workshop of the Sociology Department, Nankai University. Due to my interest in theoretical research and my background as a university graduate, I was made the deputy director of the newly formed Research Office of the Shaanxi Women’s Federation during the (government) departmental reform in early 1985.

At that time, not many people in the Women’s Federation were interested in theoretical research. However, women’s studies as an emerging discipline needed pioneers to promote it. This forced me to look for support outside the Federation. The first thing I did, after taking office, was to assist the Shaanxi Women’s Federation into holding a theoretical forum entitled ‘Reform and Women’ in June 1986, where the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family was also founded simultaneously. That Forum was funded by the Provincial Party Committee, on direct request of the Federation. The first generation of the Association consisted of over seventy members. Apart from authors of papers
presented at the Forum, they were mainly people enthusiastic about women’s studies, who came from inside the Women’s Federation, tertiary education institutions, research institutes of humanities and social sciences, and other related mass groups such as the All China Federation of Trade Unions (Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui) and All China Youth Federation. The list of candidates to be nominated for the first batch of administrators and members of the Standing Committee was a result of consultation and joint agreement between the Federation and other related units. The Chair was held by the then Director of the Shaanxi Women’s Federation, and I was the Secretary-General. The Association was affiliated to the Shaanxi Women’s Federation, and its actual operations were under the charge of the Research Office headed by myself.

Hence, the initial stage of the Association depended heavily on means of administrative manipulation. At that time, women’s studies had barely started in China, very few people knew about the theories or concepts of Western feminist terms such as ‘NGOs’, ‘gender’ (shehui xingbie), and ‘sisterhood’. The activities and ideologies of the Association, and other similar groups, were primarily under the influence of tides of intellectual liberation in China’s social science circles. The main objective of the Association is to stimulate a development of women’s studies in China that would lead to improvement of the status of Chinese women.

An Evaluation of the Space for Popular Women’s Organizations

The biggest problem for the Association, after its establishment, was the total lack of funds. Caught in the process of marketization, the Shaanxi Women’s Federation itself was already faced with a shortage of funds; therefore it decreed that all groups affiliated with it had to be self-funded. Under such circumstances, the furtherance of the Association’s activities depended totally on my own efforts. Since the Federation had given its recognition to the work of the Association, I became the full-time personnel of the Association even though it didn’t have any official staff, and the Research Office of the Federation the Association’s office. Utilizing the Federation’s phone, address, and office space, we started some activities without funding. In retrospect, the Association has gone through approximately three stages of development.

First Stage – from 1986 to 1992

Due to fund restrictions, the Association focused on training in its initial founding stage. In June 1986, taking advantage of a group of influential
Chinese scholars of women’s studies and marriage and family studies (e.g., Li Xiaojiang, Liang Jun, Liu Dalin, etc.) who happened to be in Shaanxi for a conference, we held the first theoretical training workshop on Women Studies. A second training workshop was held in July 1987. Those two workshops, which lasted for four days and had over four hundred participants in each, were targeted at cadres of the Women’s Federation and women workers and cadres of the Trade Union. The curriculum included: the characteristics of Chinese women’s liberation, women’s self-awareness, introduction to Western Women’s Studies, problems and strategies in marriage and family in the reform era, etc. This created a positive effect on the enlightenment and propagation of feminist theories. There was a charge of five yuan for participation in each of these two workshops. Deducting the expenses, there was a small fund left over for the Association to purchase some necessary reading materials. By the end of 1991, the Association had held three such training workshops altogether; in 1987, jointly with the magazine Youth Today, which provided the funding, it organized a forum entitled ‘Women’s Problems and Strategies in the Period of Reform’.6

The Association also wished to make known some of its research results. During 1987 and 1988, efforts were made to write a book on the theory of women’s liberation. Unfortunately, we were not able to secure a funding to publish it. Consequently, the Association decided to situate itself as a place for internal academic discussions and the exchange of views. In April 1989, we launched the ‘women’s salon’ project, which was to hold monthly discussions on specific topics. However, the salon only had two runs, with respective titles of ‘Women’s liberation in China and the spirit of the May Fourth Movement’ and ‘Sex and the Commodity Culture’, before it was stopped after the change in China’s political situation in 1989. The following few years were quiet ones for the Association, except in 1991, when the Shaanxi Cinematic and Television Resource Centre approached the Association and we jointly organized a viewing and discussing of films related to Western marriage, family and ethics. This can be seen as the exploratory period of the Association.

Second Stage – from 1992 to 1999
An accidental opportunity in 1992 gave the Association its turning point. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the ACWF Women’s Studies Institute of China (Quanguo fulian funü yanjiusuo) was to start a large-scale research project on the reproductive health of Chinese women. It invited institutions nationwide to bid for the project. I was both ignorant of and uninterested in reproductive health then, but my thirst for research funds
pushed me to bid for it. After careful preparation, the proposal of the Research Office of Shaanxi Women’s Federation, entitled ‘An Analysis of the Causes of Low Pre-delivery Checking-Rates of Women in Poor Areas,’ was selected from over twenty provincial bidders. Although our application was made in the name of the Research Office, the interdisciplinary nature of the project meant that there was no suitable specialist inside the Federation’s system to carry it out. This gave members of the Association an opportunity to participate. Since 1992, nine Association researchers have participated in the projects, which is now in its third stage. Its first stage was an analysis of the causes of the low pre-delivery checking-rate among women in the poor areas of Shaanxi province. Its second stage was a study on how to make more women in poor areas have pre-delivery check ups. Its third stage is to promote higher awareness and strategic policy based on the findings of the first two stages.7

Although this is not a gigantic project, it has opened up invaluable opportunities for both the Association and myself. The training and supervision of foreign experts helped me understand, systematically and for the first time, feminist theories, qualitative analysis, and concepts such as ‘listening to women’s voices’, ‘putting women at the centre’, and ‘action research’. The project also inspired me to think seriously about the relationship between activism and women’s studies.

In 1993, the Chinese government started its preparatory work for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995. Following the passing of ‘The Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women of the People’s Republic of China’ by the National Peoples’ Congress in 1992, more than twenty-six provincial and municipal levels of the Peoples’ Congress, as well as those in autonomous regions, had announced plans to promulgate its local regulations, ‘The Enactment of the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women’, by July of the same year. The Shaanxi Peoples’ Congress and the Shaanxi Women’s Federation jointly set up a group to draft the ‘Enactment of the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women in Shaanxi’. My Research Office was in charge of the actual drafting of the local regulations.

My colleagues and I took this opportunity seriously. We hoped it would promote the progress of regional legislation. However, we also faced a difficulty: none of us had studied law or had experience of law drafting. In July, the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University (Tianjin shifan daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin) and the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS) jointly organized the first symposium on ‘Women and Development’. I posed this problem to Dr Sharon K. Hom
from the United States. After listening, she recommended that we apply for a project to hire specialists to train all those responsible for the drafting of the local regulations, nationwide.

This was a very good suggestion and I immediately discussed it with the leadership of the Shaanxi Women’s Federation upon my return. We agreed to apply for a training project. In view of our needs, the training was divided into three parts. First, for learning purposes, we needed to understand issues related to women’s rights in international law. Secondly, topical seminars would be held, with reference to a few outstanding areas in current women’s rights protection, such as the right of work and employment, marriage and property rights, etc. Thirdly, we wanted to use the promulgation of the ‘Enactment of the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women in Shaanxi’ as an occasion to discuss the important and difficult parts of local legislative processes. Our project received funding from the Ford Foundation in late November 1993. Since I was going to study in Australia for six months from the following February, the training class had to be held before my departure. All preparations were commencing rapidly, when our work was suddenly obstructed by the Women’s Federation’s headquarters in Beijing, on the grounds that a provincial women’s federation is not allowed to hold nationwide symposiums. We had no choice but to change the organizing unit from Shaanxi Women’s Federation to the Shaanxi Association for Women and the Family. The scope of the training class was also reduced from a nationwide basis to ten provinces and districts of Western China. Because the Association is affiliated with the Women’s Federation, and we wished to prevent possible additional intervention from upper levels of the Women’s Federation, we decided to collaborate with the Judiciary Subcommittee of the Standing Committee of the Shaanxi Peoples’ Congress (Shaanxisheng renmin daibiao dahui changwu weiyuanhui neiwu sifa weiyuanhui) – the authoritative department in the legislative process – to organize the symposium in January 1994. The symposium was on ‘Women in Western China and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women’. There were more than eighty participants, who were legal experts or members of the Peoples’ Congresses or Women’s Federations of ten provinces and districts in Western China. Dr Sharon K. Hom and four other reputable law professors from Beijing conducted excellent lectures and training sections.

From this project I had gained more insights on the internal constraints of various Women’s Federations and the flexibility and agency of popular women’s organizations. If what had motivated me into organizing the Association was a dream for theoretical research, then the success of the
training project had made me realize that the Association could also allow me to do what I wanted to but could not do within the structure of the Women’s Federation.

The ‘Enactment of the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women in Shaanxi’ took nearly a year from drafting to passing into law. It did not create a breakthrough in the legislative realm, unlike what was envisaged at the beginning. This is due to the fact that in China, local offices cannot propose any legislative initiatives independent of those promulgated by the state. I became aware of the difficulty in introducing changes through legislative measures.

In November 1993 I participated in the Asia-Pacific NGO forum of the Women’s Conference, held in Manila. After that, I went to Australia to be trained in feminism and the research methodology of reproductive health. Those trips brought me in direct contact with many foreign women’s NGOs, which were an inspiration for me. As their starting position was the needs of women and they are of direct service to women, I began to understand and appreciate the activist aspects of feminism. After my return to China, I started to plan for the establishment of a women’s legal aid centre. This centre would have four components: a hotline for information and counselling, legal litigation, promotion and advocacy, and a shelter for abused women. Its objectives are to (1) provide a more direct, free legal service to the mass of women in China, (2) enhance sisterhood, and (3) give the Association a permanent operating base for better solidarity.

Proposals for this project were sent to the Global Fund for Women and the Ford Foundation at the end of 1994 and the beginning of 1995 respectively. Ford replied quickly that as they had already funded a women’s legal project in Beijing, they could not support another one in Xi’an. The Global Fund for Women replied in July 1995 and agreed to support us in establishing a women’s hotline. As we did not have our own foreign currency bank account, this source of funds did not come through until April 1996. After a few months of preparation, the Shaanxi Women’s Hotline (Shaanxi funü rexian) was formally established in September 1996.

Right from the beginning, I believed that as the Hotline carried an authoritative voice, our counsellors should adopt the gender perspective, but I could not persuade them to agree with me. Instead, they put more emphasis on the technical aspects of psychological counselling. After the hotline was in operation for a while, it became clear that differences in professional background, time of exposure to women’s studies, and understanding of feminisms were resulting in different value judgements counsellors made in their counselling. I came to realize
that the perspective and discourse counsellors used in their dialogues with people seeking help would determine the position and function of the Hotline. I therefore tried my best to obtain funds to provide additional training for the counsellors. To emphasize gender perspectives, we have ever since held advanced training classes and training workshops on gender analysis and on social work for our counsellors. By sending our counsellors abroad on study trips, and by inviting renowned national or overseas feminist scholars to lecture in Shaanxi, we have worked hard to raise the gender consciousness of our counsellors. In November 1997, subsidized by the Asia Foundation, five Hotline counsellors went to Thailand and India for a study tour. Through this process, we were finally able to transform the counsellors from taking the Hotline as a site of psychological counselling to one charged with a feminist stance. In other words, the Hotline was meant to help women understand the society and themselves from a gender perspective. It was to help them realize their potential in face of crisis and hardship, and it was to empower (fuquan) women and make them more capable and confident.

It has been three years since its instalment, and the Hotline has been well received by the society, especially among women. In total about four thousand calls from twenty-eight provinces and cities of China have been received. At present we have a steady crew of more than fifty counsellors. This voluntary team of mostly professional women use their philosophy of ‘helping others to help themselves’ (zhuren zizhu) to reduce the callers’ emotional distress, eliminate their psychological crisis, and develop their self-potential and improve their quality of life. Not only have those counsellors been welcome and trusted by the callers, they themselves have learned and grown a great deal. Through training and interaction, a sense of solidarity and sisterhood has quietly developed among the counsellors. We have found support, understanding and knowledge here. Thus, this Hotline network has become an important part of every counsellor’s everyday life.

This was the development phase of the Association. Other sisters and I searched and developed the space of activism of the popular women’s organizations, and in doing so we had gained deeper understanding of feminism and NGOs.

**Third Stage: from 1999 to the Present**

This can be seen as the mature period of the Association, which is marked by two very important events: the founding of the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi (Shaanxi funü falü yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin) and the partnership link established between the Association
and Hong Kong Oxfam (Xianggang Leshihui). Let me explain these two events in turn.

In March 1999, with support from Hong Kong Oxfam, the Association set up the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi, extending our service from telephone counselling to face-to-face counselling, legal litigation, training and advocacy. We paid special attention to poor women whose rights had been infringed because of their gender. We started this project because some counsellors of the Hotline felt that the help offered by telephone counselling was inadequate and wanted to establish a special institution to provide legal services for women. In term of process, the Centre was established in a more mature manner than the Hotline: the idea to build an institutional base was originated by the staff and counsellors, rather than solely coming from me alone. We all participated in the design and preparation of this project by defining the principles and goals of the Centre. In the process of developing the project, a team of core members was gradually formed which laid a solid foundation for future development of the Centre. On the financial end, we were given two years of funding right from the beginning, so we were much relieved from the heavy pressure of fund raising.

The partnership between Hong Kong Oxfam and the Association can be traced to 1997 when the former started to expand their funding projects from southwest China to the northwest. The experience of the Association in the reproductive health of rural women made it Oxfam’s first project collaborator in Shaanxi province. From 1997 to 1999, the Association worked with Oxfam on a rural developmental project. Through this collaboration, Oxfam learned that the Association’s interests in gender and development and our participatory approach are very much in line with its developmental strategy in the northwest China. It was also trying out a mode of project management that would be different from its operation in south-west China. Let me explain this a bit.

Hong Kong Oxfam started its developmental and poverty alleviation work in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces in 1992. It subsequently opened its own office in Kunming city, Yunnan province, which was responsible for the overall project management in all three provinces. It then set up county-level offices for the operation, organization, and management of specific projects in particular counties. The advantage of this kind of independent set-up is its direct, effective project management. Nevertheless, such an extensive operation is rather expensive, and the personnel relocation can be especially cumbersome when a project comes to an end. When Hong Kong Oxfam expanded its work to north-west China, it set out to experiment with a new model. Instead of setting up its
own office, it wanted to look for a local NGO to oversee and carry out its projects. As its first collaborator in Shaanxi province, the Association was chosen to be in charge of Oxfam’s projects in Danfeng and Yichuan counties. The development of the Association as an organization was then supported by Hong Kong Oxfam with the result that the Association was able to have its own office, equipment, training and operating funds. This allowed the Association to begin progressive institution-building and to make plans for the future based on a review of activities.

The current focus of the Association is on three areas. The first one concerns the development of rural women. We have long-term projects in four poor counties in Shaanxi province, which include health education, women’s literacy and skill training, drinking water for humans and animals, integrated development for rural and communal areas, etc. We take the participatory and empowerment approaches that entail consultation and need assessment, and incorporation of women’s voices. The second area of concern is on gender training. We have so far organized workshops on gender perspectives for police, judges, women leaders, cadres from local Women’s Federation, and people from the media. The third focus is on domestic violence. The service network built upon the Women’s Hotline and the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi has carried out researches, advocacy, legislative measures and training related to domestic violence. The Association with a stable team of more than eighty volunteers has now become one of the strongest popular women’s organizations in China.

**Strategies and Reflections**

From the discussion above, one can see that there is space in China for popular women’s organizations to operate, but it is not institutionalized. And, it depends to a large extend on individuals and the strategy being used. From my experiences of engaging in the development of a particular popular women’s organization, I have gathered some experiences and thought, which I would like to share with you here.

**The Relationship Between Research and Action**

The Shaanxi Association for Women and Family was established initially as a civil academic institution. Today, its activities are more action-oriented than research-oriented. I myself have also transformed from a pure researcher to an amphibian who is involved in both research and activism. This has constantly put my colleagues and me in a dilemma: personally,
many of us prefer theoretical research, we like the challenge of intellectual inquiries and the pleasure of discovery; however, we cannot abandon the activities that we have already started. Besides, we really enjoy a sense of fulfilment especially when we witness the changes that our activities and projects have brought to the women. Therefore, we frequently discuss and think about the relationship between feminist research and activism.

A major difference between women’s studies and other conventional disciplines of humanities and social sciences is that the former is critical and action-oriented. Through research, it intends to raise women’s voices, promote policy reform, and facilitate social change with an ultimate goal of transforming the social system and structure at large. This means that researchers in women’s studies not only need to re-examine, reinterpret, straighten out and create and re-create conventional thinking and disciplines, they also need to pay attention to primary problems in women’s daily lives, problems such as poverty, development, and health. China is a developing country. Its current rapid societal transformation brings all sorts of problems and troubles to women. If researchers in women’s studies or a research organization fail to respond to those problems and act accordingly, their study will be isolated from women and thereby lose support. Based upon our understanding of this feminist position, we have started off our work from our own conditions and needs as women. We have spent a lot of energy on ‘doing projects’ (zuo xiangmu), such as setting up the Women’s Hotline and Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Service in Shaanxi, advocacy and training against domestic violence, and working on developmental issues in rural areas and reproductive health. We have also ensured cross-fertilization between our research and ‘projects’. Such efforts have made our research more focused, and has closed the distance between researchers and women in general.

While working in issues of development and services for women, we have also come to gradual realization that concern for problems central to women’s lives and the effort to organize public welfare projects based on women’s needs are not just actions to improve women’s status, but are also measures to extend the influence of popular women’s organizations. It is by this means that popular organizations gain recognition from society and the government, which is an important course for such organizations to become institutionalized.

Cooperation: the Strategy for the Operation of Popular Organizations

Four patterns can be identified from the Association’s operation in recent years. First, there are activities that are initiated and carried out solely by
the Association. These are mainly research and training projects, such as the study of reproductive health among rural women, training workshops on gender analysis in 1998, and the preliminary investigations into domestic violence.

The second category consists of work nominally under the auspices of the Association, but making use of the network of the Shaanxi Women’s Federation in its actual operation. For example, many projects on rural women development would have been difficult to carry out without the cooperation of grass-root levels of the Women’s Federation.

Thirdly, there are projects that are nominally as cooperation with the Federation or other organizations, but in real terms they are independent operations of the Association. Operation of the Women’s Hotline and the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Service on Women in Shaanxi belongs to this category. The advantage of such cooperation is that the Association can make use of the good relations between the Federation and the government, and the Federation’s legitimacy, to create a favourable external environment for the Association and its activities. For example, in 1997, the Hotline received an emergency call from a young woman in Li county of the Hebei province. She disclosed that she and four other women were recruited from Wenzhou in Zhejiang province to work in Hebei, but had been forced into prostitution by their boss after arriving. The caller called around seven o’clock in the evening. At that time, all government offices were closed. The Hotline supervisor on duty immediately reported the incident to the duty room of the Shaanxi Public Security Bureau, hoping that they could rescue the women in collaboration with the Hebei Public Security Bureau. At five o’clock in the following afternoon, the Shaanxi Public Security Bureau informed us that the five women in question had already been rescued. This incident was widely reported in the media of Xi’an City, therefore making the Women’s Hotline a well-known name to many. If the Hotline had not been nominally attached to the Women’s Federation, the Public Security Bureau might not have responded so swiftly.

Lastly, there has been work achieved in collaboration with the Women’s Federation or other organizations. For example, the Association joined the provincial Working Committee on Women and Children in 1998 in a campaign entitled ‘Extending societal support, eliminating domestic violence’. The work involved training of grass-roots legal personnel and regional legislation to fight against domestic violence. As a popular organization, the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family is in no position to affect legislation directly. However, by using the Association’s long-term relationship with the Women’s Federation, and the dual
identities that some of our core members have (as a member of the Association and a cadre of the provincial Women’s Federation), we gained the recognition and support from the Women’s Federation. The leader of the provincial Women’s Federation used our research findings in their topical speeches on domestic violence at meetings of the Standing Committee of the provincial Peoples’ Congress, thereby attracting serious concern for this issue, and had it included in legislation plans. The Association organized specialists and drafted a regional legislation plan to combat domestic violence. The draft has been submitted to the provincial Peoples’ Congress through the provincial Women’s Federation. At the moment, this Bill is under procedural examination and consideration.

These patterns of operation suggest that there is much to think about regarding the relationship between the popular women’s organization and the ACWF. The latter is currently the largest women’s organization in China. It has a well-established organizational network from top to bottom, supported by a huge group of professional women cadres, the Party, and the government. It also has an existing channel for promoting policies or proposing legislative measures. All this is an important resource for Chinese women’s activism. Since the 1980s the ACWF itself has undergone many changes: the emergence of problems concerning women under the reform has made the ACWF more conscious of its role in representing women’s rights. Following the increase in openness and interaction with the international community, particularly due to the holding of the Women’s Conference, all levels of the Federation have experienced the vibrancy and challenge of the international feminist movement. Various levels of the Federation have reached much consensus and are willing to connect tracks (jiegui) with the international community. Good progress was made in the last two decades of the twentieth century in increasing the knowledge and professionalism of its cadres. And, with cadres from younger generations, there have been noticeable changes in perspective and in mode of thinking and approaches. It is important to note that, in the broad context of China’s political and structural reform, the Federation is also reconsidering its future direction as a mass organization (qunzhong tuanti). Some enlightened leaders are aware of the importance of working together with popular women’s organizations – this lays the foundation for cooperation between popular women’s organizations and the Federation.

Of course, the current structure of the Federation means that it cannot shed its features as a government organization. Besides, it has not institutionalized its cooperation with the popular women’s organizations. Therefore, whether the two can cooperate, and to what extent can they
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do so, relies upon the understanding, communication, and operational skills and strategy of the individuals involved.

Owing to extensive cooperation with the Women’s Federation and other institutions, the Association has expanded its space of activity in the last few years. It can be said, therefore, that ‘cooperation’ is the Association’s strategy and its reason of success. One advantage of cooperation is that it strengthens the power of popular women’s organizations and mobilizes more resources; another advantage is that it can push and influence more institutions and organizations into the concern for the development of women. This is significant when we remember that it takes all forces in a society to reach gender equality.

Notes

1. A literal translation of the Chinese title of the Association would be the Shaanxi Research Centre of Women’s Theory, Marriage and Family. We include ‘women’s theory’ and ‘marriage and family’ in order to correspond with two organizations of the Women’s Federation’s headquarters in Beijing: the China Society of Marriage and Family Studies (Zhongguo hunyin jiating yanjiuhui) and the China Women’s Studies Society (Zhongguo funü yanjiuhui). The former was founded in 1981. For the latter, although a preparatory team had been set up to work as early as 1986, it did not come into formal existence until 1999.

2. Editor’s note: the term means the graduates of junior high and high school of the classes of 1966, 1967 and 1968. These three classes received respectively three, two, or one year of high school education before the Cultural Revolution began. For English-language autobiographies written by these cohorts see Gao (1987) and Zhong, Wang, and Bai (2001). Thanks to Wang Zheng for explanation and references.

3. As a result of the Cultural Revolution, the annual university entry exam was discontinued in 1966. It was reinstated in October 1977 upon Deng Xiaoping’s instruction as a means to rejuvenate the tertiary education system. During these ten years, instead of entering to universities, high school graduates were sent to the countryside or factory. When the entry examination was recommenced, the age limits were relaxed so that all those high school graduates who had missed the opportunity were allowed to take the exam.

4. The magazine was published by the Guangdong Women’s Federation. Nationally, it was the most influential and widely subscribed magazine of the time.

5. At the time, the office of the Shaanxi Women’s Federation was in the compound of the Provincial Party Committee and its funds were under the care of the
Committee. Since 1987, Shaanxi Women’s Federation has had its own office block and independent finance.

6. *Youth Today* is published by the Shaanxi Youth Federation. It is read mainly by young people.

7. For findings of this project, see Xiao Yang, Hu Yukun, Wang Linhong, Zhu Mingruo (1998).

8. See Lexicon, *shehui xingbie*.

9. More than two hundred applicants responded to our newspaper advertisement, the first batch of more than sixty telephone counsellors was selected after they had passed the psychological tests and personal interviews. Before assuming their duty, they received a four-day professional training.

10. We employ participatory and empowering approaches for our projects in Danfeng and Yichuang counties, Shaanxi province. We start the projects by participatory need assessment so that women and peasants in poverty have a chance to let their voices be heard. They then take part in every stage and aspect of the project, which includes decision-making, operation, organization, management, monitoring, and evaluations. To ensure women’s participation, we organize women’s working groups, provide training workshops on gender perspectives, strengthen and nourish the activists, and include women in the project’s executive committee. Our work has laid a solid ground for women to become active in community governance and other local platforms.
The Women’s Media Watch Network

*Cai Yiping, Feng Yuan and Guo Yanqiu*

The Women’s Media Watch Network (*Funü chuanmei jiance wangluo*) developed from the meeting of international and the Chinese women’s movements. In the process of preparing for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, some women journalists at *China Women’s News (Zhongguo funübao)* a newspaper published by the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) for the advocacy of gender equality and women’s liberation, began to observe systematically and reflect on the media’s representation of women and also on women’s position and function within the media. We developed the idea of turning personal discontent with the state of affairs into collective, progressive action for change. This initial idea was made more definite and substantial with our participation in the Women’s Conference and the NGO Forum. Consequently, the Women’s Media Watch Network was formally established in March 1996. As the only non-governmental women’s organization (*feizhengfu funü zuzhi*) in China focusing on monitoring the media, the Network’s objective of ‘viewing the media with a gender perspective’ and its interest in motivating women to participate in media work attracted about one hundred media women, scholars of gender and media studies, and women writers to join, in the late 1990s. A series of activities has made the Network increasingly influential in the media world, and it is now becoming one of the most energetic and influential new non-governmental women’s organizations in China. Based on our own experience as co-ordinators and secretary of the Network we would like to describe the efforts we have made, by relying on and utilizing all available resources, to strive for gender equality in the media and to make the voice of women heard, in order to create a favourable social and cultural space for the development of gender equality.
Women and Media: the Background

Economic reforms and the opening of China to the outside world have created vast possibilities for women’s media to develop. The quantity, variety, competitiveness, readership and appreciation of women’s media have all reached unprecedented levels. According to the statistics of the Propaganda Department (Xuanchuanbu) of the ACWF, 72 different kinds of women’s magazines and newspapers were being published by June 1997. Total circulation of women’s newspapers and magazines published by different levels of the ACWF stands at around twelve million. Women’s newspapers and magazines rank as the second most popular among national popular newspapers and magazines. Among the thirty-two television stations run by the central government, provincial governments, and municipality governments directly under the central government, seven (22 per cent of the total) had special women’s programmes as of October 1998. Among the twenty-five television stations that had no special women’s programmes, eighteen had never had any, while seven had discontinued their women’s programmes because of problems of production, finances, or low viewing rates. In 1995, as a tribute to the Fourth World Conference on Women, China Central Television (CCTV) began a women’s programme called ‘Half the Sky’ (Banbianjian). At present, its weekly broadcasting time is two hundred minutes. In 1994, Beijing Television Station started its women’s programme ‘Today’s Woman’ (Jinri nuxing). Television stations in Fujian, Guangdong, Shandong, Hunan and Liaoning provinces also started to broadcast women’s programmes after 1995. Now these seven stations broadcast a total of about eight hours of women’s programmes every week (Bu, Liu and Xiong 1998).

While the media are expanding, ignorance of women’s issues is still seen in mainstream Party newspapers, in commercial newspapers and magazines that are for subscription or retailing, and even in publications whose major readership is women. In 1991, female lawyer Pi Xiaoming’s ‘White Paper on Domestic Violence’ was regarded by several mainstream publishers as having no general social significance and was rejected for publication. When the article was presented to the chief editor of a major newspaper in Beijing, his reaction was, ‘Domestic violence? Is there violence in the family? What does that mean?’ His subordinate replied that it basically means physical abuse inflicted by husbands on their wives. The editor then asked: ‘Physical abuse? Do men nowadays beat their wives? Do you hit your wife?’ His subordinate said ‘No’. Then the chief editor turned to another assistant editor and asked the same question,
again receiving the answer ‘No’. He therefore concluded, ‘You don’t hit your wife, he doesn’t hit his, I don’t hit my wife either. This issue has no general applicability or interest’ (Zong 1997). After numerous struggles, Pi’s ‘White Paper’ was published by the magazine Chinese Women (Zhongguo funü). It attracted considerable attention and concern in foreign media, but had very little impact in China.

There are many problematic concepts in reports related to women; for example, the stereotypical advocating of women’s role as mother and wife denies and suppresses women’s independent, individual value. Moreover, the notions that women cause trouble and disaster and that virginity and chastity are more important than life itself are remnants of feudalism. The superficial emphasis on women’s good appearance is also a misleading aesthetic norm. These are just some of many examples of distorted media representations of women. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were almost no advertisements in China, but in the 1980s advertising became a booming business and female images are now used in abundance. An analysis of advertisements shown on prime-time television in different areas of China between August and December of 1994 revealed that one-third of those advertisements were sexist. The main features of sexist advertisements are that they are stereotypical and use women as the attraction point, the portrayal of women does not correspond to social reality, gender differences in professional life are exaggerated and there is a strong inclination towards preserving traditional ideas (Liu Bohong and Bu Wei 1997).

In sum, through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the media overlooked women’s issues. After the mid-1990s, owing to market competition and commercialization, the media began to use women and women’s issues as their main attraction. While this has caused a lot of concern among women, there is not enough systematic study of the situation, its causes and of solutions to the problem, and, until the Media Watch Network was established, there were basically no gender-conscious interventions.

**Establishment of the Women’s Media Watch Network**

In the summer of 1995, a few months prior to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women being held in Beijing, China Women’s News deputy editor-in-chief Xie Lihua, and her fellow editor Feng Yuan, examined the presentation of women in several major Party newspapers. They discovered that even in major papers whose editorial principle is to ‘mainly report positively’, those ‘positive reports’ of women were still
full of fallacies (Xie Lihua and Feng Yuan 1995). One day, several journalists at *China Women’s News* were having lunch in their office (Xie Lihua and the three authors of this chapter were among them). They were talking about this subject, and everyone was keen to express her opinion. Finally, they reached a consensus: they would start a media watch, and they would view the media from a women’s perspective in order to improve its reports on women.

At that time, preparatory work for the Women’s Conference was in full swing. China had accepted the concept of non-governmental organization (NGO) (see Zhang, Chapter Eight), and because of the coming Conference, the founding of women’s groups was approved by authorities with unprecedented generosity. Associations of women judges, women prosecutors, women doctors and many other professional women were established one after another. Preparatory meetings for dozens of workshops at the NGO Forum on ‘Women and mass communication’, ‘Women’s participation in development’, ‘Women and environmental protection’, ‘Women’s participation in the industrial sector’ and many other topics were held. During this period, the findings of a survey on ‘The Current Situation and Development of Women News Workers in China’ made us understand, for the first time, the status, role and thoughts of women in the Chinese world of news. According to that survey, of all the media workers who have professional titles, women account for twenty-eight thousand, which is about 32 per cent. At top decision-making levels, men make up the majority of 91.5 per cent, with women only accounting for 8.5 per cent. Even at middle decision-making levels, women only take up 17.8 per cent of all positions. This is very disproportionate to the fact that one-third of the media working population consists of women (Ketizu 1995). In the national report that the Chinese government submitted to the United Nations on the enactment of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies in China there was no mention of the media (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo* 1994). However, the *Programme for the Development of Women in China* (1995–2000), announced shortly before the Women’s Conference, pointed to the media as an area which should be developed (*Zhongguo funü fazhan gangyao* 1995–2000 1995). All this made us more conscious to ‘look at the media through woman’s eyes’.

The 1995 Conference enabled Chinese women to engage in international interaction without leaving the country. For the first time, various thoughts, ideas and fruits of the international women’s movement were in full display to Chinese women. Our participation and our reports for our newspapers on the NGO Forum and the Women’s Conference helped us to acquire international and global perspectives on women’s issues,
and enabled us to re-examine the problems we were facing. The Platform for Action, passed at the Conference, listed media as one of twelve ‘critical areas of concern’ (United Nations 1996, chapter three). The Platform gives a clear description of media presentations of women’s current situation and points to missions that governmental and non-governmental institutions should take on board. Suggestions are made in the Platform regarding actions to be taken to ensure a balanced, non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media. It is also suggested that media watch groups should be set up to monitor and negotiate with the media in order to safeguard proper reports of women’s needs and concerns (United Nations 1996, chapter four). All this was an enormous encouragement to us. The Conference slogan ‘Looking at the World through Women’s Eyes’, visible everywhere during the conference, boosted our determination to correct collectively the many mistakes in the media’s reports on women. We wanted to promote equal sharing between women and men of the media, and we wanted to build a media environment favourable to women’s struggle for equality and development.

Knowing that the centre-periphery, top-down hierarchical structure is predominant in all kinds of organizations and institutions in China, we wanted to start our new enterprise in a manner that would emphasize non-hierarchical relationships and mutual cooperation, and with a structure that was totally open. We therefore selected ‘Network’ as the name and the structure of our organization. People who are responsible for routine work of the Network are not called ‘director’ or ‘convenor’, they are called ‘co-ordinator’. Xie Lihua, the main initiator of the Network, does not participate in actual organizational work, because she is engaged in many other projects, and also in order to give a chance to ‘newcomers’. Guo Yanqiu and Feng Yuan are in charge of the actual running of the Network and Cai Yiping is the Secretary. When the Network started, Xie Lihua was a member of the Capital Women Journalists’ Association (Shoudu nü xinwen gongzuozhe xiehui) executive committee. She became Vice-General Secretary of the Association in 1996. Xie Lihua participated in the preparation of the NGO Forum workshop on ‘Women and mass communication’, organized by the Association. She brought messages from the NGO Forum back to us, and passed our idea of setting up the Women’s Media Watch Network to the executive committee of the Capital Women Journalists’ Association. The idea was supported by the President and the executive committee, and the Network was then established as an independent project of the Association. Its establishment was formally announced on the tenth anniversary of the Association in March 1996. Those who attended the anniversary meeting included
leaders of all the major newspapers, radio and television stations in the capital. At the meeting a proposal was presented to everyone in the media world, and a sketch ‘Sunday Advertisements’ (Guanggao zhong de xingqitian) was written and performed by the Network’s founding members (journalists from China Women’s News) for the occasion. Tong Wei, Guo Yanqiu and Cai Yiping played the roles of father, mother and teenage son respectively. Well-known advertising gimmicks were put together in this particular situation of a small family dispute on a Sunday and sexist stereotypes found in advertisements were highlighted. Women journalists in the audience reacted strongly and some registered to join our Network right away. Not long afterwards, at a social gathering of Chinese and overseas women journalists, the three ‘performers’ were invited to perform the sketch again. We joked that this play could be used as a ‘sideline’, and that the performers could make some extra income behind the back of their work unit. Our small success had greatly enhanced our confidence in the Media Watch.
Activities of the Network

After the Network was set up, we used a full page of the special ‘Women’s Forum’ column of *China Women’s News* for a feature on ‘Raising Gender Consciousness in the Media through the Media Watch’. It included the proposal to set up the Women’s Media Watch Network, the sketch ‘Sunday Advertisements’, and a gender analysis of local and foreign media reports. The purpose was to let the general public know about and take part in our work. After that, we started our media watching, which was focused on newspapers. We were also involved in the production of the women’s programme, ‘Half the Sky’, with CCTV and we spread the idea of a women’s Media Watch to different kinds of publication with different target groups of readers. We also gathered articles to publish in the special column of *China Women’s News* called ‘Women and Society’, in which advertisements and their unhealthy implications for young women’s personality development and adaptation to society is analysed from a gender perspective. In those lucid articles, readers learn to be more sensitive to the gender aspect of media presentations. Our activities have increased the fame and impact of the Network.

We received funding from the Ford Foundation in 1997 to start a series of activities, including holding regular meetings for information exchange (and an annual general meeting), ‘monitoring’ the work of major media channels, and organizing gendered media studies and gender-awareness training. Through these activities we distribute information on media and women, exchange experiences in monitoring the media, pass on messages, share fruitful results, engage in self-education, and increase the gender-sensitivity of media workers, decision-making levels of the media, and of the audience. Our first inquiry was made on the world of the two sexes as presented in major news media. We chose eight major national newspapers in China as the target of study. These were *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*), *Economics Daily* (*Jingji ribao*), *Wenhui Daily* (*Wenhuibao*), *Legal Daily* (*Fazhi ribao*), *Workers’ Daily* (*Gongren ribao*), *Rural People’s Daily* (*Nongmin ribao*), and *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnianbao*). By critically assessing the news published in those papers in 1996, we found that there was a low frequency of female figures in the news, and that they were presented as highly passive women. The news actually did not fairly and equally reflect the roles of women, and images of women showed them as very disparate and marginalized (Feng Yuan 1998).

Members of the Network are active in writing about their observations of the media. One member, Hou Zhiming of the editorial board of *Chinese
People’s Political Consultative Committee News (Renmin zhengxiebao), wrote a critical article on a series of cartoons she saw in *China Youth Daily* in 1996. She wrote:

It is striking to see how this series of cartoons presents the trend for men to be wives as ‘The Seventh Monster’ of our society today. A man with his glasses and apron, frying spoon in one hand, frying pan in the other – the meaning cannot be clearer: cooking is the business of the wife, the man who takes up this chore is lowering himself to the level of the wife. How can he deserve to be a man any more? Well, I wonder on what basis the editor and creator of the cartoons could equate a man doing house chores with people who engage in illegal, disgusting or shameful behaviour such as ‘selling pork and milk that had been injected with water’ and ‘taking pleasure in the habit of using foul and dirty language’? The Fourth World Conference on Women has just been held in Beijing in 1995; I wonder if the many levels of leadership entrusted with the important responsibility of monitoring this newspaper have been forgetful or is this just an accidental negligence? (Hou Zhiming 1996).

Network meetings are the main venue for us to exchange information and co-ordinate action. We have both formal and informal information exchanges, topical discussions and a general annual meeting. Our members from different news media and institutions of media studies and women’s studies exchange information, we discuss current hot public topics and typical images of women, and we plan strategically on how to express our views on different media or what other corresponding measures to take in order to ensure more balanced media images of women. We are conscious of our role as women news workers. A commonly discussed subject at our Network gatherings is how to realize a gender perspective in our reports. In 1997, Tang Shengli, a restaurant waitress in Sichuan province, jumped from a building as a protest against her employer who was forcing her to work as a prostitute. The following are examples of the language reporters used to report this incident: ‘A heroine who would rather die than be a prostitute’, and ‘She used blood to save her virginal purity’. The young woman’s attitude of ‘better a smashed jade than a complete clay tile’ was highly praised as noble and virtuous. Reports of this incident had immense national impact and several girls followed Tang’s example and killed themselves rather than being forced into prostitution. Their stories were also reported in the news. In our Network discussions, we thought those reports were typical examples of the lack of gender-consciousness that is prevalent in the media. In the eyes of the reporters, what was important was not the life and health of young women, nor the fact that their freedom and human rights were
being abused, but the so-called innocence of women. The emphasis on women’s chastity is effectively a patriarchal suppression of women. Reports of that nature promote and advocate old, rotten sexist chastity concepts to readers. Those incidents should have been reported as violence against women and the media should have understood and reported those incidents from the perspective of human rights. Through gatherings and discussions, members of the Network are able to share, debate and see their similarities and differences. This is a chance for us to learn from each other. Although we often disagree on some issues, we have grown in this process. That is why when members have missed a meeting they will often call the co-ordinators to enquire about the discussions.

To attract more people into becoming aware of gender issues in the media, we started a special column in *China Women’s News*, and we set up a hotline for readers to call in and give us examples of their own media watching. In the sections ‘Women’s Forum’ and ‘Women and Society’ in *China Women’s News*, we set up two special columns called ‘Media Watch’ and ‘Media as we see it’. In November 1997, a keen reader informed us of a commentary published in a major paper, under the title ‘Did the trouble start from women?’. The commentary was about the reasons China’s national football team lost a major match. The team decided it was because a woman boarded the players’ team bus before the match and brought them bad luck. On the day this commentary was published, many readers rang in to complain and criticize the author for insulting and discriminating against women. The following day, the author published his defence. He said his original intent was to scorn the superstition of China’s national football team, it was not that he agreed with their ridiculous views. These two articles were then quickly reprinted in other papers; some reports also disclosed that in fact in many other sports there were similar superstitious, misogynist beliefs. However, in their reports of this incident, many papers were more concerned with the loss and winning of the football team and the situation of the sportsmen, and they did not care much whether innocent women had suffered and been hurt as a consequence of these attitudes. Those reports had indeed reinforced and spread the outdated notion that ‘women are the source of trouble’ which was already a common belief in the sports world. We thought we must be very strong and clear in expressing the Network’s position.

We decided to use this incident, which had caught the eyes of millions of people, to show the whole of society, especially the news media, that women are not to be humiliated or insulted. Even if the original article had not intentionally targeted women, journalists should be careful about the language they use and they should avoid ambiguous attitudes towards
ridiculous notions, so that women are not harmed by the images presented in the media. We acted quickly and we discussed the whole issue in *China Women’s News*. Since there has been a craze for football in China in recent years, anything about this subject can be a big selling point in the media. Our discussion thus triggered major attention in the news media and among the readers. Numerous readers wrote to us to criticize the outdated notion that ‘women are the source of trouble’. Our articles and the name of *China Women’s News* were frequently quoted in sports papers and other newspapers. The director of the sports section of *Guangzhou Daily* (*Guangzhou ribao*), who was also the chief editor of *Football News* (*Zuqubao*), went to *China Women’s News* to make an apology. He said: ‘In the past we only knew that ethnicity and politics were very sensitive subjects that we should be cautious of. Now we know that we also have to be extremely careful when we write about women.’

We use different means and formats to create an environment of public opinion that is helpful for women to develop, and we promote gender-awareness in the mainstream media and among decision-makers. We are particularly interested in working with other media institutions, we pay attention to women’s media, and we strive to develop women’s columns and topical programmes. For example, we offer advice to the production of ‘Half the Sky’ on CCTV. We accept invitations to be interviewed, we help with strategic plans, we evaluate programmes and we provide gender-awareness training. We try to take part in every production level of this programme, and to a certain degree, we are able to influence the content of the programme. Some of the programme’s decision-making personnel have even become members of the Network.

We organize gender-awareness and media-training classes every year. Participants have included Network activists, members of the Association of Women Journalists of Hebei province, women journalists and editors in Beijing who work for minority groups, as well as our fellow journalists in provinces such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan, and Shaanxi. Training aimed at raising gender-consciousness can make more colleagues of ours care and act for a reasonable balance of the proportion of media reports on women, hence reducing role stereotypes and the sexist phenomenon that treats women as targets of violence or as sex objects. Training can also motivate women news workers actively to influence the contents of media productions and the attitudes of their fellow media workers. Since the late 1990s, because of our openness and wide membership coming from all major media institutions, the Network and individual members have used every opportunity to express our views in Party newspapers, commercial media and academic journals. We have been interviewed by
Chinese and foreign media, and we have designed questionnaires on the
gender-awareness of performing artists for some commercial entertain-
ment magazines. Basically, we find that our influence is gradually
increasing.

Before 1995, media and gender were basically not the concern of
researchers. Since its inception, the Network has focused considerable
effort on carrying out and promoting gender-conscious media studies. In
1996, a member of the Network published the article ‘Women’s Media
Needs Women’s Consciousness’ in the currently most important women’s
research journal Collection of Women’s Studies (Funü yanjiu luncong)
(Bu Wei 1996). Subsequently, the article was awarded a Bronze Prize
by the Chinese Association of Women’s Newspapers and Magazines.
Research carried out by the Network is manifold. Some of the most
important studies include a study of gender roles as presented in major
newspapers (Feng Yuan 1998), ‘A Survey of the Difference of Men and
Women Media Workers in Using New Media Technology and the Internet’
(Bu Wei and Liu Xiaohong 1999), a study of women’s programmes on
Chinese television (Bu Wei, Liu Xiaohong and Xiong Lei 1998), and a
study of media development, gender policy and reality (Bu Wei 1998). A
study of the role of the news media in making domestic violence a social
issue has attracted a great deal of public attention (Guo Yanqui 1998).
One member has analysed media reporting of the rape of ethnic Chinese
women in the May 1998 riots in Indonesia from a gender perspective
(Feng Yuan 1999). Many of these studies are innovative and their results
have been made known and exchanged in various academic journals and
conferences, inside and outside China. Apart from that, the Network also
assisted the ACWF Women’s Studies Institute of China in a commissioned
national social science research project. The Network was engaged in
the project section on women’s images in television advertisements
broadcast by ten television stations in five regions. About one-third of
the sample of one thousand advertisements were sexist. They enhanced
traditional stereotypes of gender roles, using women as their selling point
and projecting male hegemony of technology (Liu Bohong and Bu Wei
1997). The Network has also organized activities with other NGOs. For
example, in March 1998, when a large exhibition on women artists was
held, the network co-organized a seminar entitled ‘Gender Perspectives
– Women’s Art and Artistic Women in Periods of Transformation’, with
the Women’s Culture and Art Club (Nüxing wenhua yishu xueshe) and
some participants came from Taiwan. In May 1998, as a follow-up
by the Capital Women Journalists’ Association on the Fourth World
Conference on Women, the Network successfully organized the seminar
‘Women Journalists Gearing up for the Twenty-first Century’ to promote women’s participation in the media.10

The Impact of the Network

When the Network was set up, some media workers and scholars doubted its usefulness. They thought the status of women in China was already much higher than in many other countries. They questioned the necessity of incorporating gender perspectives into news reports, and whether an emphasis on gender-awareness would affect the objectivity of news reporting. Some scholars considered that as the space for ‘freedom of expression in the news’ was already limited in China, an NGO watchdog like the Network would have no space for action. They worried that on the contrary, the Network’s criticism of the media might reduce even further the already small space for free speech.

The way to refute those views lies in the practice of the Network and its media watch and gender analysis of the media. Results of the Network’s investigations and reports based on its research have revealed the gender problems in the media, and have been discussed by its members at various occasions. All this has made people realize that the media is the carrier of social culture, and at the same time it also shapes social culture. It supplies to its readers a vast number of reflections on the world’s phenomena, which help them to understand the external world and to form their attitudes to society. News is a selection and filtration of social reality, based on factors such as ‘news value’, ‘standpoint of the paper itself’, ‘social significance’ and so on. It is a reflection of ‘reality’ mediated by the editor and writer, using narrative logic, manipulation of titles and other processes. In other words, the news is not an exact copy of social reality – rather, media reality is a far cry from social reality. It therefore follows that the demand for more coverage of women and women’s issues in the media, and improvement in the media’s presentation of women’s images, their roles and functions, reflects women’s need for the freedom of speech. To watch and criticize the media with a gender perspective is not a restriction on the freedom of speech. On the contrary it is an expression of women’s quest for rights of mass communication and speech, as well as the realization of their right to express themselves. To meet this demand is the social duty of the media – especially that of women journalists.

In the social context of today’s China, whether it is in discussion with intellectuals, or in our internal Network gatherings, we have again and
again proved the necessity and feasibility of setting up this kind of NGO women’s media watchdog. After all, China already has a history of half a century of liberating women. When the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was formally opened, president Jiang Zemin, in the welcome ceremony held for world leaders and diplomats, declared that gender equality is one of the basic state policies in China. The women’s movement and women’s studies in China have made impressive progress in interacting with the international community. In connection with the Women’s Conference, the concept of NGO was recognized and numerous women’s organizations were established. Women who are active in various news media, despite subscribing to different value systems and attitudes to gender issues, do pay increasingly more attention to gender problems in our society. All this constitutes resources for the Network to rely upon and make use of.

Based on the above consensus, we strive to realize the following principles in our activities:

**First Principle – Equality, Participation, and Sharing of Information and Resources**

It can be said that the existence and activity of the Network demonstrate women’s conscious use of media resources for gender equality. The aim is to democratize the news media from a gender perspective. We feel that the social structure and system of our country in the past did not give NGOs the conditions to exist. The lack of an atmosphere of NGO culture had adverse effects on the formation of civic consciousness (gongmin yishi) and the accomplishment of civic agency (gongmin nengdongxing). But with the introduction and acceptance of the NGO concept in preparing for the Women’s Conference, women’s organizations had the opportunity to become the first to implement an NGO spirit in practice. As a result, we also work to attain equality, transparency and democracy in our internal operation of the Network. The topic of every meeting of the Network is decided by collective discussion, and meetings are chaired by different people every time. On the request of our members, the Network has discussed subjects such as ‘How women news workers participate in decision-making’, ‘The challenge of news media and new technology for women news workers’, and many other topics. The Network has used participatory gender-awareness training and gender analysis of news to increase the gender-sensitivity of its members. We are particularly anxious to work with young people and ethnic women news workers as we want to create more opportunities for their increased participation in the media and its development.
Second Principle – Work to Increase the Voice of Women Being Heard in the Media and to Extend Women’s Right of Speech

We take the initiative to use the media in enlarging our space. This is an important step of self-empowerment for women. Publication of our research and investigation and survey reports, as well as our organizing discussion series and articles to be published in the media are effective measures for expressing different voices of women. The following is a special example. During the riots in Indonesia in May 1998, ethnic Chinese women suffered from brutal sexual attacks. But the media in China was restricted in reporting this incident, and public protest against sexual violence towards women was also banned. Under such circumstances, after overcoming numerous difficulties, Guo Yanqiu, Chen Benjian, Zhang Shuo and others managed to successfully organize the meeting ‘Women Intellectuals of the Capital Support Chinese Women Victims in Indonesia’. The Chinese media were forced to say nothing about our activity, but many foreign media institutions (including Chinese and English ones such as the International Herald Tribune, New York

TO VIEW THIS FIGURE PLEASE REFER TO THE PRINTED EDITION

Figure 10.2 In August 1998 the Women’s Media Watch Network organized a peace appeal to condemn violence against ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia. Photo by Zhang Jufang
Times and Singapore United Morning Post (Lianhe zaobao) reported our activities widely, thus making this single incident of a women’s gathering and our voice for protection of women’s rights known. Interviewed by Vogue afterwards, we mentioned the narrow nationalism we also experienced at the meeting. Once again we had learned to improve ourselves.

**Third Principle – Enhance Interaction Between News Workers, Media and Readers, and Between News Workers and Researchers**

We want to be a three-dimensional, multi-levelled, open network. Through the *China Women’s News* Hotline and special media-watching columns, we have built a bridge between readers and ourselves; through regular information-exchange meetings we transmit the latest research results and publicize these in the media. This benefits readers and researchers. Communication and mutual encouragement between Network members have given them the support to act more vigorously for their mission. Wang Kai of *Rural People’s Daily* repeatedly campaigned for the revival of the marriage and family column in that paper, when it had been cancelled after the Women’s Conference. Wang Heping of the overseas version of *People’s Daily* and Tong Zhiqi of *Economics Daily* have had their papers publish essays heavily charged with gender-awareness. This was rare in the old days. When the Network was discussing that women news workers should actively fight to enter policy-making levels of the media to be more effective in realizing a gender perspective in the media, Wei Liming of *Beijing Review* expressed a note of regret. She used to be on the editorial board of the *Review* and she used to have the ‘power’ to show more concern and report on women’s survival and development, but because of a lack of awareness that ‘more power should be fought for in order for more women’s voice to be heard’, she gave up her position on the editorial board and thereby ceased to be the head of her department. Consequently, she had lots of difficulties publishing her reports on women in *Beijing Review*, and she had to argue constantly with her superiors. Her insightful discussion of these problems was helpful. She made several Network members who had thought of quitting their post as departmental head or had been unwilling to appear on television change their mind. They felt a strong sense of mission and responsibility. They were stimulated to fight for a place in decision-making levels of the media and to courageously show themselves on the screen in order to achieve the realization of gender perspectives in the media. Their action is like a ‘single spark that starts a prairie fire’. Because of them, gender-awareness in the media is transmitted and extended, bit by bit.
Although the Network carried out many innovative projects within just three years from 1996 to 1999, and achieved some success, it still faced many limitations. First of all the Network’s investigation reports and research results did not have enough impact on mainstream media and decision-making levels. Most of the time, influence was limited to women’s circles or to those who were already concerned with those issues. Only in occasional examples such as the above-mentioned football commentary ‘Did the trouble start from women?’, when the love of men – football – is involved, did the Network’s organized discussions on social reactions cause the media and a bigger audience to look at gender problems. Nonetheless, a famous sports programme presenter at Beijing Television Station still maintained that avoiding women before matches is just a habit in the sports world. Relevant leaders of the National Sports Association stopped agreeing to be interviewed by us, and our written reports about the sweet and sour life of women sports reporters dealing with misogynists in the sports world were not published either, for all sorts of reason. Even some women colleagues in our field considered our commentary on the ‘football incident’ an ‘off-side’ action. This kind of misunderstanding and obstacle is sometimes discouraging.

The second problem facing the Network is the lack of resources to spread our ideas and work widely within all forms of media in the whole country. According to State regulations on social organizations, the Capital Women Journalists’ Association is a local organization registered with the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs. Because the Network is linked to the Association our membership is limited to Beijing residents. Furthermore, all members are women, as no male colleagues have joined us for more than a few meetings. Finally, our members in the mainstream media are still not able to influence their institutions as much as we would like. We depend heavily on China Women’s News, but its impact does not usually go beyond women. Furthermore, China Women’s News is trapped between its role as a Party newspaper, published by the Women’s Federation, and the need for commercialization. Sometimes its reports are self-contradictory and Media Watch Network articles are printed side by side with the type of advertisements we have analysed and criticized.

At our annual meeting in 1997 we decided to use advertisements as our point of entry. We wanted to evaluate and name sexist advertisements that discriminated against women, hoping this would encourage society and copywriters to resist stereotypical sexual roles and sexual discrimination in advertisements. However, as we could not secure the support of other departments of China Women’s News, we were not able to proceed with this idea by getting the government’s advertisement managing
ministry to support and cooperate with us. This support would have required various media to publish results of our study. We did not want to ‘talk to ourselves’ within our own circle, so in the end we gave up the idea.

Conclusion

The Women’s Media Watch Network is one result of the Fourth World Conference on Women being held in Beijing. As the first in the country devoting itself as a watchdog of the media, the Network had at the time of writing existed for three years. Under the double influence of commercial consumption culture and mainstream ideologies, the Network has relied on and utilized the current advantageous policy and resources to promote gender equality and transmission of women’s voices in the media. It is working hard to help create a social, cultural space that is healthy for the equal development of both sexes. This is also a quest for democraticized mass communication. However, the limitation of resources means that the functioning of the Network is currently far from able to meet its mission in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries. How can the Network, as a newly-formed NGO, grow healthily and increase its influence? This will be a challenge for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Among these, 49 (7 newspapers and 42 magazines) were published by different levels of the ACWF and 23 (3 newspapers and 20 magazines) were published by other sectors of society.
2. Chinese media are required by the State Propaganda Department (Xuanchuanbu) to provide mainly positive reports on society.
3. The Programme for the Development of Chinese Women, promulgated by the State Council in July 1995, states the following: ‘Improve social environment for the development of women. Publicize in society at large the prominent role played by women in creating human civilization and propelling social development; propagate that men and women enjoy equal personality, dignity, rights and status; and publicize women who possess the spirit of self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement. Curb the practice of portraying women in TV, movies, books, journals and the press in an insulting and depreciating way. Transform the social attitude of discrimination and
prejudice against women and promote the general understanding of the people at large on the legitimate rights and interests of women.’ See Zhongguo funü fazhan gangyao 1995–2000, 1995, article 11, paragraph 1.


5. See Feng Yuan 1996.

6. Based on this survey, Network members wrote reports and essays that were presented at the Fourth All China Women’s Theoretical Symposium (Quanguo funü disi ci lilun yantaohui) in 1996; the Second Chinese Women and Development Conference (Dier jie Zhongguo funü yu fazhan yantaoban) in 1997 (see Bao with Xu, Chapter Four); and the ‘Gearing up for the Twenty-first Century’ Theoretical Seminar of Women Journalists (Mianshang 21 shijie de nüxinwen gongzuozhe lilun yantaohui) in 1998.

7. This is a Chinese saying, meaning that destroying oneself is preferable to destroying one’s personal virtuousness.

8. ‘Media Watch’ carries articles concerned with surveys and research, while ‘Media as we see it’ is free prose writing or topical discussion. These columns have received many unsolicited articles on topics such as fiction, movies, television programmes, television presenters, advertisements, pop songs, primary school textbooks, street advertisements or pictures, mainstream news media or local news media. Authors include reporters, editors, university students, writers, civil servants and private company staff, and most of them are women.

9. These were Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang and Lanzhou.

10. A collection of articles and research reports by Women’s Media Watch Network members has been published – see Guo Yanqiu and Feng Yuan 2001.
Strategies and in-between Spaces

Xie Lihua: Because we [Rural Women Knowing All and the Migrant Women’s Club] are affiliated with the major national newspaper, China Women’s News, we asked to register with the Civil Affairs Ministry. But then we were told that we should register in Beijing, and so were asked to register with the Beijing Civil Affairs Department. They in turn told us that since we were operating more or less like a readers’ club, there’s no need for registration. We could carry out our activities just in the name of the registered China Women’s News. I had this telephone conversation recorded [audience laughter], that’s why up to this moment, the Migrant Women’s Club has never run into trouble.

Guo Jianmei: After our Centre [The Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services] started its operation, we had attracted some social attention and the Procurate came to ask us what exactly we intended to do. We were very skilful in handling that enquiry: we said that the Centre was an important classroom and basis for teachers and students of Peking University’s Law Department to participate in the realization of the rule of law. That was a very safe approach; we have been using it until this day. Because of that, we have successfully avoided the troubles of registration or investigation. We are still not clear whether the Centre is legal or not, but we have been more or less free for almost three years and we’re still operating very well. I suspect that we’ll continue to survive that way.

Soon after we announced the opening of our Centre in the newspapers, our office was flooded with people. It was so crowded the whole office stank! Many had come with their families. We were totally unable to hold our own. Even if we had exhausted ourselves to death we would not have been able to solve the fundamental problems. We knew that in the context of China, even if we could help several tens, or hundreds, or thousands of cases, the fundamental problems would still persist. China is too big and there are just too many people who need help. We therefore developed three standards to guide our work. We handle cases of, first, exceptionally poor people and whose rights have been violated and yet they are unable to defend their rights; second, major cases of serious abuses of women’s rights, which usually cause widespread social impact and reaction; and finally, cases that are closely related to the reform, social transformation or economic transition of the country. We hoped by
handling those three kinds of typical case we would be able to map out the patterns or formulae of them, and then through publicity and study, we could focus on solving those problems. Since its opening, the Centre has dealt with more than 200 of the 600-plus cases it has received. Of those we handled, over 40 were major, typical offences. Through the media and through word of mouth, those serious cases we had dealt with provoked enthusiastic responses in society. I think our approach of picking up typical cases as focus is quite successful. The impact is quite obvious.

**Liu Guanghua:** How to legalize our activities? In China, the first step to legal status is to find a supervisory body to affiliate with (guakao). We call this finding a ‘father-in-law’ or a ‘mother-in-law’. I didn’t want to find a mother-in-law because that supervisory body would be watching over our work and administration. The Education Bureau suggested that I contact the Women’s Federation. I said, ‘Sorry, I don’t want that, I have collaborated with the Women’s Federation, and have borrowed an office from the provincial Women’s Federation. It was very unpleasant.’ So I said I’d rather find a ‘father-in-law’, someone who is more lenient and is willing to give me some free space. So I started my search. The Education Bureau didn’t work out; then I approached the Youth Federation, the Students’ Association, and the Family Planning Commission. Before I came to Oxford, I was still working on this. Now it seems we’ve found a place to settle. When I go back, my school might become a women’s studies centre under the Nanning Academy of Social Sciences. It is also possible that we will come under the Education Bureau. In that case, we’ll still keep our name, Huaguang Women’s College, except that the word ‘training’ will be added to reflect its function, which is providing short-term training.

I want to legalize our work. What is the work I do? First of all, we offer education for women’s healthy psychology, body and sex. No one assesses our work. Our supervisory body, the Education Bureau, asked who assesses us, who’s the expert? Who could certify that we have the ability and qualification to carry out this kind of health education to women? Besides, we also provide health education to adolescents. We go the classrooms to talk to boys and girls, give them education on AIDS and sex. In China, very, very few people work in this field. So, I don’t quite know how to ‘legalize’ my profession.

The survival of the school is under challenge. How long can we keep our ‘Red Flag’ waving? Chinese NGOs *must* work with the government and other groups. You cannot stay outside and remain only a local unit. It
is impossible to separate yourself from others, or you risk extinction. We have always worked with the government and other groups. The first route we took was through the Education Bureau, since it was our initial ‘father-in-law’. The Bureau gave us access to schools, to adolescents and college students in order that we could give them health education.

The second smooth route for us was the Youth Federation. Our plaque has been hung at the entrance of the provincial school of the Youth Federation. Officials of the Federation, as well as those in charge of students at the school, all work with us.

Our third route is the trade union, or more specially, the Women Workers’ Department of the Trade Union. Women workers’ departments in cities stress that professional working women in urban areas are all under their supervision. They also make it explicit that the Women’s Federation has ‘extended its hands’ into the Union’s arena. So, we work with the trade unions.

The fourth route has to do with the Women’s Federation. The Nanning Women’s Federation has a marriage school. We held classes there for those who are getting married or divorced. We also gave lectures at the Guangxi Women’s Federation. We were very popular.

The final route concerns the State Family Planning Commission (Jihua shengyu weiyuanhui). This is the largest government network in China. It is mandatory that every single district and work unit has a school where health education can be taught.

Our work experiences basically follow those five routes for working with government institutions. Now we want to survive, we want to grow, but ‘no money, nothing’ [Liu speaks English here]. So we’ve been approached by enterprises and companies. They want to be my ‘boss’, they want me to ‘fish the rich’. But then my Women’s College will no longer be mine, I can’t do whatever I want to. A very big commercial group in Qiaofeng, Guangxi, which produces sanitary towels, wanted to buy our College up and let us manage the College. They agreed to help us add a building for the College. But after many thoughts, we’re still not sure if this is the way for us to develop as an NGO. We still haven’t made up our minds.

The turnover rate in our group is high. Yesterday someone said that non-governmental organizations are elitist: I don’t agree. We have many volunteers. They have found space to take part in our work outside of their career, all on their own initiative. Some of them engage in sex education for young people, some focus on the women’s counselling hotline, yet others organized a divorced women’s discussion group, which developed out of the Women’s Hotline at Nanning Radio Station.
Finally, there is the research group that works on the sex worker project. So, I don’t think we’re a small circle. Quite the opposite, we’re an open organization. Every sub-group has a leader. However, because there is no income, we put a lot into it. We have contributed a lot, we handle discouraging messages all the time and have to make psychological adjustments relentlessly. Some of our volunteers leave because they think their life is very normal and they don’t want their routine life to be disrupted. So we let them leave on an informed decision. In a nutshell, there is a constant flow of people joining or leaving us.

**Liu Bohong**: Although the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group is not registered, it’s rather famous. It is an important organizer of activities held by several networks in Beijing. For example, at the celebrations of the first, second and third anniversaries of the ’95 Women’s Conference, the group was one of the organizers. It did not appear as such in the mass media, but its name was mentioned in an introduction in China Women’s News.

**Lisa Stearns**: As a member of that group [East Meets West Feminist Translation Group] earlier, I remember the history being this: during the preparation process of the NGO Forum, we went through an effort of getting as many groups registered to participate in the NGO Forum internationally as possible. At that time the East Meets West group became accredited as a participant in the regional preparations. That would not have been possible if there had not been cooperation inside the organizing committee of the ACWF to overlook the fact that they were not a registered organization in China. So I think the point that Susie has made about the personal connections is significant. A lot of the people involved in those personal connections are here in the room today [she laughs], and know how important that is. I think that answers some of the questions that you asked about why similar organizations are not as prevalent among other key constituencies. It may be that the relationships that can be mobilized by other communities are not as ‘rich’ . . . I think if women’s organizations were only dealing with very controversial issues, it would not have been easy for this flexibility to be explored.

**The Role of the Private Sector**

**Lisa Stearns**: In the story of the Sunshine Lunch Service [presented by Huang Yan], we heard about three steps of consciousness raising that occurred in the process of organizing. I think this presentation raised very
rich issues. The women’s movement has for a long time, in my opinion, in many countries, under-emphasized how women can make better use of the private sector, in progressive ways. Coming from Norway, which speaks very loudly about its equality, the public sector may be seen to constitute the success of the women’s movement, but the private sector lags badly behind. So, it’s encouraging that Huang Yuan presents us with possibilities for women in the private sector, linking their activities to consciousness-raising. On the other hand, I think it is also a concern of mine for us to discuss just exactly where the limitations of that sector are. Perhaps I should put it more explicitly: how best do we exploit that sector?

Wang Xingjuan: The kind of economic organization Huang Yan just talked about [the Sunshine Lunch Service], is it not a bit like an economic co-op? Is it formed by people putting in their shares? No? If not, then what do you mean by the ‘rule of a household head’? Is it a kind of co-op? Or a commune? Do members share the profits? Or is [the Service] owned by a person who employs others to work? If so, then it is a private sector, then why call it a ‘new form of women’s economic organization’? I’m not clear about this.

Huang Yan: I think this indeed is an issue. We’ve been talking about women’s organizations, I think that entails [questioning its] premise: is it for women? Is it for solving women’s own problems? Then we should consider if its service is organized for women. I think this [Sunshine Service] organization has two of the following characteristics. It is first of all an organization to solve problems shared by some women, but, it is true, it was formed by one person. As you said, it is a woman boss hiring other people to work for her. It is a private operation. All those employed have received a salary. In my opinion, we still have not come to consider this kind of operation as women organizing [as it should be]. But it is an organization. It is not a ‘company’, it is a service centre.

Wang Xingjuan: I don’t think it should be called an organization. It is a company, or a small enterprise, and it has an owner.

International Collaboration against Violence against Women

Marianne Hester: Violence against women [VAW] is a global issue, it is something we have to debate on an international scale. It is very important
to look at how exactly VAW works in many different countries and how we organize around VAW in a lot of cultural and national contexts. So sharing understanding, sharing knowledge, sharing experience around VAW on a global level, [that is] absolutely crucial. For me, the link with China is very new. I really became involved by default. I was invited to develop some training on VAW with the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre in Beijing. Through working with them, and through the British Council, I ended up becoming so fascinated and very excited about what’s happening in China that I wanted to continue linking up with women in China.

During the last decade in China, there has clearly been an incredible increase in the debates and in public awareness about VAW. And you can see this [evidenced in] the new legislation, the protection of women’s rights legislation in 1992. And there is a lot of research activity, as well as developments in setting up hotlines, and [developments] around wider issues of VAW, such as domestic violence, rape, and so on.

Obviously women in China have responded in a number of different ways to dealing with these issues, by providing and supporting different kinds of activity, such as hotlines and legal advice centres. Here I want to ask questions around some of these developments. And I also want to ask how we understand VAW within this context. It seems to me it was really since the UN conference in Nairobi that there began to be a space for discussing VAW in China. Sun Xiaomei talks about the emerging discussion around those issues at that time, including maltreatment of women in Chinese families. But it was in the period leading up to the 1995 Conference in Beijing that the activities around VAW increased very rapidly and became more highly profiled. There have been a number of other conferences since the Women’s Conference, which focused on VAW, including a conference on domestic violence in Beijing, organized by the China Women’s College in 1997. And for instance, a Sino-European conference involving the Women’s Federation and the European Union in 1998. I have been to a number of conferences and seminars [organized] around this issue . . . How we think about VAW also relates to what we do about it. And if we look at the different explanations about VAW, there are quite clearly differences in the approaches when it comes to Western families and those often put forward in China. Western feminists have tended to draw on a variety of analyses, but (in the UK at least) have mainly used what’s called a radical feminist approach in terms of VAW. And this means emphasizing, in particular, notions of power and control in violence and abuse of women. In that way VAW is seen as a key element in the continuation of patriarchal social relations as a means of exerting
power over women. And Western feminists have also used the term ‘sexual violence’ to make it more explicit that violence used by men on women is likely to be sexual, as in rape or sexual assault, but also sexualized, that is a power turn-on for the men. The way men get turned on by the power involved, the control they get. Now, where Chinese and Western feminists seem to concur and overlap, is actually in seeing VAW, in some way, as the outcome of inequality between men and women. The difference is that the Chinese explanations, at least the ones that I have come across, and in particular in relation to domestic violence, have often taken a much more explicitly socio-economic approach, drawing obviously on the Marxist tradition. And Chinese writers and researchers have consequently related VAW to women’s role in production, or their lesser role in production, perhaps, rather than patriarchal power relations, tending to see the attitude towards women as rooted in traditional feudal views as they concern gender.
PART VI

Positioning Women’s Studies
‘Manoeuvring Fate’ and ‘Following the Call’: Development and Prospects of Women’s Studies

Du Fangqin

Centres for women’s studies at tertiary educational institutions in China began to appear during the historic changes of the mid-1980s, and now more than fifteen years have gone by. A review of their emergence and paths they have taken should be beneficial for projecting their future development and prospects. However, my own limitations mean I can only offer superficial observations or descriptions based on personal experience. Therefore, as I discuss the overall trends, patterns, and development of women’s studies in Chinese universities and colleges, I often draw upon the specific experiences of the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University (Tianjin shifan daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin) because of my personal affiliation and knowledge. I would like to make it clear from the beginning, not without regret, that my observations cannot be comprehensive, or representing the whole truth.

Seizing the Movement: Establishment and Development

As of December 1999, thirty-six of more than one thousand universities and colleges in China had established (or were in the process of establishing) centres for women’s studies. In order of establishment, there are three distinct stages, with the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995 as a watershed. The first stage started with several women’s studies centres set up before early 1993: they are known as the ‘Four Major Centres’ (Zhengzhou University, Hangzhou University, Peking University and Tianjin Normal University). If the Central Party School is also included, then there are five major centres. Half (eighteen) of women’s studies centres in China, however, emerged between September 1993 and
May 1995 because of the impetus given by the preparation for the Women’s Conference. After the Conference, between August 1996 and the end of 1999, an additional thirteen centres were established. This chronologically-based ratio of 5:18:13 reflects the external environment under which centres for women’s studies have been established in China. The external environment also has a bearing on the internal composition of those centres, which in effect determines their research positioning or even their modes of organization and operation in a manner that is uniquely Chinese.

The First Stage – May 1987 to January 1993

It was in the mid-1980s that women’s studies in China moved from individual research to organized collaborative endeavour. This stage was marked by the establishment of the Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University (Zhengzhou daxue funüxue yanjiu zhongxin) in May 1987, initiated by Li Xiaojiang. After that, Hangzhou University and Peking University set up their own centres for women’s studies in 1989 and 1990 respectively. Tianjin Normal University started its collective research relatively early (1987), but approval for the Centre did not come until January 1993.

Despite specific situations, it is necessary to recognize that these four universities pioneered the establishment of women’s studies centres against a common social background of China’s reform and opening to the outside world. Let me explain this background further. First of all, the enormous number of women’s issues brought by reform caught the attention of the Women’s Federation. Its branches from all over China set up study groups on marriage, family and women’s theories. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the reforms and opening-up led to liberated thinking (some scholars call it the ‘New Enlightenment’) and the call for awareness of human subjectivity. Besides, increasingly frequent academic exchanges between Chinese and foreign scholars led to the introduction of new academic ideas and subjects from outside. Both the domestic intellectual climate and international exchange have come to inspire some enlightened scholars to start women’s studies and research centres.

This is evident in the genesis of four major centres. The founder of Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University, Li Xiaojiang, says that her study of women has nothing to do with women’s problems emerging from reform. Instead, it focuses on the awakening of ‘women’s consciousness’ (funü yishi). In other words, it is based upon women’s experiences in a society that claims to have achieved ‘equality between men and women’. In her study of women, Li discovers some shortcomings in society, and therefore forms the mission to reconstruct culture. She
begins with abstract theory – taking woman (nüren) away from the general, all encompassing ‘human’ (ren), initiating the study of women as a discipline, editing and writing a series of books on women’s studies, and establishing a research centre for women’s studies (Li 1996: 313–16). Hers is the only centre for women’s studies at the tertiary level in China that uses the term ‘research’ (xue) in its title. This reveals that Li has always been self-conscious of establishing women’s studies as a discipline.2 Professor Qi Wenying, founder of the Women’s Studies Centre, Peking University (Beijing daxue zhongwai funü wenti yanjiu zhongxin), tells how during her first visit abroad in 1979, she discovered a new discipline in the United States – Women’s Studies and Women’s History. She was originally a researcher on Sino-US relations, but after coming into contact with women’s studies and women’s history, she became very excited. When she returned to China in 1981, she was very enthusiastic about introducing this new discipline to China, and she started the collective research on women at Peking University (Du, Wang and Cai 1999: 55). Tong Zhuosu, director of the Women’s Studies Centre, Hangzhou University (Hangzhou daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin), said:

Figure 11.1 Women in Henan Province listening to talks by Liang Jun and Dong Lin from the Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University in 1994 at a meeting arranged by the Women’s Federation. Photo by Kirstine Theilgaard

TO VIEW THIS FIGURE PLEASE REFER TO THE PRINTED EDITION
Our University has working relationships with over thirty foreign tertiary educational institutions. During our cultural interactions, we realized we did not have a corresponding organ for women’s studies...we felt sorry that we did not have research in this area. (Du 1993: 13–14)

It was the University’s decision that a centre for women’s studies should be established. As the founder and organizer of the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University, my own research on women and my objectives in establishing the Centre were inspired by, and came after, undertaking more thorough research and extended activities. My personal motivation was the need to explore new academic paths and to fulfill my personal dream of becoming a scholar (Du 1996). Therefore, we can conclude that a combination of factors such as enlightened thinking, reconstructing culture, introducing new disciplines, or personal academic development have motivated individual scholars to change from individual research to organized research on women during the first stage. As a result, the third distinct feature of women’s studies centres established during this period is that they were all initiated by scholars, and therefore represent a bottom-up, grass-roots endeavour.

The Women’s Conference and the Second Stage – September 1993 to May 1995

China began its preparation for the Women’s Conference in the second half of 1993. The NGO Forum required women from all walks of life to participate. Because of the preparation inside China and the busy exchanges between China and the international community, a series of women’s studies centres were established in universities and colleges. The core active figures can be divided into the following categories: (1) Women leaders of Party organizations in universities and colleges, who usually also held senior administrative posts and titles in academic departments, institutes, or programmes of the same institutions; (2) Women leaders of unions at the institutions; (3) Scholars in disciplines such as Population Studies, Sociology, Rural Development, or Education; (4) Retired women professors. Women’s research centres established in this period, unlike their early counterparts, do not have single objectives, but instead they embrace multiple meanings and purposes. For example, their establishment took advantage of the political climate of the time, and also facilitated the need to connect track (jiegui) with the international community. Many ‘elite’ women who became involved in women’s studies during this period were primarily aiming to attend the Fourth World Conference, which they saw as a chance to acquire prestigious status or
to achieve a glorious political mission. As far as disciplinary development is concerned, disciplines such as Population Studies and Development Studies, which had already received funding, intended to attract more foreign investment by using the name ‘centre for women’s studies’. On the whole, the development of women’s research centres during this period was more political than academic. We can even go so far as to say that truly academic research on women during this period almost ceased.

The Third Stage, after the Women’s Conference – June 1996 to December 1999

After the ‘Fourth World Conference Fever’ ‘cooled down’, women’s research centres began to appear in different universities and colleges again, starting from the second half of 1996. In 1998–1999, we saw a small high tide of establishing women’s studies centres. After Fudan University set up its own centre, Shanghai Normal University, Eastern-China Normal University, and Shanghai Jiaotong University also followed suit. One thing is puzzling, though: the resplendence of the World Conference, and the active responses during the second phase, might lead one to expect more women’s studies centres to have been established immediately after the event, but the reality is just the opposite. Within the year after the Conference, not even a single centre was set up. Not only that, but some originally active, influential centres actually suffered some setbacks. In the following two or three years, there was no sign of rapid growth of women’s research centres. This indicates that the Fourth World Conference actually did not have a direct, substantial, ice-breaking impact on the establishment of women’s research centres in China, even though it did pave the way for future international academic exchanges and incoming funding from international developmental institutions. It was these external factors that had the greater and more lasting impact on those centres established after the World Conference. Equally important is that research activities organized by centres established prior to the Conference, as well as their research findings, have also begun to sprout and grow in the Chinese soil.

Organization: Internal and External Relationships, Mechanism and Operation

Since women’s studies centres have been set up at different times and in different external climates, their internal and external relationships vary. So does their internal operation. However, there are also commonalities
shared by all these centres. Below, I will compare and contrast their differences and similarities by examining the issues of legitimacy and democratization.

**Legitimacy: Establishing and Manoeuvring External Relationships with Higher Levels of Authority**

The key for a women’s research centre to acquire legitimacy, and to be able to operate normally, lies in its external relationships – which evolve around its relationship with upper-level offices within the centre’s parent institution and with individuals in powerful administrative positions. It is obvious that if a women’s research centre is headed by a woman cadre who holds a leadership position in the university’s administrative system (most likely being the Deputy Secretary of the local Party), then the centre is legitimized by its formal link with the authority and therefore enjoys greater political security. Such a situation makes it easier for women’s studies to be incorporated into the academic establishment, for example by having support for the centre’s daily operation, receiving approval for its research activities, and making it possible to offer new courses in the area, and facilitating inter-departmental co-ordination. However, the disadvantage of this situation is that when the leader leaves, the centre becomes an army without its general. Moreover, whether or not that woman leader has a professional qualification or title, she will have a direct influence over that centre’s progress in curriculum development and direction of academic research. The nature of her work, administrative duty, and personal interest as well as the amount of time she is able to devote to the centre will all have a bearing on the development of that particular centre.

In a situation where the head of the women’s research centre is not a woman cadre, the establishment and continuation of the centre rely on achieving equilibrium with the authority through informal relationships. For example, founders of some centres have good personal relationships (as friends or trustworthy colleagues) with key leaders, especially the president, of the universities and colleges. Support from the leader is extremely vital to the establishment of women’s studies, and to its initial stage of development. Again, when there is a change of people in power, new informal relationships have to be established. Otherwise it is possible for the centre to suffer due to different attitudes between the old and new leaders.

An ideal situation for a centre will be to form both formal and informal relationships with people in power. A centre’s affiliation has to be clear and guaranteed by the system. Besides that, the centre should have a good
relationship with other subsidiary leaders. Survival and development of
the centre relies heavily on institutional support – this is particularly
important to centres that are led by intellectuals who do not hold any
official administrative titles. For these institutions, support from admin-
istration only comes with time. For example, the Centre for Women’s
Studies, Tianjin Normal University, to which I am attached, has gone
through a rather long, winding path – despite the fact that it is now
developing smoothly. We are affiliated with the Research Office of the
University. The Office and the Vice Chancellor oversee our operation.
We follow the rules of the University in our operation, but maintain
independence in our academic research. With fruitful results and influence
both within and outside the University (or even the country), our Centre
has established a significant presence.

Another aspect of the issue of power and control is the question of
whether a centre should stay under, or out of, the ‘control’ of power,
given the fact that degree of control is always relative. As China’s reforms
continue, society gives an increasingly greater space to individuals and
institutions. The key is to expand existing space. Experience shows that
individuals or organizations that completely refuse to be ‘controlled’ tend
to act alone and according to their own ideas regardless of other’s opinions.
Even if they are doing good deeds, others are easily annoyed, which can
lead to a crisis of distrust. This kind of ‘drifting away from control’ is not
beneficial for the institutionalization of women’s studies centres.

Democratization: Creating Solidarity and
Institutionalizing Operation
For organizers of women’s studies centres, the biggest challenge lies in
keeping the internal operation normal so that research and teaching
activities can advance continuously. At present, China has yet to publish
and summarize its experiences in this aspect. Women’s studies in the West
has developed from cross-disciplinary centres to an independent discipline
within its own departments. After thirty years of this process, today they
still face the challenge of institutionalization. The majority of women’s
studies centres in China operate under ‘four shortages’, (siwu) i.e. no
regular staff, no funding, no facilities and no time. Even survival is
difficult, let alone development. Half of these centres exist in name only
because they have no ‘project’ (keti), nor funding.³ But does the avail-
ability of funding guarantee the realization of feminist (nüxing zhuyi)
principles of equal participation and collective action in establishing
feminist research and curriculum? This will depend on the operation of
individual centres. As far as operation is concerned, the most decisive
factor at the moment is the character of the leader and her status. If the centre has a woman leader whose power reaches the level of university leadership, then the internal cohesion of the centre will be stronger. There will be no obstacle in its ‘project’ application and receiving foreign funding. It is also easier for the centre to carry out research projects and organize meetings to keep members of the centre together.

On the other hand, centres led by academics who lack authority and administrative resources have to rely upon their leaders’ personal morality and integrity. The leader needs to put in more effort and energy to oversee the centre’s operation. The pressure is on the leader to select and write proposals (shenbao keyi) so that funds will be available and research will be carried out in the interests of disciplinary and curricular development. It is even harder for her to strengthen internal solidarity because researchers affiliated to the centre are often part-time or voluntary. They already suffer from the heavy workload of their own departments. The marginality of women’s studies usually invites additional accusations and stigmatization such that they are seen as ‘being involved in some kind of questionable undertaking’ (buwu zhengye). Individuals involved in research activities at the centre feel suppressed. If core members of the centre are not conscious of democracy and equality, and are not willing to be devoted, then even if the centre has research funds, there will not be solidarity. If there is no collaborative research, if the old tradition of individual research is being followed, then the centre does not adhere to the feminist principles of collectiveness, equality, and sharing of opportunity, resources, and information. There will not be communal support, dynamic stimulation, or mutual growth in the realms of academic advancement and self-empowerment. If a women’s research centre does not adhere to those principles, it is not only a failure in conducting feminist studies. The more alarming consequence will be the alienation or even disintegration and fragmentation of the organization. Since women’s research centres are marginal and vulnerable enough, if they give up the feminist spirit and principles, traditional hegemonic values and concepts that resemble elitism will surely set in to bolster the hierarchy of patriarchy.

The Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University has worked hard to dissolve patriarchal and hierarchical systems in the intellectual arena. In its first ten years of existence, it insisted on collective activities such that members negotiate and co-operate in the organization of various academic conferences, conducting fieldwork projects, or developing curriculum. Progress has been made in the research on women and development and curriculum development in women’s studies. Individuals
have gained and grown in different ways. As the organizer, I have been conscious of the need to create opportunities for members of the centre, which include going abroad and attending conferences and training workshops. I have insisted on bilateral choices – members are responsible for specific research topics of their choice, and individual members team up voluntarily. Administrative decisions are made collectively, and routine duties are carried out on voluntary basis.

But what we have done at the Centre is, after all, an expedient measure. The development of an organization cannot rely solely on the collective passion of its members nor on the character and complete devotion of its leader. A clear signal of the maturity of an organization is whether or not it has established an internal operational system. In this regard, for most of the women’s research centres in China, which suffer from marginality and ‘four shortages’, there is still a long way to go, because their internal operation is affected by and related to whether or not their work is recognized by the university establishment. Unless their work is incorporated into the university’s routine operation, and the centre obtains a meaningful presence in the larger community, it is very difficult for it to develop a set of rules and regulations for its internal operation. Under current circumstances, I would suggest that an individual centre first carries out trial exercises in democratic operation. For example, participation in grant applications and research projects should be based upon democratic decision by the participants. Academic discussions and finance of the centre should be transparent and made public as well. When it comes to the issues of appraisal, reward, and retribution, much exploration and experimentation are needed. As a whole, the effort to gain recognition and legitimacy for the institution by becoming part of the academic establishment should coincide with efforts to establish operational rules and administrative regulations. Only through such conscientious moves can women’s studies in China seize the opportunity and time to develop and grow.

Apart from the external relationships and internal operation mentioned above, there are other factors deserving consideration. For example, skilful employment of government policies, actively searching for resources, and ongoing cooperation with colleagues both inside and outside of China must all receive attention. Moreover, based upon my own experience, if women’s research centres are to survive and develop in China, they should avoid slogans and appeals that are too radical, neither should they be too ambitious to achieve success too soon. With a balance between the Taoist principles of resilience, flexibility, non-confrontation (roudao) and the Confucian proactive ethos of still pressing ahead even when the goal seems
impossible, and in conjunction with a spirit of equality advocated by feminism, real success can be accomplished. In a nutshell, the strategy should be to:

- fully exploit State policy such as equality between women and men;
- expand the space for organizational development and research areas;
- fall back on power by gaining support from the mainstream and authority;
- draw money from everywhere to establish a material base; broaden our network of liaisons so as not to create enemies and keep good relations with all walks of life, including gender relationships;
- stand firm our position of working for women and opening up areas for women’s studies;
- and remain vague in identification by abandoning binary, oppositional thinking and be all-embracing and equal in the organizing.

These are the lessons that we have learnt in our own process of organizing.

**Academic Positioning: Constructing a Discipline and Programme for Women and Gender Studies**

In order to discuss how women’s studies centres in China may position and develop themselves, we need to go back to the larger context within which they have come to exist. In China, there are numerous organizations and groups bearing the name of women’s studies. However, based on their nature, goals, functions, and origins, we can divide them into two large groups. The first group consists of the already institutionalized, professional organizations whose concerns and research are practical-and applied-oriented. Their work offers the grounds that decision-makers rely on to formulate policy. This group includes research groups, associations, and centres at all levels of the Women’s Federation, academies of social science, and Party schools. The second group consists of centres of women’s studies in universities and colleges. These research-oriented organizations are currently on the periphery. They operate on a part-time basis and aim to expand the scope of academic research, build on the discipline, and train talented people in the area. The different orientation of these two groups began to take shape from the mid-1980s, but centres for women’s studies set up during and after the ‘fever’ of the Women’s Conference tend to emphasize the applied aspects, therefore neglecting or even abandoning their mission and duty of subverting traditional
academic research and reconstructing feminism. This inclination is perhaps related to the fact that those centres have to survive financially. It is difficult for them to refuse project subsidies. Consequently, the present situation is still that instead of opening, expanding and constructing academic, disciplinary and programme-oriented studies, research carried out at women’s studies centres in tertiary educational institutions is mostly for problem-solving, decision-making, or applied purposes. This situation needs to change.

I believe that each of the two types of women’s studies organizations should have its respective positioning, just like two lotus flowers on one stalk, or like trees whose branches interlock – a result of the unique characters of China. The two groups should have division of labour and different positions, and yet they should work together closely. Women’s studies in the Women’s Federation and the Academy of Social Sciences can carry out applied research to serve the purpose of decision-making. That is, their research should focus on everyday issues and aim at providing grounds for policies. What they need are new tools for their observation and interpretation. In contrast, academic-oriented research should be able to continually produce new analytical concepts (gainian), hypotheses and methodologies, so that research carried out by the former group is more incisive, appropriate, and scientific. While research centres in universities and colleges, based on the traditional, intellectual conscience, should continue to pay attention to the welfare of society at large, they should nevertheless make use of their positions to renovate theories, develop disciplines and curriculum, and to provide training for younger generations. They should transform the academic establishment and education system faster and more extensively, which should serve to improve women’s status and quality of living.

As I have mentioned earlier, there are not yet many centres of women’s studies in China that have consciously assumed the mission of establishing a discipline of women’s studies. As mentioned above, the earliest centre of women’s studies, the Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University, remains the only one to use ‘research’ (‘xue’) in its title, and it pioneered the publication of the ‘Women’s Studies’ series (Li 1996: 313–16). Ever since its establishment, the Centre for Women’s Studies of Tianjin Normal University has situated itself in the following manner. The centre’s main duties are to (1) carry out academic research and curriculum development in women’s and gender studies; (2) train and nurture talents in research and education of women’s studies; (3) carry out national and international academic exchanges and coalitions; (4) publish academic materials on women and gender studies, as well as
teaching and reading materials on women’s studies; (5) carry out women’s education within and outside of the University, and provide consultant services. In the decade to the year 2000, all activities of the Centre were organized round these objectives. In terms of curriculum development, the focus has been on women’s history and gender and development. Activities held were: ‘Lectures on the History of Women in China and Abroad’, ‘International Symposium on Chinese Women and Development’, ‘Seminar on Rural Women’s Development’, and ‘Reading Seminar on the Construction of Women’s History as a Discipline’. All these seminars and symposiums were carried out against a certain disciplinary background where specific issues were raised. They were not just organized for the sake of organizing. In terms of capacity-building, although the Centre is not at the time of writing qualified to accept postgraduate students, its members are aware that they should use all kinds of meetings, trainings, fieldwork, research writings, and teachings to upgrade their own academic capacity. The Centre has established wide-ranging and close contacts with women’s research groups both inside and outside China. Its collaboration with the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS) has now become a tradition. They have collaborated in organizing conferences and publishing translations many times. The Centre does its best to create opportunities for its members to go beyond the boundary of the country and engage in different kinds of academic exchanges. In terms of publication, the Centre has published books, teaching materials and seminar papers, which have had a certain impact inside China. Since 1988, the Centre has continuously offered undergraduate courses in women’s studies, although in most cases those courses are common electives and only a few of them are for majors. Our experience, even though not unique, suggests the urgency of promoting women’s and gender studies in Chinese universities and colleges.

In China, research centres for women’s studies have arisen at particular historic moments. Their growth has been arduous but their roles important and far-reaching. They must keep searching for objectives of advancement and strategies of development. Constructing the discipline, developing its curriculum, and institutionalizing its operation and modes of collaboration are all necessary steps for a centre to advance itself to a higher level. Beginning in 2000, the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University, in collaboration with CSWS, has a new project, entitled ‘Develop Women and Gender Studies in China’. This is a five-year project that involves about ten women’s studies centres from different areas and universities. It covers several disciplines and is interdisciplinary. The project objectives include research, writing teaching materials,
organizing courses. The implementation of this major project will more or less realize the aforesaid ideas, concepts, methodologies and strategies, as well as enriching the experiences of Chinese tertiary educational institutions in democratizing and systemizing research centres for women’s studies.

Notes

1. For more discussion, see Gao, Chapter Nine.
2. Interestingly enough, before Li, most study groups of the Women’s Federation used ‘women’s studies’ (funüxue) in their titles, although in effect they were studying practical problems women encounter.
3. In the Chinese academic system, a research initiative is called a ‘project’ (keti) only when it is approved by a university, research institution, professional association, or the Ministry of Education. More often than not, such approval comes with research funding. Symbolically speaking, if a research initiative becomes a keti, it means that the subject issue has come to be recognized as an important area worthy of study and funding support. For example, even today, women’s studies is still not recognized as an independent subject by the Ministry of Education in its approval and support of ‘the national, central, first-ranking projects’ (guojia yiji zhongdian keti), the most prestigious research award in China. The fact it continues to be difficult for women’s studies-related topics to become keti at university level or in various research institutes indicates the marginal position of women’s studies in academia.
4. In the tertiary educational system in China, to establish a master or doctorate programme, the university has to receive approval from the Ministry of Education, and the process of approval is onerous and political. In 1999, Peking University admitted the first cohort of graduate students in women’s studies. This master programme is affiliated to the Department of Sociology. Establishing master and doctorate programmes is an important step for women’s studies to gain recognition and legitimacy in the tertiary system. In order to accomplish this, much work is needed. For example, we need to put work on curriculum development, teacher training, preparing textbook and teaching materials, and developing long-term objectives.
5. For a discussion of the collaboration between CSWS and the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University; see Bao with Xu, Chapter Four.
Influencing Policy-making

Liu Bohong: I think the policy-making system in China today is still not democratic, there is no formal channel or procedure that policy-makers can use to solicit the views of researchers or society in general. As far as women’s studies are concerned, there are changes going on . . . I can cite two or three examples of small successes. For example, in the late 1980s, there was a research project on company expenses related to maternity leave. This research, and the suggestion to establish a central fund to cover maternity leave expenses incurred by enterprises in order to solve the problem of discrimination against women in the labour force, made an impact on the recruitment policy of enterprises, but I can’t say it was a major impact. This is a simple example of women’s studies research having an impact on policy-making.

Another example is that in 1996, the State Council entrusted the Labour Ministry’s Research Institute to study how to solve the difficult problems of employment in today’s China. One of the targets was to study the applicability of a policy that allows women to be employed at different phases of their life. In 1996, the Labour Research Institute listened to the result of a research project carried out jointly by the ACWF Women’s Studies Institute of China and the All China Federation of Trade Unions’ Women Workers Committee. Our findings were actually very different from those of the Research Institute. They found that 80 per cent of women were willing to accept ‘phased employment’, that is, when they have children they leave their job. After some years of caring for their children on a full-time basis, they return to the job market. But in our study 80 per cent of women did not agree to ‘phased employment’. That was because of a rather different interpretation of this kind of employment. When the Research Institute carried out their research, they didn’t explain to the women what the term ‘phased employment’ means. Some women thought it meant taking a portion of the salary and a long leave during pregnancy. However, in our research, we told women that ‘phased employment’ actually meant unemployment. So by different approaches we got very different results. Under the influence of this research by the Women’s Studies Institute and the Trade Unions’ Women Workers Committee, the Labour Ministry finally agreed that the policy would not be launched for another three years. This is a minor example of research findings having an impact on policy-making. Another example concerns a researcher. Professor Qiu Renzong is a member of the Institute of
Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His studies focus on making women the central point of the birth-control policy, and reflect changing perceptions of women’s reproductive rights. To a certain extent, his studies have influenced State Family Planning Commission policies. Still, I should say that the impact of researchers on policy-making is very, very small.

Kimberley Manning: There is a long tradition in China of the notion of the public intellectual, and that intellectuals have a duty to provide advice to the government on various matters. In the 1980s we saw this in a number of different forms – people producing essays, books, and advising specific political leaders such as Zhao Ziyang or Hu Yaobang. I’m really interested in women’s studies as an intellectual movement and whether certain women’s studies scholars or women scholars as a whole might also take up similar roles as advisers to the government. My question is whether women’s studies intellectuals would like to see this kind of role developed? Is there a desire to follow the models of the 1980s, which are mostly male intellectuals providing informal advice to government leaders, or would they like to see other kinds of structures set up, that would be somewhat different from that, or, something different altogether? What is the desire?

Liu Bohong: I can’t represent the whole community of women intellectuals, I can only express my personal views. How can women’s studies scholars influence policy-makers? It is a question that not only women intellectuals ponder, it’s also in the minds of women leaders. Let’s first talk about how women intellectuals can influence policy-making, and whether there could be a bridge or a channel between them and policy-makers. This is a key issue. Because the research findings of women intellectuals only appear in their own circles or academic journals, and decision-makers in China rarely read academic papers, we wonder if this is all that women intellectuals can achieve? Or can they play a certain social role which can make an impact in departments of policy-making? For example, as members of the National People’s Congress or the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, or as members of national-level committees of experts? I think it really depends on how much experts from women’s studies are able to, or find it possible to, enter this social policy-making arena.

At the same time, it also depends on whether women leaders or state leaders think their policy-making also requires support from women’s studies. I think there are changes taking place in this respect now. Let me
give you an example. The present ACWF Chairperson is Peng Peiyun. She is one of the two women vice-presidents of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. She was the Director of the State Family Planning Commission for ten years. Before then, she was Director of the State Education Commission. Now she’s the new chairperson of the ACWF. She thinks that women’s studies in China have too little direct impact on the Chinese women’s movement. Therefore, since she took office, she has been focusing on organizing research committees of women’s studies in China. In the last six months, she has been surveying research organizations of Chinese women in China. She’s visited the women’s studies centres at Peking University, Beijing Agricultural University, the Nationalities University of China and the People’s University. She found that women’s studies in China play almost no role in promoting gender-equality policy. She was comparing that with the State Family Planning Commission policies which, over the past ten years, have been influenced by three internal expert committees.

So I think building a bridge or a channel between women’s studies in China and policy-makers – which will not only have an impact in democratizing Chinese policies but also extend the scope of women’s studies – this is a very big challenge.

Outside Support and International Funding

Susan Jolly: How does foreign funding influence Chinese women’s organizations? Does it inhibit the development of so-called indigenous Women’s Studies? I think the question is quite complicated because there are pressures from both sides. I think when you do something feminist or radical, some people will always say you’re influenced by the West. And I know [that] some Taiwanese Women’s Studies scholars have talked about how difficult it is to do Women’s Studies, how they have to prove that they are Chinese enough, because otherwise they are accused of being influenced by the West. And this pressure is very constraining. But at the same time, I think the danger of Western – you could say, ‘cultural imperialism’ – I think this is a real danger. I am interested in how you negotiate it and what your view is on this question.

Guo Jianmei: [The] first funding received by the Centre [for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services in Peking] was from Ford. Two enterprises in Guangzhou, Guangdong, were willing to offer support, on the condition that the Centre promoted their products [audience laughter]. We have no human resources to promote their products. Now in China, enterprises
are willing to spend millions of dollars to run their ads for just a few
seconds on TV, but they’re not willing to give a hundred-odd thousand
dollars to support social services. I think enterprises in China have just
started. They’re not really wealthy enough, not like big corporate
organizations such as those owned by the Hong Kong tycoon Li Jiacheng.
Then, China is not a welfare state.

We would appreciate continued support from abroad.

Fang Lian: Our [Women’s Studies] Centre [in Tianjin] only received
one grant from the funding agency, which was several thousand US
dollars. It is intended for our research on factors that influence the
cultural development of women in rural areas of northern China. It doesn’t
support pure research projects. If you want the money, you have to bring
benefits or contributions to the local community. You are expected to
carry out practical work. There are now many projects and organizations,
and there is funding for these projects, in rural areas, and most of these
are concentrating on improving women’s livelihood in extremely poor
or rural regions. They have been very effective. We think that those people
have done a good job, whereas we, with only small amounts of funding,
are extremely restricted in making substantial contributions. More
importantly, we think we should not just focus on improving practical
aspects of the life of those women, we think more on the possibilities for
changing their gender awareness. So, we use the money we had for devel-
opment projects, and that was to do some gender-training work. The funding
agency demands that unless your project benefits the local community,
there is no hope for sponsorship. Our work was set within certain bound-
daries. Still, even though we were not trying to improve water supply or
construct an industrial plant, we did have a certain space to manoeuvre.

Gao Xiaoxian: Will China have stronger as well as more democratic and
financially stable organizations? If so, as donors, what would you do to
help the development of such organizations? For such groups to emerge,
several factors come into play. Donors can play important roles in this.
Money is power. I hope [now addressing] donors, when you support
women’s groups, you should consider how the group will use the money.
You should require that all taking part to promote China’s NGOs become
more democratic. Don’t reproduce the patriarchal hierarchy and elitism.
I think this is a matter to be careful about.
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PART VII

Post-workshop Reflections
Post-workshop Reflections

Red Chan

Competence of using language(s) is vital for our self-expression and communication, but the hegemony of English (hailed as the 'International Language') means that we do not give voice on an equal basis. Language is not just the carrier of culture, it is also a product of power that can be felt most strongly in cross-cultural intellectual exchanges. Those who are not able to master the ‘proper’ language will also find themselves without the power to talk and convince. I therefore admire the efforts the organizers and editors of the Workshop and this book made in ensuring that all participants use their own language to speak – not just on a linguistic level (where both English and Chinese, that is, Putonghua, are accepted), but on other discursive levels as well. Such a consciousness of the differences between languages (which carry with them the cultural connotations of worldview) is critical in creating dynamic and fruitful dialogues across geographical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries.

I am very lucky to be able to understand both Putonghua and English well enough to enter the worldviews of those who are, for whatever reason, confined to one language only. My job as an interpreter and translator is to help to reduce misunderstandings or wrong value judgements based on the lack of knowledge of ‘other’ languages and cultures. I hope I have managed to achieve this goal both during the Workshop and in my translation of some of the papers in this book.

I urge readers of this book to enter and appreciate this dialogue of difference – it is a result of listening, negotiating, or compromising, between different languages, voices, values, positions, power relations . . .

Once we are willing to engage in such interactions (despite the challenge it involves), we benefit, we do not lose.

Ding Ning

In July 1999, I attended the Workshop 'Women Organizing in China' at the University of Oxford as a member of the East Meets West Feminist
Translation Group (*Dongxifang xiangyu xiaozu*). It was my first trip abroad, and I was filled with mixed feelings. Before arriving in England, I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to visit Denmark. There I was extremely impressed by the extensive movement and activism of Danish women. It was with this experience behind me that I arrived in Oxford. Here I would like to make two reflections about the days of the Workshop.

There is a need for women’s organizations in China to communicate and interact more often. This Workshop offered the facilities for them to interact and cooperate, therefore promoting work on women in China.

We live in a patriarchal culture. Whether it is education, employment, courtship, housing, domestic violence, having an affair, or divorce, all these critical events in our lives are influenced by the overall culture. No one can really escape the current socio-cultural environment. Nor can the patriarchal culture be changed overnight. However, contesting the entire system, pointing out the unfounded nature of oppression and exploitation, advocating feminism are something worth doing. I am not a leading figure in the field. Nor am I outstanding. Nevertheless, I’m willing to advocate feminist ideas and philosophy. In fact, I have been talking about feminisms to every friend who has come to me. I would like to contribute to the development of the women’s movement as a single drop of water contributing to a stream.

Another deep impression derives from the special arrangement made for foreign funding agencies to introduce their work to us. It is like rain drops on a desert. In China, there is no shortage of talents, but talent is useless without the means to realize its potential. This Workshop brought foreign funders to Chinese women’s organizations like much-needed rain to drought-stricken soil. This meeting will have a direct effect on motivating women’s organizing activities in China. I personally would also like to find ways and means to organize East Meets West Group members to translate important books and materials in the area of feminism. This is to inspire the growth of more women’s organizations and of greater women’s activism.

**Gao Xiaoxian**

The Oxford Workshop has been the most fruitful of the various international women’s studies seminars I have attended. First of all, the Workshop took note of the fact that most of the participants from China did not have good mastery of English, therefore a very good simultaneous interpretation service was arranged, thus avoiding embarrassment over
Post-workshop Reflections

poor communication. Also, the Workshop was thematically focused; this helped our discussions to go deeper. I was made to think about many issues that had not caught our attention before – for example, the challenge posed by feminist organizations to mainstream patriarchal culture; the issue of democratization of NGOs; the impact of foreign funds on women’s NGOs, and the like. As a consequence of this Workshop, a series of measures to restructure and democratize the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family (Shaanxisheng funü lilun, hunyin jiating yanjiuhui) were introduced.

As I mentioned in my speech at the Workshop, although I started my work of promoting women’s popular organizations (minjian funü zuzhi) in the mid-1980s, my knowledge of this type of organizing – until I attended the Workshop – had always remained on the level of ‘doing things’. Whether it was to ‘do research’ in my early stage, or ‘do a project’ in my later stage, my intention had always been to utilize popular organizing to gather people enthusiastic about women’s studies or women’s activities to become my colleagues. In that sense, ‘organizing’ was a tool, its purpose was to ‘do things’. We rarely took ‘organizing/organization’ as an ‘issue’ for reflection. Shaanxi Association for Women and Family has a history at the time of writing of fourteen years, a few offices have been developed, but there is no thorough, healthy system of democratic decision-making or management (of course, this is also related to the unfavourable conditions for survival). Participation of members is usually confined to activities, rarely to decision-making. The Oxford Workshop made me rethink this situation.

During discussions at the Workshop, especially those on the issue of equality when it comes to access for diverse women’s organizations to resources and to funding opportunities, we were stimulated to reflect on the relationships between central and marginal women’s organizations, large and small NGOs, feminist (nüxing zhuyi) and non-feminist NGOs. I came to realize that even the way in which we come to construct ‘organizing/organization’ is itself an important area of feminist concern. If we believe that the objective of feminism is to realize gender equality through an improvement of women’s status, and to create, eventually, an ideal society free of exploitation, oppression and discrimination, where every individual is free, equal, and able to fully develop her or his potential, then feminist organizations should not reproduce the patterns of chauvinist culture, elitism, or hierarchy.

What is similar, or different, in the principles and objectives of feminist women’s organizations when compared to those of patriarchal organizations? How can we conceptualize ‘organizing/organization’ so that it is
participatory, empowering, and carried by sisterhood? These questions are very challenging for me, still filled with ambiguities. But I am someone who believes ‘a good action is better than a dozen of platforms’. I am willing to solve the question or further my understanding through practice. As a result in October 1999, we began a series of measures to restructure and democratize the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family. Between March and May of the following year, we specifically invited experts to assess our previous work. This is to form the basis on which we establish our strategic plans for the next five years. It is by no means an easy process: we all grew up in this contemporary culture and are used to all forms of ‘organizing/organization’.

How do ideal feminist principles work in practice? How should the spirit of ‘voluntariness’, advocated by popular organizations, meet the challenge of the market economy’s ‘principle of interest’? How do we embrace diverse understandings of feminism? All this has to be thought through seriously and handled carefully in the process. But we take delight in our consensus to make the above objectives central priorities in our strategic five-year plan: ‘to improve the institution and work of the Association; to enhance the ability of its members; to build up participatory, democratic and sustainable modes of women’s popular organizing activities’. In this process, we practised, and experienced, the meaning and pleasure of ‘empowerment’.

The road ahead is long, and difficult. But we have started, after all.

Han Henan

It is hard to express how rewarding the Oxford Workshop has been! Sharing experiences with my colleagues there broadened my views enormously. I was very pleased at the warm reception of my presentation and my confidence was boosted. The intense enthusiasm displayed by the Workshop participants is still very much alive in my mind.

The Oxford Workshop empowered me with the strength to continue my work, which includes collaboration with the Chongwen District Women’s Federation in Beijing. The subject of our collaboration is an investigation into the content and methodology of social work conducted by Women’s Federation organizations. Between September and November 1999, we sent questionnaires to women cadres of the Chongwen District Women’s Federation to assess the quality of their work. After a planning stage during which we collaborated with the Chongwen District Women’s Federation, we carried out a workshop on gender training for all its cadres.
Later we organized a series of seminars on the methods of social works for cadres of the Women’s Federation, and for other women’s cadres. Themes of the seminars have included: case study work (ge’an gongzuo), group work (xiaozu gongzuo), community work (shequ gongzuo), work with the elderly, youth work, women’s work, and the like. At the time of writing, this series of seminars was still in progress. I feel that the Oxford Workshop is like a vow we have taken to motivate us to continue with our work.

I hope that the Oxford Workshop will go on, that there will be further occasions, more sharing of experiences, and more discussions of the next step of work. Or we can join together to study, to get a better grip of theory; this will in turn make for a more informed kind of activism.

Huang Yan

The Workshop ‘Chinese Women Organizing’ could be seen as an immense success – not only did it inform us of the current situation of Chinese women organizing, some issues came also to the fore.

We take comfort in seeing that women’s organizations, especially women’s popular organizations (minjian funü zuzhi), are now developing in China. There are various hotlines, women-against-prostitution associations, legal services for women, associations of entrepreneurs, lesbian and gay groups, women’s religious groups, and so on. In short, the Women’s Federation is no longer the only women’s organization recognized as such by the government or the public. However, looking at the areas that the Workshop participants either represented or studied, there seems to be a very uneven development among popular organizations: most of them are situated close to Beijing and Tianjin. Also, looking at the nature of the organizations that the participants either represented or investigated, it appears there is a lack of diversity: most of them are public interest organizations (gongyi xing zuzhi) formed by women intellectuals who have taken to heart women’s issues. This reflects the following problems: (1) The orientation and flow of funds is too focused on areas with relatively concentrated political, cultural resources and talents; areas with underdeveloped political, cultural conditions are ignored. Consequently, women’s organizing activities are strong and active in politically and culturally advanced areas, while in other areas trends are reversed. (2) While different types of popular women’s organizations do exist, they are physically too remote and isolated to be heard. Indeed, it may even be the case that a more plausible reason for this silence is that popular
organizations developing out of local milieus are regarded as 'not up to standard' by some of the so-called 'established and recognized organizations'; hence they are abandoned. (3) Women’s organizations do not have enough horizontal connections among themselves, they are not able to share information, let alone share resources. For example, information about the Oxford Workshop and communications from other previous workshops and meetings do not easily reach areas outside Beijing and Tianjin.

The theme of the Workshop – that is, the question of organizing – was exactly what caused a rather passionate controversy among the participants. What makes an organization an 'organization'? Participants at the Workshop argued over whether certain organizations should be recognized as such. But when people begin to cast doubts on certain organizations, they may have also made up their minds to refuse to recognize them.

So what is an organization? What is a formal organization? What is an informal organization? The definitions are already available from sociologists in the field, and Gao Xiaoxian also gave a rather clear explanation in the course of the Workshop. It seems then there is no problem. However, when a new organization appears, similar and therefore rival organizations may not at first be ready to grant it recognition. On the contrary, they refuse to acknowledge its nature as women’s organizational activity. What does this kind of attitude tell us? Do women’s organizations in China lack an appreciation of democracy and equality?

In fact, a majority of the women’s organizations at the Oxford Workshop were NGOs. According to their representatives, when these organizations were first established, the Party-state authority did not recognize them, and this problem still exists. In order to legitimize their own identity, some organizations are forced to take roundabout measures. What remains puzzling is that some organizations demand equality and want to break away from a tradition of hierarchical authority; but when they deal with other organizations in a similar position, their way of thinking immediately turns back to the old mode that demands standardization and hierarchy. Their very first concern is whether other organizations fulfil the conditions to be an organization. Now the question must be asked: who set the conditions? That is to say, who has the right of definition and judgement? Does it mean that whoever has achieved a certain status also has a certain power or authority, and therefore should be in the position to exercise power over other people? If so, it only demonstrates that many of us engaged in women’s work are still deeply influenced by patriarchal patterns of conduct. Many people only become conscious of democracy
and equality when they feel the pressure of authority and orthodoxy. For example, people are not happy with the bureaucratic approach of the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF), which issues notices at random to demonstrate the hierarchical gulf that exists between upper and lower levels. Why does a critical consciousness that advocates democracy and equality disappear like smoke when faced with organizations weaker than themselves? Such an attitude could become the Achilles heel for many of those who do women work. It also alienates them from grass-roots women’s communities – the weaker groups had been waiting to be discovered, encouraged, and supported, but now they are kept outside the door because of the absence of equality. Women’s organizing activities, which could have been advanced much faster, are shrouded in uncertainty.

If asked what was the biggest reward of the Oxford Workshop for us, I think it was most important in giving those engaged in women work a chance to learn about themselves. If we can take away lessons on the negative impact of persistent orthodox, patriarchal patterns of behaviour, if we can change our habit of using power to constrain thought, and if we consciously nurture our sense of democracy and equality, then I would say that the significance of the Workshop has been immeasurable.

Liu Guanghua

As someone working on women’s physical and psychological health, I have always been sure of my position. However, in the short week during which I participated in the Oxford Workshop, I was able to witness in person the passions of international sisters over issues in the area of ‘Chinese women organizing’. I heard with my own ears the discussions, views and analyses of the many women’s studies experts. In that process of sharing of information and projects, I became more certain of what I must do for other women.

What I must do is to engage in education: an education of enlightenment in regard to gender-awareness, women’s health, sex education of adolescent girls, the empowering of women through sensitization to their rights so they can make informed, autonomous decisions. So that they learn that the real meaning of women’s liberation is to let women be ‘human beings’! This is something for which I worked hard in the past, am working at hard at present, and will be working hard for also in the future. To carry out this kind of educational work for women’s physical and psychological health through a non-profit-oriented private women’s school [as I have done] which is powerless, penniless, and without any special network and background is, needless to say, next to impossible.
Still, it has developed a momentum of its own, showing up the possibilities by which to sustain a healthy life.

It is common knowledge that women’s NGOs in China are vulnerable to financial and political vicissitudes, because they do not have the support of capital or powerful connections. They must turn to entrepreneurship to survive and develop. Fortunately, the Chinese Government has introduced a most powerful initiative for reform, encouraging social organizations to offer educational services. For over ten years, I have dreamt of setting up schools for women, of opening a window of opportunity for poverty-stricken girls, of nurturing opportunities of growth for girls who lack self-esteem. I felt that discussions at the Oxford Workshop did not give enough attention to women’s NGOs that specialize in the education of young girls, not to mention the absence of concern over the fact that very poor girls from marginal areas (from backward, distant or ethnic places) who have finished their nine-year free education, end up as mobile migrant labourers or sex workers. Other blind spots included the neglect of women who engage in high-risk, underground sex services, marginal women communities that are ignored by mainstream society, or NGO women’s organizations that offer health and legal advice, as well as AIDS education to sex workers.

As far as I know, the Taoxingzhi Educational Research Committee of China has set up the ‘National Institute of Female Students’ Education’ (Quanguo nüxuesheng jiaoyu yanjiuhui). It is comprised of principals from state-owned, public-owned, or private schools for girls, who are almost without exception women. All the headmistresses in this NGO face a common issue in their establishment and running of girls’ schools: they have to en-gender their educational approaches. They have to empower girls so that they move from low self-esteem to self-confidence. Gender-awareness of administrators of girls’ schools is particularly significant, as it determines whether the school is dedicated to making girls more girlish, more feminine, or more capable of learning, of surviving, of being cooperative and also courageous.

In starting the Huaguang Senior High School for Girls in Nanning, (Guangxi Nanning huanguang nüzi gaoxiao) can at least try to sow the seeds in this virgin land of women’s health education with my fourteen years of research findings and work experiences. I can at least try to push the ‘limit’ and work on the malleable, formative stages of growth. I can at least help those largely ignored, weak communities – those poverty-stricken girls who are expected to become either migrant workers or mothers. I can help some of them to exercise the option of going to school, so that they will have more power to fight for their rights and become outstanding women of modern times.
Overcoming one obstacle after another, breaking away from one disruption after another, the Huaguang Senior High School for Girls finally came to life on 26 June 2000. Although still only in its infancy, the school offers hope for impoverished student girls! On 3 September 2000, the School welcomed the first year of girl students. Three classes are sponsored by UNESCO, which organized an educational fair in Guilin, Guangxi province, to demonstrate its full support for our education. The sixty girls in these three classes come from a multi-ethnic background. Thirty-eight girls were classified as ‘poverty-stricken’, accounting for 62 per cent of the total student population. In spite of the complicated process of seeking approval and the late issue of formal documents from the government, in spite of the postponed opening of the School, and, in spite of other factors such as people’s discrimination against private schools, which made it difficult for the Huaguang Senior High School for Girls to be productive (necessitating initiatives that became known as ‘The Phoenix Project’), the School has nevertheless made steady progress.

The ‘Phoenix Project’ is the first of its kind in China. It helps poverty-stricken girls to fulfil their dreams of getting high school education. It has so far benefited 29 of the 38 girls classified as poor. They receive funds to subsidize school fees, accommodation and miscellaneous fees, and even a subsistence allowance.

Furthermore, the Huaguang Women’s College (Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi xuexiao), which used to be an NGO educational organization that could be banned or closed on arbitrary grounds, now also stands on firmer grounds. The fight for survival and development is still tough, but at least it has outgrown its previous vulnerability. The ‘Phoenix Project’ has earned support and participation from all walks of life; its impact is widespread and far-reaching. The harbinger of spring and hope has arrived. Today, health education for young women is well established, and although it might still appear like a few patches of seedbed, it is bound to give an outstanding harvest in the future. I am growing up together with our 60 daughters at the Huaguang Senior High School for Girls.

‘I am fine, I am most certainly no less capable than others’ is a conviction which comes from the bottom of our heart, it is also an echo that comes to us from the Oxford Workshop.

Kimberley Manning

When conducting research for my Master’s thesis on new women’s organizations in China in 1995, it became clear to me that much of the
analysis in the political science literature was not helpful in understanding women’s organizing. For example, whereas discussions of ‘civil society’ stressed the need for organizations to create autonomous spaces in opposition to the state, Chinese women’s organizations were fluidly, and often fruitfully, occupying spaces that were simultaneously ‘state’ and ‘NGO’. Four years later, I was thus delighted to find far more complex analyses being offered at the ‘Women Organizing in China’ Conference. Indeed, I discovered that the dialogue had shifted from ‘state vs society’ to one that recognizes much greater diversity within and outside women’s organizations and the ACWF.

Not systematically addressed at the Conference, however, was the political economy of feminism and its impact upon women’s organizing in China. By the political economy of feminism I mean the international imbalances of power in activism and knowledge generation. While we spent much time assessing the benefits and drawbacks of aligning women’s activism with the state, we spoke very little about the benefits and drawbacks of foreign funding for those same groups, much less the strengths and weaknesses of global feminism interacting locally. One participant raised the question of Chinese women’s organizations being funded primarily by American foundations as opposed to Northern European foundations. She suggested that a greater affinity might exist between Northern European socialist feminism and the new forms of organizing that are developing currently in China. I’m not sure whether realigning funding relationships is warranted, or even possible, but it seems to me that it is a topic that definitely deserves our attention. There is much to be learned about activism, scholarship and financial resources in the context of international women’s organizing. Should we have the opportunity to gather again, I would like to see these issues more systematically included in our dialogue and analysis.

As a final note, I would like to remark upon the extraordinary mentoring that was made available to me through the context of the Conference. When collecting research for my Master’s thesis in 1995, I benefited greatly from the encouragement and assistance of Chinese and American activists and scholars. At the conference I was afforded an opportunity to renew many of these acquaintances, as well as to forge new relationships, and this provided me with invaluable direction and support as I prepared my dissertation prospectus. They have also provided me with the joy of finding friendship in the midst of a busy academic year. Indeed, when one of the Conference participants came to my university recently to present a paper, we spent an entire evening discussing new directions in our work and our lives. ‘Women Organizing in China’ has therefore
played, and continues to play, a critical role in facilitating the development of my research, activism and life-long friendships.

**Min Dongchao**

I gained a great deal of satisfaction from the Workshop. Although the issue of women’s organizing in China was not my current research topic, it held a lot of interest for me. However, through the discussion during the Workshop, I realized that important changes have been occurring since the 1990s. Perhaps, we should think beyond the issue of women organizing in China. Thus there are a couple of points I would like to address.

At the Workshop, we noticed that many of the projects, funding, theories and methods come from the West. There are, however, a few women’s studies scholars in China who are aware of the problems of ‘post-colonialism’. Rethinking this issue, I feel we need to reconsider the dichotomies by which we usually understand global/local and centre/periphery. One of the important reasons is that we cannot talk about issues on gender, women, development, etc. only in the China context in a time of globalization. If we want to change women’s conditions all over the world, then feminist scholarship everywhere cannot avoid the challenge of self-examination in such a global economic and political framework. This is essential for forging international links among the women’s movements the world over.

As a Chinese scholar living, studying and working in the West, one thing does worry me, and that is the issue of ‘political location’. The relationship between Western scholars and ‘in betweens’, that is Chinese scholars who are located in the West, on the one hand and on the other hand researchers ‘at home’ in China should not, I think, become that of experts and informants. I think it is time to address this issue in Chinese Women’s Studies in the West and in China.

**Lisa Stearns**

Last thoughts from a wicker chair in a sunlit Oxford sitting room (tea and Digestives on the table beside me – Mandarin voices echoing in the labyrinth halls – suitcases scraping – goodbyes being shouted one last time).

As I sat these few days in the welcoming surroundings of our Oxford conference room with women whose lives straddle Europe and China, I had an overwhelming feeling of being part of something powerful –
Post-workshop Reflections

amazingly powerful. I had anticipated – expected – to be struck with nostalgia for the years when I was in the middle of the kaleidoscope preparations of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing. A nostalgia for the time I was close enough to feel the pulse, at least of a corner, of the shifting landscape of Chinese women’s organizational initiatives – and track their success and frustrations.

Instead, these days have been full of excitement. Swept into the energy in the room, I have been fascinated by reports of what these women are doing here and now – and what they plan for the future. Among the diverse participants there has been vigorous give and take, sharp challenges have been meted out, brave personal chances have been taken. There is nothing tentative about my Chinese friends – they are no longer new to the women’s movement. Yet the factional in-fighting that endangers so many movements over time has barely reared its ugly face here. It also seems that some of the hurdles of Western arrogance they complained about some years ago have been navigated. This conference has taken place in a multicultural environment of trust and respect. My feeling is not nostalgia at all. These days have been stimulating, energizing – powerful. Nostalgia suddenly feels quite a meagre emotion to have looked forward to.

Home again – thoughts from a complacent Northern welfare state where women hold their own in public office but remain absent in the private board rooms where much socio-political power is wielded, not to mention where the destiny of economic life is decided. The intensity of the Oxford conference has given way to more mellow reflection.

Telling history as identity-building: one of the engaging elements of the conference was the varied prisms through which the story of Chinese women’s organizing was told. Another was the strong sense I had that the story-telling itself was a building process. Organizational path-breakers were telling their own histories. Westerners with long ties to China were telling organizational stories rooted in personal engagement tempered by the distance that their stance gives them. New non-Chinese researchers had sifted the stories of organizing as retold in print and interviews. New Chinese activists were looking mostly forward. A number of participants were there simultaneously as agents of the movement, as researchers defining their past experience, and as objects of others’ study. The varied efforts to identify, define, describe and consolidate were both informative and legitimating. The conference seemed a process in itself for Chinese women’s organizational development: a process of building identity and cementing it solid.

In the heady years before the Women’s Conference it was easy to wonder whether energies could hold out in the longer term, whether
strategies could be generated to cope with unpredictable policy, whether building could survive the spectre of dwindling resource flows. Organizing everywhere is a roller coaster ride. Some initiatives make their way from peak to peak but many do not survive the inevitable rushes downward. Sometimes the fire sputters and goes out. The Oxford conference was a process of collective affirmation for Chinese women’s organizations and for all of us who have been part of organizing there: ‘this work is worth studying’, ‘this past is worth recounting’, ‘these experiences are instructive’, ‘we are greater than our parts’. I expect it contributed to firming the foundations upon which new organizing will take place. I’m not a fan of conferences and will continue to cogitate on why this one seemed so productive.

Language and the art of organizing: In 1992 some of the Conference participants and I sat cross-legged on a floor choosing material to translate during one of the first East Meets West Feminist Translation Group meetings. I have often since drawn upon the lesson we learned that day about the exclusionary capacity of theoretical language. Chinese friends with Masters degrees in English looked at the articles I suggested and yawned. These were full of theoretical constructs and projects to deconstruct central discourses. They were favourite pieces of mine at the time. They were all, we quickly discovered, a trial to translate and were enervating rather than energizing the group dynamic. Real-life stories, described in everyday language, raised questions that we could all relate to our own experience (or lack of it). This is what we discovered brought us close, what led a steady stream of newcomers to join us; what generated late-night arguments; and what propelled us to work at building things with other women in the mornings after.

Today some of those same women plus a whole new generation of Chinese activists are discussing cutting-edge insights packaged in the kind of language that we chose to avoid in subsequent meetings. It’s a big difference. There is a useful set of new tools among Chinese activists today. But I realize that I was still most engaged by the conference contributions that weren’t seduced into that packaging – those that still provided an rich experiential rhythm to carry the theoretical refrain. In building our movements maybe we need to have a theory about how and when to use theory, or at least how best to communicate it. I wonder, for example, if the chasms here in Scandinavia between feminist activists, feminist scholars, and women outside the movement could have been narrowed if we were more wary of the potential elitism of language. I wonder if my Chinese friends and colleagues will find ways to use but not abuse these tools they have embraced and refined so quickly.
Globalization ain’t all bad: I came away from the Conference with a reinvigorated belief that women being brought together across national borders is critical for all pieces of the women’s movement. There have been moments I have worried about the dangers of imperial feminism. At the moment, however, those fears themselves look patronizing – as though the receivers of information are not agents of how it is used. Far more dangerous it seems to me now, is forgetting how much we have to learn from each other. I am currently living in a complacent Western place. I needed to reconnect, to get ideas. I needed to tackle a creeping cynicism and laziness. I came away from the conference boosted. I was reminded that as a movement we are not to be measured by the few per cent of women in each of our countries who are involved activists. We are to be measured by what we can give and take from each other and what we can build that lasts or is remembered.

Dagmar Woehlert

First I would like to say that I really enjoyed taking part in the workshop, it was a great experience. The knowledge I gained there has helped me a lot in my work afterwards.

I am with the Asia desk of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. It is the political foundation affiliated to the Green Party in Germany (Alliance ’90/The Greens). The foundation has been working in Asia for quite some years, but started its work in China on a larger scale only recently. At the end of 1999 we initiated our China programme including women’s projects. At the time of the workshop we were still in the preparatory stage of the programme.

The workshop provided the unique opportunity of being introduced to the work of a broad spectrum of Chinese women’s groups and organizations and to talk to their representatives. It intensified my impression that there is a big development going on within the women’s movement in China. Women’s organizations are working on new topics, and finding new approaches towards certain issues and differentiating their work, for example, by splitting off smaller organizations from the old big ones.

With regard to this process it was especially interesting to follow the discussion of and with representatives of all levels of the ACWF from all parts of China. There is a reform going on within this organization and it is exciting to find those women struggling with their position in the changing society of China. New women’s organizations have been established with the introduction and development of reforms and it was
wonderful for me to learn that the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre, the organization Heinrich Böll Foundation is cooperating with, and its great coordinator Wang Xingjuan has such a great reputation within the ‘community’ of women’s organizations in China.

As a representative of an organization working with a lot of non-governmental organizations throughout the world it was fascinating to observe the debate on the issue of what kind of women’s organizations in China could be considered non-governmental. I think there is still a long way to go, especially in the minds of the people, and it is going to need much more discussion to make clear what it means when we talk about NGOs. Within this debate I wished that the workshop had given a forum to the representatives of the so-called donor organizations, not only to introduce themselves but also to give an input from their perspectives to the issue of NGOs in China.

To put it in a nutshell, I have the feeling that the Chinese women are on the move, doing a lot of great work, and still have a long road ahead.
PART VIII

Lexicon of Chinese Women Organizing
Lexicon of Chinese Women Organizing

Editorial Note: This is a selective lexicon including those items in this volume which are part of the rich, diverse and sometimes highly contested terminology of Chinese women’s activist culture. We have sought to provide as accurate background information as possible, but this is an on-going process of translation and interpretation, and much work remains to be done. We acknowledge our debt to Sharon Hom and Xin Chunying on whose work we have built (Hom and Xin 1995).

Banbiantian
半边天

BB ji rexian
BB机热线
The Pager Hotline (Beijing 1997). BB, or BP, is probably a transliteration of ‘beeper’.
See Tongzhi rexian.

Beijing daxue falüxuexi funü falü yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin
北京大学法律学系妇女法律研究与服务中心
The Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, the Law Department, Peking University (Beijing 1995).

Beijing daxue zhongwai funü wenti yanjiu zhongxin
北京大学中外妇女问题研究中心
The Women’s Studies Centre, Peking University (Beijing 1990).
Beijing hongfeng funü xinli zixun fuwu zhongxin
The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing 1996).
Previously the Women’s Research Institute (Beijing 1988).
See Zhongguo guanli kexue yanjiuyuan funü yanjiu zhongxin.

bensehua
本色化
indigenization – of institutions/organizations which have non-Chinese origins and/or traditions, also known as bentuhua 本土化.

bianyuanhua
边缘化
marginalization – of women’s organizations, characterized by lack of political patronage, socio/economic resources.

celiexing
策略性
being tactical and/or strategic – depending on the context, Chinese scholars and activists use the expression ‘being tactical and/or strategic’ to explain how they devise strategies to bypass and transcend the matrix of tensions and boundaries. ‘Being strategic’ implies conscious choices between yielding, reticence, and endurance on the one hand, and assertiveness, outspokenness, and combativeness on the other.

Dagongmei zhi jia
打工妹之家
The Migrant Women’s Club (Beijing 1996). Established by the magazine Rural Women Knowing All (Nongjianü baishitong).
The term dagongmei, designating rural migrant women and literally meaning ‘working sister’ gained popularity from the mid-1980s as the number of rural to urban migrants increased.
‘Dagongmei’ is a newly coined term, denoting a new kind of labour relationship fundamentally different from those of Mao’s period. A Cantonese term imported from Hong Kong, its meanings are multi-layered. Dagong means “working for the boss”, or “selling labour”, connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages. Mei means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status – mei is single, unmarried and younger (and thus of lower status). In contrast to the term “worker” (gongren), which carried...
the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao’s day, the new word dagong signifies a lesser identity – that of hired hand – in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labour relations and hierarchy.’ (Pun 1999: 2).

Danshen zhoumo julebu
单身周末倶楽部

difang fulian
地方妇联
local levels of Women’s Federation – can be used to refer to provincial, municipal, village level.
See Fulian, funuhui, Quanguo fulian, Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui.

Disi ci shijie funü dahui Zhongguo zuzhi weiyuanhui
第四次世界妇女大会中国组织委员会
China Organizing Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 28 August 1992)

Diyi jie Zhongguo funü yu fazhan yantaoban
第一届中国妇女与发展研讨班
The First Chinese Women and Development Conference (11–24 July 1993). Organized by the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies and the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University.

Dongxifang xiangyu xiaozu
东西方相遇小组
East Meets West Feminist Translation Group (Beijing 1993).
The English name was coined by Susie Jolly. Known as ‘Dongxifang xiaozu’ (东西方小组) or East Meets West, it was formalized into East Meets West Feminist Translation Group.

Fangzhou jiating zhongxin
方舟家庭中心
The Ark Family Centre (Beijing 1998). Established by the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinli zixun zhongxin).
feiguanfang
非官方
non-official

feizhengfu zuzhi
非政府组织
non-governmental organization (NGO). In Chinese the combination ‘NGO-zuzhi’, literally NGO-organization, is often used.

feizhengfu zuzhi luntan
非政府组织论坛
NGO Forum – also known as ‘NGO luntan’ in Chinese. Parallel to official formal United Nations conferences, there have been ‘open, unrestricted, often chaotic and contentious, NGO gatherings, called NGO forums. Loosely organized by the CONGO (Council of NGOs), these meetings typically feature seminars, panels, dances, films, and field trips, all meant to reflect the debates and disagreements among the wide diversity of interested people from around the world who are stakeholders in the issues under discussion’ (Tinker 1999: 90).

Fulian
妇联
General term used to refer to all levels of the Women’s Federation. Also used to refer to the nationwide institution. See difang fulian, funühui, Quanguo fulian, Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui.

Funü chuanmei jiance wangluo
妇女传媒监测网络
The Women’s Media Watch Network (Beijing 1996).

funü jiefang
妇女解放
women’s emancipation; women’s liberation in the specific historical context of post-1949 Maoist culture and state/party-steered legislative and socio-political changes to create socialist womanhood.

funü liyi qunti
妇女利益群体
women’s interest organizations.
Funü rexian
妇女热线
The Women’s Hotline (Beijing 1992). Established by the Women’s Research Institute (Zhongguo guanli kexue yanjiuyuan funü yanjiusuo). Can also refer to hotlines set up by women’s organizations in general.

funü xuedaoban
妇女学道班
women’s Bible classes.

Funü yanjiu luncong
妇女研究论丛
Collection of Women’s Studies. Women’s studies journal published by the All China Women’s Federation.
Web site www.cwomen.ac.uk

funühui
妇女会
women’s committee of the Women’s Federation – most commonly used in rural areas. Also used as a blanket term to denote the Women’s Federation (Fulian).
See difang fulian, Fulian, Quanguo fulian, Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui.

GAD wangluo
GAD 网络
Interprovincial Gender and Development (GAD) Network. Characterized by loosely connected groups with no formal membership. Emerged in connection with a conference held in Xi’an in August 2000.

gongmin yishi
公民意识
Civic consciousness or awareness – this concept, and ‘gongmin nengdongxing’ (公民能动性) civic agency’, are related to the term gongmin shehui (公民社会) literally ‘citizen society’ which embodies a political conception of civil society in which political relationships between state and society are based on principles of citizenship, rights, representation, and rule of law.
guakao
attach to; affiliate to (a supervisory body). ‘Guakao’ and ‘kaogua’
are used interchangeably.
See Shehui tuanti dengji guanli tiaoli.

Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi gaoxiao
广西南宁华光女子高校
The Huaguang Senior High School for Girls (Nanning, Guangxi 2000).

Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi peixun xuexiao
广西南宁华光女子培训学校
The Huaguang Women’s Training School (Nanning, Guangxi 1999).

Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi rexian
广西南宁华光女子热线
The Huaguang Women’s Hotline (Nanning, Guangxi 1993).

Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi xuexiao
广西南宁华光女子学校
The Huaguang Women’s College (Nanning, Guangxi 1994).

Guanyu jianjue daji guaimai funü ertong fanzui huodong de tongzhi
关于坚决打击拐卖妇女儿童犯罪活动的通知
The Notice on Reprisals Against Trafficking in Women and Children
(passed 1989 by the State Council).

Guojia jihua shengyu weiyuanhui
国家计划生育委员会
The State Family Planning Commission.

Guowuyuan funü ertong gongzuo weiyuanhui
国务院妇女儿童工作委员会
The National Working Committee on Children and Women under the
State Council (NWCCW) (February 1990). Originally called Co-
ordinating Committee. Also known as ‘Fuer gongwei’ (妇儿工委).
This is one of three so-called ‘national mechanisms’ (quanguoxing funü
jigou 全国性妇女机构) for the advancement of women in China.
Another English version, ‘The State Council Working Committee on
Women and Children’ is also used. Although this translation follows
the order of first women and then children in the original, it is not the
official translation.
See Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui neiwu sifa weiyuanhui funü ertong
zhuanmenzu and Quanguo zhengxie funü qingnian weiyuanhui.

Haiwai zhonghua funü xuehui
海外中华妇女学会
The Chinese Society for Women’s Studies, Inc. (USA 1989).
Web site: www.csws.org

Hangzhou daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin
杭州大学妇女研究中心
The Women’s Studies Centre, Hangzhou University (Hangzhou,
Zhejiang 1989).

hunyin baquan
婚姻霸权
marital hegemony – the societal norm and practice of (heterosexual)
marrige stigmatizing other life-styles.

Jiating
家庭
Family. Magazine published by Guangdong Women’s Federation.

jiegui
接轨
‘connect tracks’, i.e. to link up with international movements or
trends.

Jinling nüzi shenxueyuan
金陵女子神学院
Jinling Women’s Theological College (Nanjing, Jiangsu, pre-1949). A
most prestigious and long-established theological seminary with a
tradition of progressive feminist thought.

Jiuri nüxing
今日女性
Lexicon of Chinese Women Organizing

Makesi zhuyi funüguan
马克思主义妇女观
Marxist concept of women. According to the CCP’s doctrine, the roots of inequality between men and women lay in class oppression. The position has gradually been challenged by gender perspectives. See shehui xingbie.

minjian funü zuzhi
民间妇女组织
Popular women’s organizations. Also called minjian funü tuanti (民间妇女团体) popular women’s groups. Used to define new, reform-era, self-initiated women’s groups, networks and organizations.

nengdongxing
能动性
agency – of women; denoting women’s capacity for self-determination and to create initiatives for personal/collective change.

Nongcun funü peixun xuexiao
农村妇女培训学校
The Practical Skills Training Centre for Rural Women (Beijing 1999). Established by Rural Women Knowing All (Nongjianü baishitong).

Nongjianü baishitong
农家女百事通
Rural Women Knowing All. A monthly magazine published for rural women by China Women’s News.

nü ahong
女阿訇
female religious leader, usually resident at a women’s mosque, who performs multiple functions such as ritual guidance, Koranic instruction, counselling and political representation.

nü mushi
女牧师
female pastor, female clergy.

nü tongxinglian
女同性恋
lesbian.
See tongzhi.
Lexicon of Chinese Women Organizing

nü tongzhi

Women ‘tongzhi’, ‘comrades’, rough equivalent to ‘queer’; lesbians.
The parallel terms male tongzhi (nantongzhi 男同志) and men and women tongzhi or homosexuals (nannü tongzhi 男女同志) are also used.
See tongzhi.

Nü tongzhi xiaozu

The Queer Women Group or the Women Tongzhi Group (Beijing 1998).
Since late 1998 called Beijing Sisters (Beijing jiemei xiaozu
See tongzhi.

Nü zhigong laodong baohu guiding

Regulation on the Labour Protection of Women Workers (adopted 21 July 1988 by the State Council).

nüquan zhuyi

woman-rights-ism, feminism. Since ‘quan’ (权) can also mean power, the term can be interpreted as the ‘ism’ of women’s power. Although the CCP claims gender equality as a basic principle, it has defined feminism as bourgeois. In official Chinese discourse since the 1920s ‘nüquan zhuyi’ (女权主义) can have negative connotations associated with bourgeois values. The term is primarily used to refer to Western feminism.
See nüxing zhuyi.

nüxing shalong

women’s salon. From the early 1980s, as the contradictory effects of economic reforms began to be felt, the political climate also allowed and encouraged academics to meet to discuss the problems created by the reform process. These discussion groups were often called salons.

nüxing zhuyi

woman-ism, feminism. Literally the ‘ism’ of the female sex, this is a new translation of feminism which emerged in China in the early 1980s.
The term has less political but more biological connotations than ‘nüquan zhuyi’ (女权主义), which also translates as feminism. See nüquan zhuyi.

qingzhen nüsi
清真女寺
Muslim women’s mosques.

Quanguo diyi jie nannü tongzhi daibiao dahui
全国第一届男女同志代表大会

Quanguo diyi jie nütongzhi daibiao dahui
全国第一届女同志代表大会

Quanguo fulian
全国妇联
The Women’s Federation – used to refer to the Beijing-based headquarters of the All China Women’s Federation
See difang fulian, Fulian, funühui, Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui.

Quanguo fulian funü yanjiusuo
全国妇联妇女研究所
The Women’s Studies Institute of China (ACWF) (Beijing 1991).

Quanguo funü daibiao dahui
全国妇女代表大会
The National Congress of Chinese Women (April 1949). The highest leading body of the All China Women’s Federation. The Congress meets every five years to decide on the work guidelines for the coming five-year period.

Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui neiwu sifa weiyuanhui funü ertong zhuannenzu
全国人民代表大会内务司法委员会妇女儿童专门组
The Special Group for Women and Children of the Internal and Judicial Affairs Committee of the People’s Congress (set up in April 1989).
This is one of three so-called national mechanisms (quanguoxing funü jigou 全国性妇女机构) for the advancement of women in China. See Guowuyuan funü ertong gongzuo weiyuanhui and Quanguo zhengxie funü qingnian weiyuanhui.

Quanguo zhengxie funü qingnian weiyuanhui

The Committee for Women and Youth of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (established in April 1988) This is one of three so-called national mechanisms (quanguoxing funü jigou 全国性妇女机构) for the advancement of women in China). See Guowuyuan funü ertong gongzuo weiyuanhui and Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui neiwu sifa weiyuanhui funü ertong zhuanmenzu.

Qunzhong tuanti

mass groups. The All China Women’s Federation, the Trade Union, and the All China Youth Federation are the three mass groups established by the CCP. They are also called ‘qunzhong zuzhi’ (群众组织) mass organizations.

Sanwu/siwu

When they define their organizations as ‘popular’ or ‘NGO’, activists refer to the ‘three shortages’ or ‘four shortages’ as characteristics of this type of organization. The precise definition of these shortages varies. While shortage of funding is always mentioned other shortages mentioned, are: regular staff, time, appointed researchers, and facilities.

Shaanxi funü falü yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin

The Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi (Xi’an, Shaanxi 1999).

Shaanxi funü rexian

Shaanxi Women’s Hotline (Xi’an, Shaanxi 1996)

Shaanxi shehui xingbie yu fazhan wangluo

Shaanxi Gender and Development Network (Xi’an, Shaanxi 2000).
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**Shaanxisheng fulian funü yanjiuhui**

陕西省妇联妇女研究会

The Research Office of Shaanxi Women’s Federation (Xi’an, Shaanxi 1985).

**Shaanxisheng funü lilun hunyin jiating yanjiuhui**

陕西省妇女理论婚姻家庭研究会

The Shaanxi Association for Women and Family (Xi’an, Shaanxi 1986).

**Shehui tuanti dengji guanli tiaoli**

社会团体登记管理条例

Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations (issued October 1989 by the Standing Committee of the State Council).

The Regulations required all social organizations (shehui tuanti), including associations (xiehui), learned societies (xuehui), federations (lianhehui), research societies (yanjiuhui), foundations (jijinhui) and friendship societies (lianyihui) to register with their county-level Civil Affairs department. Each social organization was required to affiliate to a supervisory body (guakao danwei), which acted as a sponsor and was responsible for supervising the day-to-day affairs of its dependent associations (White, Howell and Shang 1996). In 1998 new regulations were adopted by the State Council. Also referred to in the short version ‘shetuanfa’ (社团法) meaning social organization law which connotes stronger legislative force.

See guakao.

**shehui xingbie**

社会性别

While the term ‘gender’ (shehui xingbie) has the same connotation in the Chinese context as its usage in English, which emphasizes the social and non-essentialist aspects of the maleness and femaleness, the term ‘gender perspective’ (shehui xingbei shijiao or shehui xingbei guannian), nevertheless, has been used by Chinese scholars and activists as an equivalent of ‘feminist perspective’ in Western context. Thus, workshops on ‘gender training’ (shehui xingbie peixun) are organized to show how to use feminist perspectives to, for example, carry out research, teaching, or developmental work. ‘Feminism’ (nüquan zhuyi or nüxing zhuyi) continues to be used rather cautiously.
sheng fulian
省妇联
provincial levels of the Women’s Federation.
See Fulian.

shi fulian
市妇联
municipal levels of the Women’s Federation.
See Fulian.

Shijie funü bolan
世界妇女博览
Women’s World Vision. Magazine published by the All China Women’s Federation.

Shoudu nü xinwen gongzuozhe xiehui
首都女新闻工作者协会
The Capital Women Journalists’ Association (Beijing 1986).

shuangxue shuangbi
双学双比
The ‘double learning, double competition’ is a campaign slogan coined by ACWF in 1989 to mobilize women’s participation in economic reforms. ‘Double learning’ focuses on classes in literacy, general knowledge, and training in specialized skills. ‘Double competition’ puts emphasis on women’s accomplishment and contribution to the reforms.

sizi
四自
The ‘four selves’: self-reliance, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-improvement. The notion of ‘four selves’ is used in official rhetoric to ask women to assume individual responsibility for their experience and positions. It is criticized as having the effect of blaming the victim. The ‘four selves’ also forms a conscious part of many women’s daily discourse as a means of assertiveness.

suzhi
素质
quality; qualifications. Both the ‘four selves’ (sizi 四自) and the ‘double learning, double competition’ (shuangxue shuangbi 双学双比) are aimed at improving women’s ‘quality’. As reflected in the Workshop
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discussion this is a contested concept that carries paradigmatic assumptions about an ideal Chinese womanhood (see part IV, Other Voices, Targets and Subjects – the ‘Quality’ of Women).

tanfangzu
探访组
Christian women’s outreach groups; formal or informal groups which through visits and home-based religious instruction and practical assistance extend the influence of the Church into society.

Tianjin shifan daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin
天津师范大学妇女研究中心
The Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University (Tianjin 1993).

Tiankong
天空

tongzhi
同志
In Chinese, ‘tong’ means literally ‘common’, and ‘zhi’, ‘will’. In the early twentieth century, as Communist activism emerged, the two were put together to translate the word ‘comrade’ from Russian. This word was first coined as queer, gay, lesbian in 1988 in Hong Kong. As with Anglo-American activists’ adoption of the word queer, an old word was invested with a new meaning.
The term yields multiple meanings:

- it embraces all sexual identities;
- emphasizes respect for shared ideal, goals and aspirations;
- transcends binary of East/West, homo/heterosexuality, body/spirit, etc, to suggest fluidity, flexibility, interdependence;
- is both ironic and savvy in claiming affinity with Communist Party’s cultural and ideological heritage;
- see Wu 2000.

酷儿 (ku’er) is the Chinese transliteration of queer. See nü tongxinglian, Quanguo diyi jie nü tongzhi dahui, Quanguo diyi jie nannü tongzhi dahui, Tiankong and Tongzhi rexian.
**Tongzhi rexian**

同志热线

The Tongzhi Pager Hotline (Beijing 1997).

*See BB ji rexian and tongzhi.*

**Tuanti huiyuan**

团体会员

group member or affiliated member – many professional women’s organizations were established in the 1980s and 1990s. These organizations are group members of the All China Women’s Federation. This implies that they operate under the leadership of the ACWF. They include organizations such as: Zhongguo huagong nü keji gongzuozhe lianyihui (China Club of Women Technical Staff of the Chemistry Industry of China); Zhongguo nü faguan xuehui (China Association of Women Judges); Zhongguo nü jianchaguan xiehui (China Association of Women Procurators). Organizations such as Beijing nü jianzhushi xiehui (Beijing Society of Women Architects) and Shoudu nü jiaoshou lianyihui (Capital Women Professors’ Association) are registered as group members of the Beijing Women’s Federation.

**Yancheng guaimai, bangjia funü ertong fanzui fenzi de jueding**

嚴惩拐卖绑架妇女儿童犯罪分子的决定

Decree Regarding the Severe Punishment of the Criminals Who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap Women or Children (passed in 1991 by the National People’s Congress).

**Yancheng maiyin piaochang de jueding**

嚴惩卖淫嫖娼的决定

Decree on the Strict Prohibition Against Prostitution and Whoring (passed in 1991 by the National People’s Congress).

**Yixinglian baquan**

异性恋霸权

heterosexual hegemony – the societal norm and practice of heterosexuality stigmatizing homosexuality.

**Zhengzhou daxue funüxue yanjiu zhongxin**

郑州大学妇女学研究中心

The Women’s Studies Research Centre, Zhengzhou University (Zhengzhou, Henan 1987).
Zhongguo feizhengfu zuzhi luntan weiyuanhui
中国非政府组织论坛委员会
China NGO Forum Committee (Beijing 28 August 1992).
See feizhengfu zuzhi luntan.

Zhongguo funü
中国妇女
Women of China. Magazine published by the All China Women’s Federation.


Zhongguo funü ganbu guanli xueyuan
中国妇女干部管理学院
The China Administration College for Women Cadres. In 1995 renamed as Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan (中华女子学院) the China Women’s College.

Zhongguo funü lilun yanjiuhui
中国妇女理论研究会
China Women’s Studies Society (Beijing 1999).

Zhongguo funü quanyi baozhangfa
中国妇女权益保障法

Zhongguo funübao
中国妇女报

Zhongguo fuyun
中国妇运
Chinese Women’s Movement. Magazine published by ACWF.
Zhongguo guanli kexue yanjiuyuan funü yanjiusuo
The Women’s Research Institute, the China Academy of Management Science (Beijing, 1988). Predecessor of the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinli zixun fuwu zhongxin).

Zhongguo hunyin jiating yanjiuhui
China Society of Marriage and Family Studies (Beijing, October 1981).

Zhongguo jihua shengyu xiehui

Zhongguo shehui gongzuo jiating kexue zhongxin
The Jinglun Family Centre, the China Association of Social Workers (Beijing 1993).

Zhongguo xinli weisheng xiehui funü jiankang yu fazhan zhuanye weiyuanhui
The Women’s Health Network, the China Mental Health Association (Beijing 1993).

Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan
The China Women’s College (Beijing 1949). From 1987 called the China Administration College for Women Cadres (Zhongguo funü ganbu guanli xueyuan 中华 女干部管理学院). Present name since 1995.

Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui
The All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) (3 April 1949).
Web site: http://www.women.org.cn
See difang fulian, Fulian, funühui, Quanguo fulian.
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Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui changwu weiyuanhui
中华全国妇女联合会常务委员会
The Standing Committee of the ACWF (Beijing 1949). The Executive Committee is elected by the National Congress of the ACWF every five years. In turn, the Executive Committee elects the Standing Committee and decides on the members of the national leading body. When the Congress is in recess, the Standing Committee exercises leadership on behalf of the Executive Committee.

Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui zhixing weiyuanhui
中华全国妇女联合会执行委员会
The Executive Committee of the ACWF (Beijing 1949).

Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui
中华全国总工会
The All China Federation of Trade Unions. Short version: Quanguo zong gonghui 全国总工会.

Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui nüzhigong weiyuanhui
中华全国总工会女职工委员会
The All China Federation of Trade Unions Women Workers Committee

Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhixing ‘Tigao funü diwei Neiluobi qianzhanxing zhanlüe’ guojia baogao
中华人民共和国执行‘提高妇女地位内罗比前瞻性战略’国家报告

Zhongjia nü qingnian xiangmu
中加女青年项目
The China-Canada Young Women’s Project (Beijing and Vancouver 1993). The Vancouver sister group continued its work until Autumn of 1995 and the Beijing sister group until late 1996.
Appendix I
Workshop Abstracts

Fang Lian

*Development Projects for Rural Women: The Practice and Reflections of a University Women’s Organization*

This paper describes and analyses development projects for rural women carried out by the Centre for Women’s Studies, Tianjin Normal University (*Tianjin shifan daxue funü yanjiu zhongxin*). The first section of the paper focuses on empowerment of women. Unlike the All China Women’s Federation or other development-oriented organizations, we empower women with intellectual resources (including knowledge, information and ideas). By revealing the social and cultural elements that entrap women in sluggish growth, we aim to arouse rural women’s gender-consciousness and vigilance, help them see their own advantages, seek opportunities, and become subjects of development. The second section explores ways, channels and means that are welcomed by rural women, match the local context, and are sustainable for women’s self-education. The third section discusses how university women’s organizations should carry out development projects and win the support and cooperation of local Women’s Federations and rural communities, while at the same time maintaining their own relative independence and characteristics. Finally, the paper examines the special position of university women’s organization development projects in terms of the following three factors: (1) we have a theoretical research background and have acquired a certain amount of information resources, (2) we are not funded, and (3) we work in our spare time.
Guo Jianmei

The Emergence and Development of Chinese Women’s Organizations: A Case Study of the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services (Beijing daxue falüxuexi funü falü yanjiu yu fuwu zhongxin)

Peking University’s Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, set up in 1995, is the first popular organization in China specifically engaged in researching the legal system as it concerns women. The centre also offers legal advice services. As the Centre’s work involves women’s rights and legal support, and as it is a popular organization, it has attracted attention from all over China in the three years of its operation. From its history we may derive a general idea of how women’s popular organizations (minjian funü zuzhi) exist and develop in China.

This paper is divided into the following sections:

1. The Social Context of the Foundation of the Centre.
2. Characteristics and Operating Approaches of the Centre: As a popular organization specially engaged in legal issues relating to women, the Centre has had its own characteristics and strengths when compared with similar governmental institutions. By making good use of these characteristics and advantages, the Centre has developed a series of working approaches that have proven most appropriate to Chinese society.
3. The Value and Significance of the Centre’s Existence: The three-year history of the Centre indicates that Chinese society needs such an institution and that its development is inevitable.
4. Analysis of the Problem and Obstacles to the Centre’s Development and Their Causes: Though having developed smoothly and accomplished much by taking flexible approaches and techniques, the Centre has nonetheless experienced enormous difficulties and hardships. The existence and development of popular organizations need a better state-subsidized social infrastructure and also a more tolerant social environment.
5. Targets and Strategies for Future Development: The Centre will focus on the upgrading of its comprehensive strength in the fields of management, labour and funding, making itself the leading force when it comes to local women’s organizations’ activities in law.

As the inevitable result of social progress, the ascent of Chinese popular organizations is of great significance. Quite a number of women’s popular
groups have come into being. They are very active and are doing a lot of work. However, when predicting the future growth of these popular organizations, we have to keep in mind that their existence and development will depend on favourable conditions and strong societal backing. China has stepped up its reform in recent years, and great progress and growth can be seen in every aspect. We are quite confident when it comes to pondering the future existence and development of popular organizations. We have started to take action – and where there is action there is hope.

Han Henan

*China’s Social Transformation: A Case Study of the Chongwen District Women’s Federation in Beijing*

This paper is an exploration of modes of women’s work in a society under transition. Women’s organizations in China have undergone unprecedented changes during the reform and open-door policy. In the past, women’s organizations were operated in a top-down, hierarchical manner, with the Women’s Federation at the core. With the reforms many new women’s organizations, such as women’s associations or societies, have been established. They are renewing the old vertical system and are forming a complex network of linkages. Traditional Women’s Federation work to organize, mobilize and educate women is being challenged. Administrative power and top-down issuing of orders is proving to be less and less effective. Without power or funds, the Women’s Federation faces problems from bottom to top, and its development is becoming difficult. The Social Work Department of the China Women’s College (Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan) has been working closely with the Women’s Federation in Chongwen District in Beijing. We have studied and probed the possibility of reforming the work of the Women’s Federation. Researchers and practitioners have united in carrying out professionalized work that is closer to women’s needs. Examples of work are: support groups for single mothers, protection of elderly women’s rights and interests, re-employment of laid-off working women, and employment issues of migrant women workers. My paper gives an account of the changes women’s organizations in Chongwen District have undergone during the reform period. Using a gender (shenhu xingbie) perspective, I also offer an analysis of the projects conducted by the China Women’s College and the Women’s Federation in the Chongwen District community.
Marianne Hester

Organizing against Violence against Women in China
The past decade has seen increasingly public debate and awareness of violence against women in China, including new legislation regarding the Protection of Women (1992), and both research and practice regarding domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape are in the process of developing. Violence against women, and domestic violence in particular, was initially explained by the Chinese as arising from the ‘traditional’ and feudal view of women. Yet it is also argued that the socio-economic changes of the 1980s and 1990s have led to an increase in such violence. Chinese writers and researchers thus differ in their views regarding the extent to which traditional views and gender inequalities are still current within modern Chinese society, and the ways in which it is the stress of a rapidly changing society or perhaps ‘contamination’ from outside that may be resulting in increased violence and abuse. With regard to action, women have responded in a variety of ways, providing support services and activities aimed at women experiencing violence within the family, at work and elsewhere. While feminists in many Western countries have, for example, argued for and established refuges so that women may leave violent partners, this response has not been considered appropriate in China: the massive resource implications, and issues related to housing and divorce makes this an almost impossible route to take. Women in China have responded to violence against women by developing hotlines and advice services. This paper examines some of these developments, focusing in particular on state-sanctioned and other discourses concerning violence against women, and the different responses from the ACWF, the new non-governmental organizations and academics.

Jude Howell

Rethinking the State and Gender: Challenges from Below
The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to reflect more generally on the usefulness of state and non-state women’s organizations for bringing about changes in gender relations; and second, to explore the particular challenges to the ACWF from new non-state women’s organizations in the reform period. It is argued that rapid socio-economic change has led to a pluralization and diversification of organizations mediating between the state and society. This in turn has put pressure on traditional intermediary organizations such as the ACWF to adapt. The main constraint on the pace and extent of change in such organizations is the complex
relationship they have with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The future effectiveness of the Women’s Federation will depend not only on how it renegotiates its ties to the Party but also on how it defines itself in relation to new women’s organizations.

**Huang Yan**

*Opportunity and Challenge: A Case Study of the Sunshine Lunch Service*

In the transition from planned to market economy many workers are confronted with the problems of redundancy. Losing one’s job is no doubt a painful experience. For women workers in cities and counties, whose age is between 35 and 45, the blow is particularly harsh. However, this is as much an opportunity as a challenge. It forces those women who are not willing to give up their pursuit for personal values to reflect on the true meaning of women’s emancipation. This will bring forth an awakening of their female subjectivity and collective awareness. They can then actively organize themselves and search for opportunities to fully realize their individual potential. My paper adopts a case-study approach to examine the possible positive impacts of redundancy and re-employment in awakening Chinese urban women’s female subjectivity and collective consciousness, and their self-initiated organizing at a grass-roots level. I also analyse how sediments of traditional Chinese culture can possibly influence those self-initiated women’s organizations in their development into long-lasting, vibrant grass-roots organizations favourable for nurturing an awareness of equality and democracy among women.

**Astrid Lipinsky**

*Reinventing the Grass-roots: Structure and Organization of Women’s Federation Work in Rural Hebei*

Rural organizing and rural activities of the ACWF are different from those of the urban Women’s Federation. Rural women’s organizing is probably less progressive in Western eyes, but it concerns the great majority of Chinese women. Rural women’s organization is a new focus of state initiatives in the countryside, as China is faced with urban migration and the need to secure agricultural production for feeding a growing population. Using southern Hebei’s remote and still mainly agrarian Ninglin County as an example, the paper will examine Women’s Federation personnel, cadre careers and recruitment mechanisms from the county down to
township levels. Formal educational requirements, age structure, workload and recent changes within those are discussed. What role do Western donors play in the process of innovating local Women’s Federation structures? Regional variations may suggest a certain independence of local Federation structures with regard to the Women’s Federation at a central and provincial level. The paper also considers a growing dependency of central levels on information and case studies from below.

Village-level women’s organizing is central to this paper. Contacting the villages and recruiting so-called ‘directors of women’s affairs’ (funü zhuren) are described and measured against the standards each village sets up for a women’s director. Their standing in the village leadership is discussed by comparing their salaries with those of their male colleagues.

County – village and township – village relations, while concentrating on the implementation of state policies, can provide channels for participation from below. Village-level female leadership positions are an opportunity for acquiring leadership skills and for building a collective female identity by organizing women into small groups.

Liu Guanghua

The Physical and Psychological Health of Women – Values and Practice of the Huaguang Women’s College (Guangxi Nanning huaguang nüzi xuexiao)

The Huaguang Women’s College in Guangxi province is a non-profit private school that makes use of social power to offer specialized education for women. It was established in June 1994. All of its volunteer workers are women, and the target of education is women as well. In the early days, major efforts were made to raise women’s consciousness on gender issues, and to provide psychological counselling for women. Then, from the second half of 1996 onwards, the College began to carry out research projects.

This paper will describe and analyse the activities of the College. First, I will argue that the Huaguang Women’s College is a genuine women’s NGO. Second, I will describe the development and content of the educational programme. Third, I will discuss the role of media workers who are involved as College activists and present the media research carried out by the College. Fourth, I will present the research on sex workers in which the College is involved. Finally, I will discuss and analyse the changes in values and practices which the College and its volunteers have undergone through our work. With a view to developing
women’s physical and psychological health, the College has gone through a process of continually improving its values and orientations. It has changed from maintaining a distance from women to coming close, from giving like a saviour to recognizing that all women have the subjectivity to rescue, help, and acquire for themselves physical and psychological health, from working with mainstream communities to working with marginal communities, from being overly relaxed and abstract to being practical and concrete in attitude, and from showing a gesture of care to genuinely believing in equality of moral quality of all women. All this is evident of the difficult changes in the volunteers’ value systems.

Kimberley Manning

*The Ties That Bind: Gender and ‘Guanxi’ in Women’s Organizing*

One of the most popular areas of study in Chinese politics is the influence of *guanxi* [contacts, connections, personal networks] and factional alliances on elite decision-making. Indeed, while disagreement remains about the degree to which informal networking plays in the current era, all scholars acknowledge the continuing importance of personalized relationships during this critical time of economic, social and political change. Except for Mayfair Yang’s work on *guanxi*, however, no attempt has been made to explore the gendered implications of personal networking in China. Given the emergence of new forms of women’s organizations in China and recent grass-roots changes in the ACWF, more must be understood about the way in which gendered networking has influenced and continues to influence the way in which women organize in China today.

Using biographies, ACWF and Party documentation, and historical primary source materials, I will argue that in the early years of the People’s Republic of China gendered norms tied elite women and men Party leaders into symbiotic, hierarchical alliances. Deng Yingchao and Cai Chang, Vice-Chair of the ACWF, for example, participated in the informal networks of their planner-husbands, Zhou Enlai and Li Fuchun. Rather than analyzing ACWF policy decisions on the basis of women’s subservience to a patriarchal state, therefore, it is necessary to see the way in which decisions in these early years emerged out of the efforts of husband-wife teams. With the role of the ‘elder sisters’ all but passed away in the 1990s, it is important to ask what kind of legacy this kind of gendered networking has left for women organizing today. Do important personal
ties still exist across Federation and Party lines? Are women scholar-activists (both within and outside the Federation) able to influence state leaders informally as did some of their male intellectual counterparts in the 1980s? What might some of the advantages and disadvantages be to continuing to cultivate informal ties? These are some of the questions I will ask, and to which I shall attempt to offer preliminary answers.

Min Dongchao

The Continuing Process: Translating the Words ‘Feminism’ and ‘Gender’ into Chinese

With the new flow of Western and global feminist thought into China in the 1990s, cross-cultural exchanges have become an increasingly important issue for women’s studies in China. However, we should be warned that many of those ‘exchange’ projects are in fact one-way cultural exchanges. That is, Western information flows into China, but there is not a flow in the opposite direction. The challenge faced by women’s studies in China is to establish alliances in response to the concept of globalization, while retaining its own identity at the same time.

Two events of translation that happened in the last two years have caused me to think more seriously on the above problems. I realized that issues of translation are becoming more important, and more complex, in cultural exchange projects of women’s studies in China. What puzzles me is the question of what exactly we should pay attention to in the context of translation? Is translation just about ‘finding the right words’? Or is there something beyond words? If there is, what is it?

In my workshop paper, I associate concepts from Translation Studies with theoretical ideas from Cultural Studies and Feminist thought. I use debates on the translating of the words ‘feminism’ and ‘gender’ into Chinese in the 1990s as the core of my analysis. The notion of ‘translation’ operates on two levels. The first is the literal level, which is concerned with practical discussions on translation materials. The second level is metaphorical, and involves debates on issues of understanding which take place among Chinese women from the ACWF, the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS), and within academic circles. Those debates are concerned with how Chinese women’s past should be ‘translated’ into the present, and how to handle translations between two cultures and two languages.
Irene Tong

What do They Teach at Women’s Cadre Schools? An Outsider’s Perspective

Women’s studies and research have been a visible development in China in the era of reform. They mainly exist in key universities and within the ACWF system. They gained much legitimacy and publicity on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. One wonders, however, about the extent to which the achievements in this area have impacted on, or ‘trickled down’ to non-intellectuals and to people outside the Women’s Federations.

It would not be illogical to expect that the women’s federations would extend women’s studies and research to the process of nurturing future women leaders via their networks of women’s cadre schools. These schools were set up in each province to train women cadres who might or might not belong to the ACWF system. The training was highly formal and structured, with designated textbooks and syllabi. The headmistress and teachers in each school were all hired by the provincial Women’s Federation. That means the latter was in a position to affect the content and style of teaching.

This presentation draws mainly from my observations of a women’s cadre school in one of the ‘inland’ provinces of China, supplemented by my observations in Guangzhou. Judging from the curriculum – both formal and hidden – I was left with the impression that the majority of the teachers have yet to be informed by the developments in women’s studies and research, and hence few insights from women’s studies have been imparted to the women cadres. Even if there had been such transfer of knowledge, its effects could easily have been cancelled by other components in the curriculum, and by other structural factors. I would conclude that what was being taught at women’s cadre schools not only served as a reflection of the state of women’s studies in China but also as an indicator of the change and continuity experienced in the ACWF system itself.

Wang Xingjuan

Social Change in China and the Role and Development of Chinese NGOs

The Non-governmental organization (NGO) is a relatively new and yet important concept in China. The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Centre (Beijing hongfeng funü xinlin zixun fuwuzhongxin), which is
an NGO, was founded in October 1988 in Beijing. My paper gives a brief history of the Centre, and explains the various types of work it has carried out in society during the reform period. This work includes:

1. Setting up an Expert Hotline on legal and gender issues
2. Staffing the Hotline with well-trained volunteers
3. Setting up a Singles’ Weekend Club (*Danshen zhounuo julebu*)
4. Carrying out research on legal and women-related issues, as well as making recommendations to the government
5. Setting up a hotline for elderly women
6. Setting up the Ark Family Centre (*Fangzhou jiating zhongxin*) – a family centre for single parents
7. Providing education on health and birth control for women
8. Training hotline counsellors from other cities and provinces in China
9. Helping poor women in Pinggu County to set up rabbit farms

The Centre was initiated by a group of female intellectuals who raised the funds for its establishment. It has never received a penny from the Chinese government. Apart from providing hotline services for women, the Centre also collects and analyses information gathered from the hotlines, and the results of its findings are made public.

**Sharon Wesoky**

**Symbiotic Discourses and the Contemporary Chinese Women’s Movement**

In the course of the development of a multiplicity of types of women’s organization in post-Mao China, and particularly in the 1990s, new discursive forms have also been introduced into the Chinese women’s movement. While these forms, particularly evidenced in the expansion of the issue-areas addressed by women’s movements, have especially been introduced from the context of the ‘international’ women’s movement, they have been adopted into the Chinese context not as subversive discourses, but in a symbiotic relationship with statist impulses. In other words, issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and reproductive health are localized into more conventional Chinese discourses on women’s issues. Although the leading forces in the introduction of these issues are usually ‘non-governmental’ forms of women’s group, the introduction of such issues has, over time, also expanded the range of questions that the more official-level ACWF is interested in addressing.
In this paper, I will explore some of the newer discourses in the Chinese women’s movement, particularly those on sexual harassment and domestic violence, to show the ways that discourses of the international women’s movement are adapted into local Chinese circumstances, and the ways in which notions of cultural hybridity and cultural relativism are mediated in the actual practices of a social movement existing in a non-democratic context.

Xie Lihua

How the Women’s Federation Faces Challenges from the Market Economy

After two decades of reform, China is moving from a planned to a market economy. With this enormous social transformation, the economy has become more diversified, thereby creating a variety of social interests. The result is that a diversity of women’s interest groups has emerged in China.

During the time of planned economy, the ACWF represented a rather homogenous target group of women. Women could be classified as urban or rural based on their household registration. They could also be classified as ‘white’ or ‘blue-collar’ women if the division was based on education level. However, the situation is very different now. The market economy has provided women with greater access to employment. Township enterprises have employed a great number of women workers, migrant women workers account for one-third of the highly mobile work force which flows from rural areas into cities, many women work in private enterprises or joint venture businesses, or become owners of individual private enterprises themselves, while yet others have become sex workers who solicit customers into buying drinks, food and sex. In the meantime, industrial structural reform has created more and more laid-off women workers from state-owned enterprises.

Faced with this diversity of groups of women, the ACWF must change the top-down working mode that was typical of the planned economy, and multiple modes of organizing must be created to meet women’s different needs. The entire administrative structure that moves from top to bottom should be changed into a network of women based on horizontal linkages and mutual support. A strategy which suits the market economy ought to be introduced into the Women’s Federation. Whether the government funds the Federation or not, and whether the Federation should be considered an NGO or not, I personally think is irrelevant.
Zhu Li

**The Economy of Mosques and Monasteries Managed by Women**

This paper presents a case study of the Beidajie Women’s Mosque of Zhengzhou city, and the Xiangshan (Buddhist) Monastery of Baofeng county, both in Henan province. My tentative conclusions are: ever since the religious policies were put into effect in the 1980s, women have organized themselves on their own initiative, and they have played a significant role in reconstructing mosques and monasteries. They have displayed impressive management skills in running the economies of the religious sites that were rebuilt under their charge. Some of those self-initiated women’s groups have been endorsed by government departments concerned with religious affairs.

Because of their distinctive religious backgrounds, the mosque and monastery studied here display different modes of economic management. The Beidajie Women’s Mosque has developed complete financial independence from the men’s mosque, but its management structure is modelled on that of the men’s mosque. However, women’s economic management of Xiangshan Monastery has been innovative. Historically, the Monastery came under the exclusive control of male abbots. Now about twenty nuns (who, it must be noted, hold only secondary ranks in the hierarchy of leadership status) manage a number of the Monastery’s main halls. These have their own independent accounts and are thus treated as self-managed organizations. The abbot is the most senior-ranked person in charge of the Monastery, but his authority is nominal. Furthermore, nuns have been able to join the Monastery Management Committee. The Monastery Management Committee is an official organization recognized by the government, and such membership grants religious women leaders important legal status.
Appendix II
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Note: The terms All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and Women’s Federation are often used interchangeably in the text, although they do have differences in meaning in certain circumstances. The two names have been used in the index following their use in the text, but readers are advised to look under both headings.

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