

NEGOTIATING CHANGE: THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
NEGOTIATING CHANGE: THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
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Dissertation Director:

Richard Wilson

What have given rise to the emergence of a large number of self-initiated women's organizations in China since the 1990s? How did these organizations interact with the Chinese state in a non-democratic political system? My case study of the contemporary Chinese women's movement tests the utility of the political process theories originally developed in the context of advanced industrial democracies. I found the three factors identified by the political process model—openings in the political opportunity structure, mobilization structures and framing processes can explain the emergence and development of the Chinese women's movement to a large degree. Yet the fact that this movement has existed in a context that is characterized by the continuing dominance of the party-state in society also calls for our attention to many dynamics that are not common in most Western social movements. Generally speaking, as a response to the structural biases in the classic political process model, my research has suggested that all these three factors are neither static nor invariant, and they are shaped by the strategic

considerations and choices of movement activists who are constantly in interactions with other players, especially the state.

My dissertation on the Chinese women's movement also contributes to a greater understanding of state-society relations in contemporary China. I contend that we should not view the interactions between these women's organizations and the state in the light of conceptualizations such as civil society and corporatism, which provide only a broad overarching picture of contemporary state-society relationships in China, but fail to capture the underlying nuanced dynamics in a highly contingent and complex transforming process which China is now undergoing. Alternatively, I argue that the degree of autonomy from the state differs considerably from one organization to another. More importantly, these organizations and the activists within them have made strategic choices to create the best linkage, whether it be more autonomous or more dependent, between each individual organization and the state.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **A New Women's Movement and Contemporary State-Society Relations in China**

The question of how ordinary people organize themselves and promote social change in a collective way in non-democratic political systems is always a fascinating puzzle for students of political science. When such studies do exist, they often focus on the relationship of these organizing activities to the failure or success of democratization and to their role in the democratization process as found in many studies of Latin America, the formerly communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Although we usually find relatively few large-scale open protests in repressive systems, it is low-level everyday resistance and activism that constantly exists as an implicit challenge to the values and institutions of these societies. Such collective action does not seek to challenge the overall political order; yet it builds new identities, creates new avenues for social participation, transforms political cultures and even engages in symbolic politics. How do we account for this kind of collective action in non-democratic contexts? My research on women's organizing in China provides a better understanding of non-disruptive modes of contentious collective action and its implications for the development of state-society relationships in contemporary China.

## Research Context

From the late 1970s and the early 1980s onwards, the significant withdrawal of the state from society and the gradual emergence of a realm of social and economic activities not directly controlled by the state have greatly changed the organization of society in China. The work unit system as a form of the state's vertical control structure has been gradually and partially replaced by the development of new social structures and organizational forms. This development can be found in two major areas: (1) the emergence of horizontal groups in associational activities, and (2) the development of autonomous quasi-government organizations—village self-government—in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> The first area is the focus of this research.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of associations in China since the early 1980s. As of 1992, there were 1,400 nationwide associations, 19,600 provincial-level associations, 160,000 county-level associations, and countless associations below the county level or within large work units.<sup>2</sup> In particular, this project aims to focus on women's growing organizing activities in the People's Republic of China since the 1990s when more space was seemingly available for organizing and maneuvering than for other social categories such as factory workers. Given the claimed ideological commitment of the regime to gender equality and the perceived safeness of women's issues to the regime, women's organizations were left with greater autonomy and larger social space to conduct their activities. As a result, Chinese women's groups have become the first social

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<sup>1</sup> Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy after Tiananmen* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "Corporatism in China: A Developmental State in an Eastern Asian Context," in Barrett L. McCormick and Jonathan Unger (eds.), *China after Socialism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 105.

groups in China that have broad and direct connections with their counterparts in foreign countries.

Chinese women's organizing activities can be found in most of the major initiatives and movements of twentieth century China. After its founding in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced a policy of mobilizing peasant and working-class women. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, the CCP emphasized the importance of drawing as many women as possible into production, political activities, and support work for the Red Army. In the early 1930s, in the Jiangxi Soviet area where the CCP had its earliest experience in governing, an activist agenda on women's rights, especially in marriage, was introduced. The subsequent Yan'an period (1937-1947) saw some retrenchment in the implementation of this agenda since the CCP, struggling for survival in the anti-Japanese war and the civil war, tried to consolidate its support among the poor peasantry who resisted strongly any attempts to dismantle the traditional Confucian family model. Nevertheless, during the same period, women still played a major role in rural production and in local governance, taking the place of absent men and finding some new openings in the policies of the border regions.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after the communist takeover of power in 1949, the new regime adopted a top-down approach to the issue of women's organizing and created a single nationwide women's organization as the solution to both women's liberation and the party's need for mass mobilization among women. Before the reforms of the 1980s, the Women's Federation was the only women's organization in China since any independent organizing for women was prohibited. As a mass organization, the All-China Women's

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive analysis of the CCP's approach to women's liberation and women's role between the 1920s and the 1940s, see Elizabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp.185-222.

Federation (ACWF) has had to act in the dual task of mobilizing mass support for CCP policies and protecting and promoting women's interests. Consequently, it has been caught in the conflict between these two goals ever since its foundation in 1949. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the ACWF had played an important role in mobilizing women for production, mass campaigns and political participation in the public domain. It had also taken the lead in marriage and family reforms, in challenging traditional gender stereotypes, and in uniting the diverse interests and priorities of women with different social backgrounds. On the other hand, when there was a conflict between the ACWF's gender interests and the interests of the party-state, the interests of the former had to be subordinated to the priorities of the state even though government policies were detrimental to women's interests.<sup>4</sup>

Emerging in the backdrop of economic reforms and China's opening to the outside world since the 1980s, a wide range of women's organizations have developed in response to the contradictory effects that came about with the gradual expansion of the market economy and the significant withdrawal of the state from society. On the one hand, Chinese women have started to enjoy greater autonomy and other economic benefits from economic development. On the other hand, the new era has also brought about many new problems and made some of the previously existing problems more visible. There were increasing incidents of trafficking in women, of purchased and forced marriages, of intense pressures on women brought about by the state's rigorous enforcement of birth control, and associated problems such as female infanticide and the abuse of women who gave birth to daughters. Prostitution and pornography became more

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<sup>4</sup> For such examples, see Naihua Zhang with Wu Xu, "Discovering the positive within the negative: the women's movement in a changing China," in Amrita Basu (ed.), *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp.30-31.

prominent in those areas experiencing the rapid development of a market economy. Marketization and privatization of the economy also raised concerns about discrimination against women in employment and the increasing rate of dropout by girls from school. All in all, these problems revealed that, “structural changes since 1949, primarily in the form of women entering the paid labor force, had not really been accompanied by a fundamental change in gender relations after all”.<sup>5</sup>

Facing both challenges and opportunities, starting from 1984 in Shanghai, and then in other big or middle-sized cities, professional women’s organizations became active by mobilizing career women for quality promotion, socializing and mutual learning. These organizations were mostly concentrated in coastal urban areas, and membership is automatic by virtue of employment in the professional sphere. Examples are the national-level Chinese Women’s Mayors’ Association and provincial and municipal level organizations, such as the Capital Women Journalists’ Association. By 1989, there were over two thousand women’s associations of this nature in China.<sup>6</sup> They were initiated by, and have been under the immediate supervision of, the Women’s Federation given that elections of their committees for policy-making and all critical decisions have to win the ACWF’s approval. In their study of civil society in China, Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan categorized these professional women’s organizations as a part of the “incorporated” sector, which “reflect an attempt by the state to keep control of newly emerging interests and channel them into a body that can be monitored and contained.” Thus, the capacity of these organizations to become fora to articulate women’s interests

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<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women’s Movement* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Jin Yihong, “The All China Women’s Federation: Challenges and Trends,” in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 131.

and increase their participation in society was limited.<sup>7</sup> However, even the Women's Federation at its various levels experienced significant changes during this period and had made itself a more faithful representative of "women's interests" rather than a mere mouthpiece for government policies. For example, the Women's Federation had begun to establish its own research departments to conduct research on women's problems, formulate solutions and recommend policies.

Starting from the late 1980s, the Chinese women's movement has experienced a significant widening and diversification of its organizational forms. The early 1990s especially saw a peak in the formation of bottom-up women's organizations, most of which were totally independent of the Women's Federation in terms of personnel and sources of funding. These organizations have been actively engaged in addressing the subordination of women, recognizing gendered experiences and promoting the interests and welfare of women. However, this new wave of more autonomous women's organizations remains largely urban-based and intellectual-based, even though they try to address the needs of women in the wider female population who have been marginalized and subjugated in various ways, often as a consequence of economic reforms. Most of the initiators of these endeavors are highly educated professional women, many of whom work in the state apparatus, and therefore can use their status, connections and relatively abundant material resources to foster and set up organizing initiatives.<sup>8</sup> According to Wesoky, among 50 women's movement activists she interviewed in Beijing, except for the secretary of one NGO, all of them had at least college-level education. Ten of them

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<sup>7</sup> White Gordon, Jude Howell, and Xiaoyuan Shang, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Many activists are journalists and university teachers, and both higher education institutions and the media in China are run and controlled by the state.

had Master's degrees and four had doctorates.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, for other social groups that are less resourceful and do not have webs of elite connections, such as female workers and rural women, the possibilities for self-organization are still limited. This is vividly illustrated by the case of a group of laid-off women workers who attempted to register an organization in the late 1990s but failed. In her discussion of this case, Cecilia Milwertz has attributed their failure to their position in the non-intellectual sector of the society and consequent lack of established contacts and connections with party-state institutions or officials.<sup>10</sup>

There are numerous discussions and questions about the nature of these women's organizations, the biggest controversy concerning with whether they can be classified as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The concept of non-governmental organizations was introduced into China with China's hosting of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and its concurrent NGO forum. The concept soon gained popularity among newly founded women's organizations and even the ACWF itself. Many of the women's groups established in the 1990s defined themselves as NGOs in order to differentiate themselves from other women's organizations that were initiated and supported by the party-state. Since 1993, even the Women's Federation has started to refer to itself as a non-governmental organization. Yet, at the same time, these women's organizations in China have been constantly challenged by the criticism that Chinese women's organizations are not "real NGOs".

Despite the popularity of the NGO title among Chinese women activists and scholars, the ambiguity surrounding the NGO concept greatly limits its explanatory

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<sup>9</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Cecilia Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 133.

power when applied to the Chinese context.<sup>11</sup> According to Zhang, many newly established women's organizations in China adopt different definitions of status and move freely between them in order to obtain resources from different sources. For example, the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family "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." In such cases, the activists are not confined by the designation of their organizations, but rather use a variety of organizational categories to advance their causes.<sup>12</sup> Even though these organizations might not measure up to the yardstick of "authentic" or "genuine and pure" NGOs, these women's organizing activities have played a decisive role in negotiating social and cultural transformations in Chinese society. More importantly, despite the short history of the contemporary Chinese women's movement in its current form, its very existence provides important evidence of the changes that are underway in Chinese state-society relations.

Hence, an analysis using the NGO conceptual framework alone to evaluate Chinese women's organizing activities is inappropriate due to the specificity of the Chinese context. It hinders rather than facilitates our understanding of the complexity of women's organizing in China. The variety of modes of registration, practices and strategies adopted by these women's groups points to the need to shift our focus from the formal structures of organizations to the diversity of strategies and practices within these organizations and between them and the state in the process of organizing women to

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<sup>11</sup> Naihua Zhang (2001, pp.162-169) has provided an excellent criticism of the utility of the concept of NGO.

<sup>12</sup> Naihua Zhang, "Searching for 'Authentic' NGOs: The NGO Discourse and Women's Organizations in China," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 169.

address gender and other inequalities in society. This emergent realm of women's organizing cannot simply be accounted for by a single universal and static category of NGO; instead, we need to pay attention to the unevenness in this embryonic associational realm, being composed as it is of layers which differ widely in their own nature and in the nature of their relationship with the party-state. Therefore, I will ground my research on the specific processes from which these women's organizations emerged and the various strategies and practices with which they have engaged with state institutions in China.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the NGO concept into China as a result of preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women and its concurrent NGO forum created an important alternative for women activists who seek to challenge the CCP state-centered, top-down organizational approach to women's issues through a party-led mass organization—the ACWF. As a consequence, we cannot ignore the contribution of the concept of “non-governmental organization” to the growth of self-initiated organizing activities among Chinese women. A leading article written by the editorial department of the ACWF magazine, *Chinese Women's Movement*, in October 1997 illustrates well the inspiration and empowerment that came from this concept. The article first admitted, “the convention of the Fourth World Conference on Women...popularized the concept of NGO to an extremely broad scope and degree.” The author then suggested the need to describe the ACWF “as an NGO” that has a “good partner relationship” with the government.<sup>13</sup> The effort of the ACWF to reposition itself by taking advantage of the NGO concept and defining its function and relation with the state as “partnership” rather than the old hierarchical relationship strongly indicates the considerable impact that this

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<sup>13</sup> Naihua Zhang, “Searching for ‘Authentic’ NGOs”, in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 171.

concept has had on Chinese women activists and the women's movement. I will further discuss the dissemination of the NGO discourse and its impact in the women's movement in China in Chapter 4.

Therefore, rather than applying a universal and essentialized NGO concept to analyze the newly formed women's organizations in the late 1980s and the 1990s, I think it is more appropriate to define them as "self-initiated women's organizations"<sup>14</sup> as opposed to official mass organizations initiated by the state, such as the ACWF.<sup>15</sup> Most of these organizations were affiliated with universities and other types of supervisory units, instead of being under the immediate supervision of the ACWF. Moreover, they received funding from all kinds of foundations and enterprises, which marked the end of the monopoly over the supply of resources by one institution—the ACWF. Most important, these organizations are voluntarily initiated from below by the activists themselves. Structurally, these organizations are still required to register with the government as either an associate or a subordinate of a state institution and subject to various restrictive laws and regulations. Yet, activists have set up groups and organizations on their own and have organized activities in the name of these self-initiated women's organizations. They have also sought independent sources of funding to support their organization's activities. More significantly, through their organizing activities, they have been able to introduce innovative understandings, thinking and

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<sup>14</sup> Liu Bohong (Liu Bohong, 2001), the deputy director of the Women's Studies Institute of the ACWF, defined two types of women's NGOs in contemporary China: the new NGOs are self-initiated organizations whereas the old NGOs are other-initiated either by the government, or by governmental, administrative and professional units. Given Liu's affiliation with the ACWF, it is understandable that she adopted the official stance to characterize the ACWF as an NGO. Nevertheless, her emphasis on the self-initiated aspect of new forms of women's organizations in contemporary China, as opposed to the ACWF, is insightful.

<sup>15</sup> The term "NGO" will be used only when activists themselves use the term. On these occasions, they use the term to convey bottom-up activity and a spirit of activism and independent action, and to distinguish their organizations from the organizations and institutions established and led by the party-state.

knowledge that challenge dominant discourses on women and gender issues. Regardless of whether these organizations are institutionally affiliated to, register with, or set up within an established party-state organization or not, they are so defined that organizing activities and the agency of activists, rather than the structural and operational autonomy of these organizations from the state, are emphasized.

A few important questions can be raised about the emergence and development of the contemporary Chinese women's movement. What has given rise to the emergence of a large number of self-initiated women's organizations? What is the nature of these organizations and what aims do they have, and how have they worked to attain their goals? In what ways have the state and these popular organizations interacted with each other in contemporary China? To what extent have these organizations created pressures for redefining the state-society relationship and produced the basis for establishing a democratic polity? While there are numerous studies of contemporary state-society relationships in China, theorized as civil society or public space<sup>16</sup>, less is known about the processes and actions whereby the activists of those associations--who are at the very core of social and political change—have fostered social change and even transformed the relationship of their organizations with the Chinese party-state. My study will attempt to close this gap in our understanding of the working of state-society relationships in contemporary China by exploring women's organizing activities and their interactions with party-state institutions.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, White, Howell and Shang (1996) and Yang (1999).

## **Literature Review**

My research on Chinese women's organizing since the 1990s draws upon and adds to three areas of inquiry: 1) studies of social movements; 2) the civil society approach; and 3) the corporatism approach. Instead of providing a comprehensive review of each of these three different theoretical frameworks, I will focus on the assumptions and implications of a few key works and show how they relate to and apply to women's organizing activities in contemporary China.

### **Social Movements and the Contemporary Chinese Women's Movement**

There have been occasional attempts to use social movement theories to explore manifestations of confrontational collective actions that emerged after the repression of the 1989 student-led protests, such as various policy-based protests that were organized by workers who were laid-off in the cities and by peasants in villages. However, these protests were more in the nature of individuals rallying to demand satisfaction of their own interests and too isolated to be truly termed as social movements. Can we therefore characterize the organizing activities of contemporary self-initiated women's organizations in China as a women's movement and use social movement theories to examine them?

The conventional view of social movements has generally focused on overt acts that challenge power holders. For instance, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly define social movements as "a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of public displays of that

population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment".<sup>17</sup> Such a definition emphasizes the contentious side of these movements. Kriesi, on the other hand, in his discussion of new social movements, which he characterizes as, "a set of movements that have mobilized since the early seventies in Western Europe", has identified three types: instrumental, subcultural and countercultural.<sup>18</sup> The instrumental social movement involves struggles to obtain collective goods or to avoid collective bads while the subcultural and countercultural ones are identity oriented. The difference between a subcultural social movement and a countercultural one is that the former engages in non-conflictual "authority-oriented actions" while in the latter identity emerges as a consequence of "conflictual interaction with authorities or third parties."<sup>19</sup> Based on this expanded definition of social movements, there is little doubt that women's organizing activities that have emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s in China can be characterized as a movement with a subcultural emphasis. This new type of self-initiated bottom-up organizing features three important elements that qualify them as a subcultural social movement. First, activities are carried out not by one organization, but by a collective of many organizations, groups and followers, which are connected by many fluid links and networks. Second, activists and their organizations are bound together in the sense that they share a common commitment to a common cause. In other words, they all question

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<sup>17</sup> Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, "Contentious Politics and Social Movements," in Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 442.

<sup>18</sup> A list of the major examples of new social movements given by Kriesi includes: the ecology movement and its antinuclear branch; the solidarity movement with its branches for humanitarian aid, political refugees, political prisoners, human rights, and antiracism; the peace movement; the women's movement and the urban autonomous movement.

<sup>19</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 158.

and demand the recognition of various forms of gender inequality and share a collective commitment to action that works to create a change in attitudes, understandings and practices concerning gender issues. Third, while challenging the party-state and its practices regarding women, activists employ non-confrontational modes of action in their efforts to make an impact in terms of new laws as well as changes in the discourse on women in society.

Increasingly scholars of social movements from various countries and different theoretical traditions have come to a consensus about the importance of the same three broad sets of factors that must be explored in analyzing the emergence and development of social movements. These three factors are (1) “the structure of political opportunities and the constraints confronting the movement; (2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal), available to insurgents; and (3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action.”<sup>20</sup> These are also referred to as political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes, respectively. Together, these three concepts constitute the political process model of social movement emergence and development.

The political process framework has become a dominant paradigm in the field of social movement research. However, it has also received much criticism. The most sweeping and prominent critiques probably come from Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, two sociologists who are highly critical of the strong structural bias embedded in the political process model. They find that analysts of social movements face a dilemma

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<sup>20</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald. “Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements.” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

when utilizing the political opportunity thesis in their research: a narrow definition of political opportunities poorly serves cultural movements as well as any movements “that do not target the state as their main opponent”; yet when political opportunities are more broadly defined, it makes the political opportunity thesis trivial or even tautological.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they argue that the effect of political opportunities on movement mobilization is “not invariant, but historically and situationally contingent” and subject to interpretation and construction by movement actors. Similarly, they find the structural bias in the specification of mobilizing structures problematic. Rather than looking upon pre-existing networks, they emphasize that the movement recruitment is a result of a movement’s own activities and the strategic choices of movement activists.<sup>22</sup> They also criticize cultural analysis in the process model which is based solely upon a narrowly defined notion of framing and ignores the interaction between movement framings and the broader culture and, more importantly, many other dimensions of culture. Alternatively, they suggest that we need greater attention to strategic considerations and the choices of activists, cultural meanings and the emotions that define and create the structural factors presented by process theorists.<sup>23</sup>

In another book, Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta further explore the affectual and emotional dimensions of social movements, which they deem as central to our understanding. They argue that emotions are “collective as well as individual, and they permeate large-scale units of social organization”. More importantly, they argue that

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<sup>21</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, “Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory,” in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp.6-10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

concepts such as frames and mobilization structures “help to explain movements precisely because of the emotional dynamics hidden within them”.<sup>24</sup>

Resonating with the criticism of the political process paradigm’s focus on the structural and static sides of contention, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have recently proposed some important revisions of this classic social movement agenda to introduce dynamic interactive elements. In their view, social movements and other forms of contentious politics, should be viewed as “social processes” that are not merely expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture.<sup>25</sup> They further claim that in any episode of contentious politics, they can always locate “some combination of mobilization, political identity formation and polarization, three very general but distinct processes”. Moreover, these processes can always be causally traced back to recurrent different combinations and sequences of three broadly defined mechanisms--environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms--at work according to which sector of contention or which period of the cycle is to be examined.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, they try to identify the dynamic mechanisms in the mobilization process of social movements, which always involve collective efforts at social construction and interpretation and interactive actions among movement actors as well as their opponents and other players in the contentious situation.<sup>27</sup> They recognize that political opportunities must be perceived and interpreted as such, instead of being looked upon as objective structural factors. They call

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<sup>24</sup> Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, “Introduction: Why Emotions Matter,” in Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta (eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-28.

<sup>27</sup> Even though, as they have correctly pointed out in their book, contention does not consist only of mobilization and one form of contention—a social movement, here I only discuss their reformulation of the mobilization model since it is most pertinent to my research question, that is, the mobilization process of the women’s movement in China.

attention to the mechanisms by which challengers actively appropriate preexisting networks and organizations and turn them into vehicles of mobilization, instead of creating new organizations from scratch. They also expand their view of framing “to involve the interactive construction of disputes among challengers, their opponents, elements of the state, third parties, and the media”.<sup>28</sup>

The political process paradigm has certainly provided important insights that help explain such variations in social movements as their size, form of organization and degree of success in broader cross-national comparisons. Nevertheless, the findings are largely based on empirical work which compares social movements in stable Western democracies. There has been a relative scarcity of studies of social movements in non-Western contexts. When they do exist, they often tend to concentrate on the relationship of a movement to the failure or success of democratization and its role in the democratization process. Studies of women’s movements have often inherited these same tendencies or biases from the social movement literature.<sup>29</sup>

Prominent political process theorists have admitted that political process theory is a poor guide to the wide variety of forms of contentious politics outside the world of democratic western politics. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly point out that due to built-in affinities with relatively democratic social movements politics, the theory worked much less well when applied to social movements in nondemocratic contexts.<sup>30</sup> Goodwin and Jasper have further argued that even in the context of democratic polities, political process models are not adequate for explaining the emergence of cultural movements as

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<sup>28</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Ray Raka (1999) and Sonia Alvarez (1990).

<sup>30</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.18.

well as any movements that do not target the state as their main opponent.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is a legitimate question to ask whether the classic social movement agenda forged in the context of advanced industrial democracies provides a useful theoretical lens that is applicable to a nondemocratic and nonwestern context such as China even though the contemporary organizing activities of Chinese women do constitute a subcultural social movement. Furthermore, do those considerable conceptual and theoretical revisions proposed by either the proponents or critics of political process theory offer us a better framework for analyzing the origins of the women's movement in contemporary China? If indeed, as both McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly and Goodwin and Jasper have suggested, the mobilization process must be understood as a dynamic and non-invariant process that involves historically shifting and situationally contingent combinations and sequences of mechanisms, then what is the specific combination of the dynamic and interactive mechanisms that gives rise to the particular form of collective action we find in the contemporary women's movement in China? To answer these questions, I will separately examine the utility of each of the constituent components of political process theory—opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing in the context of the contemporary Chinese women's movement.<sup>32</sup>

### *Political Opportunities*

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<sup>31</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory," in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) identify "repertoires of contention" as the fourth component of the classic social movement agenda. However, both McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) and Goodwin and Jasper (2004) suggest that the political process framework /paradigm has three constituent parts as I mentioned above.

The concept of “political opportunities” has become a staple in social movement inquiry. A political opportunity structure is defined by Sidney Tarrow as “consistent...signals to social or political actors which encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements.”<sup>33</sup> According to McAdam, the political opportunity approach views “the timing and fate of movements as largely dependent upon the opportunities afforded insurgents by the shifting institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power.”<sup>34</sup> Mindful of the danger of an overly inclusive definition of political opportunities, McAdam proposes a much narrower conceptualization of political opportunities along four dimensions:<sup>35</sup>

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically under-gird a polity
3. The presence or absence of elite allies
4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression<sup>36</sup>

However, without some conceptual and theoretical modification, such a concept seems to be of little use when used to explain the emergence (vs. the outcome) of a social

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<sup>33</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “States and Opportunities: The Political Structuring of Social Movements,” in Doug MacAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Doug McAdam, “Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Different political opportunity analysts have attempted to disaggregate and operationalize various types of political opportunities. For instance, in addition to these four dimensions, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (2007) also identify “the multiplicity of independent centers of power within regime” as one of crucial features of opportunity structure. I find McAdam’s narrowly defined concept of political opportunities attractive simply because, like Goodwin and Jasper (2004, p.6), I believe that “the more broadly one defines political opportunities, the more trivial (and, ultimately, tautological) the political opportunity thesis becomes”.

movement in a non-democratic political system such as China. On all four dimensions of political opportunity there were no significant shifts in general when the seemingly open atmosphere in the 1980s was closed abruptly by government repression of the Chinese student movement. The subsequent passage of a law intending to place stricter controls on the formation of social groups, *the Management Regulations on the Registration of Social Organizations*, signified a much more circumscribed political atmosphere. Some may argue that the emergence of women's organizing activism can still be viewed as a consequence of a continuing process of a decrease in state power and a corresponding increase in social autonomy in the 1980s which provided favorable signals in terms of political opportunities in general. Even though there has been some evidence of a continuing process of state decline, it is far from sufficient to account for the fact that none of the other potential movements, such as the labor movement or the gay rights movement, have had the same level of development as the women's movement in the 1990s. Thus, without some revisions, this conceptualization of political opportunities has limited explanatory power with regard to the formation of an incipient independent women's movement in Beijing in the 1990s.

Sidney Tarrow has adopted a more situationally specific approach to political opportunities—what he refers to as a “political opportunity structure” (POS)—which emphasizes subnational variations in movement opportunities and allows for the specification of political opportunities for different actors and sectors. He argues that “state elites are far from neutral between different social actors and movements.”<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>37</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “States and Opportunities: The Political Structuring of Social Movements,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 51.

other words, the very same state may provide different political opportunities for fostering the incidence and development of different movements under the same general national opportunity structure. The POS not only varies across countries, but it also varies across issues within a single country; it should be seen as neither static nor permanent across different movements. Given the undemocratic nature of the political system in China, a dynamic conception of the POS as specific to and contingent on a given movement is especially important in order to explain why it was still possible for some social groups such as women to mobilize themselves when the Chinese state repressed other movements. As Yijiang Ding has keenly observed in his evaluation of the political reality in post-Tiananmen China, the regime has become selectively repressive.<sup>38</sup> While in general, the state's propensity for repression does not change much, there is little doubt that the regime has a greater tolerance toward the Chinese women's movement in the 1990s. Yet, the question is still open as to what the specific opportunities that contributed to its relative success are.

Sharon Wesoky provides some insightful modifications to ideas of political opportunity structures by arguing that "there is a need, at least in some cases, to widen the concept of political opportunity structure to embrace other aspects of 'opportunity' facilitating social movement emergence."<sup>39</sup> Some empirical works on social movement in non-western contexts have shown the importance of such a perspective. In her work on the contemporary Russian women's movement, Valerie Sperling introduces the concept of "economic opportunity structure". She defines it at two levels: the first is "the occurrence of rapid, fundamental economic changes in society that may inspire or

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<sup>38</sup> Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy after Tiananmen* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 33.

depress organizing. For instance, increased women's unemployment in economic transition can encourage the creation of women's mutual assistance groups while, on the other hand, it may limit the financial resources available for organizing activities, as occurred in the early 1990s in Russia. The second level is "local infrastructural conditions that facilitate or limit the possibilities for social movement organizing, such as communications costs, the relative cost of outreach techniques, ... , and so on."<sup>40</sup> I find this attention to the possible contributions of economic opportunities to the development of social movements useful for a fuller understanding of movement dynamics in the contemporary Chinese women's movement.

In recent years, some scholars have also started to note the effects of globalization and transnationalism on social movements. Tarrow argues that there needs to be attention not only to national regularities in the state structures in which movements emerge and operate, but also to movements' transnational links.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Keck and Sikkink have noted the emergence of transnational advocacy networks of activists and their influence on the policies of states, international organizations and private actors.<sup>42</sup> Della Porta and Tarrow have explored in their book the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that are at work in the development of transnational collective action. Transnational collective action is defined as "coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international

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<sup>40</sup> Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> Sidney Tarrow, "States and Opportunities: The Political Structuring of Social Movements," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp.1-38.

institutions”.<sup>43</sup> In another book, Tarrow argues that “a dense, triangular structure of relations among states, nonstate actors, and international institutions” produces the opportunities for transnational activists to “engage in collective action at different levels of this system”.<sup>44</sup> By focusing on international interactions involving transnational activists, these scholars extend the analysis of collective action from the domestic arena to the international arena and highlight the growing fusion between domestic and international contention which produces new and differentiated paths of political change. While there is consensus on the multilateral interactions among domestic nonstate actors, states and international actors, these interactions are by no means symmetric, and, more importantly, vary from one movement to another and from one state to another. Thus we must resist the temptation to universalize them. In the case of the Chinese women’s movement, the influence of international actors on a domestic social movement is absolutely more essential than the other way around in explaining the emergence of such a movement.

Nor should the effects of globalization and transnationalism on a given local-level social movement be considered as evenly distributed among each of the three variables of analysis of social movements, “political opportunities,” “mobilization structures”, and “framing processes”. While a diffusion of organizational forms and ideas does in general exist, innovative mobilization structures and framings are largely the result of the strategic actions and choices of local activists. In Chinese context, when the state is the most important political actor and has a formidable capacity to structure political

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<sup>43</sup> Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, “Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction,” in Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (eds.), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 25.

outcomes, I find the alternation of domestic political opportunity structures the best way to examine international influences. Thus, to take international influences into account in the context of the women's movement in China, we need to ask an important question, that is, what are the international influences that have affected the structure of political opportunities in the domestic arena and how?

Sperling mentions several important international factors that have played a significant role in shaping the contemporary Russian women's movement such as the international diffusion of ideas about women's roles and feminism and the transnational diffusion of money.<sup>45</sup> We can certainly find a similarity in how the international diffusion of ideas and the transnational diffusion of money shaped the Chinese women's movement, the latter of which is particularly salient when we consider how the greater availability of foreign funding from international foundations and agencies led to the rise of independent women's organizing activities in the 1990s. In her book, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization*, Wesoky argues that combined with the endogenous political and economic opportunities, two exogenous political and economic opportunities, the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and the introduction of Ford Foundation funding, respectively, led to the development of more independent manifestation of the women's movement during the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> However, as I suggested previously, I adopt a dynamic conception of the POS as specific to and contingent on a given movement. Specifically, in the case of Chinese women's movement, it is not the domestic political and economic opportunities but the international political opportunity provided by the convention of the FWCW that separates the movement from other unsuccessful social movement

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<sup>45</sup> Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1113-155.

mobilization attempts by social groups such as workers and peasants. This movement-specific international political opportunity greatly affected the domestic-level political opportunity structure by not only lessening the state's inclination to repress the women's movement but also creating elite allies for it, and thus created unique openings in the domestic POS, which have ultimately contributed, as I will show in Chapter 2, to a rapid expansion in women's organizing activities in China. Furthermore, the opened POS specific to the women's movement are not static but situationally contingent on and subject to the strategic considerations and construction of those women activists in the movement. This is evidenced by the cooperative strategy chosen by activists while facing the threat of suddenly closing opportunity structures during the course of the FWCW, which I will further discuss in the following chapter.

### *Mobilizing Structures*

There is little doubt about the importance of mobilizing structures for understanding the trajectory of social movements. Two distinct theoretical perspectives have contributed to the research on the organizational dynamics of collective action. One is resource mobilization theory which focuses on "mobilization processes and the formal organizational manifestations of these processes."<sup>47</sup> The other theoretical tradition places more emphasis on a wide range of informal or formal social settings other than social movement organizations (SMOs), which, of course, also play a critical role in facilitating and structuring collective action. They may include informal "structures of everyday life"

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<sup>47</sup> Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.

such as friendship networks, work networks and neighborhoods, “a wide variety of social sites within people’s daily rounds where informal and less formal ties between people can serve as solidarity and communication facilitating structures when and if they choose to go into dissent together.”<sup>48</sup> There also exist more formally organized subgroups that exist within pre-existing organizations or institutions not aimed primarily at movement mobilization such as colleges, churches, voluntary and professional associations. Even the “elements of the state structure itself” may generate mobilization for social movements as McCarthy suggests in his discussion of potential micromobilization contexts.<sup>49</sup> Mario Diani even argues that we should view social movements as “complex and highly heterogeneous network structures”.<sup>50</sup> In this perspective, he thinks that “the informal nature of the networks” differentiates movements from specific organizations since the latter are just “coordinated forms of interaction with some established membership criteria and some patterned mechanisms of internal regulation”. More specifically, informal networks are coordination mechanisms through which “actors (individuals and/or organizations) exchange practical and symbolic resources”. Accordingly, informal networks facilitate mobilization in social movements. Such coordination mechanisms are “not subject to formal regulation” and “the terms of the

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<sup>48</sup> John D. McCarthy, “Constraints and Opportunities in Adopting, Adapting, and Inventing,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 143.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>50</sup> Mario Diani, “Introduction: Social Movements, Contentious Actions, and Social Networks: ‘From Metaphor to Substance’?” in Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1.

exchange and the distribution of duties and entitlements are entirely dependent on the actors' agreement.<sup>51</sup>

In non-democratic contexts such as contemporary China, all the above forms of mobilization structures have more or less provided mobilizing vehicles for the Chinese women's movement. However, pre-existing social networks or organizational ties are particularly important since resources for creating any new social organizations are generally poor. Moreover, other forms of movement mobilization that do not require mobilization structures, such as the use of leaflets and television advertising by nonstate actors, can be easily perceived by a repressive state as a threat to its authority. The utilization of networks for successful mobilization not only provides valuable resources and information that facilitate mobilization, but also works as an effective strategy to evade unnecessary governmental intervention despite the fact that it also largely limits the scale of mobilization. Even though these ties or networks are pre-existing, they are not necessarily static "structures". Instead, they are subject to the efforts of movement activists to strategically and creatively appropriate and turn them into vehicles of mobilization.<sup>52</sup> As McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have convincingly argued, the active appropriation of existing networks and organizational ties permits oppressed or resource-

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<sup>51</sup> Mario Diani, "Networks and Social Movements: A Research Programme," in Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 301-302.

<sup>52</sup> Goodwin and Jasper (2004) criticize the informal collective vehicles such as social networks and ties by arguing that these pre-existing ties can just as easily drive people away from social movements as encourage activism (p. 20). The criticism itself is valid. However, I think there is no need to abandon the concept at all. The criticism itself is exactly the reason why we need to address agency of activists and emphasize that it is their active involvement in creative organizational work that transforms these networks and makes mobilization possible.

poor populations to overcome their organizational deficits in creating new organizations from scratch.<sup>53</sup>

While scholars of social movements tend to focus on the horizontal dimension of networks among participants that can promote group solidarity and participation in collective action, Fayong Shi and Yongshun Cai have pointed to the vertical social networks of collective action participants formed with government officials as a significant mechanism that contributed to a case of successful civil resistance in Shanghai. In the case of Chinese women's movement, I will further argue that vertical networks between activists and officials but also informal networks between these activists and state institutions are equally important and may contribute to the success of organizing activities among Chinese women. What is particularly crucial in this case is the role of a pre-existing state dependent and controlled mass organization, the All-China Women's Federation, which has not only provided activists with necessary resources and network ties for mobilization but also created a unique connectedness between the movement and the state.<sup>54</sup> More significantly, I will emphasize that the vertical networks are contingent upon the active efforts of activists who strategically and creatively exploit and transform mechanisms of control into vehicles of mobilization.

What is also unique in the Chinese case is that activists have had to overcome an extra institutional obstacle created by the state to hinder their successful mobilization, that is, restrictive regulations towards social organizations that are initiated from below.

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<sup>53</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Fayong Shi and Yongshun Cai, "Disaggregating the State: Networks and Collective Resistance in Shanghai," *The China Quarterly* 186 (June), p. 316.

During this process, activists in China have innovatively developed various forms of organizations that are strategically optimal for their ongoing activities.

### *Framing Processes*

The analysis of framing processes brings us to the cultural dimension of social movements. Movements are not merely passive results of unanticipated events or structural arrangements. Rather, movement organizations and actors are actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists and bystanders. An essential task in this work is to “frame social problems and injustices in a way that convinces a wide and diverse audience of the necessity and utility of collective action to redress them.”<sup>55</sup> Snow and Benford define framing as signifying work in which movements “assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”<sup>56</sup> Frames themselves are “emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs that inspire meaning and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns.”<sup>57</sup> Effective frames must provide two essential functions: the diagnostic and prognostic functions. The former is concerned with identifying the problem and its source

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<sup>55</sup> John D. McCarthy, Jackie Smith, and Mayer N. Zald, “Accessing Public, Media, Electoral, and Governmental Agendas,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 291.

<sup>56</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sidney Tarrow (eds.), *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research across Cultures* (Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, 1988), p. 198.

<sup>57</sup> Robert D. Benford, “An Insider’s Critique of Social Movement Framing Perspective,” *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1997), p. 416.

whereas the latter suggests an appropriate strategy for problem resolution.<sup>58</sup> Through framing, activists make an issue ideationally and empirically salient for more general audiences and foster a sense of injustice and identity that can help motivate activity. Issues are subject to movement framing and reframing to improve their likely effectiveness while the movement activists' ability to package these issues successfully is crucial to the emergence and development of social movements. Recently, the central importance of the framing of issues for understanding social movement success and failure has been increasingly recognized by many scholars of social movements. While highly organized and resource-rich groups have the luxury of using many approaches to disseminate their frames, including the use of public protest, for small and resource-poor organizations, "the cooptation of elites is likely to be a more effective strategy than is protest for activists trying to get sustained attention to their framing of an issue". Moreover, another useful frame dissemination tactic involves attempts to recruit blocs of people through existing organizational infrastructures since these local organizations typically enjoy more structured and regular contacts with individuals as well as public respect and credibility.<sup>59</sup>

When movement agents develop their conceptions of injustice, diagnoses of their problems, and visions of problem resolutions, they are operating in a hegemonic field, not in a vacuum. Focusing only on cultural transformation and actor agency in a movement runs the risk of ignoring the relationship between collective action frames and the

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<sup>58</sup> David Snow and Robert Benford, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 137.

<sup>59</sup> John D. McCarhy, Jackie Smith, and Mayer N. Zald, "Accessing Public, Media, Electoral, and Governmental Agendas," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 294, 306.

existing elements within larger cultural systems, such as dominant cultural themes, ideologies and discourses from which they are drawn.<sup>60</sup> In other words, hegemonic culture constrains and influences movements at the same time that activists simultaneously incorporate and challenge dominant definitions of their groups and interpretations of their issues.<sup>61</sup>

Given the above insights from the concept of collective action frames, I shall argue that in order to introduce and disseminate new issues to audiences both in the state and in the general population, the activists in the contemporary Chinese women's movement have taken advantage of the state's discourse on gender equality and the framework of existing state-level guarantees to promote women's issues. Moreover, they have also co-opted existing state institutions in new ways to gain more support for their issues.

Social movement scholars have sought to evaluate how applicable the social movement theories developed in the context of advanced industrial democracies are to those movements in countries that are less developed and lack an extensive history of democracy. The case of the contemporary Chinese women's movement presents an opportunity for researchers to inform and broaden the political process model for social movements. In my research, in order to yield a fuller understanding of social movement dynamics, I will study all three aspects of a social movement—the effects of expanding political opportunities, organizational dynamics and framing processes. And my research will show that the rise and development of the women's movement in China can be explained by openings in the opportunity structure, available resources and networks, and

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<sup>60</sup> Goodwin and Jasper (2004) also call for attention to the interaction between movement framings and the broader culture (p.26).

<sup>61</sup> Nancy Whittier, "Meaning and Structure in Social Movements," in David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier and Belinda Robnett (eds.), *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 294.

issue frames that have broad appeal. A combination of these three factors can be safely imported to the Chinese case to demonstrate the commonalities between factors affecting Western social movements and their counterparts in a non-democratic state. However, given structural biases in the classical political process paradigm, I have suggested an approach that emphasizes that these three factors are neither static nor invariant but are, rather, shaped by strategic considerations and by the choices of movement activists who are constantly in interaction with other players, especially the state. In addition, despite commonalities, the contemporary Chinese women's movement distinguishes itself from Western social movements in terms of its unique relationship with the state.

Firstly, the Chinese women's movement is not overly oppositional to the established political order, whether it be the rule of the state or the CCP and is indeed under extensive formal control by the party-state. Yet the capacity of the state to realize this control is becoming increasingly limited while the elements of tension with, and even resistance to, existing hegemonic social and political orders can be found from time to time in the relationship between the state and women's organizations. Secondly, there exists mutual tolerance from which both sides benefit. On the one hand, women's organizations actively employ strategies whereby they negotiate with the state or even sacrifice some of their autonomy. These strategies not only minimize unwanted state penetration, ensure the survival of such organizations, or even pursue their constituency's interests and organizational goals but also allow them to influence the policy making process to a certain degree. On the other hand, the profound economic and social structural changes in the reform era create the need to expand the social organization

sector for handling growing social problems, therefore, the state also benefits from recognizing women's organizations, rather than eliminating them.

### **Civil Society**

How should we describe the newly emerging relationship between the Chinese state and social groups such as women's organizations? There are two approaches commonly employed in most of Western scholarship on contemporary state-society relationships in China. One approach is the theme of civil society, in which scholars question whether it can accurately be said that China is in the process of developing such a society. Others, however, reject the idea of an emerging civil society and propose applying the concept of corporatism.

The origin of the debate over the existence of a civil society in contemporary China can be seen as the response to the 1989 students' movement in Tiananmen Square. Recently the focus has shifted to the emergence of non-state social groups in the post-Mao era. However, different China specialists hold fairly ambivalent views regarding China's historical legacy and contemporary prospects for a civil society. For example, Martin Whyte argues that a civil society was already "emerging and consolidating" in China, which could be validated by the development of a "bewildering variety" of autonomous associations and a series of confrontations with the state during the 1980s.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Baogang He concludes that China has developed into what he terms a "semi-civil society" with strong democratic implications. However, he also observes that "so far Chinese civil society is very weak, while the state is still much stronger, albeit

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<sup>62</sup> Martin Whyte, "Urban China: A Civil Society in the Making?" in Arthur L. Rosenbaum (ed.), *State and Society in China: The Consequences of Reform* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 77-101.

increasingly less so”.<sup>63</sup> Others are more inconclusive in their findings and therefore have a more pessimistic view regarding whether China has an emerging civil society. Although Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan observe the flowering of associational life and the increasing autonomy gained by society, they ultimately conclude that Chinese civil society is at best “embryonic and uneven.”<sup>64</sup> In his edited volume *Civil Society in China*, Michael Frolic also questions the likely development of civil society. He observes that in contemporary China Western-style civil society, which features limitations on state power and the advancement of the rights of autonomous groups and individuals, “is still poorly developed and is struggling to maintain itself.”<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the definition of civil society itself has become a source of contention and confusion when it is utilized to portray the relationship between new forms of social organizations and the Chinese party-state. “Civil society” is sometimes used in a strong European liberal sense to signify an independent political society, and sometimes in a minimal Hegelian/Marxian sense to suggest a sphere of autonomous social and economic activities separated from the political life of the state.<sup>66</sup> Different conceptualizations can lead to different conclusions regarding the issue of civil society in China. White, Howell and Shang suggest that a minimal definition of civil society is more applicable to the case of China. In their book, they adopt a sociological conception which focuses more on an “intermediate associational realm” because in China state and society are “intermingled

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<sup>63</sup> Baogang He, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 162.

<sup>64</sup> White Gordon, Jude Howell, and Xiaoyuan Shang, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 208-209.

<sup>65</sup> Michael B. Frolic, “State-led Civil Society,” in Timothy Brook and Michael B. Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 56.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon White, “Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 29 (January 1993), pp. 64-68.

and braided, blurring the distinction between them.”<sup>67</sup> Such a definition, as they suggest, is distinguished from a political conception of civil society which “implicitly assumes an oppositional and conflictual relation with the state, neglecting the cooperative dimensions.”<sup>68</sup> Michael Frolic even argues for a concept of “state-led” civil society, which refers to social organizations created “by the state” as well as “a part of” the state to serve as support mechanisms to the state. They are “embryos of civil society” although they “function as surrogates for a state that is devolving control, rather than serving as centers of citizen resistance to a repressive state.” According to him, this form of civil society can more accurately represent “an ‘Asian’ type of political development...that differs noticeably from the more conventional civil society of the West.”<sup>69</sup> However, the modification and sometimes even excessive stretching of the concept of civil society in the Chinese context raises a serious question: is it appropriate to apply the concept of civil society to portray the relationship between newly formed social organizations and the Chinese party-state in the reform era?

The use of civil society to theorize the emergence and growth of independent social groups can be traced back to the late 1970s. As a central notion in classical political theory, “civil society” was reintroduced by scholars such as Ivan Szelenyi, Jacques Rupnik and Andrew Arato to cope with novel problems in their analysis of communist societies. By the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the notions of a “regeneration of civil society” and “civil society against the state” have become very appealing as a means of conceptualizing the collapse of communism in the East European and Soviet cases. In

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<sup>67</sup> White Gordon, Jude Howell, and Xiaoyuan Shang, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 3-4, pp. 208-209.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> Michael B. Frolic, “State-led Civil Society,” in Timothy Brook and Michael B. Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp.48-49, 56-58.

general, in most works, the emphasis has been on a clear-cut, contentious relationship between the state and social organizations, which mostly reflects the modern development of civil society accompanying modernization and the rise of modern democracy in the West. Jan Kubik has elaborated a rigorous definition of an ideal type of civil society. As a form of social organization, he argues that civil society (“Legal Transparent Civil Society”, LTCS) is characterized by “the simultaneous presence of all four conditions”—“secondariness, transparency, tolerance and legality” and “the existence of well-functioning five critical linkages with other domains” in which the relative autonomy of LTCS from the state is particularly crucial.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, he argues that when there is a properly functioning link between the state and civil society, the two should be kept as separate as possible in order for the latter to act as the former’s “necessary counterbalance” or “equally necessary complement”. One of the main dangers faced by civil society is that the state does too much by acting “as a bully attempting to subdue or destroy the domain of autonomous associations”.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, “when civil society actors interact with the state, their actions often becomes competitive and contentious.”<sup>72</sup>

However, in reality, a civil society that can measure up to its complete and ideal form is rare while its imperfect forms are abundant.<sup>73</sup> Although the concept of civil society has been widely utilized to analyze the fall of state socialism and subsequent

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<sup>70</sup> Jan Kubik, “What Can Political Scientists Learn about Civil Society from Anthropologists?” unpublished manuscript, pp.11-12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> Jan Kubik, “Between the State and Network of ‘Cousins’: The Role of Civil Society and Noncivil Associations in the Democratization of Poland,” in Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord, *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth Century Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 198.

democratization efforts in East Central Europe, especially the extraordinary frequency of popular protests and the well-known Solidarity movement in Poland, civil societies in these countries were “imperfect” before 1989.<sup>74</sup> In terms of the state-society relationship in these countries, such an imperfectness or incompleteness was sometimes characterized by “uninstitutionalized autonomy”: “civil society, as a set of groups, exists, but it does not exist as an institutionally protected space.”<sup>75</sup> In some cases, the authorities selectively legalized some organizations while ruthlessly persecuting others.<sup>76</sup> The critical question to ask then is whether the incompleteness found in post-totalitarian or authoritarian regimes is just a temporary condition, and thus can be overcome, with civil society eventually evolving into a full-fledged LTCS. Will this imperfectness simply lead civil society to develop into a different form of social organization? Or is this imperfectness, from the very beginning, just an indication of another form of social organization? In the case of Poland, open confrontation and a relatively well-developed autonomous civil society were observed with an imperfect civil society smoothly developing into an ideal model of civil society, i.e. a legal transparent civil society, during the process of democratic transition and consolidation. There are also cases, however, where imperfect civil society seems to be perpetuated after the autonomy of civil society has been legally

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<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, in most former communist countries, open confrontations as it occurred in Poland in the Solidarity era was not a typical experience and the development of regime-opposition relations was remarkably different from the pattern of Solidarity for the major part of the transition process. Ekiert and Kubik (2000) have provided an excellent explanation for this anomaly.

<sup>75</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 84.

<sup>76</sup> According to Ekiert and Kubik, this selective legality feature can be found both in authoritarian and post-totalitarian regimes.

protected and still other cases where seemingly imperfect civil society turns out later to be anti-democratic.<sup>77</sup>

By the same token, any meaningful discussion of the application of the civil society concept in the Chinese case before such a society actually emerges can be misleading. For those who see more harmony, cooperation and dependence in the contemporary Chinese state-society relationship than contention, competition and independence, the idea of civil society omits and obscures more than it includes and reveals. According to Ding, the Western experience of civil society especially stresses “institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the state, either in the form of legally protected rights, or in the form of customarily protected freedom.” When applied to the Chinese context, it omits and obscures the “indeterminacy of the nature and function of individual institutions”.<sup>78</sup> Though we can find evidence of new forms of associations characteristic of an emergent civil society, it was but one part of a broader, more complex and contradictory process of institutional changes in state socialist systems like China. Only very few of those associations truly share the full characteristics of a civil society—voluntary participation, transparency, tolerance, autonomy and separation in their relationship with the state, and none of them operate in a political context which protects their right to these attributes. This is not to mention the state’s constant efforts to substitute a network of corporatist arrangements for the autonomous activities of civil society.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jan Kubik, “What Can Political Scientists Learn about Civil Society from Anthropologists?” unpublished manuscript, pp. 20, 34.

<sup>78</sup> X.L. Ding, *The Decline of Communism in China: Legitimacy Crisis, 1977-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), pp.26, 10.

<sup>79</sup> For example, see Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China,” *The China Quarterly*, 2000.

More importantly, one important feature I have found in these self-initiated women's organizations is the complicated formal or informal connections existing between self-initiated women's organizations and state institutions. These connections not only have provided resources and information for mobilization but also have created and will continue to create new and innovative possibilities for organizational practices in the women's movement in China. For example, many activists engaged in new forms of organizing are termed by some as "amphibious persons" as they are both ACWF cadres and core members of newly established women's groups.<sup>80</sup> In these cases, whether they belong to the Federation or a self-initiated women's organization, is no longer important. These women activists are not confined by the designation of the category of a particular organization, but rather use a variety of organizational formats to advance women's causes. Moreover, along with this there exists a substantial interpenetration in different mixes between state officials and women activists through various connections and between state institutions and self-initiated women's organizations. Such a process seems to weaken the relevance of the state vs civil society distinction embedded in the conceptualization of civil society and leads to the question of what other models may be more applicable in explaining women's organizing activities and contemporary state-society relations in China.

### **Corporatism**

In the case of China, many scholars have found that the analytical model of civil society implies too much independence from and confrontation with the state, whereas in

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<sup>80</sup> See, Zhang Naihua, "Searching for 'Authentic' NGOs: The NGO Discourse and Women's Organizations in China," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

China the relationship between the state and associations is marked more by harmony and dependence. Therefore, corporatism seems to them a more applicable analytical tool.

Scholars who have adopted a corporatism approach to describe a form of state-society relationship primarily use Philippe Schmitter's definition:

Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.<sup>81</sup>

In recent decades, the idea of corporatism has been employed to describe the state's interactions with major economic groups in a bargaining process over such problems as wages, prices, social policy and investment. A corporatist system typically involves a limited number of economic-occupational organizations recognized by the state and enjoying a representational monopoly within their respective categories, as opposed to a pluralist system in which spontaneously forming, nonlegal and competitive associations interact in informal and unregulated ways with each other and with the state. As a theoretical scheme, the corporatist concept was rediscovered as a response to the challenge of the contemporary crisis of political economy in advanced industrial societies. However, there are also usages that have extended this approach in a broader way. Scholars such as Valerie Bunce, John M. Echols III, and David Ost have suggested that the corporatist model may be applicable to the Soviet system under Brezhnev, Poland and perhaps other Eastern European communist countries.<sup>82</sup> A recent book on corporatism by

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<sup>81</sup> Philippe Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" in Fredrick B. Pike and Thomas Stritch (eds.), *The New Corporatism* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), pp. 93-94.

<sup>82</sup> See Valerie Bunce and John M. Echols III, "Soviet Politics in the Brezhnev Era: Pluralism or Corporatism?" in Donald Kelley (ed.) *Soviet Politics in the Brezhnev Era* (New York: Praeger Press, 1980),

Wiarda argues that, after all, “powerful interest groups tied to a strong state are precisely what corporatism is all about.”<sup>83</sup> In this sense, the concept of corporatism may provide an appealing model that can account for state-society relations in general. When such an application is made, corporatism always features “a strong, directing state” interested in incorporating interest groups to “better integrate and organize state policy” on the one hand, and certain social groups having legitimate monopolies over the representation of functional interests on the other.<sup>84</sup>

In their study of state-society relations in China, Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan develop a model of corporatism based on Schmitter’s interpretation. This model highlights the state’s decisive position in the relationship because “the state determines which organizations will be recognized as legitimate and forms an unequal partnership of sorts with such organizations.” In this way, the state can limit the number of players with which it negotiate policies and can co-opt their leadership into policing their own members, which, in turn, restricts public participation in the political process and the autonomy and power of civil society. Unger and Chan are convinced that state corporatism provides a more accurate account of the rapid development of associational activities in China than does a civil society approach since the latter “assumes too much independence in associational life in ... China.”<sup>85</sup> Yijiang Ding also sees the concept of corporatism as a better description of associational activities “in the areas of political and economic life ... where associations are limited in number, usually enjoy official status,

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pp. 1-26; and David Ost, “Towards a Corporatist Solution in Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland,” Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1989), *Eastern European Politics and Societies*, pp. 152-174.

<sup>83</sup> Howard J. Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics: The Other Great “Ism”* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. ix.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “Corporatism in China: A Developmental State in an East Asian Context,” in Barrett L. McCormick and Jonathan Unger (eds.), *China after Socialism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 95-129.

and form nationwide hierarchical systems.”<sup>86</sup> Even those who have used the civil society model in their works also query whether emergent social forms now existing in China might constitute “corporatism”. For instance, Baogang He has noticed the emergence of “a structure in which state corporatism coexists with elements of civil society.”<sup>87</sup> White, Howell and Shang also admit that the deliberate effort by the state to set up a system of regulating associational activities through both a “caged” sector and an “incorporated” sector—including official and semi-official associations—“resembles a more coherent notion of ‘corporatism’” although a “counterworld” of alternative unofficial organizations coexists with them.<sup>88</sup>

However, when applied to contemporary Chinese state-society relations and the rise of women’s organizations in particular, the explanatory power of corporatism becomes inadequate for revealing other dynamic aspects of associational activities found among organizations. First, the state’s self-sufficiency policy has put enormous pressure on those official and semi-official women’s groups such as the ACWF and forces them to reassess their relations with constituents. They are gradually coming under the influence of, and beginning to speak on behalf of, their designated constituencies. At the same time, the state’s capacity to control these organizations also declines as official funding shrinks. Secondly, many of the newly formed Chinese women’s organizations in the 1990s have voluntary, grass-roots and participatory characteristics. It is true that the ACWF is still by far the largest women’s organization in China. It is also undeniable that the state has never given up its attempt to co-opt and control social organizations. Yet what is more

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<sup>86</sup> Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy after Tiananmen* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>87</sup> Baogang He, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 149.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, White Gordon, Jude Howell, and Xiaoyuan Shang (1996), pp. 33, 213.

salient in the process is an irreversible historical trend in which the rapid proliferation and development of self-initiated unofficial women's groups in the 1990s have been increasingly undermining the officially designated monopoly of the ACWF, thereby creating a relatively autonomous realm for women's activities and weakening the overall state control indirectly.

Neither the modified civil society approach nor the theme of corporatism fully captures the complexities of the dynamic interactions in contemporary Chinese state-society relationships which are still in transition, and therefore defy easy categorization. Both explanations risk obscuring the dynamics of change in China and the capacity of women's organizations to devise strategies for negotiating with the state a relationship that maximizes their members' interests and that circumvents or deflects state control and intrusion.

On the one hand, even though the state tries to bind these organizations to state patronage and confine their activities through regulations and mechanisms of co-option, the contemporary Chinese state cannot be simply viewed as a unified actor. As Kevin O'Brien convincingly argues, what emerges in China is "a multi-layered state that has grand aspirations but formidable principal-agent problems."<sup>89</sup> Such a structure features institutionally situated officials, who have diverging interests and are subject to different constraints and incentive structures.<sup>90</sup> It can be in the interests of some members of the elite to believe that the tolerance for some degree of collective action outside of the direct initiative of party-state institutions may help address various problems in society, reduce

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<sup>89</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien, "Boundary-spanning Contention in China," in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (eds.), *State and Society in 21<sup>st</sup>-century China: Crisis, Contention and Legitimation* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 116.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

the likelihood of popular unrest or even improve policy implementation and cadre oversight. From the vantage point of people contemplating collective action, this multi-layered state provides the room for them to further their interests and pry open clogged channels of participation.

On the other hand, while it is true that even the most independent women's organizations in China do not overtly challenge the state or the political system, these self-initiated women's organizations—whether truly autonomous or semi-autonomous—do not passively exist as the objects of state power. Instead, the practices of these organizations reveals a pattern of active negotiation in which they have struggled to maintain their autonomy, pursue their own agendas and even influence the state in their favor. To understand the relationship between these organizations and the state, it is more accurate to think of a continuum, instead of a simple dichotomy of non-autonomous v.s. autonomous women's organizations. And without underestimating the still considerable dominance of the state, my research concentrates more on how women's organizations and activists locate and exploit divisions within the government, channels of inclusion, government commitments, and established values to persuade receptive elites to support their organizing activities and carve out their space within existing limits. I expect to find varying degrees of autonomy in their complex interactions with the state despite the overall seemingly cooperative relationship. More importantly, I choose not to view these interactions in the light of conceptualizations such as civil society and corporatism, which tend to provide only a broad overarching picture of contemporary state-society relationship in China, but fail to capture the underlying nuanced dynamics of the highly contingent and complex transforming process which China is now undergoing.

Alternatively, I contend that we need to shift our attention to the strategic choices made by these organizations and the activists within them to create the best link, whether it be more autonomous or more dependent, between each individual organization and the state. I will also argue that in the long run the mobilization and expansion of these self-initiated and self-regulating women's organizations may weaken the capacity for control of the party state over society as a whole and undermine the existing non-democratic political order.

### **Methodological Notes**

Multiple sources and types of information were pursued in my research. Fully aware of the risk of biases associated with secondary sources, I thoroughly searched for any primary data that were available given circumstances where long-term field work was not feasible.<sup>91</sup>

A major source of data was the Global Feminisms Project conducted by the University of Michigan. Beginning in 2002, this was a collaborative international project that examined oral histories relating to feminist activism, women's movements and academic women's studies by documenting the individual life stories of feminist activists and scholars at four different project sites: China, India, Poland and the United States. Specifically, the project collected ten videotaped interviews of women's movement activists and women's studies scholars in each country. The project is organized and coordinated by the Institute for Research on Women and Gender (IRWG) at UM, which is also the home for the US site research team. For the purpose of my research, I only

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<sup>91</sup> Given the nature of the current political system in China and consequent highly restricted access to information, it is questionable whether substantially additional information could be generated by short-term field work.

focused on a subsample of the women interviewed at the China site where data collection was carried out in collaboration with the China Women's University in Beijing. The sample includes 10 Chinese feminist activists in the contemporary women's movement who were interviewed in Chinese. These activists include women leaders from diverse groups such as Youli Ge, a young leader who has been involved in various urban based organizational activities funded by international donors to disseminate feminist ideas; Zhang Lixi, Vice President of the Chinese Women's College that is affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation, who has promoted women's studies in her college; and Gao Xiaoxian, who holds an official position in the Shaanxi Women's Federation while creating several women's organizations outside the official system to engage in legal services for women, and anti-domestic violence activities.<sup>92</sup> Interviews varied in length from about 1 to 2 hours.

Another major primary source of data is articles written by activists themselves regarding their experiences and participation in the contemporary Chinese women's movement.<sup>93</sup> While many of these articles are scattered in numerous journals and books published in either English or Chinese, there are three books that are particularly worth mentioning. One is *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women*, which was

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<sup>92</sup> Detailed information on the personal background of each of these activists as well as information on interview time, location, and the name of the interviewer can be found at the website: [http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/china\\_e.html](http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/china_e.html). Interviewee transcripts, both in Chinese and English, and corresponding streaming videos, can also be found at this link.

<sup>93</sup> This may have to do with the fact that a majority of these activists are highly educated intellectuals working in education or research institutions. Those published in English are usually translated from original texts in Chinese. I compare the original text in Chinese with the translated text in English to make sure the translation is accurate whenever both are available. The same rule applies to any written materials where both English and Chinese versions are available.

published by the Ford Foundation in 1995.<sup>94</sup> The stories consist not only of reflections by Chinese women on their participation in the preparatory process but also their past experiences in the women's movement prior to their participation in the FWCW. Sixty two activists who ranged in age from twenties to sixties and two Chinese women's groups, the East Meets West Translation Group and the China-Canada Young Women's Projects contributed to the collection. These activists had played a visible and active role in the women's movement in China and were associated with diverse professions, including teachers, students, journalists, lawyers, social workers, researchers and university professors. The other book is *Shenlin Qijing* (Participating in the Extraordinary), edited by Li Xiaojiang, a leading figure in the women's movement.<sup>95</sup> The book is a compilation of articles written by 18 women's studies scholars and women's activists, which discussed their experiences and involvement in the development and growth of women's studies centers and other women's organizations in China. The third is *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*, edited by Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan, to which 10 prominent Chinese feminist scholars and activists contributed detailed accounts of their own activities in women's organizing in China.<sup>96</sup>

I collected a variety of newspaper and magazine articles relating to various women's organizations and the Chinese women's movement in general with the help of friends and family in China. I have also obtained bulletins, brochures and reports on

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<sup>94</sup> Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995).

<sup>95</sup> Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000).

<sup>96</sup> Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

organizational work, published by the women's organizations themselves on their websites.<sup>97</sup> Various official statements and documents concerning the position of the Chinese state on women's issues and women's organizations were also found through the internet. In addition, relevant secondary sources of data from the findings of other scholars' research were used.

### **Outline of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, I will examine the rise of the contemporary Chinese women's movement through the lens of political opportunities and economic opportunities with an emphasis on international influences. Chapter 3 explores organizational dynamics that contribute to the emergence and development of unofficial women's organizations. The focus will be not only on formal organizations but also on informal networks among activists and between participants and officials in state institutions. In Chapter 4, I examine the ways in which activists take advantage of the state's discourse on gender equality to frame new issues for the contemporary Chinese women's movement such as domestic violence and NGOs. In Chapter 5, I conclude by discussing how Chinese women's organizing activities may contribute to changes in the state-society relationship and to democratic political change.

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<sup>97</sup> A majority of influential women's organizations in China have established their own web sites. There are even a few exclusively web-based organizations.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **International Economic and Political Opportunities**

In this chapter, I will first look at the general national political and economic opportunity structures that have provided incentives for more independent women's activities in the 1990s. However, these general opportunities alone are not sufficient to explain such a phenomenon. I will then show that two movement-specific opportunities have been particularly crucial for the development of the women's movement in the 1990s. Politically, the increased attention to the situation of women in China due to the preparation for, and the convening of, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 altered domestic political opportunities and thus led to a greater tolerance of the women's movement by the state; economically, the greater availability of foreign funding from international foundations and agencies helped in a critical way to support self-initiated women's groups and activities.

#### **Mixed Blessing of the Reform Era**

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, both the party and the government realized that only reform and development would endow their authority with trust and legitimacy. The economic reforms undertaken since 1978 are a strategic response by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to a grave legitimacy crisis that existed by the end of the Cultural Revolution. A wide range of reform measures have been implemented to create a "socialist market economy", including the fostering of a private sector and a commercially oriented collective sector, an increase in the autonomy of state owned

enterprises, the introduction of foreign investment, the decollectivization of agriculture and price liberalization. The reform policies have brought about rapid economic development and have given enormous benefits to the majority of the population. Indeed, the Chinese economy has experienced unprecedented growth in the past three decades. The growth rate of GDP has averaged 9.4 percent per annum since 1978 with millions making over \$20,000 per year.<sup>98</sup>

The impact of China's market-oriented reforms on the state-society relationship has been profound. New groups and strata have emerged with their own distinct interests and sources of wealth such as new rich peasant households, private and "collective" entrepreneurs and more independent professionals in medicine, accounting, law and information technology. On the other hand, there are growing inequalities between regions and social strata. Thousands of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were closed at a cost of millions of jobs. Laid-off workers offered only one-off compensation without pensions or welfare protection sank deeper into poverty. In addition, tens of millions of workers in run-down and antiquated plants across the nation had their wages cut or postponed, many of whom barely subsisted on a tiny monthly allowance. In the countryside, many local authorities routinely squeezed the peasants for higher assessments and reduced subsidies for farmers. Many peasants from the rural hinterland abandoned their farms to seek employment in Special Economic Zones and other open areas along the coast. Those who remained took their grievances out on local officials. The feelings of insecurity and discontent among these more vulnerable or disadvantaged sections of the population have generated instability and social conflict.

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<sup>98</sup> World Bank, "China: Promoting Growth with Equity," Report 24169-CHA, *Country Economic Memorandum* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003).

While Chinese society is becoming more ungovernable, the institutional capacity of the party-state is also declining. The reforms have weakened the old institutions through which the state traditionally exercised control over the population in the pre-reform era: the official mass organizations and the work unit (*danwei*) system<sup>99</sup> in the cities and the collective in the rural areas. The availability of state revenues to mass organizations faced a considerable reduction when the central government tried to solve increasing budget deficits during the reform years. These organizations have had to rely increasingly on independent sources for at least part of their revenues. This self-sufficiency policy has put enormous pressure on associations and has forced them to reassess their relations with constituents. Since they have to rely on membership fees and service charges, they are taking members' needs more seriously while the government control over them generally declines.

Even though the *danwei* survived the reforms, its social control function has been greatly undermined. A growing number of people are able to find jobs in the private sectors; even those who remain in the state sector depend much less on their work units than in the past. This is due to the fact that in order to survive competition in a market economy, SOEs have had to cast off their welfare functions. Now people living in the cities have gained a degree of economic freedom and can speak out because the factors that tied them to the work unit, such as job security, housing and health care are not so pressing. As a result, the organizational structure based on work units as a means of

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<sup>99</sup> Before reforms, a work unit (*danwei*), such as a factory, a store, or a school, was not only an economic entity, but also the unit for the delivery of a variety of social welfare services and for the exercise of political control (Naughton 1997). Each SOE constitutes such a work unit. On the one hand, the employees received all their benefits and services from the work unit, from housing, child care, health care, and pensions to movie tickets, shower house tickets and coupons to buy basic necessities and scarce commodities. On the other hand, even the smallest work group in a work unit had a Party cell and weekly meetings to study the party's and the government's documents were mandatory. The CCP's multi-tiered organizations penetrated every level of SOEs to ensure monitoring and control.

control over individuals has been greatly weakened. Besides the work unit system, the state in the past also relied on residents' committees<sup>100</sup> to control people outside of SOEs. However, in the reform era, the number of rural immigrants in cities has reached such proportions that local neighborhood offices and resident' committees are no longer able to keep pace. This floating population, existing within the interstices of urban life, is also increasingly beyond the reach of official systems of social control, such as the residence registration system. In one way or another, individual members of society who have enjoyed a degree of economic independence now feel a much stronger need to develop new group as well as individual identities in order to articulate and satisfy their particular interests.

Meanwhile, the CCP is faced with a fundamental dilemma. Continued rapid economic growth is vital for the political legitimacy of the CCP because the pervasive corruption among officials has already made the moral authority of state institutions decline and has gutted the legitimacy of the ideology. Yet, economic reforms will inevitably generate further lay-offs, a further decentralizing of government bureaucracy and the shedding of more governmental functions. In comparison to the figures reflecting rapid economic growth, the government's expenditures on social welfare lagged far behind. From 1978 to 1998, the GDP per capita increased 16.88 times while the increase in government social welfare and relief funds rose only by 7.64 times.<sup>101</sup> As an alternative, the party-state needs to expand social organizations to take on functions in areas such as education, social welfare and relief where the state was previously the sole

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<sup>100</sup> Residents' committees are the governmental agencies at the lowest level in cities.

<sup>101</sup> Department of Comprehensive Statistics of National Bureau of Statistics, *Xinzhongguo Wushinian Tongji Ziliao Huibian (Comprehensive Statistical Data and Materials on 50 Years of New China)* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1999), pp. 3, 17.

player; otherwise social unrest and instability will increasingly intensify. The price the party-state has to pay for letting society share the burden is a lessening of its power over society.

In short, these changes have created a social space which is potentially fertile for the growth of social organizations. Social groups and interests are diversified and becoming more autonomous and potentially more assertive in relation to the state on the one hand, while the control capacity of the state over society declines on the other hand. However, this is not to suggest that the state is impotent to exert its will. It still retains considerable power to crush opponents that publicly challenge it and to retain pressure on chosen targets for a limited time. The sudden crackdown on the Falun Gong movement in 1998 after the sit-in demonstration by Falun Gong members in front of *Zhongnanhai*, the CCP and government leadership compound, is such an example. Moreover, in an attempt to incorporate social organizations, the state issued the 1998 “Regulations on Registration and Management of Social Organizations” to substitute for the 1989 provisional regulations. These regulations retain the essential features of the old ones, but are more extensive since, through various measures, they attempt to more closely control not only organizational activities but also the number of social organizations. As a consequence, this legislation has been criticized by many as being too confining and strict towards social organizations. As Tony Saich points out, this legislation “favors those groups with close governmental ties and discourages bottom-up initiatives”, especially “those by the disadvantaged and poorer sectors of society.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China,” *The China Quarterly*, 2000, p. 132.

While politically the post-Mao reforms constituted both opportunities and challenges for the emergence of new forms of social organization in the 1990s in general, they have also had pronounced economic effects on women's lives in particular. It is true that during the past two decades, China's high growth economy annually created a large number and wide range of jobs, with women as well as men sharing in expanded and diversified employment opportunities. Yet as China's economic system has been undergoing painful structural transformations, employment opportunities are not equally distributed between the sexes. Many female workers in the state sector have found themselves in the category of "surplus labor". Statistics from the second survey of the social status of Chinese women, conducted by the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the State Statistics Bureau, show that in 2000, the employment rate for urban Chinese women between the age of eighteen and forty-nine was 72 percent, a 16.2 percent decrease from 1990.<sup>103</sup> On the one hand, young women leaving school in urban areas have found it increasingly difficult to find their first job. According to the China Labor Statistics Yearbook, the number of women in cities who graduated from various schools including middle schools, high schools, specialized technical schools, and universities, and spent more than one year without landing their first job, has almost tripled from 1984 to 1998.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, disproportionate numbers of women were among those laid off or forced to retire prior to the legal retirement age.<sup>105</sup>

Gendered layoffs have reached new magnitudes since the late 1990s, coinciding with the

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<sup>103</sup> The Second Survey on the Status of Chinese Women Project Team, "Dierqi Zhongguo Funu Shehui Diwei Chouyang Diaocha Zhuyao Shuju Baogao" (Report on the Major Data from the Second Sampling Survey of the Social Status of Chinese Women). Downloadable at [http://www.wsic.ac.cn/StaticData/Detail\\_Browse.aspx?InfoMainId=IM-6209](http://www.wsic.ac.cn/StaticData/Detail_Browse.aspx?InfoMainId=IM-6209), accessed March 25, 2007.

<sup>104</sup> China Ministry of Labors, *Zhongguo Laodong Tongji Nianjian (China Labor Statistics Yearbook)* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1984, 1998).

<sup>105</sup> For cadres and professionals, 60 years of age for men, 55 for women; and for workers, 55 years of age for men, 50 for women.

launch of large-scale state-sector downsizing in 1997. A survey by the State Statistical Bureau of 15,600 households in seventy-one cities across the country reveals that women constitute 62.8 percent of the laid-off workers but only account for less than 39 percent of the total urban workforce, a decrease of 1.5 percentage points from 1995 to 1998.<sup>106</sup> These figures indicate that the gender gap in employment is widening rapidly and that a disproportionate burden of the economic reform is being borne by women. The deteriorating social and economic status of many groups of women in the reform era has led to new social grievances among them. Many chose to protest:

It was said before that we workers were the masters. How come now we are so casually thrown out of the door? Why are our contributions to the state-run enterprises no longer mentioned? The current state of the enterprises was not caused by women workers. Why should we be told to swallow the bitter fruit?<sup>107</sup>

Social grievances may provide a potential hotbed for organizing social movements. However, in order for such grievances to be transformed into collective action, which many other disadvantaged groups in contemporary China have not been able to do, there needs to be some unique opportunities that facilitate women's organizing activities.

## **International Economic Opportunity**

Social movement theorists have long understood that movements require a certain level of economic resources in order to be successfully mobilized. In fact, financial independence is seen as a positive source of autonomy for non-governmental organizations. However, there is a general lack of attention to funding issues in contemporary social movement theory which usually focuses on democratic countries

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<sup>106</sup> *Zhongguo Funubao (China Women's News)*, 12 June 1998.

<sup>107</sup> Fang Hong, "Xiangang Shiye Nuzhigong De Kunjing" (Laid-off and Unemployed Women in Predicament), *Zhongguo Gongren (Workers of China)*, Vol. 3, 1998, pp. 10-11.

where the existing economic infrastructure facilitates domestic fundraising, such as tax relief for charitable donations. The ease with which funds from private donations can be transferred to an organization can provide a ready funding base for movement organizations. However, in the Chinese case, the lack of such an infrastructure severely limited the possibilities for social movement organizing. Moreover, the CCP continues to have a monopolistic hold over political power and any mass-constituency organizations other than official mass organizations are viewed as a potential threat to the government. The type of mass-membership organizations that characterize the women's movement in the United States is not possible in China; therefore, it is impossible for women's organizations to rely on membership dues as a viable source of funding. Some organizations that have the Women's Federation as their supervisory unit can rely on its assistance, but such a source of funding has recently become more and more unreliable since the Women's Federation at all levels has itself experienced a significant decrease in state funding and has had to increasingly rely on finding independent sources for at least part of its revenues. Furthermore, even the largest indigenous foundations in China, unlike their international peers, have very limited budgets. Most national foundations began with an endowment of 100,000-500,000 RMB (approximately 14,000 to 71,000 USD), either from government or private donations, much of which had to be used for renting offices and hiring staff. Their total interest gained from endowment was less than 100,000 RMB annually (approximately 14,000 USD).<sup>108</sup> So instead of functioning as grant-giving institutions that can rely solely upon large endowments, most domestic foundations have to depend heavily on projects to raise funds for expenses such as daily

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<sup>108</sup> Qiusha Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 93.

operations and cannot play an active role in supporting other Chinese NGOs. For these reasons, most independent women's organizations in China face a situation of economic resource scarcity. Lack of funding often challenges their ability to accomplish whatever activities they seek to pursue and is therefore most commonly cited as the greatest difficulty that these women's groups have encountered. This is the reason why specific attention to economic opportunities for social movements in the Chinese context is particularly important.

A good example of the funding dilemmas facing independent women's groups is the experience of the Women's Experimental Correspondence and Continuing Education Institute, which is a non-profit organization providing vocational training for laid-off women in Shanghai. Funds clearly have been the greatest problem for this organization, as admitted in an interview by its founder and President, Cuiyu Wang. At its inception, Cuiyu Wang contributed ten thousand yuan out of her personal savings and there were also two women entrepreneurs who attended the Fourth World Women's Conference and both contributed ten thousand yuan. This money was used as the funding base to cover teaching materials, rent and other expenses.

In general my school did not maintain a staff or a facility. We would go anywhere there were students. We would temporarily borrow a classroom in order to limit our expenses. The places that we taught were all transitory; none of them were fixed places to teach...Currently in Chenghuang Temple<sup>109</sup> we have a house that is a little bigger than three hundred square meters. A private entrepreneur saw that we were really down on our luck and lent us the house. This was the first floor of a run down house. When it rains hard outside this room, there is light rain inside the room. During the rainy season, everything inside becomes full of mildew. The room also has very poor ventilation. When the weather is very hot, the room becomes very stuffy. There are three classrooms. We just have to make the best of the situation. Despite all of these problems, it is better than having no place at all. In this way, I

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<sup>109</sup> It is a well-known historical site and a business area in Shanghai.

save the rent and I can use all of the funds that we have to help the women workers who have been laid off in Shanghai.<sup>110</sup>

Women's organizations have pursued various strategies to ensure their ongoing survival, which range from activists using their personal money to support activities, to running enterprises, to seeking assistance from supervisory work units such as the ACWF, to grants from foreign foundations. As already noted in Chapter 1, Valerie Sperling introduces a concept of "economic opportunity structure" which she feels needs to be included in the repertoire of social movement theory. She focuses on two levels of economic opportunity: one is the fundamental economic changes in society and the other is local infrastructure conditions that facilitate or limit the possibilities for movement organizing. Both are relevant to the Chinese women's movement as discussed above. However, here I propose that we need to pay special attention in the Chinese case to a third level of economic opportunity structure, which is the international level. I will argue below that international funding has been particularly crucial for the wide growth of self-initiated women's organizations in the 1990s whose existence might otherwise have been jeopardized. Downsizing the central administration made it very difficult for the Chinese government to reject international help in economic and social development, and it has therefore compromised its ideological and political stance in order to obtain aid and to establish China as a world power. On the other hand, China's social, environmental and economic problems also provide enormous opportunities for international foundations and organizations whose performance largely depends on good projects. Thus, limited domestic resources for the support of social organizations drove many women's organizations to seek resources abroad, a practice which fits in very nicely with the goals

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<sup>110</sup> Interview of Wang Cuiyu by Gao Xueyu for Global Feminisms Project.

of Western organizations and foundations who are eager to support any signs of civil society.

Foreign funding has become an indispensable factor in promoting and strengthening women's organizations in China via grants, projects, training workshops, and conferences. I will focus on two aspects of its role in the development of the bottom-up women's movement in contemporary China: the introduction of new approaches and methodology and direct monetary resources for women's organizing activities.

I will use the case of the Ford Foundation to illustrate these arguments. The Ford Foundation is by far the largest grant giving institution in China and has been an important actor in promoting self-initiated women's organizations. Its grants accounted for 29 percent of the total grants from 15 US foundations in China (Table 2.1). The Ford Foundation entered China in 1979 along with a few other foreign private organizations due to the policy of reform and opening-up. From 1979 to 1989, without an office in the country, the Foundation's funding to China-related programs, especially to Chinese institutions, was rather limited. For example, in 1986 the Foundation's funding to China was about US\$200,000 in total, compared with US\$2.47 million to Bangladesh and US\$7.88 million to India.<sup>111</sup> The turning point came in 1988 when the Foundation successfully got the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to be its sponsor and established a representative office in Beijing.<sup>112</sup> From January 1988 until September

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<sup>111</sup> The Ford Foundation Annual Report 1986.

<sup>112</sup> The Chinese regulations require a foreign foundation to register with a government institution as a supervising agency in order to open a representative office in China.

2005, the Foundation spent a total of \$207 million dollars on China-related programs<sup>113</sup> and China has become a focus of its Asia strategy.

Table 2.1 Largest US Foundation Funders of Charitable activities in or related to China: 1994-1996<sup>114</sup>

<i>Foundations</i>	<i>Amount of Grants</i>	<i>% of Total Grants</i>
Ford Foundation	\$23,081,628	29.32%
China Medical Board of New York	\$13,019,000	16.54%
The Freeman Foundation	\$9,364,500	11.90%
The Starr Foundation	\$8,863,000	11.26%
The Rockefeller Foundation	\$7,751,820	9.85%
The Henry Luce Foundation	\$7,353,250	9.34%
John F. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation	\$3,209,650	4.08%
All Others	\$6,077,254	7.71%

Source: Boisture 1998

First, the Ford Foundation was centrally important in providing funding for activists to travel abroad to preparatory meetings for the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations (FWCW) and for other international conferences as well. Close to 100 women went to NGO preparatory meetings for the FWCW, using funding from the Ford Foundation and other foreign agencies.<sup>115</sup> It was also due to funding from the Ford Foundation that Chinese women scholars were able to attend the international conference “Women, Gender and the State” held at Harvard University in 1992. The conference provided these activists with an important opportunity to meet and discuss issues of common concern with their counterparts in Hong Kong, Taiwan, North America and Europe. And for many it was their very first opportunity to travel outside of China.

International travel and contacts with international women’s movements have in turn broadened their views on women’s issues, exposed them to feminist thought and influenced their desire to form independent women’s groups. One activist, Zhonghua He,

<sup>113</sup> Retrieved at <http://www.fordfound.org/global/office/index.cfm?office=Beijing>, accessed March 29, 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Robert A. Boisture, “Options for Increasing US Support for Chinese Non-profit Organizations,” *International Journal of Non-for-Profit Law*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 1998. Downloadable at <http://www.icnl.org>, accessed March 29, 2007.

<sup>115</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 132.

took note of the learning experience provided by her participation in a preparatory meeting for the FWCW. Influenced by this experience, she was preparing to establish a research organization on gender and development among minority nationalities in Yunnan Province:

At the end of 1993, I was honored to have the chance to attend the Asia and Pacific NGO Symposium on Women in Development in Manila. This experience broadened my views and increased my knowledge. I began to find out what sisters outside Yunnan Province and outside China were thinking, achieving and striving for. I started to understand NGOs and this international non-government space for discussion of women's issues. Consequently, I was able to put my research into an international context. Since I learned about the themes of the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies": equality, development, peace and their concrete meaning, I have also been able to connect my work with them. It would not be an exaggeration to say the symposium became a milestone in my life and work.<sup>116</sup>

Another activist, Gao Xiaoxian, noted a similar transformation due to international travel and contacts with international women's movements,

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 [for the project on the reproductive health of Chinese women funded by the Ford Foundation]. 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 center.<sup>117</sup>

Foreign visits have also helped to nourish more relaxed attitudes toward Western terms such as *feminism* and *the feminist movement* that formerly had a negative connotation in China. More and more activists are willing to claim that they are feminists. Li Ping, a woman activist who established the Center for Women's Studies at Hainan

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<sup>116</sup> He Zhonghua, "My Cherished Wishes—To My 'Manila Sisters'," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 94.

<sup>117</sup> Gao Xiaoxian, "Strategies and Space: A Case Study of the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 200.

University, admitted that she had been against feminism for many years before she was invited to take part in the European Region NGO Forum. However, the meeting changed her understanding of feminism and feminists and she can now proudly state that she is “a real feminist”.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, Chinese activists find that many problems they have encountered are identical to those being acted on abroad by international women's groups. Reflecting on her overseas experience, Xiaolu Luo, the vice president of the Capital Women Journalists' Association of Beijing, commented that “many aspects of women's issues transcend borders. Women worldwide, despite their differences, face many common problems.”<sup>119</sup> This new understanding encourages Chinese activists and scholars to press for further changes and improvements at home.

The Ford Foundation also provides financial support for local initiatives in China such as organizing conferences, workshops and training programs that have become a communication fora between Chinese and international activists and have furnished the former with the most up-to-date knowledge and techniques in the international women's movement. A good example is the three collaborative projects between the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS) and various institutions in China.<sup>120</sup> The first project was the First Chinese Women and Development Conference jointly sponsored by the CSWS and the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University in the summer of 1993. At the conference, scholars in China and abroad discussed the concept

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<sup>118</sup> Li Ping, “I Have Become A Feminist,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 256.

<sup>119</sup> Luo Xiaolu, “Dialogue One—Chatting on Women's Work,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 302.

<sup>120</sup> The Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS) is a US-based feminist organization formed in 1989. It has a membership of more than one hundred feminist scholars and activists living and working in North America, Europe and Greater China (mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan).

of gender, its operation in development theories and its applicability to the Chinese case. As a result of this meeting, two collections of essays were published: one was a translated volume of selected Western feminist writings and the other was an edited volume of conference presentations. The Second Chinese Women and Development Conference was held in Nanjing in 1997. The CSWS members continued to introduce recent developments in Western feminist studies relevant to the Chinese context and to scholarship on Chinese women. The scope of this conference is much broader since new areas of cultural studies, such as the impact of the mass media on women and the gendered configuration of popular culture, were covered for the first time. The third project was the Gender, Poverty and Rural Development Participatory Workshop held in collaboration with the Sichuan Women's Federation Women's Studies Institute in Chengdu in 1998. Unlike the two previous conferences in which the majority of participants were scholars of women's studies in China and abroad, the Chengdu workshop also brought together researchers and practitioners of 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 in Sichuan. It was divided into four sections, each with its own major theme. After presentations in each section, participants were divided into several smaller discussion groups and every participant 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 a gender and ethnic perspective. This new approach generated encouraging results. Applying a gender perspective, many participants began to question the state definitions of "poverty", "poor households" and the various approaches adopted by many poverty-alleviation programs in the country.

The Ford Foundation was the financial sponsor of all three projects in China.<sup>121</sup> As Xiaolan Bao and Wu Xu, the major organizers of these projects, put it, "...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."<sup>122</sup>

Another way in which the Ford Foundation has contributed to the development of the women's movement is to fund self-initiated women's organizations directly. The women's organizations formed outside of the ACWF system can be classified into two categories according to their different functions. One is research-based women's organizations that focus on women's studies and issues. They are initiated by women intellectuals or professionals from higher educational institutions or the Academy of Social Science. The first four major women's studies centers established in universities before 1993 are in Zhengzhou University, Hangzhou University, Peking University and Tianjin Normal University. By 1999, there were 36 university women's studies centers.<sup>123</sup> Although women's studies center are usually attached to research departments in their institutions, the universities neither fund nor staff them.

The second category is organizations aiming to provide social services, educational training or other integrated functions. Among them, the most influential are the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center, Jinglun Family Center, The Rural Women

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<sup>121</sup> Xiaolan Bao and Wu Xu, "Feminist Collaboration between Diaspora and China," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 80-90.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p.93.

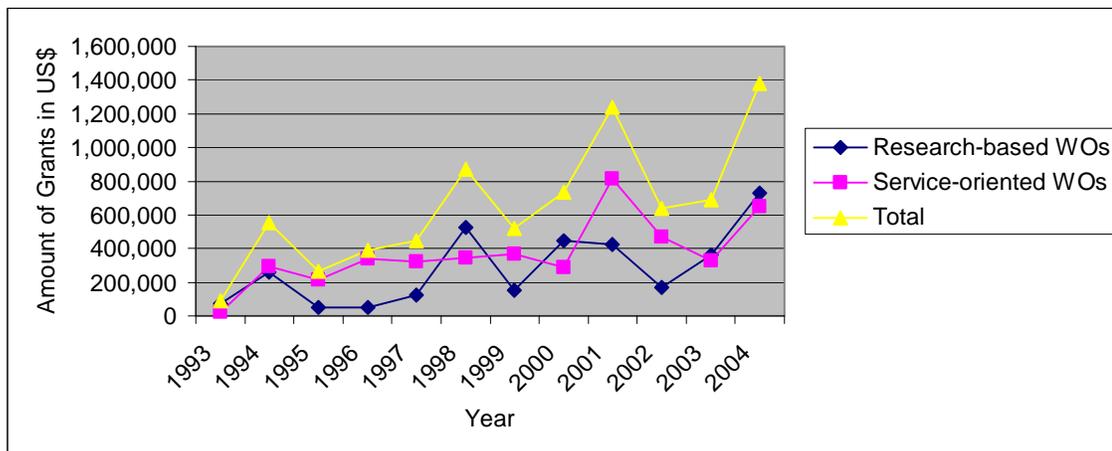
<sup>123</sup> Du Fangqin. "'Manoeuvring Fate' and 'Following the Call': Development and Prospects of Women's Studies," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 237.

Knowing All Magazine, which includes The Migrant Women's Club, The Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University, The Chinese Women's Health Network, The Women's Media Watch Network and more.<sup>124</sup>

Ford has funded numerous university-level women's studies centers such as the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University and the Women's Studies Center at Peking University. Ford has also been influential in funding the activities of non-profit service organizations, and some groups were even founded with the benefit of Ford money. Such groups include Rural Women Knowing All magazine, the Rural Women's Development Association, and the Chinese Women's Health Network. In general, while the contributions of the Ford Foundation also go to the ACWF and its affiliated institutions, its funding for self-initiated women's organizations has been increasingly significant over the years, as can be seen in Figure 2.1. The total amount of Ford grants has jumped from only \$92,000 in 1993 to \$1,379,150 in 2004. In particular, the trend of Ford funding to both research-based women's organizations and service-oriented women's organizations has shown a substantial increase although for most years it seems that a larger portion of funds has gone to the latter (Figure 2.1).

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<sup>124</sup> For a similar categorization of self-initiated women's organizations, see Liu Bohong (2001, p. 150).



**Figure 2.1: the Ford Foundation's Grants to Different Types of Women's Organizations (1993-2004)**  
 Source: Ford Foundation Annual Report (1993-2004)

In short, this indicates that Ford has played an important role in creating a self-initiated women's organization community in China which constitutes a more independent sector of the women's movement. The Chinese government provides no funding for independent women's organizations and, up to the present, private Chinese resources are still very limited. Thus, the Ford Foundation's funding support has been especially key to the survival of independent women's organizations such as Peking University's Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services and the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center which rely on Ford for approximately 70 and 100 percent of their funds respectively.<sup>125</sup> In the case of the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center (the former Women's Research Institute), the earliest-established non-university based NGO, we can see how Ford grants have been central to making this NGO function and to improving its material conditions and its work. From the very beginning, its founder and President, Wang Xingjuan has been fully aware that an NGO would not get a penny from the government and fund raising would be essential

<sup>125</sup> Ming Wang, *Zhongguo NGO Yanjiu: Yi Ge'an Wei Zhongxin (Case Studies on China's NGOs)* (Nagano: UN Centre for Regional Development, 2000), p. 218.

for the mere survival of the organization, as depicted in Wang's contribution to a collection of essays describing Chinese women's preparations for the NGO Forum,

The first 20,000 Yuan (approx US\$2,830) was donated by my friends and myself. I knew that only when this initial money could generate new money, would our Institute be able to carry on its activities, otherwise it would soon die.<sup>126</sup>

Wang had devoted most of her time and energy to raising funds for the survival of her organization and, with other group members, had made these efforts through various means. They tried to engage in the development and marketing of products of daily use for women, but made no profit. The group also attempted to offer training courses to women cadres, which brought in some money. But still, according to Wang, due to limited funding,

the working conditions were very hard. The office has neither heat nor air conditioning. The electric power is cut off from time to time. In winter, counselors wear heavy overcoats and often answer the phone by candlelight. When Mary Ann Burris from the Ford Foundation visited the hotline, she was very impressed by our commitment. Ford is supporting the second line and is also financing the improvement of our working conditions to a great extent.<sup>127</sup>

Then, seven years after its founding, the organization

rents office space of ninety square meters, including a conference room and two separate rooms for the Women's Hotline. In addition, a computer, a printer, a photocopying machine, a fax machine, and other modern equipment have been purchased for the office.<sup>128</sup>

The Ford Foundation has consistently supported the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center with grants totaling \$817,300 from 1993 to 2003 (Figure 2.2). Such a

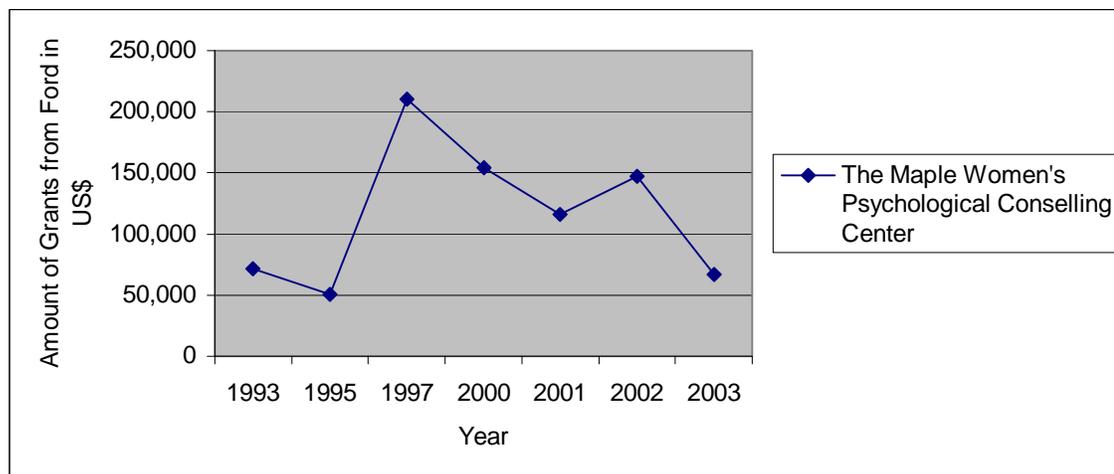
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<sup>126</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "I am Busy Raising Funds," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>128</sup> Women's Research Institute, China Academy of Management Science, *The Progress We Have Made, 1988-1995* (Beijing: Women's Research Institute, 1995), p. 1.

source of funding has been crucial not only to the survival of this organization but also to the expanding activities it is able to pursue.



**Figure 2.2: the Ford Foundation's Grants to the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center**  
**Source: Ford Foundation Annual Report (1993-2004)**

In addition to its funding to self-initiated women's organizations, the Ford Foundation also funds the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), the state-based women's organization. Such funding has an indirect impact on the development of the women's movement in China since it has contributed to greater openness on the part of this state's women's organization and has thus created influential elite allies for independent women's groups and activities. A good example can be found in Ford's funding since 1991 of the Women's Federation to conduct research and activities for its Chinese project on reproductive health. Ten provincial Women's Federations were chosen to divide the Ford funds for the project. In this process, a much more gender-conscious notion of health was introduced into the policy-making process of the birth planning policy and the inclusion of women's own voices was encouraged. Such understandings were promoted through various activities from conferences involving decision-makers from various governmental organs such as the State Family Planning Commission and the Women's Federation to the publication of research results including

“action recommendations”. The increased acceptance of feminist viewpoints among the participants in this project is evidenced in one of the “ethical principles” created at one of the conferences to guide policy-making:

In any action or decision-making concerning reproductive and sexuality, women’s autonomy should be respected and enhanced. Women are the independent subjects of their own body and life. They have the capacity to make responsible decisions and informed choices based on their own reproductive health and sexual lives. Women are the major bearers of adverse consequences of overpopulation and the primary targets of population control programs, their experiences should be considered, their voices be heard, and their participation be promoted in making decisions in reproduction and sexuality.<sup>129</sup>

As important participants in Ford’s reproductive health programming in China, prominent women cadres in the Women’s Federation such as Huang Qizao, the vice president of the ACWF, and Tao Chunfang, the head of the Women’s Research Institute of China of the ACWF, started to advocate the incorporation of a gender perspective into policy making as well as women’s activities and became allies within the state for self-initiated women’s organizations.

Despite the impressive contributions international funding has made in China, we have to recognize its limitations. When Chinese women’s self-initiated organizations depend largely if not entirely on foreign support, obtaining foreign grants has become vital to the existence of these organizations, many of which have to shape their programs and missions around the international funders’ specific interests and orientations which may not be consistent with the indigenous women’s organizations’ conditions and needs. For example, the CSWS wanted to collaborate with feminist scholars and activists in

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<sup>129</sup> Program in Reproductive Health and Ethics, *Guanyu Cujin Shengyu Jiankang He Baozhang Funu Quanyi De Lunli Yuanze He Xingdong Jianyi (Ethical Principles and Action Recommendations on Promoting Reproductive Health and Safeguarding Women’s Rights)*. Report from Shengyu, Xing, Lulixue He Funu Quanyi: Nuquanzhuyi Guandian Yantaohui (Reproduction, Sexuality, Ethics, and Women’s Rights and Interests: Seminar on Feminist Perspectives), 25 February - 1 March 1994, Beijing, China. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 211.

China to theorize about the findings of women's studies in China. However, the Ford Foundation was not interested in this for its focus was instead on developmental projects. Thus, in order to secure funding from the foundation, the organization ended up doing a series of collaborative projects on Chinese women and development. One activist who helped to organize these projects noted when describing the foundation's influence on women's activities, "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."<sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, the distribution of international funds among Chinese women's organizations is uneven. The chances of obtaining international aid for organizations that are small, newly organized or located in remote regions is very limited. The Ford Foundation's annual reports show that a large portion of the Ford funds goes to its rural programs in Yunnan province where the Foundation's major interest area is. The biggest and main recipient in Yunnan, the Yunnan Reproductive Health Research Association, receives grants from Ford almost every year. The rest of the Ford funds have gone mostly to some high-profile women's organizations in Beijing. Among them, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center, the *Rural Women Knowing All* magazine, the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University, and the Jinglun Family Center are the ones that receive the Ford funds most frequently and constitute the majority of Beijing groups receiving funding from Ford. For example, out of the total \$690,000 of the Foundation's China grants to self-initiated women's organizations in 2003, 26.4 percent went to the Yunnan Reproductive Health Research

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<sup>130</sup> Xiaolan Bao and Wu Xu, "Feminist Collaboration between Diaspora and China," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 93.

Association alone; 47.3 percent went to the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center, the *Rural Women Knowing All* magazine, and the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University; and the rest was given to other Beijing groups.<sup>131</sup> It is understandable that international foundations and organizations such as Ford have chosen to support or cooperate with high-profile indigenous women's organizations that have much influence on the Chinese public and that, with their influence and experience, are more likely to meet their proposed goals. However, continued support for these organizations will not help international foundations to reach out to and cultivate the less advanced organizations, the ones that need their assistance even more.

### **International Political Opportunity**

When the Chinese government made a bid in January 1991 for hosting the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), it was less than two years after the demise of the 1989 student movement. The Chinese leaders were trying to use the opportunity of hosting the conference to rehabilitate China's international image following their brutal crackdown on student protests on June 4, 1989.<sup>132</sup>

To understand the underlying assumption that hosting an international women's conference would help their image, we need to look briefly at the historical development of the CCP's theory of women's liberation and the relationship between the CCP and the Chinese women's movement, which I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 4. The first attempts to integrate the women's movement into the proletarian movement were

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<sup>131</sup> Ford Foundation Annual Report 2003.

<sup>132</sup> Zheng Wang, "A Historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China," *Signs*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Autumn 1996), p. 193.

made by CCP leading intellectuals in the 1920s such as Li Daizhao, Dai Jitao, and Chen Duxiu who saw the liberation of women and that of the urban workers as the two greatest linked problems in contemporary Chinese society.<sup>133</sup> Not only did they believe that women were one of the oppressed groups from whom they could draw support, but the changing position of women was to be an indicator of general social progress. One of the Marxist principles guiding the official view is, “the degree of the emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation.”<sup>134</sup> From the very beginning of its founding, the CCP made the emancipation of women one of its policy platforms by claiming “equality in the rights of men and women” as one of its immediate aims in its First Manifesto on the “Current Situation in China” issued in 1922.

In the reform and opening era, even though the Party’s priority of developing a market economy conflicted from time to time with its former policies upholding gender equality, the general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, publicly read a speech on March 8, 1990, entitled “The Entire Party and the Entire Society Should Establish the Marxist Theory of Women”, which again confirmed the Party’s commitment to women’s liberation.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Chinese leaders believe that the degree of liberation among women in China is higher than that of women in the West, and thus that displaying the great achievements of women’s liberation in socialist China would demonstrate to the world the high degree of general liberation in China. In order to broadcast its record on women’s liberation, the Chinese government put out a *White Paper on the Situation of Women in China*. In this document, the Chinese government stated strongly that under the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system, Chinese

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<sup>133</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 118.

<sup>134</sup> Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 690.

<sup>135</sup> March 8 is the official Women’s Day in China.

women today enjoy an unprecedented high status “which had remained unattainable in Chinese society over millennia and which only became accepted in many developed countries after some centuries.”<sup>136</sup> The *White Paper* also claims,

The Chinese government is making every effort to develop the economy, strengthen the legal system, eradicate all backward ideas of discriminating against and looking down on women and promote equal rights for men and women in all spheres of social life as stipulated in Chinese law.<sup>137</sup>

Therefore, accrediting itself with all the progress and advancement that Chinese women have experienced, the Chinese government regarded the convening of the FWCW as the ideal showcase for its international image. The importance of the conference for China’s image in the world was emphasized by the leadership on numerous occasions. For instance, Chen Muhua, chairperson of the ACWF, noted that the convening of the conference in Beijing is “each country’s government’s and people’s confidence and hope in the Chinese government and people,” and that the conference is “a great advancement for our country’s friendly cooperation and exchanges with all countries of the world.”<sup>138</sup>

In March of 1992, it was announced that the United Nations had accepted China’s invitation to convene the 1995 FWCW in Beijing. Immediately prior to the UN’s announcement of the conference location, the Chinese delegation to the UN was careful to note that the Chinese government was then about to pass a new law on women’s rights.<sup>139</sup> Shortly after this announcement, on April 3, the Fifth Session of the Seventh National People’s Congress passed the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the

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<sup>136</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. 1994. “Forward.” *White Paper on the Situation of Women in China*. Downloadable at <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/chinesewoman/11-1.htm>, accessed March 31, 2007.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Muhua Chen, “Quan Shijie Funu Tuanjie Qilai, Wei Shixian Pingdeng, Fazhan, Heping Er Fendou” (The Whole World’s Women Unite, For Striving to Realize Equality, Development, and Peace), *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, 10 July 1994, p. 3.

<sup>139</sup> Xinhua, “Government Proposes ‘Improved’ Women’s Rights Law,” *Xinhua*, 24 January 1992. In *FBIS Daily Report: China*, 24 January 1992, pp. 1-2.

Protection of Women's Rights and Interests. Later, the Women's Federation's officials, at a meeting of their national Party committee, stressed the law's implementation as "the basis of the convening of the women's conference" in Beijing.<sup>140</sup> Such an action appears to be causally related to China's desire to host the FWCW and to show its support for women's equality. The preparatory process for the conference continued to promote government attention to women's issues and helped to place the many explicit international statements by the Chinese government regarding its concern for women on the side of a more independent women's movement. On 28 August 1993, the Chinese government set up the China Organizing Committee for the FWCW to co-ordinate the preparatory activities for the conference. Besides the White Paper in 1994 on the Situation of Women in China, mentioned above, the Chinese government also published *Country Report on the People's Republic of China's Implementation of the Nairobi Strategy to Enhance Women's Status* to assert the CCP's unquestionable commitment toward gender equality. Moreover, to tie China's international image into the convening of the women's conference, the government issued a new measure on women's equality immediately before the conference, *The Program for the Development of Chinese Women (1995-2000)*, adopted by the State Council. The program specifically cites China's "solemn commitments for the observance of international conventions concerning women's rights and development."<sup>141</sup> In addition, it made very concrete promises to Chinese women's rights and interests, dealing with various women's issues ranging from

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<sup>140</sup> Wu Baoli and Ma Junmin, "Quanguo Fulian Zhaokai Liuji Shiyici Dangwei Kuoda Huiyi, Tonguo Yingjie Jiuwu Shijie Funu Dahui Jueyi" (All-China Women's Federation Convenes Enlarged Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Party Committee of the Sixth National Women Congress, Passes Resolution Greeting the 1995 World Conference on Women), *Zhongguo Funu Bao (China Women's News)*, 1 April 1992.

<sup>141</sup> All-China Women's Federation, *The Program for the Development of Chinese Women (1995-2000)*(Beijing: All-China Women's Federation, 1995). Online at <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/natrep/NatActPlans/china/CHINA>, accessed March 31, 2007.

political participation to employment to health to education to women's images in the media.

To prepare the conference and the accompanying Non-Government Organization Forum, the ACWF, which as a mass organization had served its political role as a mobilizing agent for policy education and informational transmission, launched a campaign to train women leaders at all levels around the nation. Over 8,000 workshops and seminars nationwide were held and almost two million female leaders and activists were involved. For hundreds of thousands of Chinese women, this campaign offered an unprecedented opportunity to learn about international feminism and feminist activism and most of them also discovered "NGOs" for the first time. Some of them even had the opportunity to attend international preparatory meetings and NGO forums in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia, and to observe how women's NGOs functioned and what issues they raised, all of which was an eye-opening and empowering experience. As discussed in the previous section, inspired by their encounter with global feminist activities, many women scholars and Women's Federation cadres changed their formerly reserved view of feminism and quickly began to popularize the idea of NGOs, the concepts of women empowering women, sustainable human-centered development and other issues raised by women all over world.

Liu Bohong, an activist who is the deputy director of the Women's Studies Institute of China of the ACWF, and at the same time, established a women's NGO known as The Women's Health Network, reflected on her experience attending the preparatory regional meeting for the Women's Conference in Manila. She commented that "it was at this meeting that I began to understand the concept of a woman's NGO and its relevance to

the international women's movement."<sup>142</sup> The following excerpt from Liu Bohong, who is a high-level official in the ACWF, not only represents many Chinese women activists' changed perception of women NGOs but also, to some extent, reflects such a change on the part of the Chinese government:

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...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.<sup>143</sup>

This viewpoint regarding NGOs indicates that the state has made a commitment not only to gender equality but also to women's NGO work in China, which further contributes to a greater tolerance of self-initiated women's organizations. During the course of the Fourth World Conference on Women, along with agreeing to "establish a monitoring system on women's condition", the official Chinese delegation also pledged to "improve women's institutions at all levels" and "attach more importance to the role of NGOs".<sup>144</sup>

To understand how the convocation of the FWCW influenced the development of the women's movement in the 1990s, it may be useful to look once again at the general elements of the political opportunity structure. According to McAdam, it includes four

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<sup>142</sup> Liu Bohong, "The All China Women's Federation and Women's NGOs," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 141.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-145.

<sup>144</sup> Speech by Peng Peiyun who is the president of the ACWF and the vice-chairman of the 9<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress standing committee. Downloadable at <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950905193325.txt>, accessed March 31, 2007.

elements: “1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, 2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, 3. The presence or absence of elite allies, 4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression.”<sup>145</sup> In the Chinese context, the existence of categories (3) and (4) can be said to have been present for the women’s movement and a relatively opened space was provided for more independent women’s organizing activities.

The preparations for the FWCW and the desires of the Chinese state to present a favorable face to the world through the conference have had a significant downward effect on the will of the party state to repress the activities of the newly emerging independent women’s movement. Furthermore, the more open political opportunity structure for women’s movement activities was found not only in general government moves toward a greater tolerance of a more independent women’s movement, but also in greater openness on the part of the state-run women’s organization, the ACWF. Elite allies within government institutions, especially the ACWF, have been created in the process. According to Liu Bohong, the Fourth World Conference on Women in China gave the ACWF an unprecedented, historic opportunity to make itself more representative of women.<sup>146</sup> It recruited young, highly-educated women cadres with managerial experience and professional skills to help with preparations and participate in the conference, many of which have developed a much more positive view of self-initiated women’s organizations and have been greatly inspired by global feminism

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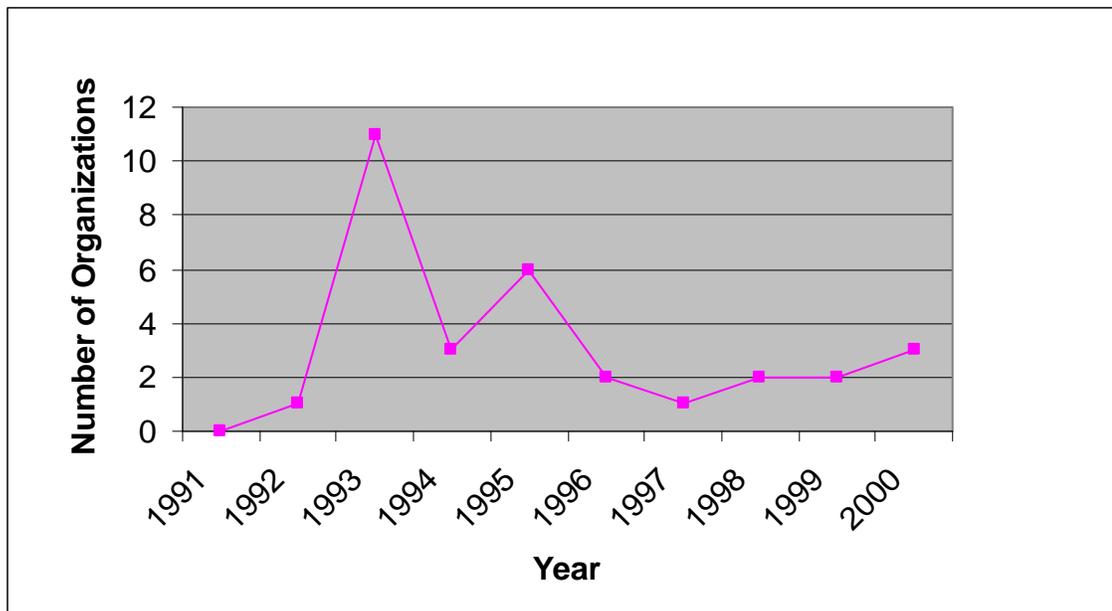
<sup>145</sup> Doug McAdam, “Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 27.

<sup>146</sup> Liu Bohong, “The All China Women’s Federation and Women’s NGOs,” in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 148.

during the process. Originally, the Chinese government had decided to organize thirty panels by government branches and the Women's Federation for the NGO Forum. With the increasing knowledge of what the NGO Forum was about, Women's Federation cadres working on the Chinese official preparatory committee maneuvered to expand the number of panels to forty seven to include topics that had not been previously discussed in public, such as women and human rights, women and the environment, and violence against women. Some of these women cadres were even directly involved in the establishment of new women's organizations independent of the ACWF. I will discuss the role of these women cadres more in the next chapter. Additionally, according to UN regulations, workshops or seminars at the NGO forum must be hosted by at least one women's NGO. So the ACWF embraced with more enthusiasm the establishment of self-initiated women's organizations. These include the Chinese Women's Health Network founded by Liu Bohong and a number of other Beijing women activists to help prepare for the FWCW and the magazine *World Women's Vision* founded by Shang Shaohua, an editor from *Women of China* magazine, especially in anticipation of the upcoming FWCW. Both Liu Bohong and Shang Shaohua worked for the ACWF and received great support from the latter for the establishment of their organizations due to the convening of the conference in China. To better prepare for the conference, the ACWF further collaborated with various organizations and activists outside its system and encouraged their participation in the conference. Inspired by the FWCW, the East Meets West Translation Group was founded by a group of young women with the purpose of translating Western feminist works into Chinese and publishing them to introduce a wider range of Chinese people to feminist ideas. Even though it was not even legally registered

according to the regulations, it was allowed to participate in the preparations of the conference with the ACWF's permission.

Consequently, the FWCW circulated the idea of global feminism and enhanced women's activism in China in significant ways. Special TV programs were produced to spread information about the FWCW and the NGO Forum. Many academic journals and various major newspapers had special issues on women, and an unprecedented number of books on women were published. These included case studies, collections of articles on specific subjects, and translations of Western feminist works. An *English-Chinese Lexicon of Women and Law* was published to explain terms such as feminism, gender and NGO by referring to their historical, political and cultural contexts in the West. Scholars affiliated with the Chinese Society for Women's Studies provided a critical analysis of feminist scholarship in various academic disciplines in the United States in a book entitled *A Review of Western Feminist Research*. Various women's magazines, particularly the publications newly founded prior to the FWCW, such as *Rural Women Knowing All* and *World Women's Vision* featured background information on the conference, as well as post-conference follow-up information on the Platform for Action and its implementation. Meanwhile, a wide flowering of self-initiated women's organizations developed in Beijing and elsewhere in China. While the most extensive development occurred in the area of women's studies, other types of women's organizations in the area of social services and educational training were also formed. The founding of self-initiated women's organizations accelerated immediately after China was selected to host the conference.



**Figure 2.3: Growth in Self-initiated Women's Groups 1991-2000**  
 Sources: Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002);  
 China Development Brief, ed., *250 Chinese NGOs* (Beijing: China Development Brief, 2001).<sup>147</sup>

Figure 2.3 above shows the growth of self-initiated women's organizations from 1991 to 2000. There was only one organization formed in 1992. Yet in 1993, the number of organizations founded increased dramatically to 11 and from 1993 to 1995, 20 organizations were founded, which is about 64 percent of the new groups founded from 1991 to 2000. The timing of the founding of various women's groups seems clearly related to the international opportunities provided by the FWCW in particular.

## Continuing and Renewing Opportunities

<sup>147</sup> In Wesoky's book, she included women's organizations in Beijing founded before 1996, therefore, for those organizations established after that and outside Beijing, I have to rely on my personal knowledge as well the information on women's organizations contained in *250 Chinese NGOs*. There are no fixed and objective criteria for determining which organization is or is not self-initiated women's organizations, but as a rule, I have specifically excluded those organizations initiated by and under the immediate supervision of the ACWF such as Chinese Women Lawyers' Friendly Society and Women's Studies Institute of China. Thus, my counting yields a smaller number than both sources, which is also a much more conservative evaluation of the growth in self-initiated women's groups. Due to incomplete and imperfect information, errors may be avoidable; however, I believe, the figure does capture the general trend during this period.

The exogenous opportunities provided in both the political and economic spheres were essentially movement-specific. More importantly, they expanded otherwise limited domestic-level opportunities and thus were central to the creation and development of a more independent women's movement since the 1990s.

Funding problems are a persistent concern related to the development of women's organizations after the 1990s. Yet, some groups have continued to procure Ford Foundation and other grants to support their operations. The continuation of the Ford women-related programs in China, as evidenced in the increasing number of grants to self-initiated women's organizations (see Figure 2.1 and 2.2), is still an important component ensuring that the economic opportunities provided by international funds continue in China.

While the Fourth World Conference on Women was a vitally important factor in the creation of a more independent women's movement in the 1990s, the whole process was not free of the state's effort to assert control over the conference's preparations and the NGO Forum itself. Confronted by protests by human rights organizations at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995, Chinese government leaders began to see the risk that state authority might be challenged and undermined during the coming conference. Starting from early 1995, greater governmental control began to be exerted over every aspect of the women's conference, culminating in the sudden decision in April 1995 to move the site of the NGO Forum to Huairou, a location distant from central Beijing and the UN conference. The forty-seven panels presented by Chinese women were closely screened through rehearsals and all the delegates to the NGO forum had to go through official training so that their talks could be geared to

displaying Chinese women's achievements rather than discussing problems. Those women who had attended conferences abroad were visited and questioned by public security personnel.<sup>148</sup> All these actions seemed to suggest the state's underlying suspicion and hostility toward women's spontaneous activities. Therefore, a legitimate post-conference question to ask is: are the openings in the political opportunity structure only temporary and did they end with the conclusion of the conference?

The evidence indicated that many aspects of the pre-conference organizing activities persisted and even thrived after the conference. Even though the number of groups that were founded declined, new self-initiated women's groups were still set up after the conference, as shown in Figure 2.3. Continuing activities are evident in the establishment of the Women's Media Watch Network in 1996 by a group of female journalists aiming to incorporate gender perspectives into the media; the second and third conferences on Chinese Women and Development, funded by the Ford Foundation, were successfully held in 1997 and 1998, respectively; the Centre for Women's Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi was founded in 1999 with support from Hong Kong Oxfam; and, beginning in 2000, the Centre for Women's Studies, Tianjin Normal University, in collaboration with the CSWS and nine other women's studies centers from different universities, launched a five-year project for the purpose of advancing women and gender studies in China to a higher level. The state, on the other hand, pleased with the success of the conference, quickly returned to a positive assessment of the ongoing promotion of the women's movement from below and a reaffirmation of its commitments to women's liberation in China. The Chinese preparatory committee had a grand celebration, issuing

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<sup>148</sup> Wang Zheng, "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 8, No.4 (1997), pp. 144-145.

award certificates to each participant in the NGO Forum to acknowledge their contribution to the nation. After the Platform for Action was solemnly signed by government officials from all over world, the ACWF launched a nationwide campaign to implement the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration, an action that was apparently sanctioned by the Chinese government.

The changed attitude of the Chinese government towards women's organizing activities from openness to repression and to acceptance again reveal a dynamic process in which the state adjusts its policies towards the women's movement in response to its interactions with women's organizations. What is particularly crucial to the renewing of the political opportunity structures in this process is women activists who strategically chose to cooperate with the former during the conference. An overseas Chinese scholar noted in her writing on the conference and its relationship to the Chinese women's movement,

When I met my friends at the NGO Forum, everyone said, "Just keep a low profile and wait for the paranoia to pass." They sounded like seasoned farmers who knew all too well how to contend with bad weather; in this kind of unfavorable political climate, one should just do some fixing and repair work, preparing for a warmer, more productive season ... Among Chinese participants, no one acted as a troublemaker. Everyone in the forty-seven panels read their lines according to the script that had been rehearsed many times. With their skillful performance, Chinese participants showed the state that women were not an oppositional force against the government. The end of the NGO Forum brought tremendous relief to the government leaders. They were further thrilled by the gratitude and praise of foreign government officials at the UN conference.<sup>149</sup>

The Chinese state was reassured by the cooperative actions of women activists in the conference that an independent women's movement would not necessarily be in confrontation with the government. In this way, the openings created by the FWCW was

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., pp. 145-146.

resumed and preserved through activists' strategic choice to show their willingness to temporarily subordinate to the state's priorities.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Innovative Organizational Forms and Mobilizing Networks in the Women's Movement**

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, reforms have affected Chinese women enormously in terms of both opportunities and constraints. As a result, the post-Mao era has seen the emergence of women's consciousness and the formation of a collective identity after decades of Maoist androgyny. The organizational manifestations of such a development can be found in the more independent and diverse forms of women's organizations that came to exist in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Chapter 3, I will first discuss the legal and policy framework surrounding social organizations in China. In particular, this regulatory system is characterized by the practice of dual registration, which functions primarily as a party-state means of controlling and restricting popular organizing. Adapting to this system, women activists have been engaged in innovative forms of organizing from below and are continuously carving out space for the founding of their organizations within the boundaries set by the state. I will then examine both the vertical and horizontal dynamics that have contributed to the very survival and development of women's groups in the contemporary Chinese women's movement.

#### **Coping with the Regulatory System for Social Organizations**

Even though international political and economic opportunities have created openings for women's organizing, in order to establish their self-initiated organizations

successfully, activists still need to overcome an important institutional obstacle—a restrictive regulatory system that controls social organizations. The proliferation of social organizations in the reform era, particularly the dramatic burst of political energy from organizations of students, workers, and city residents during the dramatic events of 1989, propelled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government to develop a comprehensive system of regulations to regain control over this sphere. The Division of Social Organizations (DSO) under the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) was established to oversee social organizations during the very heat of the 1989 student movement. In October 1989, the standing Committee of the State Council issued *Regulations for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations*. Based on these measures, a regulatory system for social organizations was gradually established and it became even stricter and more comprehensive after the promulgation of the revised Regulations in 1998.

One of the most prominent features of this system is the dual registration that is required in the registration process of a social organization. Under current policy, social organizations in China are obligated to register with the registration management agency, i.e. the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) or local bureaus of civil affairs; yet before submitting its application for registration, a social organization must be investigated and approved by the professional supervisory agency (*yewu zhuguan danwei*) in the government apparatus.<sup>150</sup> Activists refer to these supervisory agencies as “mothers-in-

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<sup>150</sup> Under the current policy, people’s and mass organizations organized by the government, such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women’s Federation and the Chinese Communist Youth League, are classified as social organizations. But unlike all other social organizations, organizations falling into this category are exempt from registration with MOCA and under the supervision of the CCP or the State Council. The government entrusts them with important government functions such as the authority to supervise other social organizations and endows them with the privileged status of government agencies.

law” since they are entitled to exercise day-to-day oversight when the MOCA and its local bureaus do not have the capacity to oversee the operations of social organizations. Each year, social organizations face two types of examinations—one for each “boss”. First, each organization must, by March of each year, submit an annual report to the professional supervisory agency regarding its activities during the previous year. Additionally, by May of each year, each organization needs to undergo an annual investigation by the registration management agency.

The rules about what types of governmental departments can be a supervisory agency are very strict: “they have to be in a similar professional field and at the same administrative level as the organization seeking a sponsor.”<sup>151</sup> More importantly, a supervisory work unit has to be a governmental department or an organ empowered by the State Council or local government, usually a government organized social organization such as people’s and mass organizations. For example, a national women’s organization has to obtain approval from the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), whereas an environmental organization in Yunnan Province should have the Yunnan Provincial Environmental Bureau as its supervisory sponsor.

The institutional arrangement of dual registration certainly helps the government to control social organizations politically and legally. The supervision of both the registration management agency and the professional supervisory agency can easily turn into explicit political control. For instance, both can retract their approval of a social organization if it diverts from its original intended objectives, and retraction of approval from either agency will cost a social organization its legal status. So the threat of

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<sup>151</sup> Qiusha Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 64.

retracting approval can be used to exert pressure on organizations that engage in activities that government officials find objectionable or inconvenient. The requirement of approval by a supervisory institution prior to an organization's registration makes it very difficult for more autonomous social organizations to register: many organizations cannot find a supervisory work unit for themselves because the "mothers-in-law" are beholden to the government should any political problem occur in a social organization, which renders governmental agencies very reluctant to take on such a potential political liability. Combined with the "anti-competition" rule,<sup>152</sup> this requirement also allows a government department to set up its own association to prevent a more independent organization from getting registered.

The dual registration provision is designed by the government to screen social organizations and impose limits on any potentially subversive activities. Yet, self-initiated women's organizations are not just passive subjects of state control and intrusion. Facing the constraints established by the government, activists employ a variety of strategies from evasion to compliance to creating alternative space to ensure the successful set up of their organizations. And regardless of what strategies are adopted, these are strategic decisions by activists seeking to negotiate a relationship with the state that maximizes their organization's interests or that deflects state penetration.

### **Evasion**

Many groups adopt the strategy of becoming a second-level organization in a larger existing institution established by the state. Such groups are considered by law as internal

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<sup>152</sup> It stipulates that only one organization can represent a particular interest or constituency in the same administrative field and in the same region.

organizations falling within state institutions or governmental organized social organizations, and thus are exempt from registration. In most of these cases, this strategy is made possible by founding activists who take advantage of pre-existing ties with their formal work units and establish their organizations within these units.

The history and legacy of the work unit system needs to be briefly introduced in order to better understand why such a strategy becomes feasible for these activists and how the work unit system facilitates movement mobilization through this strategy. In China's pre-reform years, nearly the entire population in the cities was organized by the state into various kinds of work units such as industrial and commercial enterprises, academic and educational institutions, and government offices. A work unit functions as "an enclosed, multifunctional and self-sufficient entity ... the most basic collective unit in the Chinese political and social order."<sup>153</sup> It is not just an economic entity but was the unit for "the delivery of a variety of services and also for the exercise of political control."<sup>154</sup> On the one hand, the state allocated crucial benefits and services, including housing, health care, child care, education and retirement pensions, to the individuals through their work units. On the other hand, the CCP's multi-tiered organizations within a work unit controlled even the smallest work group and organized weekly mandatory meetings to study the party's and government's documents. Virtually every adult individual belonged to a work unit and was likely to stay within it for the rest of his or her life since one could not choose to change or quit by one's own free will. The work

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<sup>153</sup> Lowell Dittmer and Xiaobo Lu, "Organizational Involution and Sociopolitical Reform in China: an Analysis of the Work Unit," in Lowell Dittmer, Haruhira Fukui and Peter Lee (eds.), *Informal Politics in East Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.185.

<sup>154</sup> Barry Naughton, "Danwei: The Economic Foundations of a Unique institution," in Xiaobo Lu and Elizabeth Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 181.

unit furthermore became the source of personal identity. For instance, an inquiry into a person's identity and social status usually began with the question, "Which work unit do you belong to?" Integrating society into the state, the work unit system had largely substituted for the traditional Chinese social networks based on clan, trade, profession, religion and region.

Economic reforms, such as economic decentralization that started in 1978—first in agriculture and then in the urban economy—combined with a gradual opening to foreign investors, have dramatically changed the work unit system. The state has removed large sections of the population from the state sector to the non-state sector. State control over those remaining in the state sector has also been significantly weakened through various decentralization measures. The most noticeable changes occurred in the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) which had to cast off their welfare provisions in order to survive competition in a market economy. The growth of a liberalized and decentralized market economy and the shift in the responsibility for housing, health care and social security concerns have greatly undermined the state's control over individuals through the *danwei*. In the mean time, since the amount of resources controlled by individuals is increasing, a realm of social and economic life that is not controlled by the state has developed, which in turn has created conditions for the development of horizontal means of identification and interaction. As White, Howell and Shang observe, "attitudes toward self, society and state have changed radically; social groups and interests have diversified, in the process becoming more autonomous and potentially more assertive in relation to the Party/state."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Gordon White, Jude Howell and Xiaoyuan Shang, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 25-26.

While the effects of the reforms in promoting new forms of social autonomy and new social interests are undeniable, the *danwei* system has survived the reforms and continued to have an important role in China.<sup>156</sup> For those who still work in the state sector such as in governmental agencies and educational institutions, the influence of ties to work units is still detectable to a large extent. Some have argued that the existence of the *danwei* system in the Maoist era led to a certain sense of “isolation” among Chinese social groups and a “fragmented” social structure which in turn impeded the emergence of civil society.<sup>157</sup> However, the work unit as an institutional legacy of pre-reform China does not always act as a barrier in the post-Mao era to the development of “new types of intermediate association” which seek “greater autonomy from and influence over the Party/state”.<sup>158</sup> Specifically, the work unit plays a positive role in the development of the contemporary Chinese women’s movement. This movement has an intellectual basis since women activists are primarily intellectuals and professionals such as journalist, doctors, engineers and scientists, university lecturers and professors, most of whom work in governmental agencies or state-run institutions and organizations. Therefore, they are able to utilize their ties with formal work units as an important organizational basis facilitating mobilization and contributing to the flourishing of alternative forms of women’s groups. In other words, many women’s organizations have been formed within pre-existing work units where activists work, such as women’s research centers and

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<sup>156</sup> Barry Naughton, “*Danwei*: The Economic Foundations of a Unique institution,” in Xiaobo Lu and Elizabeth Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 169.

<sup>157</sup> Flemming Christiansen, “Democratization in China: Structural Constraints,” in Geraint Parry and Michael Moran (eds.), *Democracy and Democratization* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 155.

<sup>158</sup> Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Xiaoyuan Shang, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 25-26.

service organizations established as programs or internal organizations at state-run universities and state research institutions.

The first women's and gender studies center was established by Li Xiaojiang at Zhengzhou University in 1987. Between 1987 and 1999, thirty six universities and colleges in China had established centers for women's studies.<sup>159</sup> Even though these centers were founded within educational or research institutions, they engaged not only in research, but also in various types of social service work. As Wang Zheng has observed, women's studies in China are truly "both theory and social practice".<sup>160</sup> One activist even criticized that research carried out at women's studies centers in educational institutions in China put too much emphasis on applied and problem-solving concerns.<sup>161</sup> This is evident in the publications of some university-level women's studies centers, such as the Women's Studies Center at Beijing University, which describe both their social service and academic activities.<sup>162</sup> Another example is the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Service at Beijing University (CWLSLS), whose name clearly indicates the organization's social service function. Guo Jianmei, the Director of the Center, also claimed, that it was "an important classroom and basis for teachers and students of

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<sup>159</sup> Du Fangqin, "'Manoeuvring Fate' and 'Following the Call': Development and Prospects of Women's Studies," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 237.

<sup>160</sup> Wang Zheng, "Research on Women in Contemporary China," in Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Susan Mann and Lisa Rofel (eds.), *Guide to Women's Studies in China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1998), p. 38.

<sup>161</sup> Du Fangqin, "'Manoeuvring Fate' and 'Following the Call': Development and Prospects of Women's Studies," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 246-247.

<sup>162</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 64.

Beijing University's Law Department to participate in the realization of the rule of law".<sup>163</sup>

Both the founding of and individual participation in these organizations are voluntary. Yet, unlike other social organizations, when the activists founded their organization, they were saved from the trouble of finding and maintaining a professional supervisory body because it was established within already-existing institutions which naturally became the sponsor institution. The MOCA and its local bureaus are not involved in monitoring or auditing the organization, and do not require the sponsoring institution to submit reports. More importantly, as long as they are approved by their universities, they do not need to be registered with and be under the supervision of the MOCA; instead, they are subordinate to the State Education Commission whose supervision is much less strict than the Ministry. Working in educational or research institutions has not only helped activists get around the registration requirements for social organizations but has also given them many other advantages when establishing independent women's organizations. These activists have a great deal of time and freedom to undertake research or service projects for their own organizations. Their appointed teaching positions usually have nothing to do with these organizations and technically they can only use their spare time to carry out activities for their own organizations; yet, in practice, the work environment and the nature of their professions often allow the line between paid and spare time to blur. Moreover, both teaching and research institutions require scholars to complete one or two publications a year and the

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<sup>163</sup> The excerpt of comments made by Guo Jianmei at the *Women Organizing in China* workshop, in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 227.

research done for independent research centers is acceptable in fulfilling this requirement, thus providing an extra bonus for their active role in running these organizations. In addition, scholars can apply the resources from their primary jobs, such as access to the library, office space and supplies, computers and most importantly, intellectual networks, to the activities of their own organizations.

Drawing upon her own experience, Li Xiaojiang explains how activists' pre-established ties with their work units have put them in a privileged position to create and nurture independent women's research organizations. Her testimony speaks loudly to the important role played by the work unit system in women's movement organizing.

In the old work unit system, every one occupies a position to get paid. But the system itself allows no room for new initiatives (even for officials, such a space is limited). Even though we had virtually nothing to begin with, the reason our organization could survive and develop was mainly because we were parasitical to the old system. I always tell people that we take a two-route approach. As individuals, we all belong to the old system, and have our secured "iron rice bowl." As an organization, however, we are outside of the system since we do not bear all the disadvantages and burdens of the old system. Because we all have positions inside the system, we are able to turn our supposedly bread-earning positions to work on new initiatives and never have to worry about our daily necessities (my translation).<sup>164</sup>

On the other hand, the sponsoring work units --universities and other state research institutions—are more often than not supportive of scholars who are able to obtain outside funding to form their own research or service organizations, partly because the former can charge overhead fees. For instance, Du Fangqin, the founder of the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University, noted that her group received great support and assistance from the school's leaders, such as the President and the Vice President, which in turn created a relatively free and favorable environment for its

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<sup>164</sup> Li Xiaojiang, "Gongong Kongjian De Chuangzhao" (Creating a Public Sphere), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 28.

smooth development.<sup>165</sup> Li Xiaojiang, who founded the Center for Gender Studies at Dalian University, also admitted that the full support of the university president was crucial for the creation and the initial stages of development of the center.<sup>166</sup>

While most women's organizations established in pre-existing work units are research organizations at educational or research institutions, the Migrant Women's Club<sup>167</sup> presents a good example of how a self-initiated service-oriented women's organization was set up within a party-state institution—the All-China Women's Federation (hereafter the ACWF or the Women's Federation) and saved the trouble of registration. Xie Lihua, one of the two main initiators of the Club, was an editor at *China Women's News*, a publication of the ACWF. Because of Xie's affiliation with the Women's Federation, she was able to set up the organization within the Federation so that the problems encountered by the WRI in finding and maintaining a supervisory unit were avoided. In addition, *China Women's News* provided the Club with office space free of charge. Thus, according to Xie, the founding of the Club was relatively easy due to its connection with the ACWF.

Because we 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 we 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 was 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

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<sup>165</sup> Du Fangqin, "Wode Funu Yanjiu Licheng" (My Road to Women's Studies), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 209-210.

<sup>166</sup> Li Xiaojiang, "The Center for Gender Studies at Dalian University: A New Plan for the Mutual Development of Women's /Gender Studies and Higher Education," in Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (eds.), *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), p. 141.

<sup>167</sup> It is the first organization in China serving "migrant women" who come to the city from the countryside to find jobs. The Club provides all kinds of support to these women from legal aid, emergency funds, basic education and recreational activities.

conversation recorded (audience laughter), that's why up to this moment, the Migrant Women's Club has never run into trouble.<sup>168</sup>

Even though the regulatory system for social organizations is utilized by the state authority as an effective way to control organizing and exclude unwanted forms of social organizations, activists have successfully exploited their pre-existing connections with their work units, usually state-affiliated institutions, to get around these regulations. Establishing their organizations within their work units as internal secondary organizations, they not only legalize their activities without registration but also attain valuable resources for organizing, both of which are crucial for the formation and development of self-initiated women's organizations. More importantly, state control and intrusion through the means of the registration requirement has been circumvented. Yet, the relative autonomy of an organization, in terms such as the choice of issues to address, activities in which to engage and modes of action, still depends on specific arrangements with the affiliated institution. In most cases, supervision is very limited; and, generally speaking, the organizations established within universities and other research institutions enjoy a higher degree of independence than those set up within the ACWF. For instance, the magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* was financially independent from the ACWF, but the editorial office was subject to the administrative leadership of the *Chinese Women's News*. Later, the relationship of the magazine to the Women's Federation became problematic when activists sought more independence from the latter and the Federation attempted to exert more control over the magazine. In the end, their differing views as to the autonomy of the magazine led to the detachment of the magazine from the

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<sup>168</sup> The excerpt of comments made by Xie Lihua at the *Women Organizing in China* workshop, in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 227.

Federation and the registration of the magazine as a private enterprise.<sup>169</sup> Such cases, however, are rarely found among those organizations established within educational or research institutions.

### **Compliance**

For those women's organizations that choose to go through the registration process, successful registration can be utilized to raise their social status and gain more legitimacy. Most self-initiated women's organizations do not have great impact on government organizations and are largely unknown to the public, thus the auspices of a powerful "mother-in-law" may furnish more influence and some degree of legitimacy for the affiliated organization. In particular, a good supervisory body can bring an organization crucial benefits such as approval of registration, green lights on sensitive activities, political protection, free or low-rent office space and even some extra funding, which in turn facilitates mobilization.

The case of the Women's Research Institute (WRI), the predecessor to the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center (MWPPCC), vividly illustrates the importance of having a professional supervisory agency for the growth and very survival of a popular women's organization. When the WRI was set up in 1988, it was affiliated with the China Management Science Research Institute (CMSRI) which, albeit not established by the state, was registered under a government agency--the State Council's Organizational Reform Committee (SCORC). In this way, the WRI was indirectly affiliated with a state

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<sup>169</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for Global Feminisms Project.

institution.<sup>170</sup> The support from and minimal control by the CMSRI as a supervisory work unit gave the WRI great freedom to conduct its own activities. At one time, the CMSRI even offered to reimburse travel expenses for activists in the WRI to attend some training workshops. Year later, when reflecting on the hard path that her organization had gone through, Wang Xingjuan, the WRI's founder and director, asserted the importance of registering with a supervising institution:

By registering like this, it gave our organization greater legitimacy. We operated as an organization affiliated with a formal, high-level state institution. Thus people did not oppose our idea of establishing a women's research institute.<sup>171</sup>

However, the relationship between the CMSRI and its "mother-in-law"—the SCORC—became so strained that the latter abruptly and unilaterally terminated the affiliation. Since the CMSRI lost its supervising agency as well as its own qualifications as a professional supervisory agency of the WRI, the WRI found itself in a very difficult situation. First, it had great difficulty renting an office. The activists could not even get a rental contract signed because no one would take the risk of housing an "illegal" social organization. In the mean time, after losing its legal status, in international exchanges with scholars and women's organizations from abroad, the WRI could no longer provide invitation letters that were needed for its foreign guests to apply for visas; nor could it obtain papers required for its own activists to travel abroad. The situation became even worse when the frequent visits of foreign journalists and high-ranking political leaders attracted the attention of the Ministry of State Security (MSS)<sup>172</sup> and the latter started to

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<sup>170</sup> Such a practice is no longer permitted under the official regulatory system of social organizations launched in 1989. All social organizations established thereafter have to be directly affiliated with a governmental institution or a government organized social organization such as the All-China Women's Federation, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the Chinese Communist Youth League.

<sup>171</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for Global Feminisms Project.

<sup>172</sup> It is the security agency in China which not only collects foreign and domestic intelligence but also monitors domestic political dissidents.

investigate the work and registration status of the WRI. Under these circumstances, the CMSRI ended its agreement with the WRI in order to avoid political liability. For some months it seemed that the organization might not be able to survive since it was stigmatized in a national circular issued by the State Council as an infiltrating site of capitalism and thus there was no chance of finding a new supervisory agency and re-registering as a social organization. However, due to the perseverance and creativity of Wang Xingjuan and other activists, the organization was transformed into the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center late in 1996 and registered as a service enterprise with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, eight years after this transformation, Wang Xingjuan admits in her interview that she still hopes to find a supervising work unit so that her organization can register with the Bureau of Civil Affairs.<sup>174</sup> Like many other women activists, Wang understands the necessity of having a professional supervisory agency for the survival and development of her organization in contemporary China. Such an arrangement for a non-governmental organization can lend recognition and support from society and the government notwithstanding the loss of autonomy.<sup>175</sup> However, as far as autonomy is concerned, this compliance strategy does not necessarily result in subjugation while governmental institutions that choose to play the mother-in-law role vary greatly in how effectively they exercise their supervision. Once registration has been secured, social organizations will be able to go about their business in relative independence of the supervisory body if they choose one that is

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<sup>173</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "Yige Funu Caogen Zuzhi De Shengzhang" (The Growth of a Women's Grassroots Organization), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 258-265.

<sup>174</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for Global Feminisms Project.

<sup>175</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "Yige Funu Caogen Zuzhi De Shengzhang" (The Growth of a Women's Grassroots Organization), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 258-261. See also Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 164-165.

willing to give them a relatively free hand. A professor involved with a number of different self-initiated women's organizations in Beijing stated that, "You can find a good professional supervisory agency and have a lot of freedom."<sup>176</sup> Another activist claimed that her organization was quite independent in its relationship with its supervisory agency, asserting that, "[W]e are fairly independent, we make our own policy decisions and we don't accept too much intervention or control from them. We report our situation to them."<sup>177</sup> It is very loose."<sup>178</sup> And the relationship of the WRI with the CMSRI seems to confirm this viewpoint. In this sense, the relative autonomy of a women's organization is very much dependent on its strategic choice of a professional supervisory agency.

### **Creating Alternative Space**

Despairing of finding a professional supervisory agency to enable legal registration as a social organization, a number of women's groups have taken the short cut of registering as for-profit corporations with local Industry and Commerce Bureaus although in actuality they are non-profit organizations. The Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center (MWPPC) was the first one to do this by registering with the Industry and Commerce Bureau in Beijing in 1996 when it could not find a professional supervisory agency. Many self-initiated women's organizations follow the same strategy so that they can avoid the hassle with registering as a social organization and still secure legal status. One group reported that its registration as a corporation took only one month and cost about 10,000 RMB (US\$1500). Unlike genuine for-profit corporations, these

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<sup>176</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 164.

<sup>177</sup> This refers to the annual report an organization submits to its professional supervisory agency which seems to be a minimum requirement of its relationship with the latter.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*.

“for-profit” women’s organizations have been held to an informal standard that is more lax than the tax regime for the former. According to Wang Xingjuan, the founder of the MWPC, this strategy works well so far for her organization,

We have never paid taxes to them. We tell them at the Industry and Commerce Bureau what we do. They are very understanding. Actually, today I went to the industry and commerce company to do our registration again. The industry and Commerce Bureau people said, “We know your women’s hotline. It is against domestic abuse.” Their attitude towards us was very good. They all knew that actually we are unable to register in the Civil Administration Department so that we had no choice but to stay registered with the Industry and Commerce Bureau.<sup>179</sup>

The strategy of registering as for-profit enterprises has been an effective means for self-initiated women’s organizations to acquire legality, which is much needed for these organizations to be acceptable to the Chinese state. Registration as a corporation requires a minimal management structure with a high degree of autonomy. However, activists face a potential pitfall when using this strategy, which may jeopardize the very survival of their organizations. In the past, these organizations have been able, on an informal basis, to settle on a much lower tax rate than the rate for a true corporation. Most of them only paid some nominal, minimal tax in the range of a few hundred dollars annually. However, the recent accounting reforms for corporations, starting to be implemented in 2003, may make it more difficult for tax authorities to use their own discretion to turn a blind eye and not require the full payment of a corporation tax. If a much higher tax rate is applied to these organizations which already have meager funding resources, it may lead to a crisis of survival. Still, for those organizations that are financially better-off, it is a very useful strategy.

A few women’s groups do not bother with any of the above strategies but simply do not register at all. One example is the East Meets West Translation group, which is not

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<sup>179</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for Global Feminisms Project.

affiliated with any institution, nor is it registered.<sup>180</sup> This is possible because their main activity is to conduct discussion between members themselves. While technically illegal, there are many “clubs”, “salons” and “forums” throughout urban China that organize as informal groups without any kind of registration or affiliation. Such forms of organizing give activists some degree of autonomy as long as the government does not feel threatened by their activities. However, for these organizations, they are not necessarily more secure, nor do they have much more autonomy in determining the content of their activism than other organizations which choose to obtain legal status. In fact, the lack of legality has put constraints on organizational development and modes of action since their activities have to be conducted in informal settings and the number of people attending meetings can not exceed a certain upper limit.

Last, but not least, the popularized use of the internet has led to a new form of organizing—web-based organizations. One example is Gendered China ([www.genderedchina.com](http://www.genderedchina.com)). Set up in 2007, it currently functions as a space for online discussion and information exchange with 139 registered users. For web-based women’s organizations, the internet makes up for their lack of resources and helps to overcome the barriers created by the restrictive regulations regarding social organizations. They put up news updates and collections of public releases on gender issues published in traditional media, debate women’s issues, and even organize some “off-line” activities by bulletin boards and emails.

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<sup>180</sup> Created by several young women along with an American working in the Beijing Ford Foundation office, this organization initially focused on translating Western feminist works into Chinese and introducing them to a wider range of Chinese people and later grew into a women’s discussion forum on feminism and contemporary political issues.

It is therefore clear that even though the Chinese state intends to use the dual registration system to impose limits on potentially subversive activities by social groups, voluntary women's groups have fully explored opportunities that can be found in the policy and legal framework surrounding social organizations. They have made tactical decisions to exist as independently as possible within the bounds of the law and to negotiate more beneficial relations with the state.

### **Networks in Mobilization**

Social movements form and grow not only through conventional social movement organizations or other formal non-movement organizations that mobilize participants for collective action, but also through a wide range of informal networks.<sup>181</sup>

In the Chinese case, the sphere of civic associations in the pre-reform period was restricted to a narrow range of officially controlled organizations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the ACWF and the Chinese Communist Youth League and social activity was mainly channeled through these organizations. There were some so-called "voluntary activities", which were actually organized by state-owned institutions, such as elementary school students' "cleaning the city" and work units' tree-planting activities. Two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and open policy and relaxed political control as well. The government started to allow associative activities outside of the state system. As a result, the past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented mushrooming of all kinds of organizations.

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<sup>181</sup> See McCarthy (1996), pp. 141-145 and Kriesi (1996), p. 152-153.

Yet, the party-state still exerts tight control over the creation and development of autonomous social organizations and has never hesitated to use its initiatives and resources to restrain or even repress organizations that the CCP sees as potential threats to its power. The CCP is still unaccustomed to, and suspicious of, organizing activities from below. Especially since the late 1980s, the growth of social organizations has been stunted by an increasingly restrictive governmental regulatory system.<sup>182</sup> Between 1998 and 2000, the total number of social organizations registered nationwide dropped from 220,000 to 136,814.<sup>183</sup>

Moreover, unlike in democracies, the institutionalized access to policy makers, the media and the courts in China is much more limited. Politicians are primarily held accountable to their superiors, not citizens. The media, especially those controlled by the central or provincial Party organizations, is largely in the firm grip of the Party. The legal system lacks credibility and is time consuming and costly for most ordinary people. In contrast, the influence of social networks or *guanxi* is pervasive in China.<sup>184</sup> In collective action such as the women's movement, networks serve as a source of valuable information, provide access to resources or political protection, and promote trust, cooperation and group solidarity. Consequently, informal networks, which can also act as "mobilizing structures", have played a significant role in mobilizing participants and

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<sup>182</sup> A few measures taken by the government to tighten its leash on social organizations (SOs) include the use of re-registration procedures to eliminate unwanted forms of social organizing, the anti-competition rule, and the prohibition of national organizations from having regional branches.

<sup>183</sup> Qiusha Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>184</sup> For example, see Thomas Gold, Doug Guthrie and David Wank (eds.), *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mayfair Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

maintaining the operations of women's organizations, most of which are small in size and constantly struggling with a shortage of staff and funding.<sup>185</sup>

Social movement theorists concur that there is a positive relationship between social networks of some kind and the development of collective action. A much more important task is to specify how networks matter in relation to successful and sustained collective action. Thus, I have identified two dynamics of informal networks that contribute to the creation and growth of voluntary Chinese women's organizations in the late 1980s and the 1990s: one is the vertical dimension and the other is the horizontal dimension. Vertically, networks between activists in self-initiated women's organizations and officials, as well as with the state-based ACWF, were crucial during this period for the activities of women's groups. Horizontally, such networks consist of interpersonal ties, inter-organizational exchanges, and connections between individuals in one group and other women's groups.

### **Vertical Dimension of Networks**

An examination of the experiences of women's studies centers in Chinese universities and colleges has revealed the importance of vertical networks to the development of these organizations. In her discussion of the paths taken by her organization and other women's research organizations in China, Du Fangqin, the founder of the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University, observed a commonality shared by all of these organizations,

The key for a women's research center to acquire legitimacy and to be able to operate normally, lies in its external relationships—which evolve around its

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<sup>185</sup> For example, the MWPC, which is much better off compared with most of women's groups, only has six people on its regular staff and about seventy volunteers.

relationship with upper-level offices within the center's parent institution and with individuals in powerful administrative positions.<sup>186</sup>

When, in some rare cases, a women's research center is headed by a woman cadre who holds a leadership position in the university's administrative system, the center naturally has a formal link with authority and therefore enjoys an advantage in its development. However, in most cases, women's research centers are led by intellectuals who do not hold any official administrative title. For these institutions, Du noted that, "the establishment and continuation of such an organization rely on achieving equilibrium with the authority through informal relationships".<sup>187</sup> For instance, founders of some centers have good personal relationships, as friends or trustworthy colleagues, with key leaders of universities and colleges. Support from the leaders has been extremely vital to the establishment of women's studies in its initial stage of development.

For service-oriented women's groups, the establishment of informal relationships between activists and individual officials has also proven to be beneficial to organizational survival and growth. The experience of the WRI and its successor, the MWPC, points to the importance of such connections. After the organization was stigmatized and ostracized, Wang Xingjuan decided to appeal to high-level authorities and wrote a letter to Jia Chunwang, the Minister of State Security (MSS), to request the opportunity to present her case and eliminate misunderstanding about her organization. A week later, she received a phone call from an official in the general office of the MSS. The official first expressed admiration for the way she tried her best to continue to serve society after retirement. He also said that her activities should not receive any societal

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<sup>186</sup> Du Fangqin, " 'Manoeuvring Fate' and 'Following the Call': Development and Prospects of Women's Studies," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 242.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

intervention and that there was nothing in the rules and regulations that prevented any citizen from meeting with foreigners. The official gave his name and phone number to Wang so that she could contact him whenever her organization encountered difficulties and problems. Wang also sent a letter to Qiang Wei, the director of the Political and Legal Bureau of Beijing, asking for a meeting with him. The Bureau sent a chairperson to meet with Wang. After hearing Wang's description of her activities and her organization, he eventually stated, "what you are doing contributes to the stability and solidarity of society. The Party and government support you."<sup>188</sup> Wang took notes at this meeting and sent them to the Beijing Public Security Bureau. The bureau eventually had a formal meeting with her and asked her to present her case. At the end of the meeting, the officials from the bureau apologized to Wang, "Please understand that our duty is to protect the security of our country. So if we have offended you, we trust you can understand."<sup>189</sup> Now since Wang's activities and her organization were approved by high-level authorities, the MWPC finally surmounted the crisis and started growing smoothly. Based upon such experience, Wang concluded that approval and support from various high-level officials were extremely important for the development of her organization.

Not only have vertical ties with high-level officials in general benefited the formation and development of voluntary women's groups, but the networks these groups have formed with the ACWF in particular have also greatly contributed to women's

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<sup>188</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "Yige Funu Caogen Zuzhi De Shengzhang" (The Growth of a Women's Grassroots Organization), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 267-268.

<sup>189</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "Zai Zhongguo Shehui Bianqian Zhong—Yige Minjian Funü Zuzhi De Jiaose Yu Fazhan" ("Social Change in China: The Role and Development of a Non-governmental Women's Organization"). Paper presented at the Workshop "Women Organizing in China", the University of Oxford, July 1999. Quoted in Cecilia Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 42.

activism in contemporary China. The ACWF is a national mass organization with a dual role as transmitter of party-state policies and as a representative for Chinese women. It has been a loyal ally of the CCP since its establishment in 1949 and also, undeniably, the most influential women's organization in China. In recent years, it has been pushed to be more self-sufficient in the government's efforts to trim a bloated bureaucracy and its staff members no longer enjoy civil servant status, which is now reserved for government employees only. Yet the ACWF still depends heavily upon government funding for staff salaries, daily operations and many of its programs, and its leaders continue to be high-ranking officials in the party and state structure. More importantly, the government entrusts the ACWF with the authority of supervising social organizations, which, in actuality, is a government responsibility. Such a regulatory function is particularly evident given the fact that all of the Chinese women's groups who wanted to sponsor a workshop at the NGO forum of the Fourth World Conference on Women had to obtain the approval of the Women's Federation. With thousands of branches nationwide and nearly a hundred thousand full time staff, the ACWF can supply invaluable political capital and other resources which self-initiated women's organizations badly need. The vertical networks between more independent women's organizations and the ACWF are built on both personal connections and inter-organizational linkages. Once again, the case of the WRI / MWPC illustrates how activists take advantage of networks with the ACWF for the benefit of their organizations.

When Wang described the path her organization had taken, she mentioned her efforts to solicit the ACWF for support from the very beginning. In order to take advantage of the ACWF's extensive nationwide networks, she submitted a group

membership application on behalf of the WRI in September 1988. Guan Tao, the ACWF secretary general, interviewed Wang and approved the application. According to Wang, the potential benefits of being a group member were significant:

The All China Women's Federation is a very big organization, having cadres and branches at all administrative levels of the country from the central committee to the lowest levels of administration. It guides and represents the mainstream of the Chinese women's movement. Popular women's organizations are like a drop of water and only if this drop of water flows into the current led by the ACWF, can it have some influence; otherwise it will dry up and have little impact. For this reason, we always try to be close to the ACWF and strive to gain its support and guidance (my translation).<sup>190</sup>

Activists in the WRI also tried to gain more legitimacy for their activities by inviting prominent leaders of the ACWF to endorse organization events. When the WRI held its inaugural meeting, Guan Tao, the ACWF secretary general, attended the meeting and gave a speech of support. In her speech, she pointed out that “the appearance of more and more non-governmental women's organizations would help the research and development of women's studies to reach a new peak”. She also expressed “her hopes that the WRI would not only become an active theoretical resource, but also a source of knowledge and information for the ACWF.”<sup>191</sup>

High-level ACWF cadres have continuously supported the WRI/ MWPC after its founding. When in September, 1992 the first Women's Hotline was started, as a gesture of the ACWF's endorsement, Huang Qizao, the Vice President, enlisted Guan Tao, the Secretary General, Wang Menglan, the Director of the Publicity Department, and Tao Chunfang, the Director of the Women's Studies Institute, as volunteer counselors to work at the hotline. In 1995, the WRI held a workshop “Women's Groups and Social Support”

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<sup>190</sup> Wang Xingjuan, “Yige Funu Caogen Zuzhi De Shengzhang” (The Growth of a Women's Grassroots Organization), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 270.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

at the United Nations' Women's Conference NGO Forum in Beijing. It was the only workshop held by one of the new popular women's organizations in China whereas all other workshops were organized by either government branches or the Women's Federation. In this workshop, WRI activists were able to seize the opportunity to address politically sensitive and socially taboo issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. This remarkable achievement again exemplified the ACWF's support and recognition of the WRI and the friendly relationship with the former that the latter had carefully cultivated over the years, since all applications for participation at the NGO Forum required approval from the Chinese Preparatory Committee of which the ACWF had overall charge.

Another women's group in Beijing, the East Meets West Translation Group (hereafter the Group), also provides an example of how personal connections with officials inside the ACWF contribute to the survival of a women's group. The Group, set up in 1993 by a group of about ten bilingual women (both Chinese and non-Chinese), is not affiliated with any institution, nor is it registered. Yet it still operates legitimately. Lisa Stern, a member of this group, revealed how the organization acquired its legitimacy:

At that time the East Meets West group became accredited as a participant in the regional preparation [for the NGO Forum]. 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'.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> The excerpt of comments made by Lisa Stern at the *Women Organizing in China* workshop, in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 230.

When scholars in universities established women's studies centers, they also drew upon the ACWF to acquire legitimacy and political clout for their institutions. One way to do this was to have leaders and research staff from the ACWF on advisory committees. As a deputy director of one women's studies center explained,

We made it impossible for our President to turn down our proposal [to set up the program] because Madame xxx [director of the provincial ACWF] had been invited to be the head of our advisory committee...However, if he did not approve the program at the outset, he would have been in hot water right away.<sup>193</sup>

Another way of gaining recognition and legitimacy is to invite high-level ACWF officials to visit independent women's organizations. As Du Fangqin commented on the visit by the ACWF president, Peng Peiyun,

April 4, 2000 marks a historic turning point for the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University and even for disciplinary and curriculum development of women's studies at universities. On that day, Madame Peng Peiyun, Vice Chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress and President of the ACWF, visited the Center and listened to our work report. She then told the Secretary and President of the university with sincere words and earnest wishes, "Please keep on supporting their work." She also wrote an inscription for the Center that reads: "Carry forward the advantage of higher education to develop women's studies and women's education and contribute to the progress of women!" The direct impact of Peng's visit is that our Center finally has its own office and thus there is one less women's studies center operating under the 'four shortages' (*siwu*<sup>194</sup>) An indirect impact is that in the eyes of mainstream politics and society, our research on women has more legitimacy. To quote the words of the director of the social security division of the university: "Now your work becomes perfectly justifiable!" It may be hard for someone from the outside to understand the weight of his words; but it is true that for many years the marginalized and alienated position of women's studies in the academic establishment has made scholars in this field feel suppressed. We have to rely on the enlightened forces in the system to change such a situation (my translation).<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Ping-Chun Hsiung, "The Women's Studies Movement in China in the 1980s and 1990s," in Glen Peterson, Ruth Hayhoe and Yongling Lu (eds.), *Education, Culture, and Identity in 20th Century China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 439.

<sup>194</sup> This term refers to no regular staff, no funding, no facilities and no time.

<sup>195</sup> Du Fangqin, "Wode Funu Yanjiu Licheng" (My Road to Women's Studies), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 210.

The ACWF's support for the activities of self-initiated women's research organizations was revealed in the opening remark made by Li Xiaojiang at an international conference organized by the Women's Studies Center at Zhengzhou University:

I want to thank the directors and colleagues at the Women's Federation in Henan province, women cadres school and *Women's Life* magazine. Over the years, we have supported each other in our effort to advance research on women's issues at both the provincial and national levels. My special appreciation goes to comrade Yang Biru, the director of the Women's Federation in Henan, for her help and trust. Without such trust, support, and her generous, invaluable political backing, we would not have been able to hold this conference (my translation).<sup>196</sup>

Furthermore, the connections with the ACWF have been utilized by activists to benefit their own research and activism. The ACWF official journals have become important forums for women scholars whose home institutions usually provide little support for research on women. In these journals, scholars outside the ACWF system can articulate their ideas, put forth their visions and advocate their causes, which may not necessarily be in accord with the official orthodox approach to women's issues. Scholars can also rely on the ACWF staff and networks to gain access to women for their research. Even Li Xiaojiang, who openly questioned the necessity for the Women's Federation's existence, has relied heavily on ACWF journals to publish her research and the help of women in local Women's Federations to carry out many projects and activities. Li reflected upon her path to participation in the women's movement by noting that

For over a decade's time, many of my essays, which have become the target of criticism, were published in ACWF sponsored publications--either in *Women of China* magazine or *Chinese Women's News*. The editors-in-charge have shared the risks and responsibility with me. My program for women's education and the enlightenment of women's consciousness was put into wide practice through the hard work of teachers at the Federation's women cadres schools, including Liang

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<sup>196</sup> Li Xiaojiang, *Zouxiang Nüren: Xin Shiqi Funü Yanjiu Jishi (Towards the Femininity of Women: The Report of Women's Studies in the New Era)* (Zhengzhou Shi: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), p. 69.

Jun. They too have shared pressures with me. Most of the projects I sponsored such as the anthropological inspection of women, women's oral history, and female reproduction and health were done in cooperation with grass roots ACWF cadres in rural areas. I have numerous friends among these women cadres. Though some of them have never met me personally, they always offered their help unconditionally when my name was mentioned. Even in the most closed and remote areas where it was exceptionally difficult to communicate with the minority women, I was able to find some women cadres who volunteered to be my guides and interpreters (my translation).<sup>197</sup>

More importantly, for many self-initiated women organizations, taking advantage of the extensive structure and nationwide networks of the ACWF is essential to successful implementation of activities. Chen Yiyun, a sociologist who set up a service-oriented women's organization--the Jinglun Family Center (JFC), commented on the cooperation between her organization and the ACWF, "Our resources are intellectual and their resources are a network. We ought to combine our resources. We should cooperate rather than compete."<sup>198</sup> For the first two years of its founding, the JFC sent out a circular announcing its phone number, address and coming activities to local branches of the Women's Federation. Another women's service organization, the Migrant Women's Club, used its status as an ACWF sponsored activity to issue 2,000 letters to hospitals and factories employing rural women and to eight service enterprises<sup>199</sup> in order to recruit the first members. Subsequently, the Club successfully recruited about two hundred women in Beijing who registered as members by filling in a membership application form at the organization's office. Gao Xiaoxian, an activist who is the secretary general of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family, also admits that many projects on

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<sup>197</sup> Li Xiaojiang, "Gongong Kongjian De Chuangzhao" (Creating a Public Sphere), in Li Xiaojiang (ed.), *Shenlin Qijing (Participating in the Extraordinary)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 26.

<sup>198</sup> Cecilia Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 78.

<sup>199</sup> These service enterprises are employment agencies that match rural migrants to urban employers.

rural women's development carried out by her organization would have been impossible without making use of the network of the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation.

All the evidence attests to the critical role played by vertical networks with the ACWF and other state institutions in assisting the mobilization of a bottom-up women's movement in contemporary China. Neither the state as a whole nor the ACWF in particular is a homogeneous entity. Internally, both can be seen as an aggregation of disparate actors, many of whom have different views, multiple identities and even conflicting interests with regard to women's issues. Externally, in the face of myriad difficulties that women have experienced in the reform era, the ACWF has also been compelled to function less as an organization taking orders from the state and more as one representing women's interests. On the other hand, scholars and activists strategically search for and exploit cracks and opportunities within the government in order to carve out the maximum space for their organizations. The vertical ties they have formed with either officials or state institutions enable them to generate support within the state, which becomes a valuable resource for successful mobilization.

### **Horizontal Dimension of Networks**

Despite the prevalence of vertical networks in the development of women's organizations in the contemporary women's movement in China, there have also existed extensive horizontal networks between activists, between organizations and between activists and organizations, all of which are indicative of a collectivity of activism. Mario Diani has defined three types of such networks in a social movement: "(a) inter-organizational exchanges; (b) individuals/SMOs [social movement organizations]

exchanges; (c) personal exchanges.”<sup>200</sup> We can find all three types of networks in the women’s movement in China in the 1990s, through which women were mobilized into activism. And later, the existence of such horizontal networks contributed greatly to the solidarity of the women’s movement, a movement in which most organizations, as an individual organization, were very small and constantly had shortage of material and human resources.

The emergence of horizontal networks in the women’s movement is also of particular importance in the Chinese context since they are considered to be a crucial basis for the development of a civil society. They were largely absent in the pre-reform society which was organized on the basis of the work unit system. Both within a work unit and across work units, the structure was vertical and hierarchical, with every individual assigned a bureaucratic rank within a work unit and each work unit subordinate to a supervisory one within the corresponding bureaucratic system. Horizontal, cross-system social interaction and mobility were “highly restricted” and decision-making power was “highly centralized with rather limited grassroots flexibility and discretion” and was permitted only in the realm of policy implementation.<sup>201</sup> Articulation of individual and group interests was also constrained by the state’s vertical control system and centralized decision-making process and was usually realized through state-designated channels and personal connections. In his study of political participation in Maoist China, Tianjian Shi noted that the institutional setting characterized by lack of grassroots participation in the political process bred distorted forms of interest

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<sup>200</sup> Mario Diani, “Analyzing Social Movement Networks,” in Mario Diani and Ron Eyerman (eds.), *Studying Collective Action* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1992), p. 109.

<sup>201</sup> Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy after Tiananmen* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2001), p. 10.

articulation: individuals had to exploit their personal connections with cadres in order to pursue their private interests.<sup>202</sup>

Today, however, there are a wide range of inter-organizational exchanges and connections in the women's movement in China. An explicit example of such ties is a group called the Network for Stopping Domestic Violence. This group was founded in 2000 as a continuation of an anti-domestic violence project—"Domestic Violence: Research, Intervention and Prevention" and its founding members featured scholars and activists from NGOs, the Association of Legal Studies<sup>203</sup>, research institutions and the women's media. In fact, its organizers are a veritable "Who's Who" of contemporary Beijing activists. They included Ge Youli (one of the initiators of the East Meets West Translation Group), Guo Jianmei (Director of the CWLSLS), Wang Xingjuan (Director of the MWPC), and Chen Mingxia (a founding member of the Center for the Studies of Gender and Law at the Institute for Legal Research of the China Academy of Social Sciences). They also included members from the Women's Media Watch Network, an NGO aiming to raise gender consciousness in the media, and a few activists from other parts of China. The network aimed at undertaking systematic research to understand the nature, causes and consequences of domestic violence in China. It also explored effective intervention models against domestic violence through two community intervention programs—one in an urban setting and the other in a rural one. Based on research and community intervention, the network sought to make policy recommendations to the government regarding the prevention of domestic violence. Currently the network has

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<sup>202</sup> Tianjian Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 17-21.

<sup>203</sup> The Association of Legal Studies is a national organization in China, whose members consist of legal scholars and research institutions.

already developed membership in more than twenty provinces, cities and autonomous regions<sup>204</sup> throughout the country and has thus become a genuine national network.<sup>205</sup>

The exchanges among these women's organizations also come in the form of co-organizing conferences and workshops, and collaborating on projects. For instance, the Women's Media Watch Network co-sponsored a conference entitled "Gender Perspectives –Women's Art and Artistic Women in Periods of Transformation", with the Women's Culture and Art Club in March 1998. Likewise, the CWLSLS of Beijing University and the MWPC together initiated the "Chinese Women's NGOs Capacity-Building Exchanging Experiences Conference" in 2004 in order to further promote cooperation and to facilitate information and other resource sharing among independent women's organizations. Other women's organizations that have participated in the meeting include the Shaanxi<sup>206</sup> Women's Marriage and Family Research Association, Beijing's Cultural Development Center for Rural Women, the Xishuangbanna Women and Children Psychological Legal Advisory Service Center in Yunnan province, and the Henan Community Education Research Center. For the past three years, all six organizations have met on an annual basis in conferences to exchange their experiences, the challenges they are encountering and effective countermeasures against these challenges. They have also discussed specific topics of interest such as the organizational and cultural developments of women's NGOs, and the sustainable development of the NGO sector in China in general.

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<sup>204</sup> There are several "autonomous regions" in China, where ethnic minorities live.

<sup>205</sup> Cecilia Milwertz, "Activism Against Domestic Violence in the People's Republic of China," *Violence Against Women* Vol. 9, No. 6 (2003), pp.647-648.

<sup>206</sup> Shaanxi is a province in central China.

Additionally, collaborative links among self-initiated women's organizations can be found in the form of mutual assistance. The MWPC in Beijing has provided assistance for the installation of women's hotlines in other locations in China. About eight or nine women's hotlines have received help so far.<sup>207</sup> As an NGO providing counseling services, the MWPC has worked very closely with women's legal affairs NGOs such as the CWLSLS. For example, it often refers its clients to the CWLSLS for legal counseling and the latter introduces its clients to the former if they are in need of psychological counseling as well. The diffusion of the internet in China has also created a new form of horizontal network that facilitates connections among women's organizations. Many of these organizations have their own organizational web sites, and offer links to the websites of other women's groups and international sponsors. For instance, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center's website ([www.maple.org.cn](http://www.maple.org.cn)) provides 27 links to relative websites.

Second, there exist numerous connections between individuals involved in one organization and other women's organizations. The following examples clearly show such ties. When the Women's Research Institute (WRI) was established in 1988, among its initiators were Xie Lihua (the founder and editor of the women's magazine *Rural Women Knowing All*<sup>208</sup> and one of the initiators of the Migrant Women's Club), Liu Bohong (the main organizer of the China Women's Health Network) and Feng Yuan and Guo Yanqiu who are both journalists and founders of the Media Watch Network. When

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<sup>207</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for Global Feminisms Project.

<sup>208</sup> It is the first magazine to focus on rural women in China. The magazine is dedicated to recording women's progress, raising rural women's self-awareness, disseminating gender-oriented concepts and providing information about production, business, culture and life.

the Institute established the Singles' Weekend Club<sup>209</sup>, Xie Lihua and Chen Yiyun, two leaders of Beijing's independent women's organizations, served as advisors. From the start of the first WRI's Women's Hotline, many volunteer counselors were journalists and gave extensive publicity to the Hotline in their newspapers, magazines and other media. The Hotline has also received the assistance of a number of professors from women's studies centers around Beijing as well as psychologists and social workers in diverse work units. For example, Professor Wu Qing, who initiated one of the first discussion groups on gender issues in Beijing, the Women's Studies Forum at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, where she taught English until her retirement, offered generous help at the initial stage of the Hotline.<sup>210</sup> As an advisor to the Hotline, she publicized the project nationally and raised funds for it internationally. She was one of the initiators of the Singles' Weekend Club as well. In addition, Professor Wu was an advisor and fundraiser for the *Rural Women Knowing All* magazine and co-founded the Migrant Women's Club with Xie Lihua. Such ties between activists in one group and other women's groups exist in other locations in China as well. For example, individual activists in the Shaanxi Women's Marriage and Family Research Association are often invited to attend conferences organized by the Center for Women's Studies of Tianjin Normal University.

What is unique in the Chinese case is an interesting "kinship relationship" between activists in self-initiated women's organizations and the Women's Federation—a number of them have a dual affiliation in that they work for the Women's Federation as well as for the self-initiated women's organizations. Although there are no statistics available on

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<sup>209</sup> A support group for single women, especially single mothers.

<sup>210</sup> Professor Wu is also a people's deputy to the Haidian District People's Congress and the Municipal People's Congress, Beijing.

the number of activists engaged in popular organizing and their employment situations, several key leaders in the movement fall into this category. Examples include Xie Lihua who works as an editor at *China Women's News*—the ACWF newspaper, Liu Bohong who is the Deputy Director of the Women's Study Institute of the ACWF, Shang Shaohua who is the founder of World Women's Vision and an editor at *Women of China*—the ACWF magazine—at the same time, and Gao Xiaoxian who established two important women's organizations in Shaanxi—the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family and the Center for Women's Law Studies and Services in Shaanxi when working as an official at the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation. In this way, though situated as employees in a government organization, these activists not only become an important asset for movement mobilizing, but also act as an invaluable channel facilitating the promotion of movement agenda to audiences in the state, a topic I will take up in the following chapter.

Finally, there are numerous interpersonal ties between activists which are vital to the recruitment of individuals into the movement. Some activists were introduced to their work in the women's movement due to personal ties with other activists. The following excerpt from Tan Shen, a sociologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Science who was involved in many of the organizing activities of Beijing's women's groups, described how a woman's intellectual's journey to engagement with feminism started with a personal encounter with another activist:

What really pushed me into serious reflection on women themselves was my meeting with Ms. Li Xiaojiang. I happened to be in the same room with her at a seminar on women's problems shortly after I was transferred to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to be the editor of *Sociological Studies*. I found that Li Xiaojiang was not only intelligent and sensible, but also composed—one of the rarest, most perfect women I have ever met. We soon gained each other's

confidence and became friends. She made me realize that when women endeavor to understand the universe, they must understand themselves as well. The deeper their self-knowledge, the sooner they will achieve freedom. Thus, I began a study of women's experiences in life, and of the relationship between social changes and women.<sup>211</sup>

Another activist, Liang Jun, who was a teacher at the Henan Women Cadres school, also linked her path to participation in the women's movement to her personal ties with Li Xiaojiang.

I never expected that the new job<sup>212</sup> would become a new beginning for me. Li Xiaojiang, an extraordinary woman, led me into another life. At the end of the spring of 1985, Li Xiaojiang, an associate professor of Chinese language and literature at the Zheng Zhou University and Henan Women Cadres School, jointly organized the first national Women's Household Management Class.<sup>213</sup> Since I had just come to the school I knew nothing about Professor Li, or about the class. It was only out of curiosity and thirst for knowledge that I went to Li's lecture....I soon became acquainted with Professor Li and, as we saw more of each other, became good friends. All the same, I look up to her as my teacher and spiritual guide, even though she is six years younger than I. Reading Professor Li's works and talking to her are exciting experiences. She has opened up a new world for me—a new sphere of learning and a new realm of thought.<sup>214</sup>

From then on, Liang has devoted herself to women's education and enlightenment so that Li's theories on women's gender awareness and emancipation can be popularized. She traveled across the country to give lectures on the subject of women's liberation to women in local women cadres schools, trade unions, student unions and women's professional associations such as the Women Technical Workers' Association, the Women Cadres' Association, the Women Teachers' Association and the Women Medical

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<sup>211</sup>Tan Shen, "Women's Studies and I," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 103.

<sup>212</sup> Here Liang referred to her new job at Henan Women Cadres School.

<sup>213</sup> Under the topic of "Recognizing Our Womanhood", the course aimed to bring about the awakening of Chinese women. It discussed issues such as the inequality between men and women and how to combat gender-specific norms and practices.

<sup>214</sup> Liang Jun, "A Serious Mission," in the Committee on Women's Studies in Asia (ed.), *Changing Lives: Life Stories of Asian Pioneers in Women's Studies* (New York: the Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1995), pp. 127-128.

Workers' Association. Her lectures covered a variety of topics such as "women's self-realization, the dual role of professional women, [and] the consciousness of female students."<sup>215</sup>

The intricate network of relations on the horizontal dimension is indicative of a collectivity of activism and commitment in the contemporary women's movement in China. More importantly, the existence of such a network shows once again that in the mobilization process, women activists and their organizations are not merely passive objects of state power; instead, they are subjects actively pursuing their own agendas and carving out their own space in a rather constrained political environment.

While relationships among women activists and their organizations, as discussed above, are often friendly and cooperative, divergence and conflict does occur among individuals and among organizations as well. While activists acknowledge the existence of disagreements between groups, most of them prefer to regard these types of relations as permissible or normal. Chen Mingxia, one of the coordinators of the Network for Stopping Domestic Violence, admitted disagreements both between organizations and between individual leaders within the Network.

[B]ecause each organization has its own aspect of work, the question of how we can get united and build good connections with each other in order to operate better, poses certain difficulties...But we still get things done and you could say that we have some successes. But, nevertheless, this is still a rather large problem. People have to deal with conflicts. This can occur at any time. So we still need to do some work in this aspect...We found that currently within our project there are also some leaders who disagree with each other. So we had to tell everybody to seek common ground while maintaining their differences and to also look for the good qualities in others.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>216</sup> Interview of Chen Mingxia by Shi Tong on September 6, 2005 for Global Feminisms Project.

Additionally, there have also been less than harmonious interactions between the ACWF and self-initiated women's organizations despite their frequent cooperative activities and mutual support between the ACWF and these women's organizations. A well-known case is the widely publicized dispute between the Women's Federation and Li Xiaojiang who openly criticized and challenged the legitimacy of the former in the late 1980s (although this particular tension had eased by the middle of the 1990s). Another example is the WRI, an organization that has developed and maintained a relatively good relationship with the ACWF over the years. There have also been less amiable interactions between the two, such as in 1995 when the WRI lost its position as a group member of the ACWF.

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of a wide variety of organizational forms in the Chinese women's movement in the 1990s reveals the continuing opening-up of social space and the dynamics of change in Chinese society. Up against an always dominating state and a great deal of top-down control, women's movement activists and their organizations have devised strategies to negotiate with the state and reconfigure a relationship that either minimizes state penetration or turns state sponsorship more to their own advantage. These organizations may be far from creating a civil society as conventionally defined given the fact that most of them have supervisory sponsors within the governmental apparatus and rarely have complete autonomy from the party state. However, the negotiations and the strategies that these organizations have developed testify to the capability of people to organize horizontally on more beneficial terms in a system where

the state seeks to limit horizontal linkages and discourages bottom-up initiatives through various means of control.

A network approach—on both vertical and horizontal dimensions—to the mobilization of the Chinese women’s movement is also adopted in this chapter to further highlight a web of thriving interactions between activists and organizations and between the movement and state institutions. These connections have been created or exploited by women activists and their organizations from the bottom-up, and on their own initiative, and have proved to be indispensable for successful organizing. The existence of such an extensive network makes up for the limited external opportunities and restrictive regulations faced by self-initiated women’s organizations, as opposed to women’s movements in democracies, and thus attention to it can supplement our understanding of social movement mobilizing based on Western social movement models.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Framing Women's Movement Issues

For many years social movement scholars have been trying to bring culture back into to their analyses of social movements. Increasingly, they have drawn on various conceptualizations such as collective identities, narratives, rituals, ideologies, discourses, and frames to understand how culture helps shape organization and collective action. In this chapter, I will focus my attention on how activists in the women's movement in the 1990s in China framed their issues and disseminated these framings for consumption by a wider audience, both in the state and in the general population. In particular, I will look at the process by which new concepts gleaned from abroad have been introduced and adopted in ways amenable to local cultural meanings and relevant to the contemporary Chinese experience.

#### The State Discourse on Women's Liberation

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official discourse on women's liberation is found in a set of views and assumptions about women and women's liberation articulated by the leaders of the CCP and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). Its origins can be traced back to May Fourth Feminism, which featured male Chinese intellectuals' promotion of gender equality and which saw the emergence of a women's emancipation movement in the decade between 1915 and 1925.<sup>217</sup> Named after the May Fourth

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<sup>217</sup> Wang Zheng, "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 149.

Incident of 1919, this decade was characterized by a nationwide protest movement led by Chinese students and intellectuals aiming to emancipate China from Manchu rule, from Western imperialist occupation and from the Confucian canon. Simultaneously, the anti-footbinding and the mass female literacy movements at the time were initiated by male intellectuals to advance the construction of a modern nation. Thus, women became emblematic of the oppression of the “old” feudal society, and emancipating women from Confucian familial traditions and raising their status were considered as inseparable from the nation-building project. Since May Fourth feminism made women’s liberation a badge of modernity in China’s political discourse, all political forces in China who claimed to be progressive, whether affiliated with the nationalist or the communist party, had to uphold the banner of women’s liberation.<sup>218</sup> However, another legacy of May Fourth feminism is that women’s liberation, in the context of anti-imperialism and the formation of a strong nation, was always secondary and subordinate to the survival of the nation.

Another origin of the CCP’s official discourse on women’s liberation was the Marx-Engels’s critique of the family and of relations between the sexes. The CCP leaders constantly quoted the words of Friedrich Engels regarding women’s issues: “the degree of the emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation”,<sup>219</sup> and “the emancipation of women will only be possible when women can take part in production on a large social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of time”.<sup>220</sup> In the tradition of Marx, Engel and Bebel, a few

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>219</sup> Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 690.

<sup>220</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publisher, 1972), p. 221.

prominent Chinese Marxists also contributed to the development of the CCP's theory regarding women's liberation. For instance, in an article published in 1919, Li Dazhao, one of the co-founders of the CCP, forcefully argued that the incorporation of women into the workforce would bring them into direct economic relations with, and the struggle against, capitalism. Chen Duxiu, another co-founder of the CCP, stated in his article "The Women Problem and Socialism", that the problem of women had two sides for not only were women generally oppressed by men but women workers also shared the oppression of the men of their class. In this way he linked the liberation of women with the proletarian revolution.<sup>221</sup> Ever since the First Manifesto on the "Current Situation in China", issued after its founding in 1921, the CCP has claimed "equality in the rights of men and women" as one of its immediate aims. Thus, from the very beginning, the CCP made the emancipation of women one of its policy platforms.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Marxist-inspired theory of women's liberation for the "new society" was formally institutionalized through the setting up of the ACWF, establishing the leadership of the CCP and the state in the Chinese women's movement. Based on the its experiences and practices in different periods, the CCP's theory of women's liberation has been reiterated, renewed and further developed over the years through various Party documents and publications.<sup>222</sup> In 1990, a new term—the Marxist perspective on women—was created by former CCP general

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<sup>221</sup> Quoted in Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 118.

<sup>222</sup> Some of the most important documents and publications include: Kang Keqing, "Xin Shiqi Zhongguo Funu Yundong De Chonggao Renwu" (Noble Tasks for the Chinese Women's Movement in the New Era), in the All China's Women's Federation (ed.), *Gezu Funu Dongyuan Qilai Jinxing Xin De Changzheng* (*Mobilizing Wome of All Ethnic Groups to Carry Out the New Long March*) (Beijing, Renmin Chubanshe, 1978); Luo Qiong, *Funu Jiefang Wenti Jiben Zhishi* (*The Basic Knowledge of Women's Liberation*), (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1986); Jiang Zemin, "Quandang Quanshehui Douyao Shuli Makesizhuyi Funuguan" (The Whole Party and Society Should Have Marxist Perspective on Women), *People's Daily*, March 8, 1990.

party secretary Jiang Zemin to denote the theories that had been formulated in the long process of the Chinese revolution. This perspective finds the roots of women's subordination in private ownership and class oppression and specifies public ownership, state power, women's participation in production outside the home and collectivizing housework to be necessary conditions for the emancipation of women from oppression and the realization of gender equality. Most importantly, it stresses that the path to women's liberation begins with a proletarian class struggle for the realization of socialism and communism and can be achieved with the arrival of socialism. Such a path designates the need to set up women's organizations under CCP leadership, rather than by individuals and social groups, and the need to address women's needs and interests so as to mobilize them to participate in revolutionary struggle. It is in this external context of the official discourse on women's liberation that women's movement activists negotiate with the state regarding what new issues are valid for the movement to address.

### **Framing New Issues in the Chinese Women's Movement**

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, Chinese women's movement activists began to engage in international exchanges in the 1980s, a process which really entered its most involved period in the lead-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women (the FWCW) in 1995. One significant consequence of this involvement was an increased awareness of the international women's movement. New terminologies derived from foreign sources entered the Chinese women's movement lexicon during the 1990s. Activists have used these new concepts to identify problems in new ways and to provide new solutions to them. Furthermore, to ultimately integrate new issues into the movement, they also drew

on already existing elements within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s official theoretical approach to women's liberation. In this framing process, the infusion of international cultural influences combined with local Chinese experience reflects the active agency of women's movement activists. The dissemination of new issues to the Chinese women's movement has also led to new interactions between the women's movement and the state as activists seek to negotiate with the state regarding what issues are valid for the movement to address. Some may view this as constituting a continuing risk of state intervention with regard to women's issues and the lack of a possibility for a truly open discourse on the situation of women, as argued by Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter.<sup>223</sup> Yet, instead of portraying the Chinese state as a static entity vis-à-vis Chinese women, I argue that the state has been simultaneously undergoing a learning process in the interactions between the state and the movement, which in turn has encouraged the former to adopt a more tolerant position toward women's issues and even to incorporate some of these issues into its own discourse.

In her book on globalization and Chinese feminism, Wesoky surveyed the tables of contents of 196 issues of women's magazines published from the years 1984 to 1996 for various foreign terms that have been introduced into the vocabulary of the Chinese women's movement. She found that most of them began to come into common usage in the 1990s, especially during the lead-up to the FWCW. The terms that are clearly introduced from foreign languages included "reproductive health" (shengyu jiankang or shengzhi jiankang), "sexual harassment" (xing saorao), "domestic violence" (jiating baoli), "feminism" (nuquanzhuyi or nuxingzhuyi) and "non-government organization"

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<sup>223</sup> Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 340.

(fei zhengfu zuzhi but also often appearing as the English “NGO”).<sup>224</sup> The issues conceptualized by these terms were previously either “sensitive” issues or issues largely not addressed in the Chinese women’s movement, or both. The increased usage of these terms has become a source for the expansion of forms of thinking and analysis employed by women’s movement activists in China. More importantly, their introduction and dissemination has engendered a sense of agency for activists in the context of a previously state-dominated women’s movement. Two issues that are of particular significance in the context of the Chinese women’s movement in the 1990s are “domestic violence” and “NGO”, both of which have to some extent been successfully incorporated into the state’s discourses and have thus achieved a relatively wide acceptance in China.

A great step forward was made in the acceptance of the domestic violence issue by more general audiences when, on April 28, 2001, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the revised Marriage Law, which outlaws domestic violence in its general provisions. The new law clearly defines the legal responsibilities of public security bureaus in curbing domestic violence. The revised law also stipulates that the victim has the right to ask for mediation and that administrative and criminal liability claims will be adjudicated in accordance with different levels of domestic violence.<sup>225</sup> Thus, the new marriage law provides the legal basis for punishing domestic violence. On 26 December 2001, the Supreme People’s Court issued a judicial interpretation of the Marriage Law which gives a legal definition of domestic violence: behavior toward a member of the family that results in injurious consequences physically, emotionally or in other ways “by beating, binding, mutilating, forcibly restricting one’s personal freedom,

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<sup>224</sup> Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 201-205.

<sup>225</sup> Gao Kun, “New Elements in the Revised Marriage Law,” *Zhongguo Wang* (china.org.cn), May 15, 2001. Downloadable at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/May/12670.htm>, accessed August 1, 2007.

or by other means.”<sup>226</sup> This definition has certainly facilitated government intervention in combating this crime. By the end of 2004 twenty-two Chinese provinces out of a total of thirty-three provinces, direct-controlled municipalities, autonomous regions and special administrative regions<sup>227</sup> had formulated regulations, provisions or measures against domestic violence.<sup>228</sup>

In the framing process regarding the NGO concept, women’s movement activists face more formidable obstacles. Strictly speaking, the issue of NGOs is not gender related and is much more politically sensitive than most of the new issues brought up in the Chinese women’s movement in the 1990s. It constitutes a potential challenge to the continuing dominance of the party-state in the post-Mao era through its subversive implications for contemporary state-society relations. Even though the issue is not directly related to gender power relations, the adoption, adaptation and successful propagation of this concept was closely correlated with the women’s movement in the 1990s whose goals could not be achieved without efforts by women’s movement activists to frame the NGO concept. In 1994, in its state report on China’s implementation of the UN Nairobi Strategy, the Chinese government announced that the ACWF is “China’s largest non-governmental organization to elevate women’s status”.<sup>229</sup> This was the first time that the Chinese government had used “NGO” to define any Chinese social organization, signifying the integration of this imported concept into official rhetoric. Moreover, the government’s 2006 *White Paper on Gender Equality and Women’s*

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<sup>226</sup> *Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily)*, December 17, 2005.

<sup>227</sup> These make up the first level of administrative division in China.

<sup>228</sup> *People’s Daily Online*, “22 Chinese Provinces Formulate Regulations against Domestic Violence: White Paper,” *Renmin Wang (People’s Daily Online)*, April 13, 2005. Online at [http://english.people.com.cn/200504/13/eng20050413\\_180790.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200504/13/eng20050413_180790.html), accessed August 1, 2007.

<sup>229</sup> *People’s Daily*, February 5, 1994.

*Development in China* has recognized the important role of NGOs and emphasized the cooperation between the government and NGOs as an effective state strategy for the promotion of gender equality and women's development.<sup>230</sup>

In the following sections, I will elaborate on how two issues—“domestic violence” and “NGO”—were introduced and disseminated to the wider public in general and the state in particular, and ultimately accepted as legitimate by them. I will also highlight how during this process activists strategically framed their issues and took advantage of state discourse on gender equality while utilizing resources from existing state institutions, such as the ACWF, to raise new issues in the Chinese context.

### **Framing Domestic Violence**

The issue of domestic violence is not entirely new. In fact, each year local offices of the All-China Women's Federation (the ACWF) had to mediate to resolve numerous cases of family friction related to domestic violence. Yet, domestic violence was not recognized as a social problem that the government had to deal with and the public was largely indifferent. The issue was conventionally perceived as something private that took place in certain families or between certain husbands and wives rather than as a problem with roots in the system of gender inequality; in many instances, physical violence in marriage was seen as normal and acceptable marital behavior, and thus officials were very reluctant to intervene.

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<sup>230</sup>All-China Women's Federation, “White Paper on Gender Equality and Women's Development in China (Excerpt),” *Zhongguo Funu Wang (Women of China Online)*, April 13, 2006. Online at <http://www.womenofchina.cn/focus/employment/employment/3277.jsp>, accessed August 1, 2007. Although it may be argued that the Chinese state only paid lip service to such a concept and in actuality hardly truly promoted the growth of Chinese NGOs, such recognition further opened up the space for the development of NGOs.

*Framing the “Old” Issue with New Perspectives*

China is, and always has been, a patrilineal and patriarchal society. It is well-known that traditional Chinese society emphasized the importance of the family and hierarchy within the family based on men’s superiority and women’s inferiority. Not surprisingly, girls were taught to follow the doctrine of the three obediences so that they would grow up to be submissive women in the family: (a) as daughters, they should obey their fathers; (b) as wives, they should obey their husbands; and (c) as widows, they should obey their sons. This doctrine guaranteed that women would depend on men and be in a subordinate position in the household and society at large throughout their lives. Moreover, wives and daughters were regarded as the private property of husbands and fathers. Numerous stories of men mortgaging and selling their wives and daughters for money and personal profit can be found in the historical literature of China. Thus, due to the inferior status traditionally ascribed to women in Chinese society, a man was entitled to beat his wife to discipline her or preserve family harmony.<sup>231</sup> There are old Chinese sayings that depict wife beating as reasonable and even necessary, for instance, “The wife I marry is like the horse I buy. They are mine to ride and mine to beat”; “If you do not beat your wife, she will get on the roof and within three days break down the house”; and “Beating is to show love, and cursing is to show intimacy”.

While it is undeniable that since the CCP victory in 1949, women’s status in society and at home has improved tremendously, the CCP has only selectively attacked the patriarchal structure in the process of the socialist revolution and always set aside the principle of gender equality whenever faced with an economic downturn or a show of

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<sup>231</sup> For a detailed discussion of social and cultural constructions justifying wife battering, see Catherine Sokom Tong, Day Wong, and Fanny Mui-Ching Cheung, “Social Construction of Women as Legitimate Victims of Violence in Chinese Society,” *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 8, No. 8 (2002), pp. 983-986.

rural resistance. Consequently, despite women being integrated into the labor force in record numbers, China's patriarchal culture and social structure have been preserved to a great extent and cultural beliefs legitimizing domestic violence have been sustained and transmitted from one generation to another. For instance, gender inequalities associated with China's patriarchal tradition still exist in terms of a sexual division of labor and unequal payment of women and men for equal work. Judith Stacey even argued that the union of patriarchy and socialism has provided new and firmer joists for a gendered system characterized by female subordination.<sup>232</sup> Little wonder then that Margery Wolf called the CCP's efforts to emancipate women as the "revolution postponed" while Phyllis Andors dubbed it an "unfinished revolution".<sup>233</sup>

In the long run, the CCP's casual treatment of gender equality as something secondary or even redundant devalued the principle significantly in the post-Mao era. In such a context, it is not unusual that Pi Xiaoming's "White Paper on Domestic Violence" was rejected for publication by several mainstream newspapers on the grounds that it had no social significance. The rejection of Pi's article is indicative of general ignorance of, and indifference to, women's issues, and domestic violence in particular, both in the public and among government officials.

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

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<sup>232</sup> Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 266.

<sup>233</sup> See Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1983) and Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

doesn't hit his, and I don't hit my wife either. This issue has no general applicability or interest.”<sup>234</sup>

After numerous struggles, Pi's article was eventually published in 1991 in the ACWF journal, *Women of China*,<sup>235</sup> which was referred to by Chinese women's movement activists as an early effort that tried to change attitudes towards men's violence against their wives by addressing it as a social and public problem. Pi, a female lawyer employed by the East District Women's Federation in Beijing, was the first to break the public silence on domestic violence and used the new terminology “violence” (*baoli*) to define violence within the family. Such a usage was not a small achievement. The term “violence” was previously only associated with the public sphere of society whereas the domestic violence problem was conventionally perceived as residing in the private sphere of people's lives—the family. As one activist keenly pointed out, “according to tradition, the above phenomena [domestic violence] are largely considered family matters which have nothing to do with outsiders.”<sup>236</sup> The advice to female victims of domestic violence usually stipulated that “a harmonious family prospers” and that “even the wisest judges have difficulty intervening in family affairs,” in which women's own well-being had to give place to the family and its integrity. A survey conducted by the Network for Stopping Domestic Violence found that a considerable portion of judicial personnel did not have the proper awareness of domestic violence, since many believed that domestic violence is a private matter in which judicial officials should not intervene.

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<sup>234</sup> Zong Chunqi, “Jiating Buying You Baoli” (There Should Be No Violence in the Family), *Beijing Ribao* (*Beijing Daily*), 31 January 1997. Quoted in Cai Yiping, Feng Yuan and Guo Yanqiu, “The Women's Media Watch Network,” in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 210.

<sup>235</sup> Pi Xiaoming, “Jiating Baoli: Baipishu” (White Paper on Domestic Violence), *Women of China*, Issue 12, 1991, pp. 20-22.

<sup>236</sup> Liu Meng, “Overcoming Violence against Women,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), pp. 268-269.

Some even believed that domestic violence is usually provoked by women who fail to fulfill their duties as a good wife.<sup>237</sup> Thus it was a major transformation to connect the notion of violence with a formerly private issue—domestic violence, which was thereby made eligible for open public discussion and state intervention.

In order to change attitudes of inattention and lack of concern about domestic violence, activists also emphasized the gendered nature of the problem. Previously there had been various attempts to depict this problem as gender-neutral. For instance, the *Chinese Women's Encyclopedia* defines “domestic violence” as “brutality, even mutually injurious behavior, in the family between husband, wife, son, daughter or other relatives.”<sup>238</sup> This definition tends to obscure the unequal power relations between women and men in the family and to downplay men’s responsibility for violence. A more gender-specific view of domestic violence stresses women as victims of this type of violence and sees the problem as a fundamental violation of women’s rights. An article published in *Collection of Women's Studies* represents the emergence of such a perspective:

This article particularly employs the term “domestic violence” to refer to family behavior of which the husband uses violent means to encroach on the wife’s physical rights. Of course we also cannot omit that in real life there also exists behavior of which the wife exerts violence on the husband, but physiological and natural strength differences between men and women make the behavior of men carrying out violence against women becomes the primary issue. Moreover, the harm is relatively greater.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup>Chen MingXia, “Marriage Laws and the Rights of Chinese Women,” in Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun, and Shirley L. Mow (eds.), *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future* (New York : Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), p. 166.

<sup>238</sup>Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 219.

<sup>239</sup>Ma Zhiguo and Du Peng, “Jiating Baoli De Falu Kongzhi” (Legal Control of Domestic Violence), *Funu Yanjiu Luncong* (*Collection of Women's Studies*), Issue 14, p. 20. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 221.

There are similar viewpoints being adopted among many in the women's movement community. For instance, Liu Meng, an activist and researcher from the China Women's Managerial College, also described the problem as "a violation of a woman's rights".<sup>240</sup>

More significantly, there are Chinese activists who further frame the problem in terms of the nature of gender relations in China, i.e., women's subordination in a patriarchal system. For instance, Luo Ping believes domestic violence is a product of the male-dominated culture and that today's culture is basically rooted in a male-centered family.<sup>241</sup> Based on this interpretation, some begin to argue that the elimination of domestic violence is a significant part of women's liberation. In this way, the issue can be connected to the state's own discourse on gender equality, which is a useful and safer means of introducing new discursive forms. An article from *Women's Studies* illustrates activists' efforts to portray the eradication of the problem as an integral part of women's liberation in order to legitimize the issue by building its link to the state's discourse on women's liberation:

A wife suffering her husband's beatings and maltreatment is already not only a private matter in certain families or between certain husbands and wives. It is a kind of social phenomenon. By explaining it in light of contemporary civilization, it can be seen that tender feelings are only a sheer cover in the husband and wife relationship, for carrying out abusive behavior still continues...Rescuing fettered women is undoubtedly an important link in women's liberation. Here, the important premise is women's own awakening.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Liu Meng, "Overcoming Violence against Women," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 269.

<sup>241</sup> Luo Ping, "Zhongguo Jiating Baoli De Xianzhuang, Yuanyin Ji Falu Cuoshi Qianyi" (A look at the Current Status, Causes and Legal Measures against Domestic Violence in China), *Xinjiang University Bulletin*, April 1997, p.48. Quoted in Wang Xingjuan, "Domestic Violence in China," in Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (eds.), *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future* (New York : Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), p. 188.

<sup>242</sup> Wang honglin and Zang Yongjie, "Ruhe Zhizhi Jiating Baoji?" (How to Stop Domestic Violence), *Nuxing Yanjiu (Women's Studies)*, February 1996, p.24. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 221.

Furthermore, there have been some efforts to emphasize the issue of domestic violence in China as a global problem faced by women worldwide. The experiences of activists in international exchanges led many to realize the issues that they were confronting, such as domestic violence, were not so different from those elsewhere. Thus, they were able to draw a commonality between domestic violence as a problem in other countries and in China. For instance, Liu Meng discovered on her trip to the Nordic NGO forum that great importance was attached to the domestic violence problem and that people were trying to understand, resolve and eliminate this phenomenon from various angles; then she drew a linkage to China's situation by noting that such an issue exists in China too and that much more needs to be done: "Actually, violence against women is nothing new to us; wives are often beaten when they give birth to a girl or when their husband has a lover, drinks too much or is unsuccessful in his career."<sup>243</sup>

A similar approach has been adopted by other activists. For instance, Liu Bohong, the activist and researcher from the ACWF, after attending a seminar at Rutgers University on "Women, Violence and Human Rights" in 1994, wrote an article in the publication *Collection of Women's Studies* to introduce international legal measures on women's human rights, international feminist activities to prevent violence against women, and the formation of international networks in preparation for the Beijing conference.<sup>244</sup> In another article, published a year later in a popular women's magazine, *Women's Studies*, Liu explicitly framed the issue of violence against women as a global

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<sup>243</sup> Liu Meng, "Overcoming Violence against Women," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 269.

<sup>244</sup> Liu Bohong, "Funu, Baoli He Renquan Yantaohui" (Seminar on Women, Violence, and Human Rights). *Funu Yanjiu Luncong* (Collection of Women's Studies), Issue 12, 1994, p. 62. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 218.

issue, discussing the fact that when she was in the United States the O.J. Simpson murder case was unfolding, greatly provoking the concern and indignation of American feminists. After discussing this domestic violence case in the United States, she also noted the measures to mobilize women to fight violence taken at the international level by various women's organizations. Then she concluded that "violence against women is not a regional problem but a global problem—that is my sincere learning after going to the United States".<sup>245</sup>

One significant effect of introducing the commonality perspective in the framing of the domestic violence issue has been the depoliticization of the issue.<sup>246</sup> Domestic violence has been portrayed as a common social problem regardless of cross-country differences in political systems or levels of economic development, not one specifically related to China. Discussion surrounding this problem in China thus does not necessarily criticize the Chinese government or the CCP in general, or condemn women's status in China in particular, nor does it explicitly challenge the Chinese state authority. In this sense, the issue has been depoliticized and removed from the realm of issues that are relevant to state legitimacy. Such a strategy has successfully encouraged the state to adopt a more tolerant position regarding discussion of domestic violence.

The framing of the issue of domestic violence in the contemporary Chinese women's movement also involves identifying appropriate strategies to solve the problem.

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<sup>245</sup> Liu Bohong, "Fandui Dui Funu De Baoli" (Oppose Violence Against Women). *Nuxing Yanjiu* (Women's Studies), January 1995, p. 9. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 219.

<sup>246</sup> Wang Zheng (1996) has an excellent discussion of the pitfalls stemming from the politicalization of women's issues in contemporary China. She argues that "political" means something relating to the interest, position, and power of the government. Hence, anything viewed as political automatically invites regulation or surveillance by the government.

In her discussion of domestic violence, Liu Bohong has advocated the following measures:

Women are the major sufferers of violence, and eliminating all forms of violence against women will still rely on women's own awareness and wisdom, on women's unity and struggle, and on women's efforts to take men by the hand. It will also rely on the intervention of state forces and the cooperation of international society.<sup>247</sup>

These measures indicate three directions where Chinese women can work on the problem of domestic violence: women's consciousness-raising, the involvement of state forces, and self-initiated organizing activities. Of particular interest here is the emphasis on state intervention. There is an increasing consensus among activists who are working in the self-initiated women's organizations on the issue of domestic violence and on the importance of cooperation with and support from various state agencies from the Women's Federation to law enforcement departments. Chen Mingxia, a legal scholar who is also one of the initiators and leaders of the first large-scale women's organization addressing domestic violence—the Network for Stopping Domestic Violence—has found fault with the ways in which the state is currently implementing laws regarding domestic violence:

Those people executing laws do not always comply with the laws, are not strict with enforcement of laws, do not take the correct legal course to prove the liability of those who violate laws, or simply impose fines instead of taking the matters to court. Some law enforcement officials in public security organs, procuratorial organs, and people's courts have little understanding of, or sympathy for, women's rights or interests, so they are lenient in their law enforcement.<sup>248</sup>

She therefore urges government at all levels to pay more attention to the work of safeguarding women's rights and having as a priority equality between men and women

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<sup>247</sup> Liu Bohong, "Fandui Dui Funu De Baoli" (Oppose Violence against Women), *Nuxing Yanjiu* (Women's Studies), January 1995, p.10. Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 223.

<sup>248</sup> Chen Mingxia, "From Legal to Substantive Equality: Realizing Women's Rights by Action," *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 5, December 1999, p. 1403.

when making government policy. Specifically, she stresses the important role of judicial officials in implementing laws protecting women and presses them to be firm in handling affairs according to law, helping women in an active manner, and cracking down promptly on offenses that infringe on women's lawful rights. To achieve such goals, she suggests, "there should be regular training courses for the law enforcement officials from public security organs, procuratorial organs and people's courts", which will improve their consciousness about equality between women and men.<sup>249</sup> In an interview, reflecting on the relations between her organization and the ACWF, Chen also argues that the more independent sections of the Chinese women's movement should collaborate with the latter in combating domestic violence as such a cooperative relationship is crucial to the success of their anti-domestic violence activities:

The All China Women's Federation from top to bottom is composed of six levels of networks. These six levels of networks could greatly help our anti-domestic violence project. Moreover, the Women's Federation is also a woman's organization. Thus we should cooperate with the people there. Therefore, in our network, the leader of the All China Women's Federation's rights and interest department is a special consultant. Various levels of the Women's Federation are members of our network. We have made it very clear to the All-China Women's Federation that we are not out to compete with the Women's Federation for work; we want to help the Women's Federation with their work ... I said to them that we wanted to help them and we all should do women's work together ... Based on our ideas—feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*) or the idea of gender mainstreaming—together we can collaborate in many aspects. Therefore, we have really good relations with the local Women's Federations. Basically the Women's Federation is willing to work on our project and also willing to help us with our work. In some places our network's operating center is located in the Women's Federation. So we work together. The Women's Federation is very willing to work for women ... Because of this [good relationship between the ACWF and our organization], we are better able to do our work ... I think that in this way we are better able to spread the idea of gender and feminism (*nuquan zhuyi*).<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 1408.

<sup>250</sup> Interview of Chen Mingxia by Shi Tong on September 6, 2005 for the Global Feminisms Project.

Thus, even though activists criticize the government for its poor implementation of the laws concerning women's issues, the issue of domestic violence has been framed in such a way that its solution still requires utilizing existing state institutions, which is compatible with the dominant discourse of state-led women's liberation.

### *Channels of Dissemination*

There are many ways that women's movement activists in China seek to reach larger segments of the population in order to spread their ideas and eventually to produce policy or even social changes. As I have already noted in the previous discussion, one way to do so is through a wide variety of women's magazines, some of which are popular in nature while others are more academically oriented, as well as more general academic journals, such as *Women of China*, *Marriage and Family*, *Women's Studies*, *Collection of Women's Studies*, *World Women's Vision* and *Rural Women Knowing All*. The first four journals are sponsored by either the ACWF or published by ACWF-affiliated institutions while the last two were founded by activists who work in the ACWF and are affiliated with the ACWF as well. The readers of these magazines constitute an indispensable target group to which women's movement activists provide information on domestic violence. For example, *Marriage and Family* has a circulation of 300,000 throughout China and the number of subscribers for *Rural Women Knowing All* is about 165,000. Through their writings, activists have introduced debates on the issue of domestic violence, discussed the ongoing activities surrounding the issue and have mainstreamed an understanding of domestic violence as a gender power issue. Thus, ACWF publications function as important communication channels that have greatly facilitated

activists' efforts to discuss new perspectives concerning the issue of domestic violence and have helped spread these ideas from their own elite circles to wider communities.

Additionally, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, these activists rely on other forms of the media, such as newspapers and radio and television journalism to raise gender consciousness and transmit new concepts to the larger public. For instance, during the second year of the Women's Hotline at the Women's Research Institute, *China Women's News* (an ACWF sponsored newspaper and perhaps the most accessible newspaper for independent and diverse perspectives on women's issues), published a regular column with examples of Hotline calls and the advice that was given, through which knowledge of domestic violence was spread to all readers of the newspaper. Wang Xiufang, an activist from the Jinglun Family Center, has broadcast educational programs on radio and television that address the background, causes and prevention of domestic violence.<sup>251</sup>

Besides the traditional forms of the media, in recent years activists have also started to use cyberspace as a medium for promoting greater awareness of domestic violence as a reflection of broader, unequal gender relations. For instance, the Network for Stopping Domestic Violence opened its own website—<http://www.stopdv.org.cn>—to the public in November 2001. As stated on the website, targeting and interacting with network members, the media, victims of domestic violence and the general public, its objective is to provide a platform for information exchange concerning domestic violence inside and outside of the network. Specifically, it has focused on four major tasks: 1) providing intensive and interactive resources on domestic violence, 2) encouraging the media to

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<sup>251</sup> Cecilia Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing for Change: A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 70.

make use of online information in order to reach out to the general public, 3) challenging the dominant discourse on domestic violence and promoting an alternative understanding of domestic violence from a gender perspective, and 4) introducing intervention practices.<sup>252</sup> By September 2007, the website had received 101,916 visits. Other popular women's organizations which are involved in anti-domestic violence activities and have set up websites include: the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University ([www.woman-legalaid.org.cn](http://www.woman-legalaid.org.cn)); the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center ([www.maple.org.cn](http://www.maple.org.cn)); the Women's Media Watch Network ([www.genderwatchchina.org](http://www.genderwatchchina.org)); and the Migrant Women's Club ([www.nongjianv.org](http://www.nongjianv.org)). The websites for the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center and the Migrant Women's Club have received 156,637 and 525,702 visits respectively by September 2007.<sup>253</sup> As relatively cheap alternative platforms of communication, these websites have become an effective medium for women's organizations to provide useful information about domestic violence and to transmit gender-centered interpretations of the issue to larger audiences in society.

Women's groups have been innovative in the propagation of their views about domestic violence. Many organize gender training programs for female cadres, government officials, judicial personnel, public security personnel and community workers. The first women's group that ran training programs for governmental officials was the Women's Research Institute. Initially, such training only covered topics such as

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<sup>252</sup> Cecilia Milwerz and Bu Wei, "Organizing for Gender Equality in China—Creating and Disseminating Alternative Discourses," *Women and Politics in Asia Conference*, Halmstad, Sweden 6-7 June 2003, p.12.

<sup>253</sup> Retrieved from [www.maple.org.cn](http://www.maple.org.cn) and [www.nongjianv.org](http://www.nongjianv.org) on September 1, 2007.

organizational and psychological skills and aimed at women cadres.<sup>254</sup> To recruit women cadres as trainees, the Institute worked with the *Women of China* magazine, a journal sponsored by the ACWF, and used the latter's institutional name to organize workshops. However, other women's organizations quickly adopted this form of dissemination and expanded the content of training to discuss various women's issues and to introduce a gender perspective. And the trainees are no longer limited to female cadres. These programs are quite effective ways for self-initiated women's organizations to influence the state in general and the Women's Federation in particular and to raise consciousness about gender equality among individuals outside the core of the women's movement. Wang Xinjuan, the founder of the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center (MWPPCC), has observed how the training workshops held by her own organization have successfully increased gender awareness among officials when dealing with the issue of domestic violence:

I feel our greatest accomplishment of this project was to change how people think. In three years we have conducted eleven sessions of gender training workshops. Initially it is very difficult to get these workshops going since in the beginning people generally do not accept these ideas...They believe that they are well educated and that they only need to follow the principle "in the eyes of the law everyone is equal." They feel that taking on a gender perspective is wrong. Therefore the first time that we trained a small group of judges, we could not even continue our training. The judges confronted our coordinator and the training was interrupted. We could not continue the first day of training ... This clearly shows the collision of ideas. A lot of the judges thought these women suffer because they did something wrong. These people need to be reprimanded. These women must have been unreasonable and made a scene; they must just be troublemakers. To make the family harmonious, the husband must beat the wife until she becomes obedient. Many judges shared such assumptions...In the end, their perspectives were changed.

...After the trainings some of the judges came to believe that all of these traditional ideas that they had held were mistaken. One judge told me about a case. A woman

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<sup>254</sup> Wang Xingjuan, "I am Busy Raising Funds," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 14.

was abused by her husband and filed for divorce. Before the judge delivered the verdict, the woman suddenly withdrew her case. It was because her husband threatened her – that if she divorced him, he would harm her family. In order to protect her family she withdrew her suit. The judge told the woman: “I don’t want you to withdraw your case because if you stay in this marriage you will continue to suffer.” However, when he heard of her situation he told the woman: “I understand why you withdrew the case. You withdraw because you don’t have other options. Currently there are no laws to protect you if you feel that your life is in danger. We cannot guarantee the safety of your family if you get divorced.” The judge said the court has not obtained the power to prevent these kinds of criminal activities from happening. But he said that after the training, the judges came to be more understanding and more sympathetic...There was a huge change in these judges. They even offer legal consultations to women who cannot win in court, telling them how they should file the law suit in a better way. They felt that their entire outlook had been changed.<sup>255</sup>

Another activist, Chen Mingxia, along with a group of activists and in collaboration with local women’s federations, conducted in Qianxi County, Hubei Province, information and education programs about the enforcement of the *Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women* and the promotion of equality between women and men.<sup>256</sup> They ran training courses for law enforcement officials at the county, town and village levels, including the cadres in charge of work for the benefit of women and those from public security organs, procuratorial organs, people’s courts and departments of justice at the county level. Forty five percent of these cadres were male.<sup>257</sup> The training courses were designed to improve the understanding of the significance of protecting women’s rights and of equality between sexes, and included the discussion of a wide variety of topics, such as domestic violence. They also printed and distributed to peasants more than 10,000 easy-to-understand serial book editions, a set of seven booklets with a combination of pictures and literary compositions. These pamphlets explained the laws

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<sup>255</sup> Interview of Wang Xingjuan by Zhang Jian on March 12, 2004 for the Global Feminisms Project.

<sup>256</sup> Chen Mingxia, “From Legal to Substantive Equality: Realizing Women’s Rights by Action,” *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 5, p. 1404.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1405.

protecting women's rights in very simple language so that even illiterate old women could understand. In addition, working together with the local women's federations, activists created entertainment programs based on real-life cases that they had encountered in their research. These were performed by the local amateur literary workers and performing artists from across the county. During intervals in the performances, activists held education sessions about women's rights and gender equality. In this way, more than 60,000 people watched these performances and subsequently many of them had a better understanding of women's rights and of discrimination against women.<sup>258</sup>

Since Qianxi country is a mountainous rural area in Hebei province, such a rural outreach program is of particular significance given the urban roots of the more independent women's movement in the 1990s. More than 70% of China's population lives in rural areas where levels of economic development as well as education are relatively low and access to modern means of communication is still limited. The significance of rural outreach programs, such as the one conducted in Qianxi, is that they ensure that concepts originating from an urban-based women's movement that transcend urban areas are shown to affect the lives of the majority of China's women who live in the countryside.

Those activists who have positions both within the ACWF and in self-initiated organizations have also been able to use their dual identities and connections with the ACWF to effectively promote the issue of domestic violence in legislative processes. For example, Gao Xiaoxian, an activist working in the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation as well as in the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family, noted

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 1405.

that due to the dual identities of some core members in the Association and the long-term relationship between her organization and the Women's Federation, she was able to use the research results on domestic violence to persuade the leaders of the provincial Women's Federation to introduce the issue at meetings of the Standing Committee of the provincial People's Congress. Furthermore, the Association organized specialists to draft a regional legislation plan to combat domestic violence; the draft was then submitted to the provincial People's Congress through the provincial Women's Federation.<sup>259</sup>

An especially interesting element in the Chinese case is that many channels of dissemination and influence have been created by women's movement activists through strategically allying with the ACWF and seeking access to its institutional connections and resources. However, the availability of these channels is very much contingent upon how individual activists and self-initiated women's organizations negotiate their relationships with the ACWF, since connections and channels are not institutionalized and are mostly informal.

### **Framing "NGO"**

Undoubtedly introduced from abroad, the concept of a non-governmental organization (NGO) is clearly new in China. Its Chinese version, *fei zhengfu zuzhi*, is a fairly literal rendition of the English. The term's newness in China is also evidenced by the fact that the timing and source of this importation is closely related to the hosting in 1995 of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and its

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<sup>259</sup>Gao Xiaoxian, "Strategies and Space: A Case Study of the Shaanxi Association for Women and Family," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 144.

concurrent NGO Forum. The concept caught the attention of the government, and especially those who had their first direct encounter with it, in an unexpected way at the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the NGO forum held in Manila in November 1993. Two Chinese delegations attended that meeting. One was a Women's Federation delegation and the other was a group of Chinese women sponsored by the Ford Foundation. At the meeting, when the Women's Federation representative—a man—took the floor, he found himself at the center of a debate over the validity of the ACWF's presence, since some participants charged that it was not a real "NGO". The vigorous, spontaneous interactions and exchanges among the participating NGOs were not just challenging but were also an eye-opening experience for the members of the Chinese delegations no matter which one they belonged to.<sup>260</sup>

Before the actual concept of "NGO" entered China from the FWCW meetings, the Chinese did have an equivalent term *shehui tuanti* (social organization), which had been and is still officially sanctioned. It predates the PRC, and referred primarily to new private associations that first appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century and then blossomed in the first half of the century. Since 1949, the government has continued to use this neutral term and three of its regulatory documents relating to private associations (1950, 1989 and 1998) all use the term "social organization" for civic organizations.<sup>261</sup> In contrast, the term NGO (*fei zhengfu zuzhi*) clearly conveys the non-official nature of social organizations and serves as an antonym to "governmental organization". Unfortunately, in the Chinese language, the word "*fei*" not only means "non-" or "not",

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<sup>260</sup> Naihua Zhang, "Searching for 'Authentic' NGOs: The NGO Discourse and Women's Organizations in China," in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 159.

<sup>261</sup> Qiusha Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 81-82.

but also connotes “wrong”, “censure” or even “anti-”, thus implying opposition to the government.<sup>262</sup>

In substantive terms, NGOs are generically defined as the opposite of both state and for-profit organizations. They are considered to be autonomous, voluntary, private, non-profit-distributing and formal.<sup>263</sup> An NGO approach to the women’s movement suggests that women can promote and safeguard their interests through women’s NGOs. Such a framework is thus at odds with the CCP’s state-sponsored mass-organization based approach to women’s liberation and its claim that it represents the interests of Chinese women. Little wonder, then, that the Chinese state has been dubious about the role of NGOs and has feared that they might be anti-government and used to challenge state authority. On the other hand, to many women, the new problems arising after the death of Mao with the advent of reforms that exacerbated gender inequalities indicated that the previous methods of addressing women’s issues were neither efficacious nor adequate. From the point of view of many women’s movement activists, the concept of NGO has affirmed the need to search for alternative forms of women’s organizing and has provided legitimacy for their self-initiated organizing activities. The diffusion of the NGO concept is thus no small task for activists.

Many Chinese had thought of non-government organizations as anti-government, which led to avoidance of the word “NGO” and a lack of recognition of their positive role in society and for the government as well.<sup>264</sup> The opportunity to participate in regional

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<sup>262</sup> “zhenfu” means “government” and “zhuzi” means “organization”.

<sup>263</sup> Lester Salamon and Helmut Anheier, “In Search of the Non-profit Sector I: the Question of Definitions,” *Voluntas*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, p. 134.

<sup>264</sup> Liu Bohong, “The ACWF and Women’s NGOs,” in Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz with Red Chan (eds.), *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 144.

preparatory meetings for the NGO Forum of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1993 and 1994 in various locales around the world, allowed women's movement activists for the first time to have direct contacts with women and their non-governmental organizations from outside China. Coming from a context that lacked such groups, the activists experienced a learning process in which they reconstituted their notion of NGO activities and began to promote a positive view of these groups. After attending the Manila preparatory conference, an activist wrote down her view of NGOs:

“NGO” has been a term foreign to Chinese women...I was most impressed by the participatory spirit of the NGO women. Because women in many countries have been oppressed by men, and all their rights and the improvement in their social status have been achieved through persistent criticism of their traditional and unreasonable social systems and through hard struggle from the bottom up, the women who went to Manila have a strong sense of self-identity, participation and action. They are powerful, innovative and creative, stressing sisterhood among women and respect for different voices. NGOs are very influential.<sup>265</sup>

Furthermore, activists have employed a comparative framework in order to popularize the NGO concept and justify their self-initiated organizing activities as a valid means for achieving gender equality and women's liberation. Specifically, activists highlight the salient differences between state-led women's liberation in China and women's movements in other countries. Through a comparative lens, Liu Bohong keenly observes the long-lasting weakness of the former:

In my opinion, the Western women's movement has involved a subjective, self-initiated, and bottom-up process. It has been part of a larger social movement. For example, in the United States, there were the civil rights movement, the student movement and the women's movement in the 1960s. [Individuals] realized that, as subjective agents, they should liberate themselves in the course of social development. In our country, however, it is the leadership of the Party, the liberations of class and nation, which have brought changes in, and protection of,

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<sup>265</sup> Liu Bohong, “Our Country is the Entire World,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p.152.

women's status. The achievement and realization of women's rights has actually taken place from the top down.<sup>266</sup>

In her essay, entitled "How Do We Face the World?—Some Thoughts on Connecting Tracks", Xie Lihua compared and contrasted a self-initiated and bottom-up women's movement led by women's NGOs in Senegal with a state-led women's organization such as the ACWF in China and discovered the advantages of the former over the latter:

Perhaps because of the difficulties they [the NGOs in Senegal] are facing, they show an indomitable vitality; and maybe because we have a well-organized system and network, we lack the sense of being our own masters, and usually are not active participants. We just wait for orders or arrangements from above.<sup>267</sup>

Even though the activists strived to give legitimacy to, and raise the status of NGOs in China, their framing efforts were accompanied by their recognition of the advantages of a state-centered matrix for a mass organization such as the ACWF. In this way, the propagation of the NGO concept has not overtly challenged the dominant CCP top-down organizational approach to women's issues, insuring a safer means of introducing the issue to the larger population and the state in particular. In the same essay, while Xie Lihua clearly noted the problems for the ACWF associated with top-down embeddedness, and pointed out the strengths of NGOs, she still recognized the merits of the former model:

What I remember most is the efforts their NGOs put into trying to improve the conditions of women ... In Senegal, and indeed in all of Africa, no country has a top-down women's federation like China's. Though their NGOs are as numerous as mushrooms after a spring rain, they remain very weak because of their loose

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<sup>266</sup> Liu Bohong, "Dialogue One," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 297.

<sup>267</sup> Xie Lihua, "How Do We face the World?—Some Thoughts on Connecting the Tracks," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p.72.

organization. FDEA, the organization that received us, is perhaps one of the three largest NGOs in Senegal, yet it has only a dozen members. Therefore, in countries like these, women could not launch vigorous national activities such as “Double Learning, Double Competing”, “Women Making Contributions” ... Comparatively speaking, the advantages of the Women’s Federation in China are obvious. First of all, the majority of our federation cadres need not worry about how to make a living; we have fixed salaries given by the government and we can whole heartedly throw ourselves into our work. NGOs abroad must first solve their financial problems before they can help other women. Furthermore, we have organizational networks at every level, but they have only separate project groups, which do not even have fixed places of work.<sup>268</sup>

As a result, the proposals formulated by the activists for change in the Chinese women’s movement stress the role of women’s NGOs more as a supplement to the way the movement is carried out by the ACWF and the Chinese government than as a substitution. This perspective is articulated in the following excerpt:

The women’ movement in China is at the stages of reflection and self examination. It is time for China’s women’s movement to enter a new stage. The international women’s liberation is developing rapidly, though facing some new problems. In China, women’s liberation has not made much progress, and women’s liberation is understood in a very narrow sense ... In Latin America, there are many women’s organizations which represent and provide services to women of different classes. They are the result of women’s own consciousness and initiatives. The organizations inform and educate. In China, we do not have such organizations. Most people expect the government to solve women’s problems. After I visited Argentina, I think we women not only need to push the government for solutions, but also need to set up our own organizations to solve our own problems. We can start by making changes little by little, and family by family. The tiny drops will one day join together to become a flood of revolution that can change the way society thinks about women, and create a living space where men and women are equal and harmonious.<sup>269</sup>

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 ultimate control by the

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<sup>268</sup> Xie Lihua, “How Do We face the World?—Some Thoughts on Connecting the Tracks,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), pp. 71-72.

<sup>269</sup> Le Ping, “Thoughts on the New Era,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), pp. 262-264.

government. Therefore, it is a particularly crucial task for activists in the process of diffusing the NGO concept to ease government and party concern over the political risk posed by NGOs. A useful strategy adopted by the activists was to downplay the oppositional side of the NGO relationship with the government and stress interdependence and cooperation between the two. Again, such a strategy can be viewed as an attempt to depoliticize the issue of NGOs. An activist who is now leading a women's legal aid NGO extensively described her vision of the proper role for NGOs with respect to how they should relate to the state:

At the Conference [in Manila], “confronting the government”, and “fighting against men” can be heard everywhere. These feisty speeches won the applause of many, but we were not thrilled or uplifted. Quite the opposite. We felt suppressed and heavy-hearted. We constantly ponder one question: how should an NGO carry out its work and influence the government so that the latter can change from its opposing, un-supportive position to a supportive position. Ultimately, this is a question of how to carry on the women's movement. As I reflect on the Conference, I think the women's movement should avoid three traps. First, the task of NGOs should be to influence government, and to win over their support and protection—not to take an oppositional stand to fight against the government. Fighting against the government is not a good strategy. Otherwise, with the deepening of misunderstanding, NGOs would find they have less and less room for their work.<sup>270</sup>

A similar perspective was articulated by another activist, Ma Yinan, who is a member of the Women's Center at Peking University. In the context of what she witnessed abroad, she sees value in working with and winning support from the state, instead of advocating uncompromising opposition by NGOs to the state:

I used to know very little about the international women's movement and foreign women's organizations. My visit to Manila gave me a chance to see the world and compare it to the situation in China. In addition to participating in the formal meetings, Guo Jianmei and I met representatives of many women's legal organizations. We visited their offices and hotlines. The organization members were all very warm and active. They had stable funding sources, so their work is

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<sup>270</sup> Guo Jianmei, “An Unforgettable Preparatory Conference in Manila,” in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), pp. 215-216.

well organized and of a high quality. However, China has just started this kind of work and there is a lot of ground to cover. Moreover, the women in Manila were very gender conscious. They knew that their work was on behalf of women, and they drew a very sharp distinction between men and women. Some even said that they wanted to step on men. They saw men and government as enemies to be fought. These women wanted to struggle against the government for their rights. This is different from the women's movement in China. In China, the differences between men and women are not so great. I suggest that we unite with men to achieve progress for humanity. I think "non-government" [*fei zhengfu*] does not mean "against government" [*fan zhengfu*]. In order to have power, especially legal status, women must win the support of the government and change the government's concept of women, but not fight against it.<sup>271</sup>

Some may view the emphasis on maintaining a close cooperative relationship with the state in the framing process of the NGO concept as a sign of state control on the one hand and of limited autonomy for women's NGOs on the other. Yet, it may just as well be a strategy consciously adopted by activists who are willing to take advantage of (or manipulate) close ties with the government in order to expand their space for growth and development in society. Consequently, the concept of NGO has been popularized to a greater degree and the positive impact brought about by the diffusion of the NGO concept is undeniable, especially in terms of renegotiating the relationship between women's organizations and the Party and the government. Engagement in discussion of this issue helps not only the more independent sector of the contemporary Chinese women's movement, those affiliated with self-initiated women's groups, but also the ACWF in its search for a proper relationship with the state. For the latter, its perspective on NGOs has been fundamentally changed, which has further accelerated the transformation of the ACWF's relationship with the party-state. According to one activist who was involved

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<sup>271</sup> Ma Yanan, "Dialogue One," in Wong Yuen Ling (ed.), *Reflections and Resonance: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: The Ford Foundation, 1995), p. 296.

with the China Organizing Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women as a high-ranking Women's Federation official:

First, Fulian [the ACWF] was finally aware that NGOs are not illegal; in China they are the popular groups (*minjian tuanti*) that are not willing to oppose the government. Fulian previously thought "NGO" was "AGO"—"against government organization," so it was very afraid and evaded this question. Now it knows that an NGO can maintain consistency with the government ...[I]t started to understand NGO functions ... Fulian finally was aware that it wanted to represent women's interest (*liyi*), and it was aware of what women's interests are. It started to be aware of how to represent women's interests, how to represent this mass. To give an example: it is supported by the state, but if serving women's and the state's interests conflict, where does it stand? This is very important—before it thought that the two did not have any contradiction, only that if it was standing on the side of the state, then it was standing on the side of women. Now it is doing much work safeguarding women's rights and interests; this is a very big change. Fulian is gradually entering an NGO role.<sup>272</sup>

Aided by the NGO concept, the ACWF has started to tackle the contradiction embedded in its dual function and to reposition itself in Chinese society and in the contemporary Chinese women's movement. This transformation in turn also lends more legitimacy to the NGO concept.

## Conclusion

Chinese women's movement activists have been able to successfully integrate new ideas imported from the international women's movement. In this process, on the one hand, the activists have had to remain within certain boundaries in their framing efforts, especially regarding the relationship with the ACWF and the government. On the other hand, and more significantly, the state discourse on women's liberation has provided a basis for activists to criticize the continuing gender inequalities in post-Mao China and to

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<sup>272</sup> Quoted in Sharon Wesoky, *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 173-174.

transcend that same discourse and widen the terrain of discourses on women's issues. In the case of domestic violence, activists even utilize existing state institutions such as the ACWF and law enforcement agencies to promote the issue. The activists' efforts to introduce new issues to more general audiences outside the movement also contribute to a general widening of tolerance on the part of the state for the women's movement in general and for discussion of previously sensitive issues in particular. All of these activities reveal the ongoing transformation of relations between the movement and the state.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusion**

The Chinese women's movement in the 1990s featured important new developments in terms of the extent of women's organizations, their types and the issues that they were interested in addressing. In particular, there was an expansion of bottom-up self-initiated women's organizations as opposed to the All China Women's Federation established by the state, and an increasing diversity of voices speaking on behalf of women's diverse needs and interests. The movement does not desire to change the existing political order, but seeks to enact social changes through varied non-mobilizational means such as providing assistance to women in need and increasing the theoretical and practical knowledge base regarding women's issues. Since it has continued to exist and grow in an undemocratic political system, it has profound implications for the development of contemporary state-society relations in China.

### **Summary of Findings**

What can we learn about social movements from the analysis of the Chinese women's movement? The foregoing chapters suggest that an emphasis on a combination of three factors—political opportunities, organizations and networks, and framing—can shed light on the emergence and development of the contemporary Chinese women's movement. Thus, my research has illustrated the utility of social movement theories, developed in the light of experiences in Western countries, in pointing out the common elements in social movements across different political and cultural contexts. Yet the fact

that this movement has existed in a context that is still very much non-democratic and characterized by the continuing dominance of the party-state in society also calls for our attention to many dynamics that are uncommon in most Western social movements.

The political opportunity structure has been widely studied in the social movements of many countries. The Chinese women's movement in the 1990s provides some important insights, however. Most significantly, international political opportunity and economic opportunity were central to the rise and evolution of a more independent women's movement in that decade. Both were movement-specific opportunities and expanded domestic-level opportunities. In particular, the hosting of the Fourth World Conference on Women created political openings in the Chinese state in the sense that the government was less inclined to repress a movement that became more and more closely linked with its international image. Meanwhile, international funding, as evidenced by the provision of Ford Foundation funds, provided important economic support to the otherwise very resource-poor women's groups organized from below. The external funding sources also offered opportunities for women's movement activists to gain exposure to international feminist debates and themes and witness the dynamism and commitment of non-governmental women's groups, which indirectly facilitated the expansion of a more independent sector in the women's movement in China. Additionally, exogenous opportunities in both the political and economic spheres, were a significant catalyst in the internal transformation of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), which in turn created important elite allies within the state for independent women's activities. The international influences explored in this study certainly add an interesting dimension to the dynamics of social movements.

The Chinese case also suggests new issues that may have an impact on the mobilization processes of social movements in non-democratic contexts. In addition to those obstacles for mobilization faced by social movement activists in Western democracies, activists in the Chinese women's movement have had to overcome extra barriers to successful mobilization, for instance, a restrictive regulatory system towards bottom-up organizing activities that is designed to maintain the state's grip over society. Yet, despite the state's attempt to control independent forms of organizing on the part of its citizens, government institutions and state-run organizations such as the ACWF can serve as the basis for social movement mobilization when activists strategically utilize their various connections with the former to gain legitimacy for, and increase the resources available to, their activities. It is therefore important to adopt a perspective that points to the contributions of both vertical and horizontal networks to the emergence and development of self-initiated women's organizations. In more general terms, the exploration of the vertical dimension of networking is especially relevant in non-democratic contexts, for it allows us to see how activists can generate support from within a state whose nature is not particularly receptive to any kind of organizing from below. An examination of the vertical dimension also points out how mechanisms of control can be turned into sources of mobilization.

Finally, with respect to the cultural and framing processes of social movements, while feminist thinking and terminology from the international women's movement have provided significant new discourses and grievance frames for the women's movement in China, the diffusion of these new discourses and frames relies on activists' efforts to localize them in a way that is acceptable to the public in general and the state in particular.

This was evidenced by the fact that activists have framed new issues, such as domestic violence and NGOs, in a way that is more compatible with the state's own discourse on women's liberation and does not challenge overall state authority. This strategy has led to a general widening of tolerance on the part of the state in discussions of previously sensitive issues.

### **The Chinese Women's Movement and Its Implications**

The study of the Chinese women's movement contributes to a greater understanding of state-society relations in contemporary China. The rapid development of more independent women's organizations in the 1990s confirms a general trend in state-society relations observed by many scholars, that is, the intellectual and organizational space for different social interests to associate has continued to expand in the reform era. However, a close look at the relations between these women's organizations and the party-state reveals more complex dynamics as well as important elements of change.

The organizational forms in the women's movement are widely diversified, ranging from official and semi-official organizations, such as mass organizations, professional and trade associations, and friendly societies to voluntary ones such as legal counseling centers, service centers, research centers, as well as unregistered informal discussion groups and web-based organizations. Their relationship with the state varies greatly in terms of degree of autonomy. This research of the contemporary women's movement has focused primarily on the origins and activities of self-initiated organizations. Still, even among these organizations, their degree of autonomy from the state differs considerably

from one organization to another. Those that are not registered perhaps enjoy the most structural autonomy.

However, while the degree of structural autonomy is axiomatically taken as a measure of the strength and validity of civil society, what is more important in state-dominant contexts such as China, is the actual complex interactions between these organizations and the state. Admittedly, the state affects the movement by circumscribing its organizational manifestations as well as channels of action. At the same time, as evidenced by my research, groups can influence the state's willingness for them to exist and the range of activities that they are able to pursue. In general, if groups do not overtly criticize or alienate the party-state, but rather act in a non-disruptive and conciliatory manner in exchange for greater tolerance on the part of the government, they may achieve some organizational autonomy. Individually, each organization has engaged in negotiation with the state regarding its own niche in order to achieve an optimal balance between state interference and independence, with the final equilibrium point deriving from a complex interaction of institutional and individual factors. Some positively seek a close relationship with the state in order to gain access to resources and legitimacy and to have an impact on policy-making processes, although their activities may be circumscribed as a result of this relationship. Others choose to keep a quiet distance, either due to lack of connections or a fear that proximity will translate into intervention and to limits on their activities. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, activists make their own tactical decisions that are beneficial to their organization's goals and interests and are not mere passive subjects of state power. In turn, influenced by its interactions with these organizations, the state itself has made adjustments and compromises and has



































