

A Historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China

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governments arrive first at basic consensus. The Platform as revised was officially approved, albeit with some countries expressing reservations on certain issues. One important victory was final approval, after two and a half years of heated debate, of the incorporation of women's unwaged labor into such economic measures as the gross national product. And yet, the UN's top-down approach to promoting women's interests in the past two decades has proven ineffective. Recent feminist analyses suggest as preferable the bottom-up approach, in which women and their grassroots organizations exert control in the development and political processes, provide input to policymakers at different levels, and influence politics nationally and internationally.<sup>10</sup>

Government's agreement to eliminate the gender gaps in satisfaction of basic needs is fundamental to all people's life sustenance and survival. Governments should acknowledge the need for gender-sensitive and community-centered development that will empower people, build on women's rights and realities, eliminate poverty, secure sustainable livelihoods, build stable and healthy lives in communities, and promote peace on a long-term basis.<sup>11</sup> New partnerships between government and civil society are in the making so as to solve women's problems more effectively. However, adequate resource allocations, organizational mechanisms, and processes for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action still require continued efforts worldwide to demand world governments' accountability to moral imperatives in working with local NGOs and grassroots groups. The global women's movement has grown and made some waves in the past two decades. However, it still must "move mountains" to translate the Platform for Action into reality and to build a better world for women, men, and children.

<sup>10</sup> Chow and Berheide, eds.

<sup>11</sup> Noleen Heyzer, ed., *A Commitment to the World's Women: Perspectives on Development for Beijing and Beyond* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 1995), introduction.

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### A Historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China

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**A** S A CHINESE woman returning home from abroad, I was eager to learn how Chinese women would respond to the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum and how this his-

toric event would affect the women's movement in China. Because China was the host country, my views of the women's conference extend beyond the two weeks when it was in session.

When the leaders of the Chinese government made a bid in early 1991 for hosting the FWCW, they were trying to use the opportunity to change their international image created by their brutal crackdown on student protests on June 4, 1989. Their assumption that hosting a women's conference would help change their image reflects the power of the Maoist gender discourse created in the long period of revolution (1921–49) and socialism after 1949. One of the Marxist principles guiding the official view on women (actually a quotation of French socialist Charles Fourier) is, "The degree of woman's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."<sup>1</sup> The Chinese leaders believe that the degree of liberation among women in China is higher than that of women in the West (a myth created in the Mao era); therefore, displaying the great achievements of women's liberation in socialist China would demonstrate to the world the high degree of general liberation in China. Seen in this light, the FWCW was to be the great showcase that China's top leaders had hoped it would be.

Although the decision of the Chinese leaders to host the FWCW was mainly out of political expedience, it had some immediate positive effects on women. In its effort to present the best face at the FWCW, the government began to give ad hoc support to some projects in women's interest. For example, a project called "Welcoming the FWCW, Millions of Loving Hearts Devoted to Spring Buds" coordinated both government and public resources to help thousands of girls in poorer regions begin schooling. To be sure, projects of this kind directly benefit only a small percentage of women. Nevertheless, with much propaganda, Chinese leaders sent a message that the central government was making special efforts to improve women's status in honor of the forthcoming FWCW. Officials at different administrative levels understood that they had to do something special to welcome the FWCW. As a result, the National Women's Federation was moved to a huge new office building in downtown Beijing;<sup>2</sup> some

<sup>1</sup> This sentence is one of the most frequently cited Marxist tenets in Chinese texts on women in the People's Republic of China. It originally appears in the Chinese translation of Friedrich Engels's essay "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific." See Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 690.

<sup>2</sup> The formal name of the National Women's Federation is the All-China Women's Federation, the leading body of the women's federations nationwide. Women working in women's federations at national and local levels are all government employees. The federations are, in fact, part of a hierarchical institution that has a dual function of a government branch and a national organization of women, derived from the Communist Party's theory that the socialist state represents the fundamental interest of the people.

local women's federations received funds to remodel their offices; more women's studies centers appeared in universities;<sup>3</sup> publishers began to look for monographs on women's issues, including feminist texts; editors of various journals and newspapers organized special issues either to display women's achievements or to discuss issues related to women; and special television programs were produced to spread information about the FWCW and NGO Forum. The official line of welcoming the FWCW in the period preceding the conference greatly heightened public interest in women, a sharp contrast to the state's withdrawal from women's causes in previous years.

However, not all women found the government's new attention to women desirable. Many women scholars and activists found that the state's interest in presenting a glorified image of Chinese women interfered with their effort to name and study women's problems in contemporary society. Referred to as research on women (*funü yanjiu*), this effort has been carried on by women since the mid-1980s and aims at both theory and social practice. Many women researchers found the new attention to women dubious. The problem was not only that energy and resources were being diverted from solving women's problems to praising women's achievements. More serious, it was that exposing women's problems politically countered the move to display an advanced state of Chinese women's liberation. Some women researchers began to worry about a possible negative consequence of the FWCW: drawing state attention to the movement of research on women that previously had been largely overlooked by the state. If women's issues, or the representation of women's issues, became connected with the political interest of the government, then research on women could be defined as political. In the People's Republic of China, "political" means something relating to the interest, position, and power of the government. Anything viewed as political automatically invites regulation or surveillance by the government. Politicizing research on women, therefore, could lead to the end of women's activism, which had been left alone in previous years. This chilling prospect almost became a reality in 1995, as I discuss below.

In spite of this uneasiness among women researchers, up to the end of 1994 many women activists were still hopeful that the FWCW, especially the NGO Forum, would provide an impetus to the growth of a non-government-controlled women's activism in China. Preparation for the conference, which involved the efforts of many Chinese women inside

<sup>3</sup> Women's studies centers began emerging in the People's Republic of China in the late 1980s. In 1994, the number of centers increased dramatically from four to more than twenty. But instead of having a curriculum that offers courses in women's studies, most of the new centers have only a few scholars who are interested in research on women.

and outside of the government, served as a process of consciousness-raising. For many Chinese, men and women, this was the first time they had ever heard of an "NGO." For those women involved in the preparation, especially those who had the opportunity to attend international preparatory meetings, seeing how NGOs functioned and what issues they raised was an eye-opening and empowering experience. Inspired by global feminism, many women quickly began to popularize the idea of NGOs, the concepts of women empowering women and of sustainable human-centered development, and other major issues raised by women all over the world. By presenting global feminist activities to a Chinese audience, women scholars and cadres of women's federations changed their formerly reserved view of feminism. The new slogan became "Connect the Rails" (*jiegui*, which means "merge") with international women's movements. The word *feminism* not only began to appear frequently in official women's journals and newspapers but also became a positive word.<sup>4</sup>

Preparation for the FWCW and NGO Forum both circulated ideas of global feminism and generated more women's activism in China. Women working on the Chinese official preparatory committee, local women's federations cadres, women researchers, and women activists in society made concerted efforts to increase Chinese women's participation in the NGO Forum. Originally, the Chinese government decided to organize thirty panels by government branches and the National Women's Federation. With the increasing knowledge of what the NGO Forum was about, women in the Chinese preparatory committee maneuvered to expand the number of panels and to include the participation of nongovernmental organizations. In the end, there were forty-seven panels presented by Chinese women. Moreover, in order to "connect the rails" with global women's movements, the organizers of Chinese panels also included topics that had not been discussed in public previously. Women and human rights, women and the environment, and violence against women were among the topics inspired by global feminism. As a result, the topics presented by Chinese panels closely resembled the major issues raised in the Platform for Action. Many women participants saw the FWCW and the NGO Forum as the greatest opportunity of the century for them to break China's intellectual isolation and to push the boundaries of women's activism in China.<sup>5</sup> They were also excited by what they perceived as the

<sup>4</sup> *Collection of Women's Studies*, published by the Women's Studies Institute of the National Women's Federation in Beijing since 1990, is the major journal in China promulgating global feminism. In the issues published prior to the FWCW, articles introducing international preparatory meetings and discussing global feminism exhibit an enthusiasm to merge with the global women's movement.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Chinese women's participation in the preparation for the conference, see *Reflections and Resonances: Stories of Chinese Women Involved in*

new openness expressed by the government. Unfortunately, that openness of the government ended abruptly.

In early 1995, a suddenly changed political climate dispelled women's initial sense of empowerment in the process of preparing for the FWCW. Chinese government leaders, encountering challenges and protests by human rights organizations at international meetings, began to see the risks lying ahead. What if those organizations were to demonstrate in the middle of Tiananmen Square? The potential for such an event worried government leaders, and they responded swiftly to prevent this political nightmare from coming true. The site of the NGO Forum had to be moved far away from Beijing. Chinese women activists at home and abroad were stunned when they heard the decision. The implication was clear. An international honor to China had now become an international threat to China's political stability or, rather, to state control of power, in the eyes of the nation's top leaders. The decision to isolate the NGO Forum expressed not only the leaders' determination not to let this event disturb China's political status quo but also the state's suspicion and hostility toward women's spontaneous activities. The ramifications of this decision had an immediate and adverse effect on Chinese women activists.

The government wasted no time in tightening control over every aspect related to the women's conference. The forty-seven panels presented by Chinese women were closely screened through "rehearsals." Talks were geared more to displaying Chinese women's achievements rather than discussing problems. All the delegates to the NGO Forum had to go through official training sessions that warned them against the would-be international hostility toward China. Nationalism was fanned up so that each delegate would consciously defend China's honor in front of foreigners even without the presence of security personnel. Disparaging rumors were spread through official channels to taint the image of the NGO Forum, to create a psychological gap between Chinese and foreign women, and to justify the tight security measures.<sup>6</sup> Local newspapers were not allowed to send their journalists to report on the conference. Western scholars who wanted to do research on Chinese women were not welcome. Meetings held jointly by women in China and women from abroad on the topic of Chinese women were no longer granted official approval. Those women who had attended conferences abroad were visited and questioned by public security personnel. In short, the situation was ironic.

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*International Preparatory Activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women* (Beijing: Ford Foundation, 1995). In the book, more than fifty women write about their own experiences of attending international activities.

<sup>6</sup> The most widespread rumors were that many foreign prostitutes would come to the conference and that foreign women were planning to hold a naked parade in Tiananmen Square.

China was about to host the largest international conference in world history, as the state, meanwhile, was taking the most severe security measures seen in the reform era to keep Chinese people isolated from the outside world.

To many Chinese women scholars and activists, the drastically changed political situation threatened to close up the social space for women's spontaneous activism that they had created in the past decade. To serve the best interest of their cause, they had to keep a low profile so as not to attract unwanted attention from the security system. Their strategy was to further "depoliticize" research on women by consciously keeping research on women away from politically sensitive issues, such as human rights, and engaging for the time being in some purely "nonpolitical" projects.<sup>7</sup> This strategy had its cost, as it meant that women participants could not expect to have an open exchange with foreign women at the NGO Forum on all the issues. Instead, in this historic event they had to perform within the political boundary drawn by the government. In other words, they had to treat the NGO Forum like a showcase, as the government stipulated.

Moving from the initial stage of empowerment in the period preceding the conference to this later stage of coping with repression, many women activists were filled with frustration, disappointment, anger, and sadness. It was heartbreaking for them to see that the state was able to straitjacket an international event that was meant to empower women and for which they had worked so hard. Nonetheless, no one was disheartened. When I met my friends at the NGO Forum, many said, "Just keep a low profile and wait for the paranoia to pass." They sounded like seasoned farmers who know very well how to deal 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.

The political weather has always changed suddenly in China. Even before the adjournment of the official conference, the Chinese government leaders' paranoia had already subsided. The NGO Forum ended without

<sup>7</sup> When global feminists demanded loudly that women's rights be treated as human rights, Chinese women researchers were very cautious about this issue. They would rather deploy officially approved phrases such as "improving women's status" and "protect women's rights and interests" than use the language of "human rights." For in the tremendous political tension around the human rights issue prior to the conference, an open identification with human rights could put one immediately in the official category of antigovernment political dissident. Keenly aware of their limited options in the repressive political atmosphere prior to the conference, women in the women's federation of Shanxi Province began a huge project—a gigantic silk wall hanging embroidered by over a thousand women from Shanxi rural areas. The collective embroidery project was a way to inform rural women of the approaching women's conference because the piece was to be displayed at the site of the NGO Forum. This masterpiece of women's art was sold after the conference, and the money is to fund Shanxi rural women's development.

incident. There was no demonstration against the Chinese government; instead, there were demonstrations against American imperialists! China was obviously not the target of attack, much to the relief of Chinese leaders. They realized that most women from abroad were not coming to discuss China's problems at all. On the side of Chinese participants, there were no troublemakers. Everyone in the forty-seven panels read their lines according to the scripts they had rehearsed. 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 elated by the gratitude and praise of foreign government officials at the UN conference. It seemed to government leaders that hosting the conference had gained them honor after all. Their nervousness was thus suddenly replaced by a smugness when the FWCW adjourned. Quickly, officials at different government branches staged celebrations. All of them, in their different capacities of working for the conference, had contributed a lot to winning honor for China. The Chinese preparatory committee also had a grand celebration, issuing award certificates to each participant in the NGO Forum (there were five thousand of them nationwide) to acknowledge their great contribution to the nation.

This national farce amused many women participants. They understood that the celebrations signified a reversal in the official view of the conference. The official return to a positive assessment of the conference meant that Chinese women could move toward merging with the global women's movement. After the Platform for Action was solemnly signed by government officials all over the world, the National Women's Federation was quick to use the pledge of the Chinese government to launch a nationwide campaign to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the document that "voices the aspirations of women all over the world," as the Chinese media hailed it. This campaign is creating legitimacy for expanding Chinese women's activism under the guidance of the official international document. In other words, the document will serve as the measure of Chinese women's achievements from now on. The shift to global feminism in the discourse of Chinese women's liberation has been sanctioned by the Chinese government through its official boast of China's contribution to the birth of this document.

In the congenial climate of post-FWCW China, the impact of the conference on women is openly discussed by Chinese women themselves. The official publication of the National Women's Federation, *Zhongguo funü-bao* (Chinese women's newspaper), has become the chief vehicle to promulgate the spirit of the conference. Many participants contribute to the paper, talking about their own experiences or discussing their plans to fulfill the Platform for Action. In order to "let everyone share the treasure



left by the conference," the chief editor invited a group of participants of the NGO Forum to a discussion meeting in October 1995.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper printed the abstracts of each participant's talk under the title "Seeing the World through Women's Eyes." The topic of concentration was the concept of gender. A woman scholar expressed succinctly the major point of the discussion: "The greatest inspiration the women's conference gave to people is that we should look at things with a gender perspective." A woman writer described how her heightened gender consciousness enabled her to discern blatant sexism in the media. She emphasized, "By raising gender consciousness, you will notice all those things you have never been aware of before." Several women stressed the urgency of adopting a gender perspective in China. They called on Chinese newspapers to "develop the achievements of the conference to influence the society and decision makers so that they will consider the gender issue. We should use our pens, our mouths and our minds to spread out gender consciousness."

The FWCW has surely facilitated the rapid impact of feminism on China's official media. Not only has the largest official women's newspaper in China been openly promoting a feminist gender consciousness, but women's periodicals run by the national or local women's federations all over China have also joined in the process of making a feminist discourse by printing excerpts of the documents of the conferences and articles discussing plans for implementing the Platform for Action. All of this suggests that the National Women's Federation, the largest and official women's organization in China, is moving from its former reservation and isolation from feminism to an open enthusiastic embrace of feminism. This significant change, virtually a sign of the state sanction to merge with global feminism, promises the continued growth of a women's movement with feminist gender consciousness and a feminist agenda in post-FWCW China.

<sup>8</sup> See *Zhongguo funübao* (October 30, 1995), 4.