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Gender and Maoist Urban Reorganization

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STUDIES OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA have usually discussed the functions of residents' committees in socialist transformation without a gender perspective, although they have sometimes noted the high percentage of women in urban neighborhood work (*linong gongzuo*). This chapter integrates gender into the study of socialist state building, drawing on interviews with former members of residents' committees as well as the rich, recently opened government archives in Shanghai in order to examine the emergence of residents' committees in Shanghai in the early 1950s, and the meanings of urban women's neighborhood work. Social transformation and state formation intertwined with changing social spaces and gender boundaries. Located in the core of the spatial hierarchy, the urban women examined here were in the whirlpool of socialist transformation, contrasting sharply with women in the rural periphery, described in Gail Hershatter's chapter.

Socialist state building was replete with gendered conceptualization and practice. In the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) reorganization of Shanghai, residential areas were envisioned as the rear where women were supposed to provide services to male workers in the industrial production front. Housewives (*jiating funü*),¹ valued for their "political purity," were mobilized to work in residents' committees, replacing male *baojia* heads and gangsters to become prominent figures in local administration. With housewives moving into neighborhood work, the *nei-wai* boundary blurred. Residential areas, once considered *wai* in relation to individual households, would be turned into a "women's sphere." The CCP-created women's sphere represented a murky domain where domestic women crossed boundaries of household and

gender, worked for the government within their communities, and brought state issues directly into individual households. The success of state penetration of urban families, in other words, was inseparable from the feminization of this public arena. And women neighborhood cadres were at the forefront of practices that created a socialist state effect in residents' daily life.²

The reshaping of gendered social spaces, however, was not accomplished by a coherent state entity detached from social practices but rather was itself part of a gendered process of state formation. It was the women in the CCP that initiated mobilization of a million housewives for the dual goal of liberating them from the bondage of the old "feudal society" and making them qualified citizens for the new socialist state. The grassroots organizing efforts of the Shanghai Women's Federation (SWF) were utilized, and then contained, by Shanghai government branches that were exploring ways of managing local society. Neighborhood, therefore, became a site for gender contention and negotiation not only among residents but also between the SWF and other government branches. Boundaries within the emerging new political order were drawn when such gendered power struggles played out in the social realm, marking the reproduction of gender differences within the processes of the state.

Gendered Conceptualization of Urban Space

Social reorganization began as soon as the communists gained control of Shanghai on May 25, 1949. The new communist government, struggling to overcome the social problems and legacies of a war-devastated economy, was also confronted with the pressing task of "establishing democratic government" (*minzhu jianzheng*).³ Military victory alone did not give the CCP legitimacy. The new state needed "democratic government" to set it apart from and surpass the Nationalist "reactionary dictatorship." The official vision of democratic government centered on creation of a new power structure that would link people and government. This connection was to be achieved by creating institutions that would enable Shanghai residents to convey their concerns to the government as well as to assure that the government's decrees reached every corner. The key concept that emerged from their discussions is "organizing" (*zuzhi*), a positive word that was never equated with the negative word "control" in their usage (even if, in practice, the two went hand in hand). Cadres viewed grassroots organizing by communist vanguards as a democratic process at the heart of communist revolution. Hardly anyone paused to think of the implications of continuing this organizing practice when the party already became the state power holder.⁴

Of the five million Shanghai people, industrial workers, the trade union constituency, constituted one million, including 170,000 women workers. Several hundred thousand others could be organized in students, professional women, merchants, and trade organizations. The rest were self-employed or unemployed, including one million housewives. This majority of Shanghai's population lived their diverse (and, for more than a few, criminal) daily lives in various residential areas. This messy majority posed a special challenge to communist organization, especially when the spatially based *baojia* system, in place since the Japanese occupation, was abolished by the CCP as "the basis of the Nationalist reactionary dictatorship."

How to sort out who were friends and who were enemies among this diverse majority? What mechanisms could address urgent needs of public facilities, public health, security, and social welfare in poor residential areas where working-class people and urban paupers concentrated? The two questions, central to urban reorganization, suggest different tasks for the Public Security Bureau (PSB) and the Department of Civil Administration (DCA), respectively. Mapping the social topography of residential areas where different classes mixed and population was in constant flux was crucial to the new power holders, who were determined to organizationally penetrate society and turn it towards a socialist planned economy. The second question was also pressing, given that in shantytowns numerous unpaved mud roads flooded after rains, public lavatories overflowed, makeshift homes were subject to frequent fires, running-water stations were controlled by local despots who ripped off the poor, unlit streets bred crime, and many newly unemployed were hungry and grouchy because communists had driven their bosses away. Official internal reports, most based on firsthand investigations, expressed serious concerns about urban underclass living conditions and their sentiments toward the CCP. One such report, emphasizing the urgent needs of the poor, quoted unemployed workers: "Communists say *fanshen* (turnover). . . . Yes, we now turn over into the coffin!" Fundamentally, the legitimacy of the self-styled "people's government" would rest on its ability to effectively address the myriad problems emerging daily at the local level in this large city.

In the early days, the top party echelons remained unsure about the form of local urban administrative structures, but they maintained a principle not to set up formal administration below the district level, expressing a vision that all the residents would be absorbed in the workforce in industrialization. Shanghai government leaders, conscious of their pioneering role in creating a new form of urban governance, devoted much attention to the reorganization of local society. The debates within the leadership expressed two views. One followed the Soviet model, organizing people by trade and profession.⁵ The other, based on the realization that the majority of Shanghai people had no

stable trade or profession, sought to organize spatially by residence, a clear reflection of the *baojia* concept. Those who preferred this “spatial organization mode” to the “trade organization mode” did not argue against the Soviet model or dispute the top leaders’ vision of industrialization. Rather, they emphasized that support for industrial workers required attention to their home life. Spatial organization was needed to improve the workers’ living environment and thus further support the production sector. The director of the DCA of Shanghai, Cao Manzhi, discussed Shanghai leaders’ views on urban reorganization at a national conference on August 17, 1950. He assured his audience that “the production principle is primary, and the residential area principle is secondary.”⁶ Articulating a hierarchical division between production and residence/consumption, Shanghai leaders deftly catered to the CCP leaders’ preoccupation with industrialization while addressing the needs of urban governance.

Regarding residential areas as auxiliary or rear to the production front not only reflects the imprint of communist wartime experiences in which rural women in the rear were mobilized to support the front but also reveals a gendered conceptualization of urban space. It certainly was not a reflection of social reality in that the “rear” was actually the front for millions of men and women who made a living in the residential areas. But it dovetailed with the image of “family dependents of workers” (*jiashu*) who were supposedly unproductive but provided necessary services to male workers. In reality, many men also belonged in the category of “family dependents of workers,” considering the large number of female textile workers in Shanghai.⁷ Many wives of workers also engaged in work outside the home. However, in most documents when “family dependents of workers” are mentioned, the term refers to women (as proved by the occasional use of “male family dependents of workers”). Reorganizing Shanghai according to the dichotomous division of productive and nonproductive sectors, the government soon envisioned women’s utility in the new socialist society. Instead of simply serving their individual households, women were called on to serve the production sector in residents’ committees.

Gendered Reorganization of Social Space

Women’s massive organizational participation did not occur immediately although the need to recruit women was recognized by the government early on. In 1950, when the cadres in the DCA were still exploring the form and constituency of neighborhood organizations, they complained about housewives’ indifference to any organization. The emerging new activists included

workers, students, small business owners, and even “rogues and hustlers” (*baixiangren*), but few housewives.⁸ The change of political power did not automatically enable women to step out from domesticity. The neighborhood space in this initial stage remained masculine even though the male dominated *baojia* system was recently abolished. As a DCA report emphasized:

It is necessary to rely on student and worker activists to take the lead. But they usually do not have time to care about residential matters. Therefore, training family dependents of workers, housewives, small business people and enlightened people can make a more constant force. . . . We must mobilize and train women activists. In the beginning we can train more progressive intellectual women with blue or white-collar family background and without children. Then we can include backward housewives.⁹

Transforming housewives thus became an integral part of urban reorganization.

Before the DCA eyed housewives, the Shanghai Democratic Women's Federation (SDWF) had already begun to mobilize a million housewives, its largest constituency in the city. Shortly after the establishment of the preparatory committee for the SDWF on June 26, 1949, it decided to combine six existing women's organizations to form the Shanghai Housewives Association (SHA) on August 22, 1949. The six organizations had either been peripheral organizations of the CCP or were newly formed by the CCP.¹⁰ The SHA, working under the leadership of the SDWF, set out to “liberate housewives and prepare them for social production.”¹¹ The decision to organize housewives was not an easy one. The party emphasized a class line. Previously housewives (an urban category) had never been included in women-work (*funü gongzuo*). But since organizing Shanghai women workers was the job of the Women Workers Department of the Trade Union, the SWF sought its own constituency. The director of the preparatory committee of the SWF, Zhang Yun, who had been an experienced leader of women-work since the 1920s, envisioned organizing housewives as a crucial part of the SWF's institutional development. By December 1950, twenty-one branches of the SHA were set up at the district level to reach housewives in residential areas. A report of the DCA that discussed neighborhood organization in 1950 assessed the work of the SHA: “Chinese housewives are usually influenced by the poison of old ethics of ritual and lack understanding of society and politics. But after joining the Housewives Association, some enhanced their understanding and reformed their mentality. This organization should continue to exist in order to protect women's rights and raise women's status.”¹² The positive evaluation of the SHA revealed the DCA's recognition of the effectiveness of the SHA's work with housewives. Its problematic language, saturated in the May Fourth representation of the backwardness of women in domesticity, claims that it was

through interaction with the SHA that some housewives began to express interest in affairs outside their households.

In December 1950, parallel to the DCA's exploration of resident organization, the SWF decided to establish grassroots organizations in the jurisdiction of each public security station. In less than one year, women in 10,009 lanes elected 42,900 representatives and 6,000 chief representatives, and 120 housewives' committees were set up with 1,300 members. In 1952, following the call of the All-China Women's Federation to establish Women's Congresses in urban areas, the SWF replaced chief representatives and housewives committees with a Women's Congress. Women representatives elected by neighborhood women formed the Women's Congress. They in turn elected a women's committee that paralleled the emerging residents' committee.¹³ The neighborhood-based Women's Congresses assured close contact between the municipal and district women's federations and women in residential areas.

The district women's federations hosted frequent meetings and workshops to train women representatives as grassroots activists. Women activists identified and trained by the SWF began neighborhood work. Moreover, the gender-specific Women's Congress, with its emphasis on women's special needs, was much more attractive to women than the early neighborhood organization dominated by men. If a resident meeting was called by the winter protection brigade (an early form of neighborhood organization), few housewives would attend. But if the meeting announcement was signed jointly with the Women's Congress, many would attend.¹⁴ The DCA leaders immediately recognized the strength of the SWF in mobilizing housewives. Many internal reports emphasized the importance of "working closely with *Fulian* (Women's federation [WF])."¹⁵ The municipal leader even instructed that the SWF should concentrate on neighborhood work, stressing the pressing demand for developing neighborhood work as well as confirming the crucial role of the SWF in residential areas.¹⁶ Supported by the city authority, however, women's organized neighborhood activities quickly encountered men's hostility. A DCA report described the interaction of the male-dominated neighborhood organization and the women's organization:

Some leaders of the neighborhood organization hold an old mentality. . . . They think housewives are neighborhood residents and should be under the unified leadership of the winter protection brigade [WPB]. But since housewives have had their own organization and raised their understanding, they cannot accept the bureaucratic arrogance of the WPB. In some areas disputes have occurred and each organization has gone its own way to carry out work.¹⁷

Local WF cadres complained that men in the winter protection brigade "looked down upon housewives and displayed bad manners." When the two

organizations worked together to put up slogans and information in neighborhoods, the WPB would refuse to acknowledge the Housewives Association (HA) by not allowing them to sign the propaganda pieces. When the neighborhood HA wanted to run women's literacy classes, the WPB insisted that its members be the teachers; otherwise it would not allow the HA to run classes. When both were supposed to collect donations for the Korean War, the WPB rushed out to collect donations for a six months' quota for a neighborhood, immediately sending them to the bank in its name alone. "Such competitive mentality led to frequent disputes. The situation is serious."¹⁸ Although gender conflicts emerged as women "intruded" into male space, cadres in both the DCA and SWF tended to downplay gender tensions, describing instead organizational conflicts. Both sides emphasized the need for organizational cooperation. However, the spirit of equal cooperation did not last. Gender conflicts would soon be played out between the SWF and the DCA.

While the SWF was effectively organizing housewives in Shanghai, the DCA, in collaboration with the PSB, was busy setting up neighborhood organizations as a new form of democratic governing. Among the various quarters, residents in the poor areas expressed strong interest in an organization with resources and attention from the government to address their welfare needs, and many men actively collaborated with the organizing efforts of government cadres. In April 1951, the DCA hosted a conference of the representatives of streets and lanes with 1,561 participants from all the districts in Shanghai, and it declared the official decision to form "street and lane residents' committees." By mid-October 1951, 1904 residents' committees had been established.¹⁹ To provide better leadership to the "autonomous" residents' committees, 129 street offices were set up, each managing ten or more residents' committees in the precinct of a public security station.²⁰

The residents' committee proved an effective vehicle for the government to "penetrate the masses." By connecting to most urban dwellers (by the end of 1952, 3,891 residents' committees managed 4.21 million residents, 85 percent of Shanghai's population), it was the most widespread grassroots organization. Any government branch that wanted to reach the people would go to the residents' committees for help. The committees were quickly overwhelmed, as attested by a 1953 report.

The various branches of the municipality and districts all need to reach residents in lanes, and the street offices are the ones directly facing residents. . . . Each government branch tells the street offices to carry out their work. . . . We investigated the tenth street office in Songshan District and here is its situation:

Its major work is the campaign. After the campaign concludes, there is much work to finish. Besides that, the civil administration section requests it to work on relief and help families of military personnel and martyrs. The health section

asks it to work on street sanitation, public hygiene and immunization. The culture and education section asks it to run literacy classes and investigate the situation of school age children. The district people's court asks it to work on accumulated cases. The district political consultative committee asks it to send out meeting notices and to report on how representatives to the People's Congress connected with residents. . . . Besides these demands from district branches, there are also demands from the municipal government. The Land and Property Bureau asks it to persuade residents to pay more rent. The Revenue Bureau asks it to mobilize residents to pay property and land tax collectively. The Culture Bureau asks it to organize residents to participate in group dance. The insurance company asks it to investigate residents' financial situation and mobilize residents to buy insurance. Cooperatives ask it to help collect scrap bronze. The local products company asks it to help sell all kinds of local products. The Telephone Bureau asks it to popularize long distance service and public phone booths. The film company asks it to sell movie tickets. The people's bank asks it to investigate residents' pre-war savings and current financial situation, and to promote patriotic saving so as not to leave any resident out. The Public Utilities Bureau asks it to fix hazardous houses, to dredge sewers, and to repair street lamps and wires.²¹

Evidently, the residents' committees were expected to manage everything in urban life except producing commodities. The perceived auxiliary nonproductive sector, suitable for "family dependents of workers" to manage, was a complicated miniature city in its own right. Within the boundary of the miniature city, tens of thousands of housewives stepped out of their domesticity and broke gendered boundaries by engaging in all sorts of work in civil administration and public security. Many parts of the city saw an increasing physical presence of women who were "running" neighborhoods as literally "domesticated" social spaces, spaces that a few years earlier had been associated with gangland violence.

Drawing Gender Boundaries in State Formation

In 1953, the Shanghai government launched a citywide employment survey combined with a campaign for "rectifying residents' committees." The benign employment survey camouflaged a new stage in the campaign for suppressing counterrevolutionaries that had begun in 1951 and was now to enter residential areas. The DCA instructed cadres to use unemployment registration to thoroughly investigate Shanghai lanes where fugitive landlords, hidden counterrevolutionaries, and other dangerous elements took refuge. All residents' committees were to be rectified and reorganized so as to ensure working-class leadership in neighborhood work.²²

The conscious class line was supplemented with an explicit “gender line.” The DCA directives emphasized the need “to mobilize and rely on women.”²³ Housewives were not expected to confess their past history as other members of the residents’ committees were. The reason was explained by a report of the SWF that also participated in the rectification work. “Having been unable to participate in social activities, housewives had a limited social circle in the old society. . . . Generally speaking, therefore, they have few historical problems and they are not the major targets of the rectification.”²⁴ Thus, political purity and reliability were added to the earlier pragmatic rationale for recruiting housewives as a permanent neighborhood workforce. Housewives became more desirable than ever in the eyes of the party. By the end of the rectification over ten thousand former residents’ committee members were purged, nearly all of them men. Many women activists were selected to residents’ committees, replacing men with a shady past (former *baozhang*, landlords, rogues, and Nationalist Party members), men who abused their power in residents’ committees (these two types sometimes overlapped), and men with an occupation that did not allow them to function well in neighborhood work. When rectification ended in 1954, women constituted 54.6 percent of 103,931 residents’ committee members, a significant increase from 37.3 percent in 1953.²⁵ Incorporating a “gender line” into its class line, the CCP transformed the social space of the resident organization into a women’s sphere within five years.

The women’s sphere, however, was not led by the SWE. The rectification enabled the DCA to stake its claims in the new territory. Investigative reports in the DCA described the Women’s Congress and the residents’ committee as competitors who “vie with each other for cadres, for the masses, and for work.”²⁶ But women in the Women’s Congress did not see themselves or their organization as secondary to the residents’ committee. As one WF cadre complained, “The public security station gets the upper hand of the street office, and the street office gets the upper hand of *Fulian*.”²⁷

The SWF’s strong neighborhood presence was no longer appreciated by the DCA. DCA internal reports began to call for a “unified leadership” as a solution to the competition in neighborhood work.²⁸ Earlier the neighborhood organization’s male leaders used the term *unified leadership* to control the women’s organization. Now the same term used by the DCA officials had the same connotation. Worse still, officials in the government began to suggest that since residents’ committees were established, the Women’s Congress should be eliminated. The threat to the existence of its grassroots organization posed a major crisis to the SWF. The SWF appealed to the All-China Women’s Federation, which succeeded in retaining the Women’s Congress with a compromise.²⁹ In late 1954, the DCA issued regulations that defined the Women’s Congress as an integral but subordinate part of the residents’ committee. The

chair of the Women's Congress should be the deputy director of the residents' committee, an arrangement confirming the importance of the Women's Congress, or a conciliatory gesture to the SWF. However, the Women's Congress was no longer allowed to conduct any concrete work on its own initiative, but only to convey women's demands to the residents' committee and to carry out the tasks assigned by the residents' committee. In February 1955, the municipal leading body Shanghai Neighborhood Work Committee issued "tentative regulations on the organization of Women's Congress in Shanghai neighborhoods." It formalized the Women's Congress's subordinate position to the residents' committee while confirming the importance of women-work in neighborhood work.³⁰ The central stage of residential areas was now dominated by the residents' committee, an organization created and managed by the DCA and the PSB.

By drawing a new boundary between neighborhood work and women-work, the containing regulations of the Women's Congress drastically reduced its power and imposed on the SWF a narrower definition of women-work to legitimate its subordination to neighborhood work. In reality the Women's Congress was continuously called on to do all kinds of neighborhood work. Drawing gender boundaries thus was practiced at multiple levels in the process of state formation. The DCA maneuvered to maintain its dominant role in local society by marking institutional differences. Demarcating the boundary between the "mass organization"—the Women's Federation—and the "government," the latter succeeded in institutionalizing the WF's subordinate position. It epitomized a classic irony in the history of the CCP that mobilizing women at the grassroots to break gender boundaries went hand in hand with creating or reproducing gender boundaries within the party power structure.

The WF's involvement in neighborhood work had another ramification. Working with housewives, the WF unwittingly devalued itself even in the eyes of many urban women who had opportunities to move out of domesticity. The WF's *funü gongzuo*, women-work, came to be understood as *jiating funü gongzuo*, housewives' work. The hierarchical division of production sector and living quarters, and corresponding feminization of the latter, placed those who worked in this new women's sphere as secondary. The Engelsian emphasis on women's participation in social production as an index of women's liberation, and the dominant gender ideology of breaking gender boundaries in work as a sign of modernity, further degraded and marginalized millions of housewives in the Mao era. The association between the WF and housewives, as a result, disqualified the WF from representing the vanguard of urban women, a predicament that the WF would try hard to remedy in the post-Mao era.

Similar to the experience of the WE, the residents' committee constituted mainly by housewives could not reach an elevated status, either. In subsequent years, the term *juweihui* (residents' committee) would connote a social space occupied by women with a low level of education, preoccupied with trivial activities. The nature of their work in a gendered social space contrasted with the glamorized subjects of state propaganda, such as women flying airplanes, operating locomotives, or climbing power poles. Except in the early years of mobilizing housewives, "neighborhood cadres" remained one of the least noticed groups in state representation. The following section introduces two of these discursively obscured women who served their urban communities in the 1950s. Why did these women respond to the CCP's call? What did neighborhood work mean to them? To better understand the local dynamics of socialist transformation, it is important to examine some of these women's lived experiences.

From Housewives to Neighborhood Cadres

This section draws on interviews of women in a neighborhood where I grew up, located in the former French Concession, and composed of mixed classes. Composed of many upscale apartments and townhouses, the neighborhood was a desirable residency for professionals and business owners. In 1949, before the communist victory, many wealthy residents moved to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or other parts of the world. Newcomers were still mostly members of the middle and upper-middle classes from other parts of China, but many had experienced displacement because of the wars. Lower-class residents lived in the same lanes or buildings, working as maids, washerwomen, gatekeepers, vendors, and so on. They lived in servants' rooms, garages, or makeshift structures. The crowded neighborhood had over twelve hundred households and about six thousand residents on one block in early 1950s. The seven-member residents' committee was to manage the life of this community, with the help of several subcommittees and many small-group leaders.

Of many neighbors interviewed from 1996 to 2001, five were among the first cohort of neighborhood cadres. My discussion will focus on two of them, Zhang Xiulian and Gao Wenling, while drawing on information provided by other neighbors.³¹ In the early 1950s, except for a retired man in the initial stage of neighborhood organization, the residents' committee was staffed by housewives in their late twenties to mid-thirties, young mothers with children. The high female participation reflected the class composition of this neighborhood in which women with a secondary or higher education were not rare. Archival documents show that many housewives worked for the residents'

committees hoping to gain employment through connections with government officials.³² But in this neighborhood, the majority of first cohort neighborhood cadres stayed, mostly because of family responsibilities or no financial need for another income.

Zhang Xiulian became involved in neighborhood work when the government began to organize winter protection brigades in 1950. A daughter of a dockworker, Zhang was twenty-nine years old with a middle school education, married with four children. Two additional children in the early 1950s kept her family in poverty until her older children entered the workforce. Her husband was a white-collar worker in a foreign company and a Communist Party member. Fitting well the profile of “family dependents of workers,” she was visited by a cadre from the district public security bureau. “Please come out to work; you are from a worker’s family.” Zhang recalls the phrase the cadre used to persuade her. Initially unwilling to “come out to work” because of heavy demands of child care, Zhang was persuaded by her husband to do voluntary work for the new government.

The term “come out to work” indicates that in 1950 the neighborhood was seen as *wai*—outside to women’s domesticity. But a few years later some men who did not allow their wives to work in factories would let them do “neighborhood work” as it became regarded as *nei*—inside, where women belonged. Women managed community life as devotedly as they managed their own households and equally without payment. But while the neighborhood became *nei*, or female space in the public mind, neighborhood work was qualitatively different from domesticity in the minds of these women. Crossing the boundary of domesticity would entail unexpected social and political meanings that eventually transformed these housewives.

Once she became involved in neighborhood work, Zhang fell in love with it. She was appointed director of the security and defense committee because of her good class background. Her work was to provide information about residents to the public security station in the neighborhood precinct or directly to the district public security bureau. Who were the permanent residents, and how did they make a living? Who were the temporary residents, where were they from, and why were they there? This was basic but crucial information for a PSB that was eager to map the complex social landscape of Shanghai neighborhoods. To know each household, Zhang participated in all kinds of work run by other branches of the residents’ committee. She joined sanitary teams to check the household cleanliness. To make friends with the residents and to win their hearts, she helped clean dirty hallways and spray pesticide on bug-infested bed frames.

Knowing all the neighbors personally, she proved to be extremely valuable to the public security station. “One day the policeman Chen came to ask me,

‘A counterrevolutionary from the West Gate [a residential area in Shanghai] has come to hide in this neighborhood. Have you seen such a man?’ I answered immediately, ‘Yes, I know where he is. Is he in his mid-thirties?’ Chen was stunned.” She had seen her classmate’s mother-in-law chatting with a man selling loquats in the neighborhood. The mother-in-law had told her that the man was her neighbor in the West Gate. She told the story of her discovery of the counterrevolutionary in great detail, revealing not only an excellent memory but also apparent pride in her past perceptiveness as director of security.

Zhang’s exuberant accounts of catching “counterrevolutionaries” and other dangerous elements surprised me. Knowing that her collaboration with the public security system had given her a notorious reputation in the neighborhood, I had assumed that she would refuse to grant me an interview. When she delightedly agreed to meet me in 2001, I thought that she would avoid such stories. Her unexpected openness expresses an unchanged identification with the CCP, though she never gained party membership. Understanding the meaning of such identification became the core of my investigation.

Zhang’s proud recollections included more than security work. She was selected as a jury member of the district court and as chair of the Women’s Congress. Because of her close relationship with officials in the street office and the public security station, she had tremendous informal power. She helped unemployed residents get jobs, and her words counted in determining whose grain rations should be reduced and who should get subsidies. She emphasized that she based her decisions on each household’s actual needs. “The other day I went to buy a cake at Laodachang [a bakery]. A Shandongese who worked there said to me, ‘Auntie, thank you so much. If not for you, I would have starved in the period of reduced grain rations.’” Her anecdote was a tribute to her past, suggesting that neighbors continually reminded her of her former good deeds that she would otherwise have forgotten.

Zhang’s intimate knowledge of her neighbors worked two ways, helping establish effective state control over local society and also making the socialist state appear humane in the eyes of residents. The two facets of her work were often felt along class lines in the mixed-class neighborhood. For neighbors of comfortable families who had no welfare needs from the government but real worries about state control, Zhang was a nuisance who meddled in residents’ lives to please the authorities. Zhang once brought the PSB to a middle-class family to investigate allegations that the family’s five-year-old daughter had shouted counterrevolutionary slogans. This notorious case added to her unpopularity among middle-class neighbors. Many poor families that had no fear of Zhang’s reports to the public security gratefully remember her crucial help when they were in need, such as finding a hospital space for a sick neighbor or giving a job opportunity to the wife of a poor

family with many children. Stories told to me by neighbors of different classes suggest that Zhang identified with the poor and had a grudge against the rich even before the CCP raised her class consciousness. The state effects along the class line were created not only by the party's differential policies, but also by many women like Zhang who expressed their own class-based sentiments through their daily work.

But class was not the only dimension in this woman neighborhood manager's life. It was quite telling that while Zhang was disliked by most middle-class neighbors, it was the men who felt her presence in the neighborhood intolerable and attempted to curb her power. In the early 1950s, three men gathered signatures from male residents on a letter to the PSB, denouncing her for various crimes. They soon learned that her relationship with the PSB carried more weight than their accusations. The government's reliance on such women in local society thus disrupted gender norms and generated new gender dynamics, which might have caused unintended animosity among many men who resented being subject to women's authority in neighborhoods.

The new government supported women like Zhang in a deeper sense. In the interview, Zhang's animated tones revealed clearly the moments most dear to her. "Oh, the happiest moment was when I organized residents to tour the newly built China-Soviet Friendship Palace. I was truly exhilarated! I organized several hundred residents, all housewives!" Leading housewives to appear in a prestigious public space had deep symbolic meanings for her. Both her class and her gender could no longer exclude her from entering the social space to which she could not have belonged a few years before. Such experiences stimulated her most euphoric recollection. She also emphasized the big meetings at which she was the honored speaker. "My husband went to a conference held by the East China Bureau. I was invited to give a talk about women's liberation. . . . Many of the attendees at the East China Bureau conference were quite-high-ranking cadres. . . . I only had an outline, first point, second point, and third point. I did not have a draft." In the talk, she recalled her life in the old society:

My father worked on the dock. When foreign ships came, they used a sampan to send the cable to the dock. My father rowed the sampan. How dangerous it was! A big wave could overturn the sampan. One night he did not come home. I was scared to death. I took his cotton coat to the dock to look for him. It was extremely cold. I experienced all this. That is why I was able to tell my stories without a draft. You cannot make up those stories.

As a woman, being able to tell her working-class father's bitter life to a prestigious audience meant more than demonstrating a clear identification with the party. Explaining her devotion to neighborhood work, Zhang emphasized,

"I never thought of quitting, because I felt extremely happy. We women have power now. We can speak. In the old society, other people would say, 'You get to the side! I want to talk to your man! Go back into your house!' Women had no status. No one wanted to talk to you. . . . Thinking I can speak to the leaders, I can attend all kinds of meetings, how happy I was!" The euphoria of being able to speak in public still persists for Zhang. It was the CCP, including male officials, that provided her with the opportunity. Transformed from a voiceless working-class housewife who was brushed aside rudely by men to a vocal cadre who had a public presence, Zhang regards those early years in 1950s as the most cherished time in her life.

Women like Zhang played an important role in helping the CCP create a fresh image of a "people's government" that declared the public space in socialist China to be a space of the "new masters"—previously downtrodden classes, including women. Speaking subaltern women, laden with signification, were both created by and creating a new political order.

Gao Wenling, who lived in the same lane with Zhang Xiulian, was thirty-four years old in 1949, with three children in middle and high schools. Her husband, assistant to foreign CEOs of postal services in China, had a high salary (about five hundred yuan per month). She was content with her comfortable domestic life and worked toward sending three children to college. Participating in socialist construction was not on her agenda. But her son, influenced by her brother, an underground communist, joined the army when he was in college. Heartbroken by her son's choice, Gao nevertheless became a glorious "military dependent," a prime candidate for neighborhood work. Government officials came to talk to her "with flattering words, such as 'This is revolutionary work; you are a glorious mother; you will answer the call of the state.'" It was difficult for her to refuse since the work simply involved helping register voters for the People's Congress. But one task led to another. Gao was soon recognized by the officials as a capable woman. When the next election for residents' committee members came, the officials put her name on the ballot and she got the majority of the residents' votes. She worked in the neighborhood for over thirty years until her retirement, serving as chair of the Women's Congress, director of the security and defense committee, and director of the culture and education committee, among many of her titles. Like all neighborhood cadres, Gao, previously addressed as Mrs. Pu, became known by her own surname. The new form of address suggested an identity change from a wife to an independent working woman, a feminist practice with a long history in the CCP, although in this case the neighborhood cadres still rely on their husbands' income.

Gao's recollection emphasizes the scope and complexity of her work. A list of her work includes finding piecemeal work for poor women with children; helping with the census conducted by the public security station (collecting and

verifying household registration pamphlets); mobilizing residents to do public hygiene work and doing it herself (sterilizing sewer lids to prevent disease, setting up medicinal bonfires to kill mosquitoes, leading inspection teams to check residential cleanliness, etc.); writing signs for campaigns and blackboard articles (on political events or public health); organizing weekly residents' group meetings to read newspapers or government documents (few families had a radio or TV set in those days); distributing coupons for grain, oil, cloth, and any other rationed items to each household; collecting utility fees, milk fees, land taxes, and "patriotic" savings; setting up neighborhood canteens, day care centers, elementary schools and persuading residents to donate part of their housing for such purposes; and mediating disputes among residents, including court appearances.

"People would come to the residents' committee for everything. . . . That is why we knew many people. Even now those people are old, I still know their names, their buildings, what jobs they had. It was like being an old ancestor who had to manage everything." She stressed that residents still look to her for help long after her retirement. "Just recently, an old man of over ninety years old climbed up three stories to my home, calling me 'director, director.' He wanted me to mediate a dispute with his neighbor."

Skillfully and shrewdly managing conflicts among residents or between residents and the government, Gao was a respected neighborhood authority figure, whom residents addressed as "Sister Gao" or "Auntie Gao," depending on their age. Neighborhood work provided women activists a space where they formed lasting personal relations with residents. Aided by the state-enforced mobility control and through their work organizing residents' collective actions, neighborhood cadres turned urban anonymity into semikinship. Expanding the boundary of *nei*, women managers helped Shanghai lanes acquire certain qualities of rural villages in the course of socialist industrialization. In the murky domain of the neighborhood, *nei* intersected with *wai*, the public mixed with the private, and state control blended with state welfare. It was a "socialist big family" that embodied the communists' vision of the state and relied on women's expanded "domesticity."

Working diligently at her post, Gao did not experience her role in the same way as Zhang. For an upper-middle-class woman, taking on neighborhood work did not mean a radical boundary change or shift in social status. In her class position, she had not experienced the same gendered spatial boundaries as Zhang. She had traveled many places with her husband, including Japan, and had mingled with elite foreign residents. For her, 1949 marked a decline in her family's social status. Compared with her past experiences the neighborhood was a small mundane world with little excitement beyond the headache of daily management. Except for the early days when the govern-

ment was wooing her and Gao was elected to be a member of the district People's Congress, Gao's long tenure lacked elevated moments. Gao's account, though at times expressing pride, satisfaction, indignation, and humor, does not contain the excitement characteristic of Zhang's narration.

Gao reveals her reason for continuing at her post when she mentions talking with her friend Ma, who was chosen to be the director of the residents' committee. "I asked her, why accept such misfortune? The work is so much trouble. The work is such that only they can fire you and you cannot quit. . . . Otherwise people would think, oh, how come she went home? She must have some problem." In the countless political campaigns of the Mao era, numerous people lost the trust of the party. To be selected as a neighborhood cadre signified a political status and served as a badge that one was problem-free. Although Gao was protected by her identity as a military dependent, her class background meant that she was not trusted as much by officials as Zhang. To maintain the aura of being problem-free was thus extremely important. "I felt that I had simply been a housewife. Now I worked in society. It was impossible for me to have a [political] problem!" Working as a neighborhood cadre for Gao, therefore, was in part a statement of her refusal to be marginalized. It was a conscious effort by a woman who had previously enjoyed high social status to maintain a respected political status in the socialist society.

Gao and Zhang had been close to each other in the early days of working together, but their relationship turned sour. In interviews each had different perceptions of the tensions between them. In Zhang's view, Gao was a caring person who had been initially kind to her. It was improper handling of officials that created tension between them. Because cadres from the street office and the public security station always came to her (Zhang) to get information, instead of talking to the director, Ma (also an educated middle-class woman), or Gao, who was the deputy director, Gao and Ma became unhappy. Gao's version confirms that Zhang had very close interaction with the public security station. But this was not the source of her envy but rather of her aversion to Zhang. Gao contemptuously indicated the negative consequences of Zhang's behavior. "Although the residents' committee is only a grassroots organization, to residents, to friends, on the issue of political identity, your one sentence could make people suffer. That is the reason many people hate her. Why did she go to the public security station all the time?"

The tension between the two women neighborhood cadres *was* created by the officials, or more precisely, by the CCP's class line. Zhang frequented the public security station more than other neighborhood cadres because she was the most trusted. Often she was the only one selected to attend special training workshops or meetings hosted by the PSB. Many tasks she received from the PSB were confidential, which prohibited her from explaining to other cadres what

she was busy doing. The differential treatment certainly made the experience of neighborhood work different for women of different class backgrounds. It helped consolidate Zhang's close identification with the "people's government" and Gao's detached stance. From their different political identifications, Zhang could not understand that other neighborhood cadres might not want to help the PSB as wholeheartedly as she, and Gao could not see that the business of the PSB *was* Zhang's business and that Zhang was proud of being part of the political game. Although the two women never mentioned their different class backgrounds, a factor that did not initially affect their closeness, the party's class line eliminated the likelihood that these women would feel sisterhood in neighborhood work. The gendered space in the neighborhood of mixed classes was undoubtedly divided by party-defined class identities.

Conclusion

Defined by the CCP as an autonomous mass organization, the residents' committee was a form of local governance mixing the heritage of the *baojia* system and innovations of the CCP. Public facilities, public health, public order, and social welfare are costly. The Communist Party found the most economical and effective way to address these issues early in its experience with urban governance. Urban women's unpaid work became part of the "infrastructure" for the central planning apparatus that the party sought to put in place. The story presented here, however, is not only about women's indispensable economic utility to the state. Women's participation in neighborhood work involved spatial rearrangement and social reorganization in the process of socialist state formation.

Gender, central in this process, functioned at multiple levels. It was expressed in communist male officials' conceptualization of a gendered urban space with unemployed women in a residential "rear" providing service to the production "front." It was demonstrated in the Women's Federation's effort to build its urban grassroots base by including housewives in its work, an effort that resulted in its rapid organizational development and collision with male-dominated branches of the government that were establishing their control of local society. Mobilizing women in local communities, in this sense, was a practice staged by communist women and men with different goals and understandings. Conflicts between communist men and women led to the demarcation of distinctions between the residents' committee and the Women's Congress. This practice should be seen as part of the process of drawing boundaries between the "government" and party-led "mass organizations" in the formation of the party-state. In this case, the unequal gender relations in

the party were naturalized, consolidated, and legitimized by the internal distinction between the “government” and the CCP-led “mass organization,” a distinction full of ambiguity but nonetheless taking on “the appearance of structure” of a communist state.³³

Gender was also expressed in local women’s involvement in the state project. As Zhang Xiulian’s story illustrates, participation in local governance was experienced by many women as breaking gender boundaries, moving from domesticity into public space. For women like Zhang, who had been marginalized by both gender and class, neighborhood work enabled them to ascend to the core of community life and become speaking subjects. However, this is not a simple empowerment story in a newly created women’s sphere. This “women’s sphere” was not autonomous but was closely supervised by the public security station and the street office, and permeated not with gender consciousness but “class consciousness.” The estrangement between Zhang Xiulian and Gao Wenling provides a glimpse of a political environment in which the party’s class line had a divisive function in the women’s community.

Diversely experiencing neighborhood work, women of different backgrounds and motivations all participated in producing the socialist state while being produced as new state subjects. The residential area as a social space was a prime site for the party to develop its state project. Running each block of the city, minutely taking care of myriad tasks assigned from top down, women neighborhood cadres transmitted the daily message that the new state was at residents’ doors. An all-encompassing social organization envisioned by the party was accomplished by these diligent women who brought each household into the “socialist big family.” The patriarch still resided in this “big family.” But by reducing the power of patriarchs in individual households through state planned economy, and by replacing male *baojia* heads with women neighborhood cadres in local administration, the party inadvertently changed gender power dynamics in urban society.

Notes

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1. The term *jiating funü*, literally “family woman,” emerged in the Republican era referring to married women without employment, as a contrast to “career woman.”

2. I draw on Timothy Mitchell's insights on the elusiveness of the boundary between state and society in "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *State/Culture*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76–97; and on Gail Hershatler's discussion of Mitchell's concept of the "state effect" in "The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s," *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 43–70.

3. Shanghai Municipal Archives, B168-1-742 (preliminary summary of administrative work); B168-1-497 (summary of Civil Administration Takeover Department's July work).

4. B168-1-742.

5. B168-1-756 (directives and reports on establishing democratic government, Political Council, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Civil Administration Department of Shanghai).

6. B168-1-745 (talk outline by director Cao Manzhi, Department of Civil Administration of the Shanghai People's Government at a national conference of civil administration on constructing district power structure in big cities).

7. B168-1-782 (investigation of families of workers' committee, No. 7 Textile Factory), 1955.

8. B168-1-751 (DCA summary of neighborhood work in nineteen districts), 1950.

9. B168-1-751.

10. *Shanghai funüzhì* (Shanghai women's gazetteer), ed. Shanghai Women's Gazetteer Compilation Committee (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2000), 258. In January 1952, the SWF and SHA set up joint offices at municipal and district levels. The SHA disbanded in April 1955, having "completed its historical mission."

11. C31-1-2 (summary of work in the first four months of SDWF preparation), July–October 1949.

12. B168-1-751.

13. *Shanghai funüzhì*, 265. In 1996 there were 2,809 Women's Congresses in Shanghai.

14. C31-2-57 (on future organization of residents' committees), 1951.

15. B168-1-749 (provisional methods of organizing residents' committees), 1950.

16. C31-1-37 (report to the municipal party committee), September 13, 1951.

17. C31-2-57 (investigation of relationship between neighborhood organizations and the Housewives Association), June 14, 1951.

18. C31-1-33 (summary of SWF work), 1951.

19. The jurisdiction of committees varied from a few hundred households to a thousand, depending on the population density of a residential area. Boundaries were usually drawn along lanes or blocks.

20. B168-1-756 (work establishing democratic government), April to October, 1951.

21. B168-1-772 (briefing on the street office's organizational structure and suggestions for future work), July 20, 1953.

22. B168-1-772 (combining employment work with rectifying residents' committees).

23. B168-1-14 (summary of neighborhood rectification), 1954.

24. C31-2-259 (report on rectification work in lanes), No. 52. May 22, 1954.

25. B168-1-783 (Shanghai residents' committees' organization work), May 28, 1954. The percentage of women continues to increase. Currently it is over 80 percent.

26. B168-1-14 (report on rectification work of Shanghai residents' committees), October 23, 1954.

27. B168-1-772 (the problem of grassroots organizations), 1953.

28. B168-1-14.

29. The contention over the Women's Congress is the subject of "State Feminism? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Mao's China," forthcoming in *Feminist Studies*.

30. B168-1-30 (tentative regulations on Women's Congress organization in Shanghai neighborhoods), February 26, 1955.

31. I use pseudonyms for the neighborhood cadres presented here.

32. By 1952, more than forty thousand housewives in Shanghai entered gainful employment, most of whom had a secondary education or above.

33. Mitchell's analysis of internal power relations and the appearance of external "structures" of the state is borrowed here. The distinction between the "government" and the "mass organization" by the CCP has been seen as intended to keep a firm control of society via "mass organizations." My emphasis here is that the distinction also results from internal power relations. The distinction did not create an appearance of state-society separation but rather a party-state that penetrated all social spheres, "producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power." See Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," 83.