

6 Feminist networks

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In one of the hundreds of tents set up for concurrent panels organized by 30,000 women activists around the globe, a group of Chinese female judges on the panel “Women and Law” were presenting their papers on the progress women in the PRC had made in achieving legal equality. When questioned if there was a law prohibiting domestic violence in China, women judges on the panel replied that there was no domestic violence in China. They did not realize that right before the panel feminists from abroad had circulated photocopies of a Chinese article describing a case of domestic violence. It was an embarrassing moment for the Chinese women panelists who had to follow the official script on the taboo issue in front of feminists from abroad.

Fast forward to 2001. The revised Marriage Law includes a new term, “*jiating baoli*” (domestic violence), and stipulates that domestic violence is one of the legal grounds for divorce. In the new Marriage Law of 2004, Clause Three of the General Principles further stipulates that “domestic violence is forbidden.” Moreover, by the end of 2004, 22 provincial and municipal governments had passed local statutes against domestic violence. Nationwide local women’s federations working jointly with local police have set up over 400 women’s shelters, and more than 12,000 anti-domestic violence reporting stations.¹

Explicit mention of domestic violence in the mass media and the law, and the establishment of institutional mechanisms to deal with the issue, provide ample evidence of Chinese feminists’ successful engagement with the state in the decade after the Fourth UN Conference on Women (FUNCW). By highlighting feminist activism against domestic violence, this chapter attempts to explore the relationship between spontaneous feminist activism and state feminism during the rapid development of a gender-based social movement since the FUNCW. Further, by analyzing the strengths and limitations of the ongoing feminist movement, this chapter intends also to illuminate a significant political transformation that mingles legacies of the Mao era and contemporary global feminist practices to reposition women in the market economy.

A brief review of the women’s liberation movement in the Mao era may provide historical context to better understand the changes that post-Mao Chinese feminists have made. Upon the founding of the PRC, a Party-led women’s movement was

institutionalized with the formation of the Women's Federation (WF). Although the professed dual goal of the WF was to assist the Party in mobilizing women for the socialist state agenda and to protect women's rights and interests, in reality the state agenda often overrode women's interests. The organizational monopoly of the WF was later compounded by some top CCP leaders' abuse of the concept of class that denigrated articulation of women's needs as "bourgeois." Following a class-line, the gender-based organization was straitjacketed conceptually. In official discourse, while women were encouraged to enter men's spheres for equal participation in social production, the understanding of women's liberation basically stopped there. The confining definition of women's liberation and the lack of legitimate language and channels to make gender-based demands constituted grounds for the rise of spontaneous feminist activism in the 1980s when an emerging market economy exposed and increased gender inequality.²

Since the 1989 Tiananmen social movement, spontaneous feminist organized activism has, against the odds, evolved from providing a focus on articulating and studying women's problems in the market economy to offering multifaceted efforts aimed at "mainstreaming" gender. Much of Chinese feminist activism to this point could be categorized as the politics of recognition, demanding state and public recognition of women's legitimate rights in all spheres of life, as well as enhancing state and public awareness of the effects of gender hierarchy. However, it can be expected that feminist activism would eventually move beyond the stage of advocacy and consciousness-raising to enter the realms of representation and redistribution. Efforts to address sexist media representations of women, to assist rural women in obtaining land rights and other material resources for their development, and to help urban laid-off women wrest benefits from the state have all been part of feminist struggles on the ground. Crossing diverse social groups and regions, the ongoing feminist movement in China necessarily engages in a wide spectrum of struggles. This chapter focuses on contestations over recognition of women's gender-based demands, an area of feminist activism that has generated most striking results in public policies and institutional changes. Activism in this area has also accompanied significant conceptual and organizational development within Chinese feminism since the FUNCW.

As a participant/observer in Chinese feminist activism over the past two decades, I use data collected from published works, feminist websites, conference papers, interviews, and personal interactions and observations to engage in an in-depth examination of a macro process. My goal in this chapter is three-fold: first, to delineate the contour of a significant social movement that has effectively intervened in the articulation of visions of modernity and the policy-making process, and that has created innovative ways for women's political participation in a market economy that has widened the gender gap and consolidated gender hierarchy; second, to analyze the tensions and constraints of Chinese feminist activism in order to open debate on new possibilities for feminist action in China; and third, to explore the theoretical implications of feminist contestations in China by examining not only why feminist demands were made but, more importantly, how feminists have been able to generate legal and institutional change in the past decade. Chinese

feminists' ability to intervene in the policy-making process, as well as in social practices at the grassroots level, invites scholarly scrutiny of a fluid historical process that is reshaping China's social and political landscapes.

The impact of the Fourth UN Conference on Women (FUNCW)

The FUNCW on Women provided an important political opportunity for Chinese feminists to become NGO pioneers in post-Tiananmen China. In the mid-1980s, as Chinese intellectuals began to revive social sciences as part of the discourse of scientific modernity, urban educated women began small-scale activities, such as organizing salons or conferences to discuss women's issues, or conducting research on women as a way to respond to problems women confronted in a time of drastic social and economic transformation. Studying women with scientific methods was seen as a move away from the constraints of Maoist class analysis that had previously subsumed gender issues. In 1986 when the anti-liberalization campaign thwarted intellectual efforts at political reform, many more women intellectuals turned to research on women as a viable channel to continue their interest in social change. Liu Bohong, the current deputy director of the Institute for Research on Women at the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), remembers how she started to do research on women in 1986:

Under the political context of the time, I was not allowed to talk about humanitarianism, human nature, or human rights, but it was acceptable to talk about women and the rights and interests of women. Possibly this was because at the time society did not think of women's issues as being very important. Women's issues would not bring about dangerous political thinking. Thus, I created a research space for myself.³

Feminist scholars operated in a more adverse political environment post-Tiananmen wherein organized activities, large or small, were no longer permitted. Gao Xiaoxian, the founder of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family, one of the largest women's NGOs today, was demoted based on her "political problem," having organized a women's salon in early 1989.⁴ In fact, many of those salons and discussion groups organized by women intellectuals starting in the mid-1980s faded in the 1990s, though some revived when the Chinese government declared its sponsorship of the FUNCW.

Although spontaneous organized activism peaked in China in early 1989, the term "NGO" entered public discourse only during China's preparations for the FUNCW. Chinese feminists, seizing the opportunity provided by the FUNCW, were the first to try to popularize and legitimize the concept. Numerous articles were published by the ACWF's newspaper (*Chinese Women's Daily*) and journal (*Collections of Women's Studies*) prior to the conference introducing the activities of various women's NGOs abroad and making the case that NGOs were not anti-government organizations. Since the NGO Forum on women was part of the

package required to host the UN conference, the Chinese government had no choice but to allow the circulation of the concept of NGOs and to permit the formation domestically of women's NGOs. It also approved the designation of the ACWF as an NGO. The CCP's paranoia over spontaneously organized activism was vividly manifested in its hasty decision to move the NGO Forum on Women from Beijing to Huairou where unfinished conference buildings and even tents were used to welcome the 30,000 NGO forum participants. It was a nerve-wracking moment for the CCP, but an educational experience as well. None of the participants, Chinese or foreign, staged protests against the host government, despite titillating rumors circulated by the Chinese government to justify the tight security presence.

Equally significant to the legitimization of NGOs were the subsequent increases in international funding for Chinese women's organized activism following the conference. The Ford Foundation, with a feminist program officer Mary Ann Burris in charge of funding for women's issues, played a crucial role in promoting the development of Chinese women's NGOs by sponsoring projects and Chinese women's participation in several global preparatory meetings for the NGO Forum on Women. Financial support from donors such as the Ford Foundation facilitated the revival of activities that had fallen into remission post-Tiananmen by women activists outside the WF system. For example, Gao Xiaoxian organized the first workshop on women and law in 1993 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, which led to the initiation of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family. Today this association has an elaborate organizational structure and runs multiple research and action projects mostly on rural women in China's western regions. The association has an annual budget of 6 million yuan and 23 full-time staff.⁵

Along with financial resources from international donors, the FUNCW also introduced new feminist concepts and analytical categories to Chinese women activists, who eagerly employed these new theoretical tools to move beyond China's stiff canonical theory of women's liberation. Gender as a feminist concept was first introduced to Chinese women activists in 1993 through the collective efforts of the Chinese Society for Women's Studies in the USA, with the support of the Ford Foundation.⁶ In Beijing a group of young Chinese women professionals and Western feminists formed the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group in 1993 to translate feminist works into Chinese and effectively disseminate global feminist concepts via mass media.⁷ These translation efforts were all spurred by the news that China would host the UN conference, aiming at bridging the conceptual gaps between global feminisms and the Chinese women's movement. Additionally, the numerous preparatory meetings for the NGO Forum on Women also provided Chinese women activists their first opportunity to observe NGOs abroad.⁸ These educational experiences were meaningful both for Chinese NGO leaders and for officials of the WF. Certainly, the NGO Forum on Women in Huairou offered the most in-depth encounters between Chinese women activists and feminists abroad. Chinese participants freely visited various tents with panels on diverse feminist topics and issues, picking up flyers and leaflets on their way. Anti-domestic violence, the rights of gays and lesbians, and the rights of prostitutes were but a few of the openly discussed topics that to that point had been taboo in China.

Besides the concept of NGOs, other key feminist concepts were translated and entered circulation in this period. They included “gender” (社会性别) (as culturally and socially constructed; as a hierarchical system that reproduces and is sustained by unequal power relations); women as a “disadvantaged social group” (弱势群体); “women’s empowerment” (妇女赋权); and “women-centered sustainable development” (以妇女为中心的可持续发展). Appropriating the mainstream slogan of “connecting tracks with the world” (与世界接轨), Chinese feminists successfully circulated these concepts while openly advocating stronger ties with international women’s movements. They called for a development agenda that prioritizes social justice and gender equality in a time of growing class and gender polarization in China’s market economy. Chinese feminists abandoned the Marxist category of class as an analytical tool either because of its affinity to Maoism or because of its critical challenge to capitalism, and replaced it with the feminist analytical category of gender, making it a viable issue in mainstream discourse and providing a critical lens to expose social hierarchy and injustice. Some of these concepts were soon picked up by other social groups. For instance, workers and peasants began to employ such terms as “disadvantaged groups” to advance their own rights and interests.

While thousands of Chinese women were eagerly absorbing ideas and issues from the global feminist communities in Huairou, the official delegation of the Chinese government to the UN conference was grappling with feminist concepts replete in UN documents titled *The Platform for Action* and *Beijing Declaration*. On this front, the ACWF should be credited with circulating these feminist documents via the official channels of the WF. It is mostly through the official media of the ACWF that the concept of gender together with a range of global feminist issues achieved wide currency in China. “Mainstreaming gender” has hence become an important agenda of the ACWF.

The deft maneuvering of Chinese feminists inside and outside the official system turned the FUNCW into a significant victory for Chinese women. Since the end of the nineteenth century, women have been used to represent the nation, civilization, and modernity; and the European colonialist statement that one could judge the level of a civilization by the status of its women, mistaken as a socialist concept, was long a key adhesive element fastening gender equality with modernity in China.⁹ The FUNCW provided Chinese feminists the environment to activate this idea in order to consolidate the connection between gender equality and modernity, a connection seriously loosened by the market economy. The chair of the ACWF, Huang Qizao, told heads of various ministries in a meeting that in today’s international community the level of a nation’s civilization was measured by the percentage of women in public office, but, in China, focus remains on GDP size.¹⁰ The nationalist card played by Huang may not have swayed the central government. However, following the FUNCW, the national census bureau began to add a gender category in data collection. It has become a frequent practice of the ACWF to hold UN statistics of women as a crucial index to measure Chinese women’s advancement, and by extension, to measure the level of Chinese modernization. The consolidation of the connection between the status of women and modernity

is a key strategy of Chinese feminists that has been deployed pervasively and successfully in feminist bargaining and engagement with the state.

Equipped with the leverage of a gendered modernity discourse, the legitimacy of NGOs, a new analytical category in “gender,” and international donor funding, Chinese feminists expanded organized activism significantly in the decade after the FUNCW. At the end of the decade there emerged three national networks of feminist activism: Gender and Development (GAD), Stop Domestic Violence (Stop DV), and Women and Gender Studies. Women activists have worked on far more diverse issues than the orientations of the three networks suggest, but these are currently the three main areas of feminist activism that receive large sums of money from international donors. At different developmental stages and with different operating structures, the networks share the following features:

- 1 They are independent of the state both in terms of financial support and identifying issues relating to women’s interests. They are initiated and operated independently by women who may or may not have a position within the state system.
- 2 They are creating mechanisms to transform official institutions with feminist ideas and practices, but without much fanfare. Gender training sessions for officials, rural women’s leadership capacity-building workshops, local taskforces on domestic violence, shelters, faculty training workshops, women’s studies programs, and so on, are among the wide range of innovative activities taking place nationwide. Different from the conventional definition of social movements, these feminist activities never take the form of protests or demonstrations in open spaces. They engage with the state system and institutions via *indoor* activities, and as such they escape the attention of Chinese public security and China watchers abroad.¹¹
- 3 These networks all rely on international donors for financial support. As such their sustainable development is in question.
- 4 The organizers of these networks are conscious of their role in China’s political transformation. Embracing Maxine Molyneux’s conceptualization of “practical gender interests” and “strategic gender interests,” leading feminist activists form organizations to raise demands for women’s interests and to generate cultural, social and political change with a feminist vision. The latter part of this agenda is the most challenging for feminists around the world. The specific challenges confronting Chinese feminists in this regard will be discussed below.

Stop DV – a case study

Domestic violence, *jiating baoli*, is a new term that entered the Chinese lexicon after 1995, when Chinese feminists began to openly engage the issue. While the feminist definition of domestic violence connotes more than wife battering, this is a major part of domestic violence, and a pervasive practice in male-centered cultures. In most parts of China, wife beating has been a “normal” part of domestic life. Challenges to violence against women in China did not start from the FUNCW.

Feminists in the CCP had long been involved in battles against wife battering. During the Communist Revolution, women party members would mobilize rural women by addressing local practices of abuse of women.¹² After the founding of the ACWF, abuse of women was placed on the agenda of local women's federations. Local WF officials, more than anyone else, knew the prevalence of domestic violence, as severe cases of wife battering are often first reported to them. In fact, one of the early agitators for legislation against domestic violence was Chen Zhunlian, an official in the Changsha WF, who began to advocate for local regulations against domestic violence in 1994.¹³ In the same period, WF officials in other provinces also began to explore possibilities for local regulation. In short, the taboo on open discussion of domestic violence in China at the time of the FUNCW was an expression by a patriarchal CCP state concerned with face before international guests, not a reflection of actual practices within the WF.

After the conclusion of the FUNCW, the ACWF used the legitimacy of *The Platform for Action* and *The Beijing Declaration* to publicize goals for achieving gender equality. Given the Chinese ruling class's eagerness to "join tracks" with the world, and given the fact that the UN represents the "global" in bureaucratic terms, then by joining global feminist movements based on the principles laid out in the documents, the ACWF hit upon a legitimate means to engage in feminist activism, though it continues to avoid using the term "feminism." "Joining tracks" with "the international women's movement" has become a popular slogan in WF publications since the FUNCW. Moreover, the ACWF maneuvered to turn one phrase in Jiang Zemin's welcoming speech at the FUNCW, "equality between men and women is a fundamental state policy of China," into genuine state policy.¹⁴ Thus, under the rubric of implementing fundamental state policy, women activists inside and outside the official system openly embraced global feminist concepts and issues that have gushed into China via translated works, international conferences, workshops, collaborative research projects, and so on.

Of the myriad issues facing women, domestic violence rose to prominence after the FUNCW when feminists outside the WF system began to organize around the issue. The Stop DV Network, one of the largest feminist NGOs in China today, originated in 1998 when three women activists from Beijing attended a symposium on domestic violence in India. Observing grassroots activism against domestic violence in India made these urban professional women eager to know the situation of domestic violence in China. Ge Youli, co-founder of the East Meets West Translation Group, and formerly the assistant to the Ford Foundation officer Mary Ann Burris, recalled:

After we came back from this symposium, we thought about it and wondered what "domestic violence" meant for Chinese women. Also, what was the current situation for Chinese women? Actually, we did not understand this issue very well at the time; we only felt that this phenomenon existed. So what kind of societal, psychological and political-cultural influence did this have on Chinese women? We then discovered that there were very few resources, very few research materials, and very little data on this subject. This was

our first thought. Second, we wanted to know what kinds of mechanisms were available in China for responding to issues of violence, domestic violence, and how many of them aimed at helping women and sought to reduce domestic violence. We were not very clear about this. We also did not know if these kinds of institutions existed. So I felt that maybe China should also have a domestic violence project. Together we established a plan of action. The process of making this plan was rather long. It was not like the three of us returned from the conference with a clear understanding of “violence” and then sat down to think what we should do and acted. It was not such a simple process. Actually, what we did was to bring together people from about 20 or 30 women’s groups in Beijing, and brainstormed. We asked them to talk about, first, how they viewed “violence,” and, second, if we were to act against domestic violence, what exactly we should do. On a big blackboard we listed what everyone said, one after another. Then we put them in a certain order. On the list we had about seven or eight items that we thought were the most urgent. For example, I still remember, some pointed out that we had to be able to describe the situation of domestic violence in China so we needed data and research. So I said, OK, let’s do research and data collection. Some said that we needed to raise people’s awareness of domestic violence because this was still a topic that was not discussed. People did not recognize it as a problem and treated it as if it did not exist, but it did. So we should raise public awareness about domestic violence and therefore should work with the mass media. So we decided that our next urgent job was to mobilize the mass media and disseminate information about domestic violence. Thus we identified another activity. Some said that we must intervene on behalf of women, because we needed to make sure that when women were assaulted they could go to seek help. We discussed how the existing institutions such as residents’ committees and local police stations might feel about “violence” and if they had mechanisms in place to combat domestic violence or stop domestic violence. We did not know. So we needed to first go and try to understand their working procedures. Second, we needed to see if it was possible to develop these necessary resources within the existent systems. Third, we needed to train local officials so that they would realize that domestic violence was not simply a marital dispute. They must understand that as police or a residents’ committee member they should take on the responsibility to prevent violence. Therefore, we agreed that we wanted to mobilize police, raise their sensitivity and give them training. We also needed to mobilize judges and lawyers who dealt with these kinds of cases. So one item after another, we made a list for action.¹⁵

This detailed description of the organization process behind a feminist activist group illuminates several significant points. First, organizers were consciously aiming not only to generate an intervention action but also to transform Chinese political culture by introducing participatory democratic procedures that were typical for feminist NGOs abroad but new in the Chinese context. As Ge stated in the same interview:

I think that within our movement and within our organizational behavior, we should consciously pursue a kind of mode that is different from the traditional leadership style, managerial style, or organizational style. What did we think this kind of mode should be? It was participatory, equal and sharing, and it did not exclude, rank, or control.

So I think that the domestic violence project has two significant aspects. One is that this project was the first to address the phenomenon of domestic violence candidly and explore Chinese anti-domestic violence theories and actions. The second significant aspect was that during the whole process of establishing, implementing and organizing the project, we attempted to create a new model that is different from the traditional masculinist model. I believe that we are actively involved in establishing a new culture. I believe that ultimately feminism must create a new culture. It will break with the old, traditional culture and create a new culture.

I would like to emphasize that the explicit goal of transforming masculinist culture by increasing women's participation in political processes with feminist practices is shared by many Chinese feminist activists. In fact, many leading feminists had been enthusiastic about political reform in the 1980s and have found in feminist NGOs a feasible channel to engage in political reform. They have envisioned and become involved in creating a gender democracy, a political position, and practice that signifies the emergence of a new and different player on the political stage in the reform era. The brief history of the Stop DV Network, in this sense, records a crucial period in which Chinese feminists have successfully carved out social spaces for political action that promise a feminist transformation of the political system and social institutions.

Moreover, the various groups' brainstorming led to their decision to engage with the state. In this process we see neither wariness toward the state nor fear of the state, usually assumed to be typical of the relationship between NGOs and the state in China. Instead, we find tremendous ease and confidence in the ability to work with the state apparatus to address the issue of gender inequality. Two factors may explain this unique phenomenon of Chinese feminist activism. One is the power of a gendered modernity discourse as discussed in the previous section. Although market economy has canceled many socialist principles, values, policies, and practices, gender equality has remained a signifier of modernity in official discourse. It has proved extremely valuable for Chinese feminists in their efforts to advance women's interests and generate social change. They have the legitimacy to engage in feminist activism by claiming that they are just implementing a fundamental state policy. If China wants to be regarded by the international community as a modernized nation with a high level of civilization, the government has to pay attention to Chinese women's status. If the existence of domestic violence tarnishes China's image, Chinese feminists are helping the government to remove this stigma to elevate national status in the eyes of the global community. Chinese feminists have skillfully played this global/nationalist card to hold the government accountable.

Women's NGOs have also gained confidence to engage the state thanks to the provision of the state-sanctioned WF system. A gendered "bridge between the Party and the masses," the WF is the best channel for feminist infiltration into the state post-FUNCW. Since the early 1950s, the WF system had set up grassroots organizations in each rural community and urban neighborhood, making it the only mass organization other than the party itself to achieve such a vast spatial and population coverage. Since its hierarchical structure is modeled on that of the government administration, at each level of the government is a corresponding women's federation. Although it is not inside the government, WF personnel are nevertheless on the government payroll and its top officials are appointed by the Party's organization department at the same administrative level with the same privileges as any other government official of the same rank. The WF's non-governmental but official status gives this gender-based organization much more power than any NGO in China. Collaborating with the WF, women NGOs such as Stop DV can access both the human resources and official power of the WF.

The vision in Ge's description of their initial brainstorm for the Stop DV Network was not limited to utilization of state resources through the WF. More significantly, these feminists took the state as a major target for political transformation. Women's NGOs cannot survive and succeed without the state. Nor can they rely on the state to produce the social changes envisioned by feminists. The adopted strategy then is to institutionally and conceptually transform the state apparatus from within.

The Stop DV Network, initiated in 2000 with grants from multiple funding agencies amounting to US\$800,000, quickly evolved into a registered NGO affiliated with the China Association for Legal Studies in 2003. The network started with 15 research and intervention programs envisioned in the initial collective brainstorms, including interviewing domestic violence victims, setting up grassroots domestic violence monitoring mechanisms and supporting networks, launching large-scale awareness campaigns in the media, running gender training workshops, and becoming involved in legislation and implementation of new laws. In short, the network has engaged in a full spectrum of activism addressing domestic violence. Participants include victims-turned-activists at the grassroots level, as well as senior legal scholars and officials who were key figures in revising the Marriage Law. According to Chen Mingxia, the current coordinator of the board at the Stop DV Network and a senior legal scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the great contribution of the Stop DV network is that it creates an innovative model that "combines bottom-up with top-down."¹⁶

The operation of the Stop DV Network demonstrates interesting relationships between NGOs, GONGOs (such as the WF), and the Chinese state. Now named the Stop DV Network and Research Center, the NGO includes both individual activists nationwide and institutions such as women's studies centers in universities, local women's federations, bureaus of civil administration, hospitals, and local public security bureaus, making a national network with over 63 local institutions and organizations in 26 provinces. Local WF branches are the major partners of the Stop DV Network. Individual members of the Network are either government

and WF officials, or professionals from the legal, medical, educational professions, and mass media. Increasingly, women who received help from the network have become activists as well. The Network has swiftly brought feminist issues and concepts into the official system by running training sessions, workshops and conferences, serving to change public discourse, generate internal transformations in gender values and norms, and establish institutional mechanisms to implement new laws and change local practices.¹⁷

The emergence and development of a national women's NGO has changed the political topography of China in meaningful ways. The sheer existence of this registered national NGO reminds us of the political strides Chinese activists have made since 1989. The Network has not only subverted state restrictions on spontaneously organized activism, but also, together with many other women's NGOs, effectively broken the monopoly of the ACWF in "representing" women's interests. Furthermore, the emergence of NGOs like Stop DV has induced transformations within the ACWF, which has been eager to embrace issues and concepts from the "international women's movement," so as not to be left out in the process of a gendered modernization.

At the local level, WF officials have generally welcomed the resources and expertise provided by women's NGOs. Also, local WF officials who have been seriously fighting for women's rights and interests are happy to find collaborators in feminist NGOs, who not only share their aspirations but also often bring prestige to their work. A national NGO such as Stop DV is packed with top scholars from prestigious institutions or universities in Beijing whose status carries considerable weight in meetings with local activists and officials. Somewhat ironically, the current dominant spatial and occupational hierarchies augment the power of highly educated NGO activists in their collaboration with local officials, even though hierarchies are ostensibly the target of their work.

Chen Mingxia comments on the relationship between the Stop DV and the WF system in the following.

In our relationship with the Women's Federation, we try to maintain independence while seeking collaboration. At present people abroad have many (critical) views towards the WF, thinking that the Women's Federation is both a governmental institution and non-governmental organization. But I think regardless whether it is governmental or non-governmental, the Women's Federation, from the top to the bottom, is a national network at six administrative levels. Such a network of six levels could greatly help our anti-domestic violence project. Moreover, the Women's Federation is also a women's organization. We should cooperate with people there. Therefore, the Director of the Department of Women's Rights and Interests in the ACWF is a special consultant in our network, and local women's federations at various levels are members of our network. We have made it very clear to the ACWF that we are not out to compete with the WF for work; we want to help the WF with their work. I made this point very clear to the officials of the ACWF. Of course perhaps because I am senior in my age it is somewhat easier for me to

say such things. I said to them that we want to help them, and we should do women's work together. But we have one point that we are very clear about. We may ask them to be a consultant or ask them for other support, but we still must maintain our principle of independence. In other words, we insist upon our conceptual framework and our independent principles [from the official system]. Within our conceptual framework, based on the principle of feminism, or gender mainstreaming, we can collaborate in many aspects. Therefore, we have really good relations with local women's federations. Basically, local women's federations are willing to work on our project and to help us with our work. In some places our network's operating centers are located in the local women's federations. Thus we work together because local women's federations are very willing to work for women. What we do is to convey to them that we do not claim to protect women or to liberate women; what we seek to do is to liberate ourselves along with other women. In other words, as we help these women we are also empowering ourselves. At the same time we are helping other women we also empower ourselves. The local women's federations think that this is a very good idea.¹⁸

Chen Mingxia's emphasis on the good relationship with local women's federations is suggestive in multiple ways. Mostly, it reminds us of the reality that the WF system is itself a network of diverse women officials located differentially in a geographic hierarchy. Local women officials who care about women's affairs have no vested interest in blocking a particular NGO's activism, especially when it brings needed funds. Actually, top officials at the ACWF have also expressed their support for activities by women's NGOs, calling on all women to work together to promote women's social advancement. The ACWF has shown itself eager to catch up with the issues raised by women's NGOs so as to maintain their competitive edge as a leading body for women's issues, rather than begrudge emergent NGOs.

With money from international donors, the Stop DV Network has created a unique pattern for political participation in China. Linking itself to the official WF system, the network is able to access the institutional resources of that system. Since the WF organizational apparatus reaches down to each village and each neighborhood, the collaboration between the NGO and the WF enables urban feminist academics and professionals from core areas such as Beijing to connect with women at the grassroots level in peripheral regions. Their collaboration augments the influence of the NGO and allows a horizontal NGO to gain vertical channels. From the point of the NGO, this collaboration is also an important way to transform the WF by making the official organization more gender-sensitive, and more women-centered rather than party-centered. And, no less important, the collaboration provides the NGO legitimate means to engage the government at all levels.

Finally, the network defies theoretical boundaries between society and state by deliberately including government branches among its members. A holistic approach to domestic violence requires a comprehensive campaign that mobilizes society as well as the state. Therefore, eligibility for grants from the Network to

fund anti-domestic violence projects includes NGOs and central and government bodies. Thus, government branches apply for grants from an NGO to work on the issue of domestic violence. By tactfully maneuvering multiple terrains, the Stop DV Network has become a leading force acknowledged by the state in promoting social, cultural, legal, and political changes to address domestic violence. In a sense, the Stop DV Network is such an inclusive network that it also networks the state.

What else can we find in the success of the Stop DV Network?

To critically examine Chinese feminist NGO activism, it is necessary to ask not only what has been accomplished by feminist activists but also what has been neglected or omitted. In sharp contrast to transnational feminist emphases on multiple systems of oppression and intersectionality of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, the absence of “class” in Chinese feminist articulation is glaring. The rapid ascendance of the analytical category “gender” is, in a sense, at the expense of erasing the analytical category “class” in China. Feminists in China have voraciously embraced gender exactly at the moment when the term “class” has turned into a new political taboo. Women scholars in the 1980s contributed to the deconstruction of a Maoist class analysis that eclipsed and erased gender issues by presenting an essentialist notion of women.¹⁹ In the 1990s, feminists found in “gender” a much better analytical tool than an essentialized womanhood and femininity. In the post-Mao market economy, the state, with complicit help from elite intellectuals, has conveniently abandoned Marxist class analysis in the aftermath of critiquing the Maoist definition of class. Gone also were the previous socialist principles of social justice and equality. In their place we have witnessed the rise of neo-liberalism and stark class polarization over the past two decades. And the state has placed severe surveillance on spontaneous organizational activities around class issues. However, class and gender often intersect, resulting in large female populations with little resources both in urban and rural societies. In this context, the ascendance and centrality of “gender” in the past decade functions both as a feminist tactic to promote the value of social justice against a dominant social Darwinist ideology amid rampant capitalism and a feminist evasion of sensitive issues like class. Seen in this light, the success of the Stop DV Network has much to do with the fact that it focuses on a gender issue that crosses other social divides, hence, making an evasion of class possible. Nonetheless, at the local level WF officials have clearly observed the effects of gender and class in the phenomenon of rising domestic violence.²⁰

A focus on gender could, theoretically, include class issues as well. And feminist projects generally are already conceptually oriented towards the disadvantaged and marginalized, including laid-off women workers, migrant workers, and domestic helpers. However, without the freedom to articulate a clear critical framework that addresses multiple hierarchies and inequalities, Chinese feminists run the risk of being co-opted by the state. Their success in engaging the state via the official WF

and their discursive legitimacy to pursue gender equality as part of full modernity have been made possible largely because most feminists consciously operate within the parameters of the current political culture. In a time when women bear the brunt of downsizing, layoffs, early retirement, and severe violation of labor rights in the private sector, we have yet to see the emergence of national networks demanding women workers' rights.²¹ Chinese feminists are fully aware of the limits to state tolerance for organized activism, and few are willing to move outside the comfort zone of gender into the minefield of activism based around class issues. Self-censorship is routine. A sentiment shared by many leading feminist activists is that the legitimacy gained by organizing around gender issues should not be squandered by involvement in politically sensitive issues.

Tactful cautiousness is sometimes hard to separate from a desire to be accepted by the official system. Perhaps the danger of state co-optation is graver for academic feminists than for feminists whose activism takes place among marginalized women. Academic feminists are more accessible for temptation by the benefits offered by the state to compliant intellectuals. The timid approach is exemplified by the Women's and Gender Studies Network mission statement, which begins:

Under the leadership of the Communist Party and the ideological guidance of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong thought, Deng Xiaoping theory, three representatives, and the view of scientific development, [we will] insist on the policy of "let a hundred flowers bloom, and let a hundred schools of thought contend," closely relate to Chinese reality, actively develop the academic field of women's and gender studies and related teaching, research, and activism, in order to serve the construction of a prosperous, powerful, democratic, and civilized socialist modern country.

Such official clichés, according to the drafter, are necessary for the organization to survive official scrutiny. Members of the organization debated whether to include a jargon-filled preamble to the bylaws of a women's NGO, but none pointed out the irony that an academic feminist organization would willingly accept, and in some cases even embrace, the dominant political discourse rather than challenge it. If academic feminists accordingly lose their critical voice, the meaning of activist success deserves careful scrutiny. However, in the political and intellectual environment of today's China, it is difficult for feminists to openly engage in meaningful debates of their political actions. As a result, problematic and ambiguous actions and ideas remain unquestioned.

The triangular relations between women's NGOs, GONGOS (WF), and the state should be a topic for serious feminist intellectual scrutiny. But, at present, discussion is limited to how to recognize the unique features of the Chinese state and in what ways feminists can best utilize official institutions and discursive resources, or how the WF may form partnership with NGOs.²² Feminists in China remain preoccupied with strategizing their engagement with the state via the WF, and are complacent about the positive results of their innovative strategies. Although building the capacity of women's NGOs is increasingly on the agenda of various

women's organizations, a critical examination of the political parameters in which women's NGOs operate and of the effects of the triangular relations on NGOs has yet to be seen. The mixed results of the ACWF's role over the past decade have largely been neglected by feminists. For instance, in order to promote research on women, the ACWF established a Chinese Association for Research on Women. Leading scholars on women and gender issues, including some prominent male scholars, have been invited to the board of the Association. Viewed positively, the ACWF's action lends needed legitimacy to the development of women's and gender studies in China. However, few recognize that its semi-official role can also exert a corrosive influence on women scholars who have been striving from marginal positions to establish a feminist field in the Chinese academe. Women scholars are discovering that their activism in support of women's studies could lead to semi-official positions in the Association. Thus the ACWF's mechanism to promote women's studies or empower women scholars could simultaneously function to co-opt women scholars, making scholars consciously or unconsciously identify with the ACWF's positions, as illustrated by the paragraph in the draft bylaws for the Women's and Gender Studies Network.

The Women's and Gender Studies Network has only just come into existence. Its future relation with the ACWF and the state will be interesting to watch. But, at this initial stage, an eagerness to conform to the ACWF line is already apparent. Moreover, the network's conforming acts are glossed as strategic decisions. Without an open intellectual space to debate and delineate differences between strategy and goal, political expediency may increasingly become the goal of women activists who aspire to officialdom or semi-official positions. Activism would then merely serve as a step to mainstream power. In a rare website piece critiquing Chinese feminism, one writer observes, "Involvement in 'the feminist cause' in China is an action of almost zero risk. Chinese universities, research institutions, media and press smoothly accept 'feminism,' which in turn has quickly become a resource for 'feminists' to seek promotion, publication and fame in their institutions."²³ Although it is debatable how "smooth" the process is for the academic mainstream to "accept" feminism, the writer is perceptive to point out that a supposedly subversive political movement is being co-opted by the mainstream. (The Women's and Gender Studies Network is intended as an activist space for feminist intellectual critique and new knowledge production. How far Chinese feminists can go in the direction of critiquing the existing political culture and dominant ideologies will depend on their determination of their positionality in the intermeshed relations between NGOs, the ACFW and the state.)

Conclusion

Feminist activists have been important players in China's dramatic social, cultural and political transformations since the 1980s. In the limited space here, I have demonstrated that they have enabled a decisive departure from Mao-era gender politics. Institutionally, feminists have succeeded in breaking the monopoly of the WF by gaining the legitimacy to pursue gender interests collectively on their own

initiative. Women's NGOs are now operating at local and national levels, taking on diverse activities addressing gender inequality. While the WF is still located in the state bureaucratic system, possessing tremendous institutional and material resources, its long assumed position as the leader of the Chinese women's movement has been brought into question by the growth of feminist NGOs, which have often placed themselves at the forefront by raising new demands and articulating new visions. The WF still exerts far more influence than any feminist NGO in China, but officials at different levels of the WF are forming partnerships with diverse women's NGOs in collaborative projects, as with the Stop DV Network. Designed as a "bridge" between the party-state and the "masses," the WF, in its close interaction with feminist NGOs, has made the state ever more porous and become a major channel for feminist negotiation with the state.

Conceptually, feminists have expanded on the Marxist theory of women that mainly focused on women's participation in production in the socialist period. Embracing gender as an analytical tool to dissect power relations in previously unquestioned gender norms, Chinese feminists have accomplished a paradigm shift in conceptualizing gender inequality. New understandings of gender hierarchy have led to a wide range of activism intervening in both public policy-making and social practices. Organized action against domestic violence exemplifies feminist engagement with both the state and society in raising gender awareness. Many more actions and programs centering on gender mainstreaming are taking place daily inside and outside the official system throughout the country. Advocacy for gender equity is an area that has continued socialist principles of social justice and equality while simultaneously transforming socialist gender politics in the new global context.

Chinese feminists have manifested their agency and creativity through various innovations over the past two decades. However, they have also largely played within safe political parameters. They have translated global feminist concepts into local practices and endowed many global concepts with local meanings. Most prominently, feminist NGOs in China have developed an entangled relationship with the WF and the state in their efforts to engage the state and promote gender mainstreaming. The triangular relations are unique, conditioned by the specific dynamics of contemporary Chinese political culture. The benefits of engaging the WF and the state to address gender inequality are broadly accepted among feminist NGOs. But a critical awareness of the dangers of state co-optation has yet to materialize. A glaring lesson of the past century for Chinese feminists is that China has no shortage of agitators for social change but few agents in the matrix of power relations able to retain a critical view of their own actions or interactions. The modern history of reform and revolution is mostly a story of efforts aborted and thwarted due to the limitations of historical actors hemmed in by the very historical environment they intended to change. Forging ahead with a feminist agenda while entangled with a patriarchal state characterized by an entrenched bureaucracy, a male-centered intellectual setting clearly leaning in service of the state, as well as a capitalist economy rooted in dispossession and displacement, Chinese feminists confront tremendous odds at producing a peaceful feminist revolution aimed at

deconstructing hierarchies, installing social justice, and transforming existing masculinist culture. Being a feminist neither offers sanctuary from the effects of political and cultural hegemony nor provides immunity from the mistakes of masculinist historical actors. Profound social changes, as envisioned by feminists, require much deeper and broader transformations than the formation of NGOs. To what extent NGOs, feminist or not, can remain a transformative force rather than being transformed by all corrosive forces around them is an open question, depending largely on whether NGO activists, feminist or not, have the ability to pause and reflect, and to explore how to regenerate ourselves while reconfiguring the external world.

Notes

- 1 Huang Qingyi's talk at the ACWF conference on protecting women's rights, December 23, 2004.
- 2 The initial feminist response to problems confronting women in the post-Mao era was expressed in a surge of research on women nationwide in the 1980s. See Wang Zheng (1996) "Maoism, feminism, and the UN contemporary China", *Journal of Women's History* 8(4): 126–53; and (1998) "Research on women in contemporary China" in Gail Hershatler *et al.* (eds.) *Guide to Women's Studies in China*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 1–43.
- 3 Chen Fang's interview of Liu Bohong, 2004, for the Global Feminisms (GF) project at the University of Michigan.
- 4 Wang Zheng's interview of Gao Xiaoxian, September 26, 2005, for GF project.
- 5 The details of the Association's structure and activities can be found on its website: www.westwomen.org
- 6 For a detailed discussion of the role of the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS) in the US in disseminating feminism in China, see Wang Zheng (1998) "Research on women in contemporary China" in Gail Hershatler *et al.* (eds.) *Guide to Women's Studies in China*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 1–43. The CSWS, a grantee of the Ford Foundation, has collaborated with women scholars in China to host numerous feminist workshops in China since 1993. Members of the society also worked collectively to publish four volumes of feminist works that have had a wide circulation among feminists in China: Bao Xiaolan (ed.) (1995) *Xifang nüxing zhuyi pingjie* (On Western feminist research), Beijing: Sanlian shudian; Sharon Hom and Xin Chunying (eds.) (1995) *English-Chinese Lexicon of Women and Law*, Paris and Beijing: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and China Translation and Publishing Corporation; Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin (eds.) (1998) *Shehui xingbie yanjiu xuanyi* (Selected works on gender studies), Beijing: Sanlian shudian; and Ma Yuanxi, Kang Hongjin and Du Fangqin (eds.) (2000) *Shehui xingbie yu fazhan* (Selected translations on genders and development), Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- 7 Ge Youli and Susan Jolly, "East Meets West Feminist Translation Group: a conversation between two participants" in Ping-Chun Hsiung *et al.* (eds.) (2001) *Chinese Women Organizing: cadres, feminists, Muslims, queers*, Oxford and New York: Berg, pp. 61–75.
- 8 See the Ford Foundation's (1995) publication *Reflections & Resonance: stories of Chinese women involved in international preparatory activities for the 1995 NGO Forum on Women*, Beijing.
- 9 This widely circulated statement on women's status, which has been taken as a quotation from the French socialist Fourier, was made in 1817 by John Stuart Mill's father

- James Mill when he commented on the level of civilization of India in *The History of British India*, 2 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1968), pp. 309–10. Sociologist Arland Thornton notes the early circulation of the idea in European feminist literature since the eighteenth century in *Reading History Sideways: the fallacy and enduring impact of the developmental paradigm on family life*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 165–7.
- 10 Huang's remark was circulated informally among ACWF officials.
 - 11 Major works on contemporary political transformation in China generally overlook feminist organized activism, including such recent work as Merle Goldman (2005) *From Comrade to Citizen: the struggle for political rights in China*, Harvard University Press. Feminist organized activism in China, in my view, poses interesting and serious challenges to theorizing the Chinese political system.
 - 12 See Jack Belden (1970) *China Shakes the World*, Monthly Review Press, pp. 275–317.
 - 13 Wang Zheng's interview with Chen Zhunlian, September 9, 2005. Her advocacy was effective. Changsha municipal government passed the Regulations on Anti-Domestic Violence in January 1996, the first of its kind in China.
 - 14 For a detailed discussion of this maneuver, see Wang Zheng (2003) "Gender, employment and women's resistance", in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.) *Chinese Society, Second Edition: change, conflict and resistance*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 158–82. The ACWF named 2004 the year of publicizing "the fundamental state policy of equality between men and women." The whole WF system put in much effort to educate both officials and the general public about the "state policy" which at the time had not appeared in any legislation. The head of the ACWF, Gu Xiulian, went on a lecture tour to the Central Party School and provincial party schools to talk about the importance of implementing the "state policy," a highlighted activity of the theme year.
 - 15 Zhang Jian's interview of Ge Youli for Global Feminisms project, December 22, 2002.
 - 16 Shi Tong's interview with Chen Mingxia, September 6, 2005, for the GF project.
 - 17 For detailed information on the Network, see its website: www.stopdv.org.cn
 - 18 Shi Tong's interview with Chen Mingxia, September 6, 2005, for the GF project.
 - 19 See Wang Zheng, "Research on women in contemporary China" for a detailed discussion of this historical process.
 - 20 At a workshop on domestic violence organized by the Shanghai Women's Federation, a director of the Baoshan Women's Federation described mounting cases of horrific wife battery with indignation. In the predominantly working-class district dominated by a state-owned steel plant, the low morale of working-class men often finds an outlet in domestic violence. "What kind of working class is it? They only have one ability left, beating their wives!"
 - 21 A possible exception would be the Center for Women's Development and Rights at Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xi'an, which has organized domestic helpers to help them demand rights and benefits from the government. This effort, however, is framed as an issue relating to women's rights and development, not working-class rights.
 - 22 The volume collecting the most concentrated discussions on the topic is Ping-chun Hsiung *et al.* (eds.) (2001) *Chinese Women Organizing: cadres, feminists, Muslims, queers*, Oxford: Berg. Also, see Chen Fang's interview with Liu Bohong, 2004, the GF project.
 - 23 Sun Shaoxian, "'Aristocratic' Chinese 'Feminism'" ["Guizhuhua" de Zhongguo "nüxing zhuyi"], available online at: www.38hn.com/news.asp?id=472