

Feminisms with **Chinese Characteristics**

Edited by Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao



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Feminist Struggles in a Changing China

Wang Zheng

Embedded in political, social, economic, and cultural transformations, gender has been a highly salient site of contention since the Chinese elite started to search for a modern China in the late nineteenth century. Having risen to become the world's second largest economy in the twenty-first century, China nonetheless witnesses growing conservative social and political forces that have importunately attempted to reinstall and consolidate gender and class hierarchies in the context of global capitalism. This chapter examines three cohorts of Chinese feminists as a way to illustrate shifting settings and constant contentions over gender equality: state feminists of the socialist period, postsocialist NGO feminists around the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), and young feminist activists ascending the public stage since the second decade of the twenty-first century. Each cohort has adopted distinct strategies for their diverse agendas, conditioned by their particular historical contexts and social and political parameters.

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But continuities remain. While the first generation of socialist-period feminists has long left the historical stage, some of its legacies have persisted, especially in terms of its institution building in the form of an official mass organization: the All-China Women's Federation. The relationship between feminism and the state remains central to feminist struggles in China even though state socialism has long evolved into state capitalism, and a rapid privatization of the economy has produced 250 million citizens who do not work in the state sector.¹ And just as Chinese feminism's inception was inseparable from a global context a century ago, today it is as deeply embedded in processes of globalization as ever. Contemporary China is in a time of compressed temporalities in the sense that various contentious discourses over the past century have neither reached closure nor faded out, but have often been reenacted and remobilized simultaneously against a drastically changed historical setting. This chapter traces both continuities and changes in Chinese feminist struggles while critically examining constraints and possibilities for further development.

A Brief Overview of Chinese Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century

Feminism is one of the many ideologies that educated Chinese have embraced in their pursuit of modernity and rejection of an ancient dynastic system underpinned by a hierarchical sex-gender system that held chastity as the supreme value of women in the interest of patrilineal kinship. Just as the imagination of a modern China has never been singular, feminism has also been understood in diverse ways that, nevertheless, express a shared concern with gendered social arrangements.

At the turn of the twentieth century, anarchist, socialist, liberal, evolutionary, eugenic, and nationalist positions shaped various

1. Xing Zheng 邢郑, "Geti Siying Jingji Cheng Xina Jiuye 'Xushuichi'" 个体私营经济成吸纳就业 "蓄水池" (Private Enterprises Have Become the "Reservoir" for Absorbing Labor), People.cn, October 28, 2015, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2015/1028/c1004-27747492.html>.

feminist articulations. In their proposals for changing gender hierarchy, rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and gender norms based on Confucian ideals of gender differentiation and segregation, feminists expressed different imaginings of a better future: a more humane society that centered on social justice and equality, a modern society that allowed individuals to break away from the constraints of Confucian social norms embedded in kinship relations as well as the control of an imperial polity, and a stronger nation that turned China from being the prey of imperialist powers into a sovereign state. Regardless of their diverse political positions, reformers, revolutionaries, professionals, and educated women and men from elite social backgrounds who embraced various versions of feminism agreed on the necessity of changing gender practices in transforming their ancient civilization, which had fallen into deep crisis in a time of imperialist and colonialist expansion. The confluence of diverse and often contradictory ideas and practices rapidly made a neologism a key phrase in twentieth-century China: *equality between men and women* (*nannü pingdeng* 男女平等), a Chinese rendition of the English phrase *sexual equality*, which had been circulating globally since the late nineteenth century. Signifying a conscious rejection of the foundation of Confucian social order prescribing differentiation between men and women, equality between men and women became a badge of modernity that social groups and political parties adopted to assert a progressive identity.

After the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, educated women from elite families who had joined the revolution against the Qing government launched a women's suffrage movement to demand equal political rights in the new Republican polity. Suppressed by a dictatorial president in 1913, the suffragists turned to women's education and careers to lay a social foundation for women's political rights. Radical male intellectuals launched the New Culture movement in 1915 to challenge the dominant Confucianism, which provided a renewed critical feminist thrust. Gender hierarchy, gender differentiation, gender segregation, double sexual standards that demanded chastity of women while legitimizing polygamy, and cultural practices ritualized in the service of maintaining a deeply entrenched hierarchical society

that was fundamentally based on the dominance of men over women were highlighted as quintessential symbols of the backwardness of Confucian culture, defined as feudalist. Feminism was enthusiastically embraced as a powerful weapon to combat the feudalism that had dominated China for millennia.

The small circle of cultural radicals, which included the future founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), rapidly expanded its social and intellectual influence after May 4, 1919, when college and secondary school students spearheaded a nationwide patriotic movement. Incensed by the treaty about to be signed by world powers at the Versailles Conference, which transferred all of Germany's rights in Shandong province to Japan after World War I, the May Fourth Movement, with its vehemently anti-imperialist female and male students as major constituents, became a powerful vehicle that carried the New Culture's advocacy of antifeudalism, including the promotion of feminism, into mainstream urban society. Equal educational and employment opportunities for women, and their freedom to socialize with men, ending centuries of gender segregation, were seen as the foundation for women's liberation. Pursuing equality in all spheres of life and achieving an independent personhood became the hallmarks of May Fourth women's feminist subjectivities. Many May Fourth feminists—by definition, educated women and men—later played important roles in China's political, social, and cultural transformations.² From two cohorts, older New Culturalists and younger student participants in the May Fourth Movement, emerged a small group of men and women, disillusioned with the Western liberal but imperialist powers, who in 1921 formed the CCP, modeled after the newly founded Soviet Union, and openly endorsed “equality between men and women” in its platform.³

2. For a historical study of May Fourth feminism, see Wang Zheng 王政, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999).

3. For a study of radical women's participation in the inception of the CCP, see Christina K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women,*

Even though many high-profile May Fourth feminists joined the CCP, the term *feminism* began to lose favor within the Party when CCP feminists came into contact with Western socialists and communists and adopted their view that feminism was bourgeois—a discursive practice that had originated in rivalries between radical suffragists and socialist women in the early twentieth century.⁴ Nonetheless, CCP feminists kept alive the May Fourth feminist agenda of women’s liberation, simply replacing the discredited word *feminism* with *women’s rights* and maintaining pressure on the Party to promote those rights. They mobilized women for the revolution with yet another new term: *women-work*.⁵

Managed by a Women Department or a Women-Work Committee in various periods, women-work was a major platform for CCP feminists engaged in pursuing gendered social justice and equality, especially for lower-class women, as well as an important branch of the CCP specialized in mobilizing women’s participation in the Communist Revolution. In urban areas the underground CCP feminists targeted women factory workers as the major constituents of women-work; in the CCP military bases in rural areas, peasant women were the target for feminist organization and mobilization. Running literacy classes and raising both class and gender consciousness were part of the women-work among factory workers; addressing abuse of women in patriarchal families, opposing arranged marriage, and promoting freedom to divorce were issues adopted by CCP feminists in rural base areas,⁶ though the focus on the latter item largely shifted

Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

4. Marilyn J. Boxer, “Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept ‘Bourgeois Feminism,’” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 1 (2007): 131–58.

5. For an early study on women-work in the CCP, see Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

6. For a detailed study of marriage and divorce in the CCP’s base areas in Northern China, see Xiaoping Cong, *Marriage, Law, and Gender in Revolutionary China, 1940–1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016).

to enhancing women's economic status in rural families by encouraging them to participate in gainful productive work in the early 1940s.

The inner logic of the two-pronged agenda of women-work was that in order for the CCP to succeed in attracting women to the Communist Revolution, which promised women's thorough emancipation down the road, the Party had to address women's particular and immediate needs and interests. In practice the two dimensions of women-work presented an inherent source of tension that required tremendous wisdom for CCP feminists to juggle skillfully, as male leaders at all levels tended to treat institutionalized women-work as an auxiliary instrument to fulfill various tasks of the Party. After all, the wars against Japanese invaders and the Nationalist Party provided them with an excuse not to prioritize women's gender-specific interests, but instead to demand women's contribution to the Revolution.

Socialist State Feminist Transformative Practices

China in 1949 was an agrarian society with about 90 percent of its total population of 540 million residing in rural areas, 90 percent of women being illiterate, and an economy devastated by decades of war. Economic recovery with women's participation and increasing women's literacy were high on the CCP's agenda for socialist modernity.⁷ The victory of the CCP in 1949 enabled feminists in the Party to wield socialist state power to materialize their feminist dreams. Only 530,000 of the CCP's 1949 membership of 4.49 million were women, but many of these CCP women rose to official positions in administrations ranging from the central government to urban street offices and rural townships, depending on their Party seniority and level of education. Although we do not claim that each CCP woman was a

7. Zhongguo Renquan Yanjiuhui 中国人权研究会 (The Association of Human Rights in China), ed., *Zhongguo Renquan Nianjian* 中国人权年鉴 (The Annals of Human Rights in China) (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2007), 580.

conscious feminist, the numbers and power of Chinese socialist state feminists in the early People's Republic of China (PRC) were arguably unprecedented in feminist histories of the world. This was a consequence of a feminist-informed Communist Revolution in the world's most populous nation that attracted female constituents with equality between men and women as an integral goal of the revolution. Upon the founding of the PRC, many CCP feminists, in their official capacity, vigorously initiated and promoted transformative programs to cash the Party's promissory note of women's thorough liberation in a socialist country. This belies the general assumption in much of the scholarship in English that these women were passive followers of a male-dominated party.

The first National Women's Congress, organized by senior CCP feminists Deng Yingchao 邓颖超 and Cai Chang 蔡畅 in March 1949,⁸ resolved to set up a national women's organization, the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF was changed to All-China Women's Federation in 1957, hence ACWF), an umbrella organization that horizontally united all pro-CCP women's organizations, and an official institution that vertically reached down to the rural villages and urban neighborhoods nationwide. This vast organizational reach enabled socialist state feminists to effectively carry out many transformative actions nationwide. The very first law adopted by the socialist state, the 1950 Marriage Law, drafted by a feminist committee led by Deng Yingchao, was a centerpiece in the socialist feminist mission of transforming Chinese feudal culture. The law enforced the dismantling of traditional marriage practices such as arranged marriage and

8. Cai Chang joined the CCP in 1923, and Deng Yingchao joined it in 1925. Their Party seniority allowed them to enjoy tremendous respect, especially since they did not pursue high political position with their Party seniority. Cai in 1923 married Li Fuchun 李富春, who became vice premier of the PRC, and Deng in 1925 married Zhou Enlai 周恩来, who became the premier of the PRC. The informal power Cai and Deng enjoyed in the Party was beyond the reach of their successors in the ACWF.

underage marriage, and granted women freedom to divorce and to remarry, establishing new gender norms of equality between men and women with state power.

Women's literacy, equal employment and equal pay, political participation, reproductive health, and new public facilities to reduce working women's burden of childcare and housework were also areas of remarkable feminist achievement in the early PRC. Their efforts to involve and engage rural and urban lower-class women, particularly in all the transformative programs aiming to eliminate class and gender hierarchies, expanded urban elite-based concepts and practices of women's rights from the first half of the twentieth century. That said, the socialist state paradoxically widened the gap between the rural and urban by setting up a two-tier household registration system that offered urban residents more privileges and material goods in order to speed up industrialization.

Socialist feminists' comprehensive vision of Chinese women's liberation crucially hinged on transformation of subjectivities. Senior feminists were acutely aware that without undoing a patriarchal culture that saturated the psyche of the people and of CCP members, efforts to achieve women's equality in all spheres of life would encounter severe obstacles and resistance. Cultural production was thus also an important realm in socialist feminist transformation, a heritage from the May Fourth New Culture Movement, when progressive intellectuals (a cohort that included many men) produced a massive amount of literature and drama to condemn the feudalist patriarchal tradition embodied in Confucianism. The Chinese term *feudalism* in socialist novels, operas, and film (a state-owned industry led by female and male feminist leaders) decidedly represented the Other of the socialist new China. It became a gender-inflected key word encompassing everything we today call sexism, masculinism, patriarchy, male chauvinism, or misogyny. Even illiterate women in rural areas could deploy the term effortlessly to accuse men of chauvinism.⁹ "Equality between

9. See the documentary film *Small Happiness*, by Carma Hinton, 1984.

men and women” and “women’s liberation,” popularized via state-owned media, especially the ACWF’s magazine *Women of China* and socialist films accessible even to rural communities, became household slogans intimately connecting gender equality with the authority of the new socialist state. A socialist feminist gender discourse rapidly rose to mainstream discourse in the early PRC.

Chinese socialist state feminists in the early PRC were an integral part of the international women’s movement of the socialist camp that was represented by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). On December 10, 1949, only two months after the founding of the PRC, the All-Asian Women’s Congress, attended by 197 representatives from twenty-three countries, was organized by the ACDWF in its new role as a member of the WIDF.¹⁰ Hosting an international conference on women when only about ten socialist countries had established diplomatic relationships with the PRC indicated the CCP leadership’s full support for this initiative, as well as the state feminists’ high capacity for global networking. The event certainly expressed state feminists’ conscious efforts to merge the women’s movement in the PRC with socialist women’s movements globally. With the Chair of the ACDWF, Cai Chang, serving as the Deputy Chair of the WIDF, Chinese socialist state feminists also played a leading role in the international women’s movement until the 1960s, when the CCP split with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The CCP feminists’ firm identification with the Party both empowered and constrained them because of the contradictory political environment. Ideologically, the Party’s platform endorsed a feminist pursuit of gender equality and “equality between men and women,” which was written into the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China. Institutionally, however, male Communists assumed leading

10. For a study of WIDF, see Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF),” *Women’s History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–73.

administrative positions. Many male officials did not eschew male chauvinism during the Communist Revolution even though they vowed to strive for an egalitarian society. *Women of China* in the early 1950s exposed many sexist behaviors of male officials, including blocking women from entering gainful employment.¹¹ Feminists in the Women's Federation system found their proposals for women's benefits often pushed aside by male officials. Even the institutionalization of a women's mass organization did not resolve the problem of gender hierarchy in the Party. The ACWF,¹² after all, was organized as a Party-led mass organization that was responsible for advocacy, rather than as an executive branch of the government, although everyone in the Women's Federation system was also on the government payroll.

Because each level of the Women's Federation subordinates to the Party committee of the same administrative level, Women's Federation women officials often encountered Party officials who showed little interest in equality between men and women or women-work. Party chair Mao Zedong 毛泽东 was apparently well aware of this situation. On November 12, 1952, in a meeting the ACWF leaders had requested, he instructed them on dealing with different levels of Party committees with these colorful words: *yi song* 一送 (first, submit proposals to the Party committee); *er cui* 二催 (second, push the Party committee to respond); *san maniang* 三骂娘 (if the first two methods did not work, third, just curse and swear).¹³ Apparently, though it was

11. See chapter 3 in Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2016).

12. The acronym ACWF has two meanings: one, the national women's organization that has six administrative levels paralleling the state administrative structure; two, the national headquarters of the mass organization, based in Beijing. In the following, ACWF is used strictly to refer to the national headquarters, while Women's Federation means the whole system of the national women's organization.

13. Luo Qiong 罗琼 and Duan Yongquiang 段永强, *Luo Qiong Fangtanlu* 罗琼访谈录 (Interviews with Luo Qiong) (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 2000), 126. Mao's original phrase *san maniang* was changed by women officials into *san*

never an intentional policy, neglecting women's interests was a common practice within the Party that continued into the socialist period; and significantly, the chair's support stopped at the verbal advice without offering any structural rearrangement of power relations, a measure that had not been envisioned, let alone proposed by the ACWF leaders to the supreme Party leader.

Encouraged by Mao's advice, quite a few Women's Federation officials who actually followed his instruction were unfortunately labeled as rightists for their candid criticism of their Party leaders in the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957. The subordination of the gender-based mass organization to the male-dominated Party led to subsequent institutional marginalization of the Women's Federation in the state structure of the PRC, which in turn conditioned the routine experiences of feminists in the CCP that women-work was of lesser value, except for those moments when some item on the Party's central agenda required that women be mobilized.

Historically, the CCP used the label of "narrow bourgeois feminism" as a political stick to beat down those outspoken feminists who insisted on the priority of women's interests or raised a critical voice against male chauvinism in the CCP. In this historical context, state feminists in the Women's Federation system routinely operated in a politics of concealment in their endeavors to promote feminist agendas. Since singularly and openly raising a demand on behalf of women would have a slim chance of eliciting the support of male authorities, Women's Federation officials learned to insert feminist items into the Party's agenda in order to gain legitimacy and resources for actions with a clear gender dimension. One example was when the Shanghai Women's Federation organized a large-scale women's rally against American imperialism in 1951 at the request of the municipal Party committee. Using support from the municipal and district

piping (三批评 third, criticize) in their public talks, perhaps because of the apparent gender offensiveness and class connotation of the original. Cursing and swearing in profane language were sometimes adopted by lower-class women as a powerful weapon in their resistance, but were forbidden for women of "respectable" families.

governments on this legitimate Party central task, Women's Federation officials swiftly expanded the Women's Federation's institutional development in Shanghai neighborhoods by setting up grassroots women's organizations.¹⁴ Articulating their strong support of the Party's central tasks, state feminists often embedded a hidden script that intended to advance women's diverse interests. In other words, camouflaging a feminist agenda with dominant Party language was a major principle in the politics of concealment. The concealing and self-effacing maneuver appealed to the authority of the Party and glossed over their own struggles behind the scenes.

Receding into the shadows, socialist state feminists were unknown to either the public in China or scholars outside China. Women's dramatic advancements in education, employment, and political participation in the socialist period were noticed by many observers outside China, but without any knowledge of state feminists' endeavors, these observers generally attributed all the accomplishments to a patriarchal party-state that supposedly showed sporadic benevolence to women. A dominant conceptualization of a monolithic socialist state in the field of China studies has disabled scholarly imaginations about possible feminist visions and contentions inside the socialist state.

Socialist state feminists' efforts to eliminate both gender and class hierarchies and transform a patriarchal culture were halted in 1964, when a Maoist class struggle against revisionism and capitalism rapidly ascended to become a dominant agenda of the CCP. The ACWF stopped functioning in the heat of the Cultural Revolution, when all government branches were paralyzed. Though the effects of state feminists' social and cultural transformations in the first fifteen years of the PRC persisted, and institutional mechanisms they developed for gender equality in education and employment continued, their feminist agenda of further transforming gender relations was suppressed by the Maoist class struggle. While working-class young women had

14. See chapter 1 in Wang, *Finding Women*.

more opportunities to be promoted to leadership positions in the Cultural Revolution because of Mao's wife Jiang Qing's 江青 prominent position in the power center, a New Culture agenda highlighting anti-patriarchy in cultural production was condemned by Jiang Qing and other radicals as an expression of revisionism. Suppressing a conscious agenda of feminist cultural transformation by state feminists in and outside the ACWF, Maoist radicals did serious harm to the feminist revolutionary cause. When the ACWF revived its function in 1978, the political landscape had already changed so drastically that the surviving first cohort of state feminists found their previous accomplishments for gender equality under severe attack.

A major erasure of socialist state feminists has arisen in the production of historical knowledge of socialism since the late 1970s, when the CCP began to depart from the socialist course after Mao's death in 1976. In Chinese intellectuals' concerted critique of the CCP's crimes under Mao's dictatorship, descriptions of the socialist period were mainly limited to condemnations of its ills, and Mao became synonymous with socialism. The antisocialist discourse was both grossly reductive and openly masculinist. In postsocialist intellectuals' efforts to dismantle both the CCP's authoritarian rule and socialist egalitarian values and practices, socialist state feminist gender ideology and practices that promoted equality between men and women were characterized as the Maoist state's imposition of gender sameness, a crime of the CCP that distorted women's natural femininity and masculinized them.

In an article published in the prestigious Chinese academic journal *Sociological Studies*, Zheng Yefu 郑也夫 argued that contemporary China was falling far behind developed countries in terms of the level of a knowledge economy, as well as the levels of social and material wealth. At the same time, he pointed out the Chinese women's liberation surpassed all countries in the world in terms of women's equal employment and equal pay. Deploring what he viewed as a cause-and-effect situation, Zheng offered a critique that condensed key elements in the backlash against socialist women's liberation:

The immediate consequence of a government-enforced women's liberation outpacing socioeconomic development is dysfunctional family relations. . . . We have failed to explore a new gender division of labor in family life **because, through supporting the weak and suppressing the strong, a strong administrative power has interfered and destroyed the normal division of labor between the strong and the weak in family.** It has even made the weak mistakenly think they are not weak, and made the strong lose confidence in themselves. **Ultimately, it has deprived Chinese society of "real men."** . . . **A women's liberation promoted by politics has also made China lose its women.**¹⁵

Restoration of gender differentiation was promoted by the urban elite's conflicting proposals: embracing a Western capitalist modernity symbolized by sexualized and commodified women in advertisements, or reviving a Confucian tradition by retrieving so-called Oriental female traditional virtues, which women could express by being self-sacrificing, virtuous mothers and good wives. Rearranging gender practices by promoting a discourse of femininity has been a prominent theme in elite proposals to undo socialist modernity since the early 1980s. The preferred Chinese rendition of *feminism* as *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义 "feminine-ism") since the early 1990s partly reflects the hegemonic power of this discourse of femininity.

The CCP's turn to privatization and marketization was accompanied by a dismantling of socialist institutional mechanisms that safeguarded gender and class equalities for those working in the public sector, such as equal education, equal employment, equal pay, and state-funded health care and childcare. The state's departure from a socialist egalitarian distribution system was also crucially legitimized by the propagation of a neoliberal ideology that harped on social Darwinism, a discursive maneuver that many male intellectuals eagerly

15. Zheng Yefu 郑也夫, "Nannü Pingdeng de Shehuixue Sikao" 男女平等的社会学思考 (Sociological Reflections on Gender Equity). *Shehuixue yanjiu*, no. 2 (1994): 110 (bold in the original).

adopted. The slogan “Getting rich is glorious” was promoted by the Party’s media, and the poor were blamed for being incapable. The much-abused concept of a Maoist class became a convenient excuse for the CCP to abandon class as an analytical category in its embrace of global capitalism.

The profound social, economic, and ideological ruptures that were concealed by one major continuity—the continuous authoritarian political system that sustained the CCP’s rule—coincided with the retirement of the first generation of state feminists. Having barely returned to their posts after the ACWF’s ten-year hiatus during the Cultural Revolution, the top feminist leaders used the limited time before their retirement to promote compilations of source materials and histories of the Chinese women’s movement in diverse locations nationwide, manifesting their will to pass down the heritage of a socialist feminist history. They also started to organize national conferences on research on women, in an attempt to address the myriad problems women confronted in the era of marketization by insisting on a Marxist theory of women’s liberation. This theory’s fundamental thesis is that women’s liberation is based on their participation in social production.

Propagating this Marxist theory of women’s liberation was the Women’s Federation’s feminists’ important discursive struggle to resist tremendous masculinist pressures in and outside the government to push women back to the kitchen as a solution to increasing unemployment in marketization. These initiatives recruited and relied on scholars who were showing interest in women’s issues, and quickly stimulated a high tide of research on women nationwide beginning in the early 1980s. Discrimination in women’s employment and education in a market economy and protection of women’s legal rights in marriage and at work were among the hot topics for scholars who aimed to affect public policies with their research. In this period Chinese scholars heavily relied on the Women’s Federation’s funding and organizational network as well as institutional legitimacy to get involved in research on women. However, feminist scholars from the West tend to ignore the crucial role state feminists played in this

research boom, instead focusing on leading women scholars' activities in their effort to identify an autonomous feminist movement vis-à-vis the supposedly Party-controlled women's movement. Literary scholar Li Xiaojiang has been credited as a pioneer of research on women in the 1980s, while much of the work state feminists in the ACWF have done since the late 1970s to initiate and support research on women has gone unnoticed.

In their old age and declining health, many members of the first generation of state feminists vigorously engaged in writing and publishing memoirs and autobiographies. These moves expressed their conscious resistance to the discursive erasure of Chinese socialist feminist struggles. However, when the CCP, now led by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, had already made decisive moves to merge with global capitalism, which was characterized in the media as a new vision of Chinese modernity, socialist state feminists' claims of their accomplishments in socialist revolution could have little purchase, sounding outdated. Few cared about what these feminists remembered of a time that was condemned as a dark age dominated by Mao's dictatorship in the rising hegemonic discourse of antisocialism. Thus this cohort of socialist state feminists, as well as their endeavors, failed to enter the constructed public memory, or historical knowledge, of a socialist past in the age of capitalist globalization.

The Fourth World Conference on Women and Feminist NGOs

The state accelerated privatization and marketization in the 1980s while opening China to transnational corporations. Urban women workers bore the brunt of this "economic reform," as they became the first to be fired and last to be hired. The labor laws of the socialist period still existed, which required enterprises to pay for reproductive costs, including paid maternity leave and day care. Seeking to maximize profits in a changed economic system, even state-owned sectors began to lay off women disproportionately, as well as close down publicly funded day cares and canteens in the name of optimizing

management and improving efficiency. The one-child policy initiated in 1979 placed rural women in a deep predicament, as the simultaneous decollectivization in rural areas installed a household responsibility system, which increased patrilineal peasant families' demands for male labor and male heirs. Female infanticide and forced abortion spread rapidly, resulting in a seriously skewed sex ratio at birth: 117.8 boys born for every 100 girls in 2011.

In the context of a severe backlash against socialist women's liberation in male-dominated public discourse and the state's dismantling of socialist egalitarian institutional mechanisms in a state-controlled market economy, the beneficiaries of socialist gender equality policies rose to form a significant feminist force. A cohort of urban, educated women who were positioned in academic institutions in the 1980s began to participate in research on women in collaboration with the same cohort in the Women's Federations in large cities with the intention to influence public policies. When the Chinese government decided to host the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in the aftermath of the state suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, this cohort of feminists swiftly seized the opportunity to push the political boundaries that curtailed spontaneously organized activities after 1989. Many of these women founded feminist NGOs with resources from international donors, as well as legitimacy granted by the NGO Forum, which was held in tandem with the FWCW and attended by about forty thousand feminists from all over the world.

The ACWF's presence in NGO activities preparing for the FWCW was challenged by global feminist communities due to its ambiguous status as a mass organization on the government's payroll, subordinate to the CCP. A new term, *GONGO*—government organized non-governmental organization—legitimized its participation in the NGO Forum, an ironic moment that made NGO a desirable status even in the eyes of a worried Chinese government. In any case, the monopoly of the ACWF in leading a Chinese women's liberation movement was deconstructed by the rise of feminist NGOs, though the two kinds of organizations worked more in collaboration than in competition

in the decade following the FWCW. Two articles published in 2010 presented detailed examinations of the rise of Chinese feminist NGOs in the context of China's hosting of the FWCW.¹⁶ This section highlights a few key features in this cohort of feminist activism from the hindsight of a changed political milieu in 2015.

First, the introduction of a key feminist concept, gender, proved to be enabling and empowering. Gender as a feminist concept was introduced to China by Chinese feminists in diaspora in the process of preparing the FWCW to critically engage with both postsocialist discourse of femininity naturalizing gender hierarchy and a limited Marxist theory of women's liberation unable to explain gendered power relations in all modes of productivity. For this cohort of feminists, who were deeply shaped by the socialist gender discourse of equality between men and women, feminist gender theory provided a powerful critical lens through which to see weaknesses in a state-endorsed and instrumental gender discourse. Li Huiying 李慧英, a leading feminist scholar and activist of the Central Party School, articulated the significance of feminist gender theory for her in these words:

I think it was a very sad situation in women's pursuit of rights since China's liberation, because women's pursuit of rights has been turned into a means to the end. But now in the concept of gender, the highlighted "rights" are about human autonomy and agency. People should know what rights they have and then should struggle for those rights.¹⁷

16. Naihua Zhang and Ping-Chun Hsiung, "The Chinese Women's Movement in the Context of Globalization," in *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms*, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview, 2010), 157–92; Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang, "Global Concepts, Local Practices: Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women," *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 40–70.

17. Li's interview transcript and video can be accessed on the China site of the University of Michigan's Global Feminisms Project, an online archive of interviews of feminist activists from around the world: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/global-feminisms/interviews/china/china-interviews/>. Li Huiying, ed., *Shehui Xingbie yu Gongong Zhengce* 社会性别与公共政策 (Gender and Public Policy) (Beijing: Dangdai

The attraction of gender, rendered in Chinese as *shehui xingbie* (社会性别, “social sex”), in Li’s emphasis, lies in an empowering notion that women should and can control their own destiny without subjecting themselves to the demands of a patriarchal state. The concept of rights is deployed here to demand citizens’ rights against an authoritarian state. For this cohort of urban-educated women, liberation had been defined for them by the socialist state. In the 1990s gender theory that emphasized women’s agency and explicated gendered power relations and structures illuminated the limitations and constraints of that liberation. It brought about a sort of consciousness-raising for these urban feminists, who began to see the potential of exercising citizen’s rights to demand gender equality beyond statist definitions. The expression of citizens’ agency, which had been amply demonstrated since the 1980s and brutally suppressed in 1989, now found a vehicle in a timely and legitimate notion of NGOs backed by the FWCW.

Second, the decade after the FWCW witnessed Chinese feminists’ innovations in widely circulating the Platform for Action, the Beijing Declaration, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, which the Chinese government signed in 1980) to hold the government accountable, and in translating global feminist concepts to local practices. They initiated programs to address a wide range of issues, such as domestic violence, gender and development, feminist curricular transformation in higher education, legal aid for women, rural women’s political participation, sex ratio imbalances, vocational training for rural women and unemployed urban women, and cultural productions that challenged sexist sexual norms, such as the staging of a Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*. Among all kinds of feminist activities, a creative form of gender training was widely adopted.

Utilizing the UN agenda of mainstreaming gender as the basis for legitimate feminist actions, Chinese feminists promoted gender

zhongguo chubanshe, 2002), was the first publication on public policy in China adopting gender as an analytical framework.

training as an important mechanism of social and cultural transformation. Various feminist NGOs conducted gender-training workshops as an integral part of their feminist projects, on themes such as combating domestic violence, gender and development, and women's psychological counseling hotlines, to enhance all the participants' gender sensitivity. The workshops were also offered to various levels of government officials whose responsibilities related to women's interests. In the context of a rising neoliberal discourse in China since the 1980s, and when the state collaborated with the intellectual elite to make a Marxist concept of class a taboo subject in the process of China's turning into a global sweatshop, promulgating the concept of gender equality as a mandate from the UN was also a feminist strategy to uphold social justice as a legitimate goal to pursue, and to hold the state accountable for its verbal commitment to equality between men and women.

The third feature most saliently demonstrates the specificity of Chinese feminism: the collaborative relationship between the Women's Federations at different levels and feminist NGOs in diverse locations. Instead of drawing a distinct divide between the two kinds of organizations, feminists from both the Women's Federation and NGOs often participated in the same projects initiated by NGOs. And in some cases, feminists in the Women's Federation even organized NGOs when they felt constrained and limited by the official women's organization.¹⁸ Feminist NGO organizers and feminists in the Women's Federation were mostly in the same cohort, shaped by the same socialist ideology and practices of women's liberation. Moreover, feminists who organized NGOs were, in most cases, respectable academics in universities and academies of social sciences, all run by the government. Members of the two groups thus were from not only the same cohort but also the same urban elite class

18. See the University of Michigan's Global Feminisms Project, interviews of Gao Xiaoxian 高小贤 and Wang Cuiyu 王翠玉.

and enjoyed social prestige and resources due to their positions in the state system.

Fundamentally the collaborative relationship was conditioned on the ACWF's switch from their target constituency, women of lower classes—the masses—in the socialist period to an orientation toward urban professionals in the context of class realignment and social reconfiguration mandated by the state as it merged with global capitalism. Urban professionals' expertise was eagerly sought after in the rising discourse of a scientific modernity in postsocialist China. NGO feminists' scholarly titles allowed them to present themselves as experts to state officials, including the Women's Federation system. NGO feminist organizers who were consciously maintaining an independent position in terms of initiating and managing feminist projects nevertheless needed the vast institutional reach of the Women's Federations at six administrative levels, as well as the official status the Women's Federation offered to effectively promote feminist issues and influence policy making.

The unique collaboration allowed effective feminist intervention in state processes, or to use a less sensitive term, "implementation of gender mainstreaming," in the context of increasing state monitoring of NGO activism. Many issues identified and advocated by feminist NGOs have been incorporated by different levels and regions of the government, and have even entered legislation. Chinese feminists had no leverage to stem the state's merge with global capitalism, which has resulted in officials' massive profiteering from their power to dispose of public assets and regulate the labor of the lower classes, and thus has increased gender gaps as well as class polarization. However, feminists have forged ahead with diverse programs, ranging from legislating against domestic violence and promoting rural women's participation in village management, to transformation of patrilocal marriage systems and land distribution policies to raise rural women's status in villages and change patriarchal cultural norms of son preference. The ACWF also promoted the Reproductive Security Fund at the municipal government level to mitigate the severe impacts on urban women

workers of eliminating socialist benefits for women's reproductive work that had previously been guaranteed by state-owned enterprises. The momentous success of this collaboration between feminists in and outside the official system is China's first anti-domestic violence law, passed on December 27, 2015, after two decades of persistent feminist struggles following the FWCW.

Feminist actions and accomplishments have been quite impressive, but they were mostly known only within Chinese feminist circles. The goal of affecting policy making and intervening in government agenda setting in the context of the Chinese political system requires the strategy that socialist state feminists had long adopted: maneuvering behind the scenes and using personal networks and institutional resources. Friends, colleagues, relatives, and classmates positioned in powerful posts can all be accessed for a particular project in a society whose operation heavily relies on the lubricant of personal ties. In this sense, this cohort of feminist leaders of either NGOs or Women's Federations also has acted as lobbyists who absolutely have no intention to publicize their crucial maneuvers. Keeping a low profile is in the best interest of the cause they fight for.

The legitimate concern about the effectiveness of their operations via state power could also become a source of self-censorship, however. This cohort's conscious subversive feminist actions have made them very sensitive to the political parameters set by the state, which paradoxically place them under the influence of a state constantly monitoring NGOs. The state's punishment of the very few feminists who dared to openly raise a dissenting voice and work on taboo issues forcefully demarcated a forbidden zone: issues related to so-called national security, such as labor organizing, ethnic conflicts, and violation of citizens' rights in any form by any government branch. One prominent case is that of feminist literary scholar Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明 of Zhongshan University, who bravely made documentary films recording struggles of village women and men against corrupt officials, rural victims of HIV-contaminated blood in the so-called plasma economy promoted by provincial governments, the injustice of a court ruling

in a date rape case, and so on.¹⁹ Her actions, which crossed the line of an exclusive focus on less risky “women’s issues,” resulted in the discipline of the state in the form of her forced early retirement and nonrenewal of her passport. The personal price is high if one dares to defy the authoritarian state, which has been increasingly corrupt and coercive in the two decades following the FWCW.

The political context has thus served as a critical factor in feminists’ choices of what actions to take and what strategies to adopt; it also limits what may be accomplished. The constraints of the context also largely explain this cohort’s preoccupation with the feminist concept of gender. Legitimized by the UN mandate, gender has been carved out as a relatively safe zone for feminists to pursue social justice and equality without an open challenge against multiple systems of oppression in the process of a repressive state capitalism. Gender mainstreaming is a circumscribed feminist agenda in comparison to the vision of this cohort’s revolutionary foremothers, who pursued women’s thorough liberation via political, economic, cultural, and social structural changes. It nevertheless has quietly created new areas of feminist intervention that their foremothers did not envision or where they were unable to intervene. Last but not least, this cohort’s tremendous efforts in gender training, especially their efforts to develop women’s and gender studies curricula in higher education and to promote feminist knowledge production, have inserted a critical feminist discourse into contemporary China’s media and knowledge production, otherwise dominated by blatant sexism and neoliberalism. Such discursive endeavors have paved the way for the rise of a younger generation of daring feminists who reject the ambiguous term *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义 feminine-ism) and openly embrace *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义 women’s rights/power-ism), a Chinese rendition of feminism shunned

19. See the University of Michigan’s Global Feminisms Project, interview with Ai Xiaoming; and her documentaries *Taishi Village*, *Stories of the Plain*, and *The Heavenly Garden*.

by mainstream society for its emphasis on women's demand for both rights and power.

New Style of Feminist Actions of Young Feminists

In the second decade following the FWCW, the dynamics in the field of Chinese feminist struggles changed again due to drastic shifts in China's social and economic transformations, as well as its political environment. The feminist pioneers who formed NGOs with the opportunity of the FWCW inspired other groups to follow suit in establishing issue-oriented NGOs nationwide. The rapid growth of various NGOs with massive financial support from diverse international donors alarmed the CCP, which was insecure about its rule and was confronting increasing class and ethnic conflicts domestically and the impact of color revolutions globally. A decade after the NGO Forum hosted in China, the CCP started to tighten up its monitoring and regulation of Chinese NGOs and to restrict their international funding sources, as well as to subvert and co-opt Chinese NGOs.

At the same time, a younger generation of feminists emerged on the stage of social activism, disregarding the tightening political control. Many of the students of the first cohort of feminist NGO leaders, now situated in various urban professions, including universities, the media, and Women's Federations, carried on feminist struggles in new forms and styles. This cohort of feminists in their late thirties to early forties was joined by an even younger group of feminists who were recent college graduates in their twenties. One commonality across the age groups is that they had grown up in postsocialist China, when socialist institutional mechanisms such as equal employment and guaranteed equal pay, along with a position in public enterprises, were largely dismantled in the process of privatization and marketization. In tandem with institutional changes, the socialist gender discourse of equality between men and women was by the 1990s already overshadowed by a discourse of gender differentiation that celebrated a "natural femininity" attained by "modern" consumption of feminine products and by resumption of the traditional

role of a virtuous mother and good wife, and a hegemonic masculinity embodied in “successful” men who possess power, wealth, and women. The strong attraction of these young, educated women to feminism is not accidental in a particularly limiting and blatantly sexist political culture.

A demographic factor in combination with China’s drastic economic development has made way for the rise of these young feminists. The one-child policy since 1979 resulted in an unprecedented number of single daughters (the lucky ones who were not aborted) who enjoyed all the resources their families from both parents’ sides could afford for their education and personal development. The coming of age of these “little princesses” coincided with China’s huge expansion of college education, which tapped the educational market on the basis of an expanding middle class.²⁰ As a result, the proportion of female college students rapidly rose from about 37 percent before 1999 to 51.03 percent in 2012, and the proportion of female Master’s degree holders rose to 51.46 percent in 2012.²¹

This college sex ratio, which indicates an opposite trend to the skewed sex ratio in the population, demonstrates female students’ superb academic performance, since each applicant has to pass national college entrance examinations to be accepted by various universities according to their test scores. The gender of applicants whose test scores rank among the top regardless of discipline and location has also shown a continuous change, with the male top testers declining

20. College enrollment in China jumped from 2.28 million in 1978 to 29.07 million in 2008. *Xin Zhongguo Liushinian Jiaoyu Chengjiu Zhan* 新中国六十年教育成就展 (An Exhibit of the Accomplishments of Education in the Sixty-Years of the New China), China Education Statistics, www.stats.edu.cn/tjdt/60/ 新中国60年教育成就展.htm.

21. Zhang Lin 张琳 and Cai Yunqi 蔡蕴琦, “Guanzhu Daxuesheng Xingbiebi: Dushu Nüsheng Youxiu Gongzuo Nan Lingdao Duo” 关注大学生性别比: 读书女生优秀工作男领导多 (Pay Attention to the Sex Ratio of College Students: More Excellent Female Students in School but More Male Leaders in Workplace), *Yangzi wanbao*, September 12, 2012.

from 66.2 percent in 1999 to 39.7 percent in 2008.²² The consistent high performance of female students has led to an outcry in male-dominated media about *yinsheng yangshuai* 阴盛阳衰—a so-called gender imbalance with a flourishing female (*yin* 阴) and declining male (*yang* 阳). Many universities have adopted discriminatory admission policies that set a higher score for female students to be considered, on the grounds that many more enterprises would like to accept male graduates rather than female graduates. Indeed, blatant gender discrimination in employment has been a well-known reality since the economic reform, and even many government branches have jumped on the bandwagon of posting only male-wanted job advertisements.

A large cohort of well-educated young women from diverse social and economic backgrounds with high aspirations for themselves as well as high expectations from their families, contradictorily, has encountered excessive gender discrimination and pervasive masculinist sexual norms that openly treat women as sex objects and secondary citizens. Inspired by feminism, young women nevertheless have few social resources to make their voices heard, let alone to participate in the policy-making process, as the feminists of older cohorts have been able to. As a feminist organizer of this young cohort commented on the feminist strategy of the second cohort working quietly with and within the official system to generate policy changes, “Their experience is very difficult to replicate. At the time of the FWCW they usually already had some managerial positions in the official system, and they had a circle of friends who were in the decision-making or advisory positions. These factors have served as the lubricant between their NGO programs and the government.”²³ It is a sober assessment

22. Liu Bohong 刘伯红 and Li Yani 李亚妮, “Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu zhong de Shehuixingbie Xianshi” 中国高等教育中的社会性别现实 (A Gendered Reality in China’s Higher Education), *Yunnan minzu daxue xuebao* 1, no. 28 (January 2011): 55–64.

23. Li Sipan 李思磐, “Zhongguo Ban Nüquan Zhuyi: Qimeng dao Zijue” 中国版女权主义: 启蒙到自觉 (Chinese Version of Feminism: From Enlightenment to Self-Consciousness), Weibo, February 12, 2015, <https://weibo.com/p/1001603808858006020709>.

of the relative deprivation of young urban educated women's social, economic, and political power vis-à-vis that of the cohort who grew up in the socialist period.

Where to find new resources for feminist activism? What forms of action are viable for the young feminists who have hardly any ties with those who have power in the official system? It turns out that social and economic marginality does not necessarily disempower the young educated urban feminists who have been brought up in the age of cyberspace and of new conceptual frameworks circulating globally. The young feminists quickly identified a powerful medium for feminist engagement: the Internet. And because they are not embedded in the official system and have no constraining considerations associated with those who have some social status, they are far less restricted in conceptualizing the possibilities of their actions. As a result, we have witnessed many innovative actions initiated by young feminists who have nothing to lose.

Most prominent among those who engaged in online feminist organizing in the second decade following the FWCW were Feminist Voice in Beijing and New Media Women's Network in Guangzhou. Feminist Voice was an offshoot of Women's Media Monitor Network, a feminist NGO in Beijing founded in 1999. Led by Lü Pin 吕频, who quit her job at the ACWF's newspaper to become a freelance writer to enact her vision of autonomous feminism, Feminist Voice formed a loosely connected feminist network via its website and its electronic journal, which circulated via email. It attracted young feminists who had neither prestigious social status nor available social resources, but who nevertheless possessed abundant imagination and creativity. A loose coalition of young feminists all over the country named Young Feminist Activism (YFA), working closely with Feminist Voice, operated vigorously via website, email, Weibo 微博, and WeChat, with provocative topics and self-initiated actions. Because their intention was to call public attention to violations of women's rights in all aspects of Chinese society as a way to engender feminist social and cultural transformation, they deliberately created shocking images in public spaces and then took photos of their

actions to circulate online. Their strategy drastically departed from those of the older cohort of feminist NGO leaders, who were good at maneuvering behind the scenes and inconspicuously running gender training workshops indoors. Visuality became a crucial method for these younger feminists to enable visibility of many unseen and untold violations of women's rights.

A group of Shanghai feminists in 2012 innovatively staged a performance action, first in a Shanghai subway station, with signs saying "I can be slutty, yet you can't harass me" to protest sexual harassment on public transportation. It became an instant social media sensation when photos of a couple of feminists in action were uploaded online. Inspired by the success of the pioneering operation, which did not require many resources yet reached a huge audience with a provocative feminist message via the Internet, the YFA members who were affiliated with Feminist Voice began to stage a range of public performance actions that successfully attracted public attention. They occupied men's rooms in public to demand gender equity in the design of public bathrooms; they shaved their heads to protest gender discrimination in college admissions; they adorned themselves in "blood"-stained white wedding gowns in public to protest domestic violence and posted topless photos online collectively, inscribing anti-domestic violence slogans on their bodies; they launched a feminist cross-country walk to circulate feminist messages; and engaged in many more such creatively eye-catching actions. As the introduction to the YFA photo exhibition in New York City in the fall of 2015 states, "These young people are full of inspiration, talent and bravery at the intersectional space of art, body politics and social movement. Feminism has no doubt become the fountain of their wisdom."²⁴

The YFA's most influential performance action took place on March 7, 2015, with the "assistance" of the police, who detained five

24. *Above Ground: Forty Moments of Transformation: A Photography Exhibition of Young Feminist Activism in China*, New York City, September 23–27, 2015. The exhibition was organized by YFA to parallel the UN Global Summit of Women.

young activists preparing to post anti-sexual harassment stickers on public transportation in multiple cities as part of their activities to commemorate International Women's Day. The detention of the Chinese Feminist Five at the moment when global feminists launched Beijing+20 to evaluate feminist progress since 1995 galvanized a global mobilization. Feminists in many countries staged protests, and over 2 million people from all over the world signed the online petitions demanding their release. Chinese feminist activism entered the global spotlight.

Domestically, the detention of the Feminist Five epitomizes the tightening political control of social movements by the state, marking a new era in which NGO feminist activism no longer enjoys a special safe zone in comparison to other social movements that have long been under the state surveillance and suppression. The logic of state control is manifested clearly in the bizarre detention of young feminists: any coordinated and organized activities simultaneously happening in multiple locations indicate the existence of or potential for a cross-regional organization, which has to be crushed regardless of its legitimate agenda of protecting women's rights. In the following years YFA-organized activism was seriously curtailed, and their strategy of pursuing visibility with performance actions is unlikely to continue as police effectively close any public spaces for such actions, especially by activists who are already tightly monitored. At the same time, many more young women demonstrate their enhanced interest in feminism by spontaneously joining online discussions of gender issues to promulgate and expand a feminist discourse via the Internet. The term *nüquan zhuyi* (women's rights/power-ism), unambiguously embraced by this cohort of feminists, is gaining increasing purchase among the young generation while the security system and cyber police are rapidly increasing the scope of their surveillance.

The New Media Women's Network in Guangzhou was initiated and led by journalist Li Sipan 李思磐 and sustained by a core group of young professionals and faculty members in universities in Guangzhou, many of whom had been active participants in feminist programs organized by Ai Xiaoming before her forced retirement. The

location of Guangzhou was congenial to social activism, as it is adjacent to Hong Kong. Ideas and resources for civil society frequently flowed from Hong Kong to Guangzhou via various channels.²⁵

The New Media Women's Network creatively launched colorful public activities such as public lectures and art exhibitions, as well as online feminist activism. One of the most prominent cases initiated by this group was the anti-sexual harassment campaign in higher education in China in 2014. The group succeeded in collecting about 260 signatures from Chinese professors and scholars transnationally on two petitions: one to the Ministry of Education demanding the implementation of anti-sexual harassment mechanisms in Chinese universities, and one to the president of Xiamen University demanding due punishment of a professor's systematic sexual harassment of his female graduate students. All the transnational mobilization was accomplished via email and WeChat, with the active participation of the YFA, as well as older feminists situated in academic institutions. The widely circulated petitions resulted in the temporary removal of the male professor from his teaching post at Xiamen University (a mild punishment that was unsatisfactory to feminists and his victimized students), and the Ministry of Education's regulation to forbid sexual harassment at universities—a regulation that at this writing remains only on paper without enforcement mechanisms).

Another influential action by the New Media Women's Network was the massive online discussion on the meaning of International Women's Day launched by Li Sipan in a blog post a few days before International Women's Day in 2016. By March 8 it had received 101 million visits: thousands of young people joined the public discussion on how to continue a feminist heritage, join global feminist struggles, and resist capitalist consumerist cooptation of a feminist event as a way to commemorate International Women's Day. Feminism, *nüquan*

25. The eruption of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014—that is, citizens' protests against the CCP's encroachment on Hong Kong's civil rights—reversed the situation. NGOs in Guangzhou have since been tightly monitored to prevent the impact of Hong Kong's civil society from reaching the mainland.

zhuyi, has never received such massive public attention in China. The Feminist Five and many more people from the YFA also actively participated in the celebration and debates online and even recirculated the anti-sexual harassment stickers that had been evidence of their “crimes” a year before. This huge success of cyber action demonstrates the existence of a rapidly expanding social force that is eager to be informed of feminist heritage, as well as to get involved in feminist actions.

As the Guangdong area has been a center of manufacture for global markets, concentrating tens of millions of migrant workers, feminists in Guangzhou have developed contacts with women workers organizations in recent years, turning increasing attention to the intersection of class and gender. The efforts of young, urban, educated feminists to seek coalition with a more marginalized social group, with full knowledge of the politically sensitive nature of their action, indicate their conscious challenge of political boundaries with an expanding feminist vision. In their online communications, these college-educated young feminists, fluent in English, frequently demonstrate their familiarity with current transnational feminist issues, as well as feminist critiques of capitalist globalization. The critical concept of class has been consciously deployed by this cohort in their articles circulated via WeChat, analyzing migrant women workers’ marginality and their predicament, conditioned by both gender and class power relations in today’s China. The concept also featured prominently in the online discussion on International Women’s Day.

Finally, the most prominent feature distinguishing this young cohort from the previous two cohorts of Chinese feminists examined in this piece is their open defiance of heterosexual normativity. Unlike older feminists who generally avoid open discussion of sexuality (with the exception of Ai Xiaoming, who pioneered the Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*, which challenged the taboo of Chinese women’s open discussion and display of sexuality), the young cohort displays their diverse sexuality with ease and deeply analyzes the oppressive nature of compulsory heterosexuality. Some young feminists are also active members of gay and lesbian organizations. The

determined break from the grip of dominant heterosexual normativity is often inseparable from the empowerment of these courageous young women's and men's exposure to feminism, and embracing a feminist activist identity seems logical to many of them. They are not afraid of being singled out as a minority, sexually or politically, in a largely conformist society. Any individual challenge against homophobia or discrimination based on sexuality receives strong support from this young cohort of feminists.

Though this section presents Feminist Voice and the New Media Women's Network as two cases of autonomous feminist NGOs operated by post-FWCW feminists, the feminist activities of the young generation, whether collectively organized or individually spontaneous, whether covert or overt, are certainly not centered around these two organizations, but rather dispersed on and off the Internet in many sites that defy state surveillance. The emergence of a decentered Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018 may best illustrate how feminist energy has been continuously manifested in ways unexpected by the national security system.

Anti-Sexual Harassment: A Feminist Rallying Point

China's merge with global capitalism has witnessed the rise of a hegemonic and toxic masculinity embodied in "successful men" who flaunt their wealth, power, fame, and possession of young women. Powerful men preying on young female subordinates in all walks of life has become such a prevalent practice that a neologism has long been in public circulation: *the hidden rule* (*qian guize* 潜规则)—that is, young female subordinates, whether in the workplace or educational institutions, are expected to provide sexual service to their male superiors. Understandably many powerless young women have complied unwillingly, and many others have bravely resisted, often bearing painful consequences. In either case the stories would be hidden as a function of the hidden rule.

The earliest media report on a case of brave resistance was the 2009 incident of Deng Yujiao 邓玉娇, a twenty-one-year-old woman

working in a public bath center as a pedicurist.²⁶ In self-defense against attempted rape by a local official client, Deng stabbed him, and this resulted in his death. Deng was arrested but later released after a public uproar on the Internet from people who were enraged about the rampant corruption of government officials. Many men joined the condemnation of the official's sexual assault, and some male lawyers volunteered to provide legal defense to Deng, who, in much of the publicity online, was praised as a heroine who dared to fight against officials to defend her "purity"—that is, her chastity. A few feminists from the Chinese Women's University in Beijing staged a performance action in public to express their support of Deng's resistance and their protest against sexual violence in society.

In 2013 another case of sexual violence enraged the public. A school principal in Haining county, Hainan province, pimped fifth grade girls to local officials who were looking for virgins, and no legal action was taken against them before feminist interventions. Ye Haiyan, a renowned feminist activist, and Wang Yu, a renowned feminist lawyer, together with four other feminists went to Haining to stage a public protest, demanding legal action against the perpetrators. The photo of Ye Haiyan holding a sign saying, "HEY PRINCIPAL: GET A ROOM WITH ME AND LEAVE THE KIDS ALONE!" went viral online. While school children were too powerless to fight against sexual violence, feminists' heroic struggles in this case gained huge public support, but the effort did not end well. Ye Haiyan was detained and then police harassed her and chased her out of each location where she tried to stay. She had to return to her rural hometown as a result of state persecution because of her feminist action.²⁷

26. "Deng Yujiao Incident," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deng_Yujiao_incident.

27. The protest of sexual violence against schoolgirls by Ye and other feminist activists, as well as subsequent police persecution, were recorded and brilliantly represented by film producer Wang Nanfu in her documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016). The feminist lawyer Wang Yu was arrested in the police roundup of over a hundred lawyers nationwide in China on July 9, 2015.

In 2014, when the serial sexual harassment committed by a professor at Xiamen University was exposed via the Internet, the public indignation was mostly expressed by a female audience, and feminists responded strongly with collective actions nationwide and transnationally. By this time the hidden rule had obviously been practiced so widely in the educational system that university administrators did not bother to punish the famous professor, who amassed a huge amount of academic resources, and few men publicly condemned him. Treating young women as their trophies is no longer a corrupt practice confined to the government officials but is now an assumed sexual privilege sought after by many men with some sort of power in all walks of life.

Living with such oppressive masculinist sexual norms, many young women are frustrated, outraged, and eager for action. Wei Tingting, one of the Feminist Five, and her friends conducted a large-scale survey of sexual harassment in higher education in 2016 as a way to raise public awareness of the prevalence of the problem. He Xi, a student at Xi'an Foreign Languages Institute, wrote a letter in 2017 to the president of the school to request that institutional mechanisms be set up to combat sexual harassment. Huang Xueqin, a young journalist, began an online survey of sexual harassment in the media workplace via her WeChat account ATSH in 2017.²⁸ And in the summer of 2017 leading feminists of two generations gathered in Shanghai for a workshop on how to coordinate feminist efforts for concerted anti-sexual harassment activities.

In the deteriorating political environment, anti-sexual harassment efforts in higher education and the workplace were identified as a relatively low-risk issue for feminist action, though the feminist workshop

28. For feminist anti-sexual harassment activities, see 女权学论 Nüquan Xue-lun, "Zhongguo Mitu Yundong Tuishou Huang Xueqin Zao Juliu" 中国米兔运动推手黄雪琴遭拘留 (Huang Xueqin, Leader in the Chinese #MeToo Movement, Was Detained). www.chinesefeminism.org, November 11, 2019.

was organized confidentially to avoid police attention.²⁹ Back in May 2017 Song Xiuyan, the Party secretary of the ACWF, in her talk to Women's Federation officials, claimed that "feminism" (女权主义) was promoted by "Western hostile forces," openly invoking a Maoist class-struggle scheme that cancelled the legitimacy of feminism in official discourse.³⁰ The blatant reversal of the ACWF's congenial relationship with NGO feminists since the FWCW signifies the further encroachment on the official system by national security's new definition of feminism as a social movement instigated by hostile foreign forces to subvert the Chinese state. Feminists at the workshop were fully aware of the drastically changed political climate for feminist activism.

Still, an massive outburst of feminist mobilization against sexual harassment emerged at the beginning of 2018. Luo Xixi, who works in the United States but was once a graduate student at Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, reached out to Huang Xueqin after observing her online activities against sexual harassment in the media. Inspired by the ongoing #MeToo movement in the United States, Luo decided to expose her former professor Chen Xiaowu, who had sexually harassed her years before and has been continually harassing his current graduate students. Luo had written to the administrator of the university but to no avail. Now Huang, a seasoned journalist, worked with Luo to launch a powerful public exposé via the Internet, openly charging Chen Xiaowu, using Luo Xixi's real name and related evidence, on the New Year of 2018. The first-person exposé became an instant hit on the Internet, and feminists from diverse locations and organizations immediately recognized its significance.

29. The organizers of and participants in this workshop are not revealed here for the sake of their safety.

30. Song Xiuyan 宋秀岩, "Ba Jiang Zhengzhi Guanchuan yu Fulian Gaige he Gongzuo Quan Guocheng" 把讲政治贯穿于妇联改革和工作全过程 (Raising Political Awareness in the Entire Process of the Reform and Work of the Women's Federation System), People.cn, May 19, 2017, <http://fj.people.com.cn/n2/2017/0519/c181466-30211002.html>, accessed June 26, 2020.

In the following days organized petitions and spontaneous support surged both on social media and in the official media as many young women journalists decided to join the fight. Feminists from the summer workshop of 2017 coordinated to circulate online a petition template to university administrators. To protect current students from retaliation, alumni were contacted to sign petitions to nearly a hundred universities, demanding that mechanisms be set up to combat sexual harassment. Inspired by Luo's example, one young woman after another came out to expose professors and supervisors at diverse workplaces, ranging from universities and the state-run CCTV to NGOs, breaking the cultural taboo of shame that had long been internalized by survivors of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Young women began to adopt a Chinese phonetic transliteration of #MeToo (米兔) to name the ongoing anti-sexual harassment movement in China.

Understandably such large-scale agitation could not escape attention and action from the national security system. Orders to ban reporting on #MeToo in the official media took effect quickly, while cyber police began frantically deleting such content from social media, including WeChat. In the tidal wave of state censorship, Feminist Voice became collateral damage, with its Weibo account shut down permanently. Those in charge of monitoring social movements could not comprehend the decentered and dispersed nature of the surge of feminist activities. They had to punish some organization for its imagined leading role behind the scenes. When various feminist online accounts continued to circulate #MeToo-related information, cyber police moved on to closing down many more Weibo and WeChat accounts and intimidating prominent activists by "treating them to tea," a euphemism referring to police interrogations of activists without due legal procedure. As state suppression intensified, feminists explored diverse means to maintain the momentum of the #MeToo movement. Some sent letters to government officials and legislators; others provided legal support or psychological counseling to survivors of sexual harassment.

While the police accelerated their surveillance, various local governments and various branches of the central government began to respond to the wave of the #MeToo movement. Hangzhou's municipal government was the first to require universities to set up policies dealing with sexual harassment in August 2018. The Ministry of Education followed the trend in November, issuing regulations that included rules against sexual harassment. A proposal to revise the Civil Code in November 2018 included rules against sexual harassment that eventually became the 1010 clause in the Civil Code, which was passed by the People's Congress on May 28, 2020.³¹ Besides defining various acts of sexual harassment as illegal, the clause specifies the legal responsibilities of any institution in which sexual harassment occurs. These responsive changes in policy and law indicate feminist operations within the official system, though how to implement the new regulations and law on the ground remains a huge challenge for feminists in and outside the official system.

Conclusion

In 2013, at a meeting with the ACWF leading body, president Xi Jinping instructed: "Special attention should be paid to women's unique role in propagating Chinese family virtues and setting up a good family tradition. This relates to harmony in the family and in society and to the healthy development of children. Women should consciously shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young, as well as educating children."³² Emphasizing traditional familial roles

31. On the legal significance of the clause for anti-sexual harassment in the Civil Code, see Wen Juping 温举平, "Minfadian Jiedu: Qiye Ruhe Yingdui Xingsaorao Dailai de Falü Fengxian" 民法典解读: 企业如何应对性骚扰带来的法律风险 (Interpreting the Civil Code: How Can Enterprises Deal with the Legal Risk Caused by Sexual Harassment Cases), Deheng lüshi shiwusuo, May 29, 2020, www.dhl.com.cn/CN/tansuocontent/0008/018697/7.aspx?MID=0902.

32. Xi Jinping 习近平, "Jianchi Nannü Pingdeng Jiben Guoce, Fahui Woguo Funü Weida Zuoyong" 坚持男女平等基本国策, 发挥我国妇女伟大作用 (Upholding the

for women articulates both a masculinist imperative to restore China's presocialist gender order and an increasing social crisis since the state has shed its responsibilities for the care of children, the old, and the sick. The privatization of reproductive labor and the recent population policy that switches from one child to two children added new fuel to the fundamentalist neo-Confucian agitation for reviving patriarchal order, making gender contentions ever more ferocious.

Chinese feminist activists are confronting grave challenges as the male-dominated authoritarian state is turning openly conservative in its gender policy and further tightening its political control of any social activism. With the ominous state narrative claiming that feminist activism is instigated by hostile foreign forces, autonomous feminist NGOs are not only demonized but also delegitimized, a huge regression from the FWCW, when Chinese feminists of the second cohort gained political legitimacy for organizing. Curtailment of domestic NGOs has taken place simultaneously with drastic measures of restricting international donors' support of Chinese NGOs. Thus the resource-poor young feminists confront not only political perils but also financial predicaments for organized activities. Most seriously, the police have also accelerated their control of cyberspace with rapidly advanced high-tech. State censorship is a daily experience for Chinese netizens, when the cyber police constantly delete texts circulating online or via WeChat, or shut down websites. The very space and means of young feminist activism are under the omnipresent surveillance of the police.

Paradoxically, the phrase *equality between men and women*, a legacy of the first cohort of state feminism, remains on the ACWF agenda as well as in state discourse. Not only did Xi Jinping pledge the Chinese government's commitment to equality between men and women at the September 2015 Global Summit of Women, in ACWF leader Song Xiuyan's 2017 talk that condemned feminism, she simultaneously

Fundamental State Policy of Gender Equity, Exerting Women's Great Role in Our Country), Xinhua net, October 31, 2013.

claimed to uphold the “fundamental state policy of equality between men and women.” Logical consistency has never been a concern of the CCP, but taming social groups that are not immediately under its control has become a top priority in its agenda of “protecting stability” (*weiwen* 维稳), especially in the era of Xi Jinping. The discursive fissures and contradictions can continue to be strategically used by feminists in and outside the official system; that is to say, spaces for feminist actions are not entirely sealed, though the format and content of feminist actions are closely monitored. The effects of operating in a virtual panopticon are serious perils for the development of Chinese feminism.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, substantial changes in the social setting and political environment have profoundly affected Chinese feminist practices. The ACWF has long lost its first cohort of revolutionary feminist leaders; the second cohort of feminist officials fostered in the socialist period with a commitment to women’s liberation is mostly retired; and the women’s organization has become part of the state bureaucracy, with officials who generally have less commitment to gender equality than interest in career advancement. While conscious feminists still operate in the official system here and there, institutional constraints often seriously limit their capacity for feminist initiatives.

With neither state power nor ties to those with official power, and with the tightening up of cyber space, the disadvantaged young cohort of feminists nonetheless has access to a crucial power: a critical mass of young women who are increasingly frustrated with gender discrimination and sexual exploitation. As is demonstrated by the sudden surge of the #MeToo movement in 2018, which resulted in both severe suppression by the police and positive changes in government policies and law, feminist organizing around young women’s interests is not only feasible but necessary, though such activism has to try to avoid the radar of the police. Diverse and geographically dispersed young feminist groups are continuously operating, mostly within the confines of today’s political parameters. If we believe that the current political climate would not remain stable forever, then we have reason

to predict that it is only a matter of time before the next burst of concerted feminist interventions pushes political and cultural boundaries. The depth and scope of the next feminist surge by young women, however, will depend on conscious reflections and evaluations of the effects of state censorship and surveillance on individual feminists so as to enable them to explore new areas for feminist breakthrough. Such efforts are beginning to emerge in an otherwise gloomy time.³³

33. A group of feminists situated in diverse geographic locations hosted an online workshop titled “(Self-)Censorship, Social Activism, and Chinese Feminist Scholarship” on July 10, 2020, exploring constraints on the development of Chinese feminism.