

ONE

## Research on Women in Contemporary China

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One of the most significant social phenomena in contemporary China, often overlooked by China specialists, is the continuous development of research on women since the mid-1980s. The end of the Maoist era terminated the monopoly of class as *the* category for social and historical analysis. Women emerged as a focal point in public debates as well as in scholarly scrutiny in the reform era. Different social and political groups expressed their objection to Maoism or their vision of modernity through discussing women; their conversations, in turn, formed powerful discourses on gender in post-Mao China. Research on women (*funü yanjiu*), carried out primarily by urban educated women, has become a nationwide women's movement that is creating new gender discourses in China. This essay examines the social and political contexts of the rise of research on women in contemporary China, attempts to delineate the contours of this movement, and discusses its meanings to the women involved, as well as the relationship between the Chinese women's movement and Western feminism.

As a participant, observer, and sometimes both in the development of research on women in China in the past several years, I present my observations and information based on my interviews with women scholars and activists in China and my participation in some projects carried out in China, in addition to my survey of related literature and documents. However, I do not claim that this paper represents an "inside view." As a Chinese historian of women in the United States who has studied Western feminist

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scholarship for a decade, I view the ongoing women's movement in China from multiple perspectives.

### Establishing a Chinese Women's Studies—The Initial Stage

Many Western feminist scholars have criticized the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for abandoning gender equality in the course of revolution. Yet for many Chinese women who grew up in the People's Republic of China, especially urban women who were beneficiaries of the equal educational and employment policies of the Maoist era, the CCP-created presumption that "Chinese women were liberated" was a fact beyond questioning. In the early years of the reform era, however, this presumption was seriously shaken by the inadvertent effects of the one-child policy. In the early 1980s, cases of female infanticide and abuse of women who gave birth to female infants in the countryside were reported in newspapers nationwide. This was shocking to the Women's Federation (Fulian) as well as to most urban educated women, since these were practices supposedly relegated to the pre-1949 past—before Chinese women were liberated. The national Women's Federation immediately launched a campaign to "protect the legal rights of women and children," a move that suggested that women's liberation was an unfinished cause and needed more public attention.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after that, other problems related to urban women attracted more public attention and media coverage. These included divorce (associated with long-term separation of married couples or social and spatial mobility of groups of men and women during and after the Cultural Revolution), marriage (a large number of urban educated women were reaching their thirties with dim prospects of marriage, an issue that caught the attention of the Central Committee of the CCP), women's employment (the urban economic reforms quickly threatened gender equality in the sector of public ownership), women's femininity (as a critique of the ultra-leftist line that supposedly masculinized Chinese women), and prostitution (increasingly prominent with the development of a market economy).<sup>2</sup>

Facing all kinds of women's problems in the new political era and assigned the task of solving those problems by the Central

<sup>1</sup> See Li Xiaojiang 1991 and Tan Shen 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See Honig and Hershatter 1988.

Committee, the revived Women's Federation (which had been disbanded during the Cultural Revolution) decided that theoretical research on women should be one of its priorities. In the post-Mao pursuit of scientific knowledge and methods, theoretical research (which connotes a scholarly approach and scientific methods), instead of a Maoist mass movement, was seen as the correct approach to finding solutions to women's problems. In September 1984, the national Women's Federation held the First National Conference on Theoretical Research on Women, which emphasized the importance and urgency of research on women and asked local Women's Federation branches to organize women researchers as well as to improve the theoretical quality and analytical ability of Women's Federation cadres. Zhang Guoying, a leader of the national federation, stressed candidly at the conference, "We must realize the urgency of social investigation and theoretical research on women's problems. We should guide the practice of the women's movement with theory. Otherwise, the Women's Federation will not be an authoritative mass organization."<sup>3</sup> In other words, federation officials felt not only that emerging women's problems urgently called for solutions, but also that consolidation of the leading position of the Women's Federation in the age of scientific modernization urgently called for its engagement in theoretical research. The official push from the national Women's Federation provided legitimacy for research on women, and the power of the Women's Federation's organizational network stimulated research on women nationwide over the next few years. There can be no doubt that the Women's Federation was the major force behind the surge of research on women.

In October 1986, the national Women's Federation held the Second National Conference on Theoretical Research on Women. The two-year interval had witnessed obvious progress in women's research. More than a hundred people attended the conference, of whom 50 percent were not from the Women's Federation system but from academies of social sciences and universities throughout the country. Six major topics were discussed at the conference: reform and women's liberation, women's role in the construction

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<sup>3</sup> Xi Xingfang 1989. Introducing the content of the first conference, Xi gives an account of "an important talk" by Du Runsheng, director of the Rural Policy Institute of the Central Secretariat. The talk, which represents the party's guideline to the Women's Federation, emphasizes that the Women's Federation should both encourage women to work for the party's goals in the new era and grasp women's special problems and provide services for women.

of spiritual civilization,<sup>4</sup> women's image and the view of women, the social value of reproduction, how to create successful women (*funü chengcai*), and the establishment of Chinese *funüxue* (lit., "women's studies"). On the last issue, two opposite opinions were expressed. The first opinion resisted establishing *funüxue* on the grounds that the term was never seen in Marxist classics and it came with opening up to the West, so using it might carry the implication of bourgeois feminism. The second opinion advocated women's studies: *funüxue* was a discipline, a part of human sciences, just like economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so on. It had no class nature; both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat could study it.<sup>5</sup>

### The Debate over "Funüxue"

The disagreement expressed at the conference over the issue of *funüxue* was a continuation of a public debate. In 1982 the academic journal *Guowai shehui kexue* (Social sciences abroad) first mentioned women's studies, which was translated as *funüxue*. The same journal in 1984 published a translation of an article from the Japanese journal *Science of Ideas*, "The History of the Feminist Movement and Women's Studies." In 1983, *A Collection of American Female Writers' Short Stories* was published, and in the introduction the editor, Zhu Hong, briefly described women's studies in American universities. She translated the term as *funü yanjiu* (women's research or research on women). In 1986 the China Women's Press published a translation of a Japanese work, *Nüxingxue rumen* (An introduction to women's studies). Here women's studies was translated as *nüxingxue* (lit., female studies). Although the three terms have since been used by different people to refer to women's studies, they contain subtle differences in Chinese connotation. *Funüxue* and *nüxingxue* are apparent neologisms of foreign descent. Although both of them convey an idea of academic discipline with the word *xue*, *nüxingxue* could be construed as merely a study of female physiology and psychology.

<sup>4</sup> "Spiritual civilization" (*jingshen wenming*) is a term promoted by the CCP in the economic reform era. *A Chinese-English Dictionary of Neologisms* 1990 gives the following definition of the term: "The advanced state of mankind's spiritual life. It consists mainly of two aspects: one is the scale and level of development in education, science, culture, art, hygiene, athletics, etc.; the other is the direction and level of development in sociopolitical thought, ethics and morality. The two penetrate and promote each other. It is the opposite of *wuzhi wenming*, material civilization."

<sup>5</sup> Xi Xingfang 1989. See also Zhu Qing 1987.

*Funü yanjiu* sounds native and has little ambiguity in terms of its content: any issue relating to women could be the subject of *funü yanjiu* (research on women). However, this term does not suggest a strong connection with an academic discipline. As I will discuss below, *funü yanjiu* in China, unlike women's studies in the West, is not concentrated in academic institutions. In my view, *funü yanjiu* is an accurate term to refer to what has been going on in China, while *funüxue* is a good translation for women's studies abroad.<sup>6</sup>

In 1984, *Funü gongzuo*, a journal of the Women's Federation, printed an article by Deng Weizhi calling for establishing *funüxue* in China.<sup>7</sup> In "Improving and Developing *Funüxue*," Deng suggests that it is important for research on women to be labeled *funüxue*, so that people will consider women's issues from an academic perspective: "Our country has the experience of a women's movement since the May Fourth period, especially the precious experience of work on women in the period of socialist construction. Some of the experience has been theorized, but most of it is still waiting to be theorized and waiting to be composed into a whole scientific system. *Funüxue* is the product and demand of the advancement of the women's movement."<sup>8</sup>

On January 27, 1986, *Zhongguo funübao* printed a short article by Deng Weizhi titled "Welcome the Golden Age of *Funüxue*." This article caught the attention of both Li Xiaojiang, a teacher of literature who had just begun her career as an advocate for women's studies in China, and Luo Qiong, a high-ranking member of the old guard of the national Women's Federation. Li

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<sup>6</sup> This point refers to the current state of research on women in China. As the field of research on women has been changing continuously, the connotations of both *funü yanjiu* and *funüxue* will change accordingly. Currently, although most attention in the field is still aimed at addressing women's issues in contemporary society, some women scholars are beginning their feminist efforts in academic disciplines. They have articulated clearly that they are aiming at "establishing feminist disciplines." It is my prediction that eventually, the term *funüxue* will be used to refer only to feminist disciplines in academic institutions, although it will be a very long process for a Chinese women's studies to take shape in academia.

<sup>7</sup> Deng Weizhi is a renowned scholar from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences who rose to fame in the mid-1980s by constantly advocating new ideas in public. In my interview with him in 1995, Deng told me, "I read about the term *funüxue* from a journal that printed translated information from abroad. I had no idea what *funüxue* was. But I figured it was a new scientific discipline. I think we need to develop all new disciplines in social sciences."

<sup>8</sup> Deng Weizhi 1995, p. 2. For a comment on Deng's role in promoting women's studies in China, see Ding Juan 1992, p. 194.

had already in 1985 formed an association for *funüxue* attached to the Association of Future Studies of Henan Province. Now she found *funüxue* becoming a national topic, especially with the help of Luo Qiong. On March 8, 1986, Luo published an article in *Jingji ribao*—"Pay Attention to Theoretical Research on Women's Problems"—in which she opposed introducing *funüxue* to China, for "our theory of women's liberation is different in ideological system, objects of service, and final goals from the so-called *funüxue* that came into being in the United States and Japan since the 1960s."<sup>9</sup>

In China an issue becomes prominent and political once a high-ranking figure takes a stand. *Funüxue* quickly became a sensitive issue because of Luo's open involvement. But in the open and free political atmosphere of the mid-1980s, Luo's official voice failed to suppress other voices from below. Instead, it stimulated a public debate on the necessity of establishing *funüxue* in China. Some people thought women's problems should be studied in different academic disciplines and that *funüxue* would narrow the scope of research on women. Some believed that *funüxue* was a comprehensive and systematic science that included well-developed disciplines dealing with the subject of women but that conditions for establishing *funüxue* in China were not yet in place. But others felt an urgent need to establish a Chinese *funüxue*. While Luo criticized *funüxue* as being unorthodox, many insisted that Marxist *funüxue* inherited and developed the Marxist theory of women's liberation and hence had its own bright prospects in China. Hardly anyone involved in the debate had any idea of a feminist concept of gender, that is, one that regarded gender as a cultural construction as well as a principle of social organization, although the increasing attention to women's issues as well as to the issue of women's studies signified the opening of the public forum on gender.<sup>10</sup>

The debate on *funüxue* did not help clarify what women's studies was in the West, but it got many people excited over the idea of *funüxue*. For most of them, "funüxue" signified a brand-new Western academic field that promised a modern scientific approach to women's issues. People who were tired of orthodoxy and people who wanted to carry on Marxism both found *funüxue* attractive because this "scientific academic field" seemed to enable

<sup>9</sup> Ding Juan 1992, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. See also Sun Xiaomei 1991.

them to move beyond the status quo. The debate did not last long, because many people, including the Women's Federation cadres, were eager to jump on the bandwagon of *funüxue*. Many in the federation felt that contemporary women's problems called for a scientific approach. The Women's Federation in the new age should have new functions as well as a new image. *Funüxue* carried no political stigma but had some academic prestige. So beginning in 1986, one after another, local Women's Federations formed associations of women's studies or research on women. These associations were a new form of organization, providing a space for scholars and Women's Federation cadres to meet and discuss subjects of mutual interest. They also served as a channel for Women's Federation cadres to reach out to the academy for help with their research projects. In 1990 the national Women's Federation set up a national Women's Studies Institute (Quanguo funü yanjiusuo),<sup>11</sup> which published the nation's only theoretical journal on women's studies, *Funü yanjiu luncong* (Collection of women's studies). This quarterly journal has so far remained the most important scholarly forum for women researchers inside and outside the Women's Federation system.

What made the 1980s a remarkable age for women's research is not just efforts of the Women's Federation cadres, but also the spontaneous activities of many women scholars. In 1985, Li Xiaojiang formed an Association of Women's Studies in Henan. In the same year, another Association of Women's Studies was formed at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute by some Chinese and Western teachers in the English department. And in Changsha, a women's society was formed by local women scholars to meet and discuss their concern with women's issues. In 1987, the Center for Women's Studies, an outgrowth of Li Xiaojiang's Association of Women's Studies, was established at Zhengzhou University. In 1988, a Women's Salon<sup>12</sup> was formed at Beijing University by Qi Wenying, a professor of U.S. history; an Association of Women's Research was established at the Central Party School by some graduate students and faculty; at Tianjin Normal University, Du Fangqin, Ming Dongchao, and other women faculty formed a

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<sup>11</sup> The national Women's Federation established a Research Institute on the History of the Women's Movement in 1979 and a Research Institute on Women's Status in 1983. The two were combined in 1990 to form the Women's Studies Institute of China.

<sup>12</sup> A salon is regarded as an informal gathering whose organizer does not have to go through the troublesome procedure of registration for a formal organization.

"Women's History and Current State" research group; at Fudan University in Shanghai, some women teachers in the English department formed a women's studies group; Xu Anqi and Cheng Huifen from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, together with some women journalists, formed a women's salon; and in Beijing, the nongovernmental Chinese Institute of Management established a Women's Studies Institute headed by Wang Xingjuan, a freelance researcher who in 1992 opened the first national women's hot line.<sup>13</sup>

China had seen a surge of research on women in the 1920s and 1930s, spurred by May Fourth feminism and carried out predominantly by male intellectuals. This new wave of research on women in the late twentieth century has been conducted primarily by women. Since the mid-1980s, research on women has proliferated. The political chill that followed the Tiananmen incident of 1989 affected some nonofficial organizational activities, but it did not stop the development of research on women. Why has research on women become such a widespread form of women's activism in the post-Mao era? What has served as its theoretical underpinning? What is its relationship to the state? What are women's goals and strategies? And who are the women that have played a major role in creating and sustaining this movement?

### The Marxist Theory of Women and the Women's Federation

From the very beginning, many scholars and Women's Federation cadres have claimed that Chinese women's studies is guided by a Marxist theory of women (*Makesizhuyi funüguan*). To understand the variety of meanings attached to this claim, we need to look briefly at the historical development of the CCP's theory of women's liberation.

The CCP's official discourse on women's liberation has its origins in the May Fourth feminist movement, Marxist theories of communist revolution and the history of private ownership, European socialist views on women's liberation, the Soviet Russian model of women's liberation, and the nationalism of the early twentieth century, when the party was founded. After May Fourth feminism made women's liberation a badge of modernity in China's political discourse, all political forces in China that claimed to be progressive had to uphold the banner of women's

<sup>13</sup> See Liu Jinxiu 1992.

liberation.<sup>14</sup> The CCP, founded by a group of cultural and political radicals who regarded women's emancipation as one of their commitments, began to institutionalize ideas of women's liberation first in the National Revolution (1925–1927), then in the Communist-held base areas, and later in the PRC. In this long and complicated process, although the CCP's discursive practices have reflected a range of ideological and political origins, a clearly articulated theory of women's liberation has been formed and designated as the theoretical underpinning and guideline for Chinese women's liberation. Except for a few texts translated from Western originals or Japanese translations of Western originals, the main body of the theory consists of works by women's liberation theorists in the party, as well as the party's documents addressing women's issues in different historical periods. The major tenets of the theory are (1) that women's oppression is associated with private ownership; as such, it is a part of class oppression; (2) that women's participation in socialist and communist revolution is the only correct way to their eventual liberation; and (3) that the socialist state implements gender equality, but women's thorough emancipation can be achieved only at a higher stage of human history—communism.<sup>15</sup>

According to this theory, socialism ensures a high stage of women's liberation by eliminating private ownership and practicing gender equality in all spheres. In the Maoist era, social practices followed this theory faithfully. Gender equality was written into the constitution, and the implementation of gender equality in education and employment was effective, at least in urban areas and the state-owned sector. Even though gender hierarchy in Chinese culture was never seriously challenged by the Maoist state, the slogan inherited from May Fourth feminism, "the equality between men and women" (*nannü pingdeng*), entered daily language in the PRC with the power of state propaganda, and gender equality became a state-sponsored dominant theme in China's gender discourses. This Maoist discourse of gender equality, an equality often measured by masculine standards, has

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of May Fourth feminism, see Wang Zheng 1995a. For an analysis of the CCP's early gender politics, see Gilmartin 1995. Gilmartin argues convincingly that the May Fourth feminist influence on the CCP is much greater than scholars in the West have estimated.

<sup>15</sup> The classics include Bebel 1928, Du Junhui 1936, and Luo Qiong 1986. Luo's work provided an updated synthesis of the party's gender policies and theories on women's liberation.

become both the target of contemporary Chinese women's critique and a major source of their critical strength in the post-Mao era.

In the reform era, when the party's priority of developing a market economy either contradicted or canceled its earlier policies of gender equality, the theory of women's liberation became the most important site where the Women's Federation negotiated with the state for the interest of women. The Women's Federation actively engaged in reformulating, reiterating, and promoting the theory of women's liberation. In this process, a new fixed term—Marxist theory of women—was used to denote the theories that had been formulated in the long process of the Chinese revolution. The content of the Marxist theory of women, however, was not fixed at all. By shifting emphasis in their exposition, advocates of the Marxist theory of women were able to use it flexibly for their political purposes. The Women's Federation propaganda about the Marxist theory of women served to remind the party of its commitment to gender equality, as well as to consolidate the power of the official women's organization.

Women in the Women's Federation system or in different branches of the government in charge of women's affairs have consciously used the Marxist theory of women in one way or another to defend women's interests in the reform era. The most famous case in point happened in the early 1980s. When surplus labor posed an immediate problem in the early years of urban economic reform, some sociologists and economists (predominantly men) openly proposed that the high rate of women's employment was inappropriate for the Chinese economy at this stage and that women should go home to make room for men in the workforce. Women's Federation cadres and women scholars opposed this argument, deploying the Marxist theory of women as their weapon. They contended that women's participation in social production is the precondition of women's liberation; without women's economic independence, equality between men and women would have no material base; socialism with Chinese characteristics needed to guarantee women's equality in employment. A high-level Women's Federation official, Guan Tao, subsequently commented that studies and public debates conducted by the Women's Federation cadres and women scholars on women's employment created such a powerful public consensus that it influenced state policy makers: "In the early 1990s, when some people made a proposal to the State Council suggesting that in order to reduce employment pressure China should practice

periodic employment for women, Premier Li Peng vetoed it right away."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the Women's Federation cadres and women scholars in the reform age have consciously embraced the Marxist theory of women to empower women. One of the most successful maneuvers of the Women's Federation in this period occurred on March 8, 1990, when Jiang Zemin, the general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP, read publicly a speech titled "The Entire Party and the Entire Society Should Establish the Marxist Theory of Women," drafted by cadres of the Women's Federation. The speech was quickly invoked by the Women's Federation as the message to officials of different administrative levels that women's liberation was still an issue on the agenda of the Central Committee of the party.<sup>17</sup>

There are two obvious reasons for Chinese women to adopt this strategy at this historical moment. First, women in responsible positions in charge of women's affairs have all been influenced by the Maoist theory and practice of gender equality. Because their values and beliefs had long been shaped by discursive practices of gender equality in the Maoist era, they were alarmed by increasing gender inequality in the social, economic, and political life of the reform age. Second, only the Marxist theory of women gave women some political leverage in negotiating with the state on behalf of women's interests. It should be noted that in this context, the term "the Marxist theory of women" should not be understood narrowly as the several Marxist principles summarized in Jiang Zemin's speech. Rather, it signifies the whole discourse of women's liberation of the Maoist era.<sup>18</sup> This discourse,

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<sup>16</sup> Guan Tao 1995, p. 8. In this talk, which emphasizes the important role Chinese women have played in the state decision-making process, Guan also alludes to the fact that the Women's Federation maneuvered to have the top party leaders reiterate in public the principles of the Marxist theory of women.

<sup>17</sup> See *Zhongguo funübao*, March 8, 1990. After Jiang's speech, the Women's Federation began concentrated propaganda on the Marxist theory of women. A textbook, *Makesizhuyi funüguan* (The Marxist theory of women), was published for classes in women's cadres' schools (Na Ren and Sun Xiaomei 1991). The strategy of letting the top party leader reiterate the Marxist theory of women was repeated in 1996 when, on March 8, Jiang Zemin gave a speech titled "Nannü pingdeng shi cujin woguo shehui fazhan de yixiang jiben guocuo" (Gender equality is a fundamental state policy in promoting our social development) (*Zhongguo funübao*, March 8, 1996). For further information on the federation's promotion of Jiang's speeches, see *Zhongguo funübao* in the two periods.

<sup>18</sup> Significantly, in 1991 women researchers in the national Women's Federation and the Shanxi Women's Federation jointly compiled *An Introduction to the Marxist Theory of Women*. The authors reviewed the whole history of Chinese women's liberation under the CCP and discussed policies, legislation, and organizations relat-

which includes the legitimacy of the Women's Federation as well as other institutions and legislation that guarantee gender equality and which has created the legitimacy of the party's rule by describing the party as the savior of Chinese women, exerts its power over the new state leaders, who are far less committed to gender equality than the early CCP founders. The discursive power of women's liberation over the state, and Chinese women's conscious deployment of that power, are distinctive "Chinese characteristics" relating to research on women.

The active role of the Women's Federation in promoting the Marxist theory of women and research on women indicates that the Women's Federation is no longer simply an organ of the government that only serves to make Chinese women statist subjects, as many believe it was in the Maoist era. Rather, it consciously explores strategies to work for women's interests. To be sure, carrying out state policies and demands is still a major part of "woman-work" (*funü gongzuo*) in the Women's Federation. Nevertheless, the new dimension of the federation's "woman-work"—that is, studying and solving women's problems—helps place the federation in the position of mediator between women and the state in the reform era.

When we assess the changing role of the Women's Federation, it is also necessary to highlight certain continuities. Although in the reform era the government has partially abandoned the Women's Federation financially (that is, the Women's Federation has to finance some of its own projects and activities, as well as part of its employees' bonuses), Women's Federation cadres are still government employees, and its top officials at different administrative levels are still appointed by their superiors in the government. This means that if the head of a local Women's Federation feels that her first priority is to satisfy her boss and secure her job, she can make the whole institution focus on government directives rather than initiate work for women's interests. This factor largely determines the different performances of Women's Federations in different locales. In other words, the institutional continuity ensures that the Women's Federation will continue to function as a part of the state bureaucracy.

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ing to women's liberation. Apparently, the Marxist theory of women is not treated simply as some ideas about women's liberation, but also as practices of Chinese women's liberation (Shanxi Women's Federation 1991).

The other important continuity is ideological: the primacy of the Marxist theory of women. As suggested above, the insistence of the Women's Federation cadres on the Marxist theory of women can help them argue for social justice for women. But in the language of the Marxist theory of women, many Women's Federation cadres also maintain the "truth" that a successful Chinese women's movement can only be led by the CCP with the Women's Federation as its leading body.<sup>19</sup> Actually, the federation's publication of a history of the Chinese women's movement and histories of local women's movements, a major research effort in the mid-1980s, reinforced that "truth," or rather myth, created in the Maoist discourse of women's liberation. Reclaiming that "truth" reflects the desire of Women's Federation cadres to consolidate the power of the Women's Federation after ten years of eclipse. But it also means that the Women's Federation does not challenge the core of the Maoist discourse of women's liberation. The Women's Federation is still supposed to be *the* legitimate organization representing Chinese women.<sup>20</sup> Mobilizing women to achieve goals set by the party is still the main objective of the Women's Federation. The federation's attempt to identify with both women and the party-state is consistent with the Marxist theory of women, for the socialist state supposedly represents the fundamental interest of women (though it is more accurate to say that the Chinese socialist state *defines* the fundamental interest of women). However, although the tenets of social justice and gender equality in the Marxist theory of women have been challenged by the forces of the market economy, the statist core in the Maoist discourse on women has been seriously challenged by Chinese women since the beginning of the reform era and particularly in the 1990s. In fact, the latter challenge provides much of the dynamic in the development of Chinese women's studies.

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<sup>19</sup> See Luo Qiong 1992, pp. 8–12; and Shanxi Women's Federation 1991, p. 136.

<sup>20</sup> See Barlow 1994. In this article, Barlow argues that Fulian has monopolized the representation of Chinese women ever since its establishment.

## The Role of Women Scholars

The promotion of research on women by the Women's Federation originally aimed at simultaneously promoting women's interests and consolidating the official leading position of the Women's Federation in the Chinese women's movement. But for women scholars in academia, excited by the ongoing political and intellectual efforts of dismantling Maoism in the early 1980s as well as by newly received scattered information on Western feminism and women's studies, research on women pointed to a new means of political participation and opened up a new social space for women's spontaneous activism. In the post-Mao era, intellectual women began to reject the making of women by the party-state. In this respect, Li Xiaojiang, then a scholar of literature at Zhengzhou University in Henan, played the most prominent role in the 1980s.

While many women contested the Women's Federation monopoly by engaging in scholarly or activist projects for women on their own, Li Xiaojiang did more than that. In a pamphlet published in 1989, Li openly questioned the necessity of the federation's existence, claiming that there would be no effect on society if the Women's Federation were disbanded overnight. She predicted that if the federation failed to reform, "it would be difficult for the Women's Federation to find its space of development in the social development."<sup>21</sup> Li's criticism was threatening to top officials of the Women's Federation. Since the founding of the All-China Women's Federation, they had never confronted any challenge to their leading position in the party-controlled Chinese women's movement. Moreover, Li's critique drew on the language of reform: the socialist big iron pot was being broken up, and any institution without practical utility would be eliminated in the process of reform. The theme of reform justified Li's audacious criticism. Women's Federation officials found themselves on the defensive.<sup>22</sup> They had to *prove* the utility of the Women's Federation in the reform era before they could claim a leading

<sup>21</sup> Li Xiaojiang 1989, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Luo Qiong 1992 was an explicit reply to Li Xiaojiang's charge. Luo was incensed by Li's claim that "it would be difficult for the Women's Federation to find its space of development in the social development" if it did not change. Luo cited many "historical facts" to demonstrate Fulian's achievements in the Maoist era and called for Women's Federation cadres to make continuous efforts for women's liberation.

position. Seen in this light, the federation's increasing efforts to work for women's interests have not only grown from within, but also have been stimulated by pressure from outside.

Li rejected the Women's Federation not only because she saw it as inept in representing women's interests, but also because she believed that "awakened" Chinese women now had the ability to organize by themselves and no longer needed an authority to control all women's affairs.<sup>23</sup> Historically, of course, the party had established the All-China Women's Federation not because Chinese women were incapable of self-organization, but rather because there were too many "awakened" women and too many women's organizations for the CCP to control or to "lead directly." The founding of the Women's Federation in 1949 marked the closing of the social space for Chinese women's spontaneous activism that had been created since the May Fourth era. With the end of the Mao era, significantly, Chinese women intellectuals demanded the reopening of that space.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, Li's challenge to the Women's Federation did not result in two separate camps of research on women, one by women scholars and one by Women's Federation cadres. From the very beginning the two groups worked closely to establish a Chinese women's studies. Many research projects are jointly done by women in academia and women in the Women's Federation. Li herself has relied heavily on the help of women in local branches of the Women's Federation to carry out many projects and activities. This cooperation can be explained in several ways. First, conferences on women held by the Women's Federation and publications run by the Women's Federation have been important forums for women scholars whose home institutions usually give little support to their research on women. In other words, women scholars do not have the necessary resources to engage in large-scale activism on their own, while Women's Federation cadres are paid and equipped to do research on women. There is no reason for scholars to reject Women's Federation resources in their shared interest in promoting research on women.

Second, women scholars have been treated as either equal partners or specialists by Women's Federation cadres. In the new field of research on women, the Women's Federation cadres do not

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<sup>23</sup> Li Xiaojiang 1989, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of Chinese women's activism before 1949, see Wang Zheng 1995a.

claim superiority or leadership over women scholars. Moreover, women scholars have the freedom to choose not to participate in a project. Instead of compromising their independent positions, women scholars have been able to participate in policy making by working with the Women's Federation.

Third, women inside and outside the Women's Federation who are engaged in research on women are mostly from the same cohort and have similar educational backgrounds. In the 1990s they were about forty years old and had experienced the Cultural Revolution. Many of them had been sent down to the countryside in the Cultural Revolution and entered college after it was over. As college graduates, some of them were assigned to academic institutions, others to the Women's Federation. Differences derived from their current working environments do not easily override the common goals and views they formed in their similar past experiences. In fact, women of the same cohort inside and outside the Women's Federation share more views than women of different generations within the Women's Federation. Some women in the Women's Federation are very conscious of their historical role in transforming the Women's Federation (a process we might characterize as "subversion from within"). This younger generation of Women's Federation cadres has made possible the active role the Women's Federation has played in research on women in the past decade.

Finally, theoretical conflicts in the field of research on women have not happened along a clear-cut line between women in the academy and women in the Women's Federation. In the early days, Li Xiaojiang's challenge to Women's Federation legitimacy was criticized as "bourgeois feminism" by the federation's old-timers such as Luo Qiong. But the federation's very engagement in studying women's problems in the reform era implied a recognition of the inadequacy of Maoist class theory. In fact, after the Cultural Revolution, the whole nation, including Deng Xiaoping, was eager to abandon class as the only category of social analysis. It was precisely against this political and intellectual background that the rising attention to women's problems in post-Mao China emerged. Even though a clear conceptualization of gender did not emerge in this period, gender issues no longer had to be encompassed, or diverted, by a class analysis. In this context, the charge of "bourgeois feminism" was weak and unconvincing. It failed to grip the younger generation of Women's Federation cadres who

were also abandoning Maoist class analysis and exploring new ways of conceptualizing women's issues.

Instead of drawing a line between the Marxist theory of women and "bourgeois feminism," some women researchers in the Women's Federation began a conscious effort to merge the two. *An Introduction to the Marxist Theory of Women* (1991), a book compiled jointly by the national Women's Federation and the Shanxi Women's Federation and praised by the Women's Federation officials as the first theoretical work on the Marxist theory of women in contemporary China, devotes a whole chapter to the relationship between the Marxist theory of women and feminism. Although the analytical framework of the authors was still the Marxist theory of women, they nevertheless criticized the "extreme view" of entirely rejecting Western feminist theory. The authors contended that people holding this view "overlook the fact that women have always been in the oppressed position in class societies, and that their struggle is beneficial to the liberation of humankind. They neglect the fact that feminist pursuit of an ideal society without gender oppression but with gender equality is consistent with the Marxist ideal of eliminating all exploitation and oppression."<sup>25</sup> The authors found it "unscientific" to refuse to recognize the merit in feminist theory and practice. The correct attitude, they argued, was to incorporate the useful examples of feminist struggle into the development of the Marxist theory of women, including feminist critique of traditional culture, feminist strategies in fighting for equal rights, and feminist efforts to raise women's consciousness. These statements signified an important departure of the Women's Federation from its former position of opposing Western feminism.

If the changing attitude of Women's Federation officials toward Western feminism prevented a head-on collision between the Marxist theory of women and emerging feminist activities in 1980s China, it is also important to recognize that women scholars in academia did not entirely abandon the Marxist theory of women, nor did they immediately embrace a gender critique promoted by Western feminism. In the process of theoretical development, there is no distinct line between women scholars and Women's Federation cadres, although women in academia were the first to be exposed to Western feminism in the 1980s through contacts with Western feminist scholars in their institutions or through

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<sup>25</sup> Shanxi Women's Federation 1991, p. 272.

reading about feminism in academic journals or in original English works. Because there was very little translation of contemporary feminist texts in the 1980s and because most scholars in China do not read English, women in China who were interested in Western feminism had some information about Western feminist movements but very limited knowledge of feminist theoretical developments.<sup>26</sup> Their perceptions of Western feminism were often shaped by personal contacts with Western feminists whom they happened to encounter or by critiques of Western feminism made in the Maoist discourse on women.<sup>27</sup> There is little wonder that in this early stage women scholars were promoting a women's studies in China without grasping the concept of gender that is central in the development of women's studies in the West.<sup>28</sup>

### An Essentialized Woman and the Discourse of Femininity

What were the specific intellectual strands that shaped or stimulated Chinese women scholars' search for a new direction in the 1980s? In its initial stage, Chinese women's studies received more impetus from contemporary political and intellectual ideologies in China than from Western feminism.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were characterized by a surge of interest in gender differentiation. This interest was in part a rejection of the desexed, politically turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. Women's resentment toward a legalized gender equality that held men as the standard also played a large role in

<sup>26</sup> Li Xiaojiang 1988, p. 21, names Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as the representative works of contemporary Western feminist theory. In fact, these two were the only major works translated into Chinese in the 1980s. It is obvious from Li's book that by 1988, when she was already a prominent advocate of women's studies in China, the most recent major Western feminist work she had read was *The Feminine Mystique*.

<sup>27</sup> For concrete examples, see Wang Zheng 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Li Xiaojiang's works in the late 1980s can best illustrate this point. In *The Exploration of Eve* (1988), she presents a history of the Chinese women's movement that duplicates the official representation of the history of Chinese women's liberation. In *Women's Way Out* (1989), she argues that excluding female labor is necessary when reform seeks high efficiency but that an open economic system provides more opportunities for women than before; individual women should discard the mentality of dependency so that they can seize the opportunities and find a way out of women's predicament. These works show little awareness of gendered power relations in Chinese society and reveal the author's uncritical view of contemporary state policy on modernization and the official representation of Chinese women's history.

this burst of enthusiasm to “be women.” But for theorists, the issue of gender differentiation was also closely connected with the neo-Marxist critique of the party. This critique, represented by the renowned theorist Wang Ruoshui’s “alienation” theory, ushered in an age of reappraisal of the Communist regime. According to Wang’s theory, thirty years of the CCP’s proletarian dictatorship had alienated both the Chinese people and the party itself; it had distorted the human nature of the people and corrupted the party. By the time this challenging critique was suppressed by the party, the terms “alienation” and “human nature” had already entered Chinese intellectual and literary discourse. Theorizing and describing an essentialized and universal “human nature” became a popular theme in theoretical and literary works in the following years.

Following the logic of alienation theory, other theorists began to argue that the ultra-leftist egalitarian policy on women had distorted women’s nature. Masculinization of Chinese women was soon added to the list of ultra-leftist crimes. Feminization of Chinese women therefore became a progressive stance, suggesting a negation of the Maoist politics as well as a recovery of human nature. The Cultural Revolution “iron girl” was ridiculed in both academia and popular culture; women of the generation brought up on Maoist gender equality found themselves pitied by women of the younger generation, for they had not lived a feminine life; some had even become repulsively masculinized as a result. Many women writers gained popularity by depicting that generation’s agonizing process of retrieving femininity or rediscovering a feminine self. An emphasis on gender differentiation (achieved through the feminization of women) in dress, social roles, behavior, and occupations became the hallmark of the 1980s and marked the birth of a discourse of femininity in post-Mao China.<sup>29</sup>

This process of gender differentiation went hand in hand with the rise of women’s studies. When many Chinese women rejected a desexed Maoist era and Maoist gender equality by adopting feminine dresses and social roles, some women scholars went

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<sup>29</sup> See Honig and Hershatter 1988, pp. 42–51, for the fad of femininity in China and its political implications. Feminine dress and feminine roles advocated in the media in the early 1980s also suggested a call for freedom of choice of personal lifestyles and a rejection of the state control of private life. The individualistic message had a liberating effect on many women who had not dared to do anything different from what the government required.

further than that. They wanted to differentiate women not only from men in appearance, but also from class in theory. After all, an era without gender differentiation had been achieved mainly through the power of the singular, overbearing analytical category—class. Moreover, in both the Marxist theory of women and the Maoist practice of long-term class struggle, women's interests were either subordinated or neglected in the name of class struggle. Separating women from class, some felt, was crucial to providing a theoretical basis for women's studies in China. While Women's Federation research on women's problems implied a departure from the dominance of class theory, some women scholars explicitly challenged class theory by theorizing women in essentialist terms.

In retrospect, it is not accidental that the Western term "women's studies" caught Chinese women's attention. "Women's studies" came at a time when Chinese women were looking for something to support their struggle to break away from the grip of class theory. "Women's studies" suggested to Chinese women that in modernized countries women were regarded as a separate, independent category deserving scientific and scholarly research. What could be more effective than women's studies to announce the distinctiveness of women? What else could separate women from class through the use of scientific theories and methods? Understandably, women's studies quickly became the major vehicle that enabled Chinese women to define "woman" as a category of analysis and to move away from the dominance of class theory. Li Xiaojiang's works in the 1980s provide the best illustration of this process.

In *The Exploration of Eve* (1988), Li strives to provide a theoretical basis for a women's studies in China by separating women from class. She conceptualizes her effort as redefining the Marxist theory of women. Li contends that the configuration and evolution of the female precedes and transcends class in nature. "The two belong to different categories (women belong to a human ontological category, and class belongs to a social historical category)." Li argues that a conceptual abstraction of women is the only correct starting point for a Marxist theory of women. "The precondition of a Marxist theory of women is to abstract entire women, that is, to abandon women's state, nation, historical time, class, and age in order to obtain a conceptual generalization." She further contends that a Marxist theory of women "belongs to human science." As such, "it not only examines

women's class qualification in social and historical terms, but also studies sex differences on the bases of biology and psychology; and it also attempts to grasp women's existence in the essential movement of human society."<sup>30</sup>

Li's frequent use of words such as "science," "nature," and "essence" reveals a clear affinity with the Chinese intellectual debate over alienation theory. Her appeal to science and scientific knowledge is also a strategy frequently used by Chinese intellectuals in their efforts to dismantle Maoist political discourse. In fact, in this process Chinese intellectuals have created a discourse of scientific modernization. Li's effort in establishing a scientific women's studies is certainly shaped by this discourse. In the political and intellectual context of 1980s China, a scientific understanding of women is to use the language of "hard science" or pseudo-science (mostly early-twentieth-century imports from the West) to present an essentialized woman. This essentialized woman is neither to be controlled by Marxist class theory nor to be regulated by proletarian women's liberation theory. Rather, as Li Xiaojiang suggests, this essentialized woman should be the basis of a Marxist theory of women.

Li Xiaojiang's discussion of women's studies in the West most clearly demonstrates her intellectual indebtedness to Western feminism as well as her limited knowledge of contemporary feminist theories. She notices that beginning with the feminist movement of the 1960s, women's studies in the West has developed rapidly in academia as a force in revolt against traditional theories. In her perception, the contemporary feminist movement in the West means that "women as a whole body are revolting against a male-centered society on the basis of 'woman's' interests. This revolt is an abstraction that provides a real basis for the theoretical abstraction in women's studies."<sup>31</sup> Here the word "abstraction" means searching for a generalized and essentialized woman who transcends all social qualifications. Seeing the purpose of women's studies as that of theorizing women abstractly certainly reflects Li's own concerns in her political context. But this "abstraction" is exactly what supplied her with a perspective different from the dominant class theory. In Li's view, the feminist movement in the West suggests that women can be an abstract entity fighting for their shared interests. The key to reaching that

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<sup>30</sup> Li Xiaojiang 1988, pp. 31, 32–33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

abstraction in China, as Li sees it, is to foster a female consciousness, that is, to make Chinese women realize that they are women.

Stimulated by knowledge of the Western feminist movement, Li's consciousness of female subjectivity is nevertheless not a gender consciousness. In Li's theory, there are two key components in female subjectivity: female consciousness and self-realization, that is, striving to reach one's potential in all realms. Female consciousness, according to Li, is an awareness of being female, that is, being different from men not only in physiology but also in sex roles. I am not using the term "gender roles" since in Li's theory women's roles as mother and wife are innately determined by the female reproductive system. Li's theory of female consciousness is based on a critique of the Maoist discourse of women's liberation. She argues that Mao's notion of gender equality was still male-centered in that women were measured and judged according to men's standards, as expressed by the slogan "women can do whatever men can do," and that women's participation in social productivity does not equal women's liberation, as the "double burden" weighs heavily on women. These critiques of Maoist discourse were significant in the 1980s. But rather than criticizing socialist women's liberation for its failure to change patriarchal culture and institutions, Li blames it for its disregard of women's unique femaleness and for its "distortion of the original features of the two sexes."<sup>32</sup>

The rise of women's studies, which strove to provide a scientific understanding of femininity as well as a consciousness of female subjectivity, has both been shaped by and has contributed to the discourse of femininity that began with the public debate on women's nature. Glorifying women's feminine role, this discourse of femininity may provide psychological relief for women who once felt guilty for playing the roles of mother and wife, even though it does nothing to change the reality of women's double burden. Emphasizing women's essential nature, this discourse has helped effect the separation of women from class, posing a direct critique of the traditional Marxist theory of women. The discourse of femininity, after all, was created largely by women themselves while it opened up social space for women's spontaneous activism. In short, the making of the discourse of femininity in the 1980s embodies Chinese women's efforts to challenge Maoism.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Li Xiaojiang 1989, pp. 70, 140.

<sup>33</sup> Significantly, in 1993, Li Xiaojiang called for an end to the separation of women from class. She apparently realized that Chinese women had already accom-

The discourse of femininity is not, however, entirely positive in its effect on Chinese women. Women's nature, or femininity, has more negative connotations than human nature in male-centered cultures. When women are defined by femininity, they are reduced to less than human beings. Unless the cultural baggage contained in the word "woman" is discarded, an appeal to "being a woman" results in reactivating many disparaging notions of women in Chinese culture that had been suppressed in Maoist gender discourse. No matter how much more freedom Chinese women enjoy now by glorifying femininity (the most noticeable freedom is of course to wear whatever feminine clothes they like), it is obvious that the discourse of femininity has also restricted women's development. One example may illustrate the point. At a women's conference in Shanghai in 1992, Xie Xide, a renowned female physicist (at the time over seventy) and the former president of Fudan University, one of the best in Shanghai, presented a table of female enrollment in the physics department; it showed a dramatic increase in the 1950s and 1960s and a dramatic decline since the late 1980s. In 1993, no female students were enrolled in Fudan's physics department. A whole generation of young women has come to feel that they have to channel their intelligence into more "feminine" occupations.

Moreover, the discourse of femininity has been promoted by different social groups. While Li Xiaojiang and other women intellectuals were advocating an essential femaleness for political purposes, commercial interests found in femininity a lucrative commodity. In the market economy the Chinese media has seen an explosion of images of "modern femininity." Various images of modern feminine women are created with the basic elements of traditional feminine virtue, sexy bodies, and consumerism. The power to define women has been shifted from the state to market forces. With the power of the mass media, commercialized modern femininity has overshadowed the consciousness of female subjectivity promoted by Li Xiaojiang and other women, while the latter lacks conceptual power to deal with the new challenge. In the changed political and social milieu of the 1990s, many Chinese women scholars began to be keenly aware of the need for new

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plished that historical task. However, without a gender perspective, she believed it was time for Chinese women to "merge into society": "If we continue to simply emphasize women's problems and singularly protect women's interests, we will not have new results. Not only that, we will appear too narrow-minded and absurd." See Li Xiaojiang 1993, p. 31.

conceptual frameworks to create counterdiscourses to the discourse of femininity and to move beyond the limits of the Marxist theory of women.

### Research on Women in the Context of the Fourth World Conference on Women

At the beginning of the 1990s, research on women in China experienced significant changes. New concepts from Western and global feminisms first trickled and then gushed into China with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Forum of 1995. The flow of contemporary feminist theories and practices into China has become a major source of new analytical tools that Chinese researchers on women are eager to grasp. As a result, research on women is not only expanding in scope but also changing in quality with new interrogations of dominant discourses.

In the past few years, feminist scholars in the West, especially those who study Chinese women, have conducted many projects involving women scholars in China. These projects include Western scholars' trips to China, during which they give talks to Chinese women scholars, and conferences and programs in their home institutions in which they invite scholars from China to participate. Of these activities, the most influential was the conference on "Engendering China" held at Harvard University in 1992. This was the first time that a group of women's studies scholars from China participated in an academic conference abroad. As Chinese historian of women Du Fangqin comments, it was "the first formal dialogue between Chinese and Western scholars on research on women in China."<sup>34</sup> Western feminist critiques of ethnocentrism, orientalism, and cultural imperialism helped create an academic environment that women scholars from China found congenial.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Harvard conference was designed to bring together Chinese and Western scholars of Chinese women, one of its most significant results was providing an opportunity for dialogue between two groups of Chinese women: those engaged in women's studies research in the PRC and Chinese women scholars

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<sup>34</sup> Du Fangqin 1995, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> Papers presented at the conference are compiled in Gilmartin et al. 1994 and Li Xiaojiang, Zhu Hong, and Dong Xiuyu 1994.

living in the United States who had formed the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS). One of the main goals of this organization was the promotion of women's studies in China, and the Harvard conference proved crucial for this project. One direct result was that the two groups of Chinese women decided to organize a joint seminar. In the summer of 1993, the CSWS and the Center for Women's Studies in Tianjin Normal University held a two-week seminar, "Chinese Women and Development—Status, Health, Employment," at Tianjin Normal University. Five members from the CSWS (the author was among them) presented feminist perspectives on gender issues, and more than ten scholars at home delivered reports on their research projects on women's problems in China. More than a hundred women (from both academia and the Women's Federation) from all over China attended the seminar.

The Tianjin seminar enabled Chinese women scholars in diaspora to raise a feminist voice directly in China. This group of women had become involved in women's studies while receiving their graduate education in the United States. Most of them are of the same cohort as the majority of women's studies scholars in China. That is to say, they were also mostly products of Maoist gender discourse when they left China. Studying in the United States, many of them went through a similar intellectual experience: demythologizing Maoist women's liberation with a feminist critique. In fact, they have become the first group of Chinese feminists in the post-Mao era who are intellectually conscious of their position and who do not shun the label "feminist." The diaspora position has marginalized this group of women but at the same time strengthened their potential to be a source of counterdiscourses in China. The Tianjin project was one of their efforts to open a channel for the development of feminism in China.

Members of the CSWS were surprised by the eagerness expressed by women researchers at home to learn about feminist theories and methodologies. Even a high-ranking national Women's Federation cadre said candidly, "Marxism is not enough to analyze women's problems in today's China. We need new theories and we should learn anything that can help explain Chinese women's problems." She asked me straightforwardly, "Now, tell me, what do you think is the most useful thing for Chinese women in your study of Western theories?" The open-mindedness demonstrated in the seminar indicates women researchers' keen awareness of the limitations of the Marxist

theory of women and their strong desire for new conceptual frameworks.

For most of the participants, the Tianjin seminar was the first introduction to the feminist concept of gender. Heated discussions followed lectures, and Chinese women's issues were examined in a new light. The questions raised at the seminar included the following: Has the state always represented women's interests? Was women's participation in social productivity a state policy to promote women's liberation or a state expediency to use women's labor? What state policies had a liberating effect on Chinese women? On which group of women? What should women do when facing gender discrimination in the job market, sexual harassment in the workplace, and violence in the family, besides looking for individual help from counseling services and hot lines? Not all the questions were analyzed carefully and thoughtfully, but the questions themselves suggest a significant step away from the myth that the socialist state automatically represents the fundamental interest of women. Women researchers in China later regarded the Tianjin seminar as the beginning of the "large-scale landing of the global women's movement and feminism in China" that introduced to Chinese researchers the key feminist concept—gender.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the Western scholars and Chinese women scholars in diaspora, a third force has played an important role in helping the flow of feminism to China: international organizations or Western private foundations. Of these, the Ford Foundation played the most prominent role in the first half of the 1990s. The Ford Foundation funded both Chinese participation in the Harvard conference and the Tianjin seminar. In June 1995, it also funded another major exchange between Chinese and Western scholars, the conference "Chinese Women and Feminist Thought" in Beijing. The Ford Foundation, with its program on reproductive health in China, has helped send Chinese women scholars to attend conferences abroad and has brought Western scholars to China to attend conferences or work on specific research projects. In this sense, the Ford Foundation has enabled increasing intellectual exchanges and communication between women scholars in China and the West. What is more, with the Ford Foundation's

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<sup>36</sup> Liu Bohong and Jin Yihong n.d.; Du Fangqin 1995, p. 70. Both the Harvard conference and the Tianjin seminar have reached a much larger audience than their participants by the publication of conference papers and seminar proceedings.

funding, many Chinese women scholars and activists have been able to engage in projects for which they would be unlikely to get support from their own institutions or the government. Aside from large-scale research projects on reproductive health, the Ford Foundation has funded projects on rural women's development, women's education, the mobility of the female population, and women's legislation. Those projects have taught feminist perspectives and approaches to women's problems. More important, this learning does not end with the completion of a specific research project. The women involved have continued their examination of Chinese women's issues with their newly acquired feminist knowledge. For example, a group of women was funded by the Ford Foundation to translate *Our Bodies, Our Selves* into Chinese. In the process, they formed an organization on women's health and engaged in further research on Chinese women's health issues. Cases such as this indicate that in the past few years, intellectual and material resources from abroad have served as a strong stimulus in the growth of a feminist movement in China.<sup>37</sup>

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was certainly the most significant event in the development of research on women in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> Since China was the host country, the FWCW began to influence research on women in China long before it was in session. But before examining Chinese women's role in the process, we first need to look at the Chinese government's role in this event.

The paranoia expressed by the government at the time of the conference puzzled many people. Why did the Chinese government bid to host the FWCW in the first place? The top Chinese leaders made the decision in early 1991 when they were desperately looking for some means to change their international image created by the Tiananmen incident of 1989. Interestingly, their assumption that hosting a women's conference would help change their image reflects the power of the Maoist gender discourse. One of the tenets in the Marxist theory of women holds that "the degree of woman's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."<sup>39</sup> This is well known to

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<sup>37</sup> For more information on projects funded by the Ford Foundation and other international organizations, see Tan Shen 1995.

<sup>38</sup> A portion of this section has been published in *Signs* 22, 1 (1996).

<sup>39</sup> This sentence is one of the most frequently cited Marxist tenets in Chinese texts on women in the PRC. It originally appears in the Chinese translation of Friedrich Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Engels mentions that Fourier was "the first to declare that in any given society the degree of woman's emancipation

Chinese leaders. The leaders also believe that Chinese women are more liberated than women in the West. Therefore, displaying the great achievements of women's liberation in socialist China would demonstrate to the world the high degree of general liberation in China. Seen in this light, the FWCW was the best showcase that China's top leaders could devise.<sup>40</sup>

Although the decision of the Chinese leaders to host the FWCW was mainly one of political expedience, it had some immediate positive effects on women. In its effort to present the best face at the FWCW, the government began to give ad hoc support to some projects intended to benefit women. For example, a project called "Welcoming the FWCW, Millions of Loving Hearts Devoted to Spring Buds" coordinated resources from both the government and the public to help thousands of girls from poor regions begin schooling.<sup>41</sup> To be sure, projects of this kind only directly benefit a small percentage of women. Nevertheless, with much propaganda, they sent a message that the central government was making special efforts to improve women's status as a gift presented to the FWCW. Officials at different administrative levels understood that they had to do something special to "welcome the FWCW." As a result, the national Women's Federation moved to a huge new office building in downtown Beijing; publishers began to look for monographs on women's issues; editors of journals and newspapers organized special issues to either display women's achievements or discuss issues related to women; and special TV programs were produced to spread information about the FWCW and its accompanying nongovernmental organizations forum. The official line of welcoming the FWCW in the period preceding the conference greatly heightened public interest in women, contrasting sharply with the state's withdrawal from women's causes in previous years.

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is the natural measure of the general emancipation." See Tucker 1978, p. 690.

<sup>40</sup> In the summer of 1995, when the rising paranoia overshadowed the desire to display achievements, the decision to host the conference became controversial within the party. Those who were responsible for making the decision began to explain their original motivations and the political context when they made the decision. The June 4 incident was explicitly mentioned in the explanation that was passed to local party branches and participants in the NGO forum.

<sup>41</sup> *People's Daily* (overseas edition), April 13, 1994, p. 7. Prior to this project targeting girls, the government had a "Hope Project" to help children in poor regions begin schooling. State-owned enterprises as well as individuals from all over the country donated money to the "Hope Project."

In this period of official mobilization to welcome the Fourth World Conference on Women the nation saw a sudden surge in the establishment of women's studies centers. Out of their concern to look as modern and progressive as Western countries at the time of the conference, the chief officials working on the conference began to show interest in the state of women's studies. In February 1994, the National Committee of Education and the national Women's Federation jointly called a two-day conference on women's studies. The conference chair was Peng Peiyun, chair of the China Organizing Committee for the FWCW. The agenda of the conference was to discuss women's studies at home and abroad and to make suggestions for China's preparation for the FWCW, but its main goal was to give government officials an idea of what women's studies was and how to present Chinese women's studies at the FWCW. When directors of women's studies centers in universities were invited to the conference, some twenty-five centers responded. Apparently, many of these were formed in a rush after the universities received the conference notice. Very likely, many women's centers consisted only of a name and a deputy who could attend the conference. Nevertheless, universities all over the country learned that women's studies was now supported by the government.<sup>42</sup>

Not all women found the government's new attention to women desirable. Many women scholars and activists found that the state's interest in presenting a glorified image of Chinese women interfered with their effort to identify and study women's problems in contemporary society. Some women's studies associations affiliated with local branches of the Women's Federation shifted their focus from research on women's problems to displaying women's achievements. The problem was not only that much energy and resources were diverted from solving women's problems to praising women's achievements. More serious was that exposing women's problems politically subverted the move to display an advanced state of Chinese women's liberation. Some women researchers began to worry about a possible negative consequence of the FWCW: drawing state attention to the movement for research on women that previously had been largely overlooked by the state. If women's issues were to become connected with the political interest of the government, then research

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<sup>42</sup> The information on the women's studies conference was provided by researchers who attended the conference.

on women could be defined as political, and therefore subject to government regulation or surveillance. Politicizing research on women, therefore, could lead to the end of a women's activism that had been relatively ignored in the reform era. This chilly prospect almost became a reality in 1995.

In spite of such uneasiness, up to the end of 1994 many women activists were still hopeful that the FWCW, and especially the NGO forum, would provide an impetus to the growth of a non-government-controlled women's activism in China. The preparation for the conference, which involved the efforts of many Chinese women inside and outside the government, served as a process of consciousness raising. This was the first time that many Chinese, men and women, had ever heard of an NGO. For those women involved in preparation, especially those who had the opportunity to attend international preparatory meetings, seeing how NGOs functioned and what issues they raised was an eye-opening and empowering experience. Inspired by global feminism, many women quickly began to popularize the idea of NGOs, the concepts of women empowering women and sustainable human-centered development, and other major issues raised by women all over the world. By presenting global feminist activities to a Chinese audience, many women scholars and Women's Federation cadres changed their formerly reserved view of feminism. The new slogan became to "connect the rails" (*jiegui*) (merge) with international women's movements. The word "feminism" not only appeared frequently in official women's journals and newspapers, but also took on a positive valence.<sup>43</sup>

The preparation for the FWCW and the NGO forum both circulated global feminism and generated much more women's activism in China. Women working in the Chinese official preparatory committee, local Women's Federation cadres, and women activists in society made concerted efforts to increase Chinese women's participation in the NGO forum. Originally, the Chinese government decided to organize thirty panels by government branches

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<sup>43</sup> *Funü yanjiu luncong* (Collection of women's studies) published by the Women's Studies Institute of China of the national Women's Federation is the major medium promulgating global feminism. In the issues in 1994, articles introducing international preparatory meetings and discussing global feminism almost entirely replaced discussion of the Marxist theory of women. The authors of those articles were all participants in international meetings. The articles expressed an enthusiasm for merging with the global women's movement.

and the Women's Federation. With the increasing knowledge of what the NGO forum was about, women in the Chinese preparatory committee maneuvered to expand the number of panels and to include the participation of nongovernmental organizations. In the end, forty-seven panels were presented by Chinese women. Moreover, to "connect the rails" with the global women's movement, the organizers of Chinese panels also included topics that had not been discussed in public previously. Women and human rights, women and the environment, and violence against women were among the topics inspired by global feminism. As a result, the final list of topics presented by Chinese panels closely resembled the major issues raised in the Platform for Action. Many women participants saw the FWCW and the nongovernmental organization (NGO) forum as the greatest opportunity of the century to break China's intellectual isolation and to push the boundaries of women's activism in China.<sup>44</sup> They were also excited by what they perceived as the new openness expressed by the government.

Unfortunately, that openness ended abruptly. In early 1995, Chinese government leaders, encountering challenges and protests by human rights organizations at international meetings, began to see the risks lying ahead: what if those organizations held a demonstration right in the middle of Tiananmen Square? The site of the NGO forum, the Chinese government decided, had to be moved far away from Beijing, to the small town of Huairou. Chinese women activists at home and abroad were stunned when they heard this decision. The implication was clear. In the eyes of the nation's top leaders, an international honor to China had become an international threat to China's political stability or, rather, to state control of power. The decision to isolate the NGO forum expressed not only the leaders' determination not to let this event disturb China's political status quo, but also the state's suspicion and hostility toward women's spontaneous activities. The ramifications of this decision quickly and adversely affected Chinese women activists.

The government wasted no time in tightening control over the women's conference. The forty-seven panels to be presented by Chinese women were closely screened through "rehearsals." Talks

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<sup>44</sup> For more information on Chinese women's participation in the preparation for the conference, see Ford Foundation 1995. In the book, more than fifty women write about their own experiences attending international activities.

were geared more to displaying Chinese women's achievements than to discussing problems. All the delegates to the NGO forum had to go through official training sessions that warned them against the purported international hostility toward China. Nationalism was fanned so that each delegate would consciously defend China's honor in front of foreigners even without the presence of security personnel. Disparaging rumors were spread through official channels to taint the image of the NGO forum, to create a psychological gap between Chinese and foreign women, and to justify the tight security measures.<sup>45</sup> Local newspapers were not allowed to send their journalists to report on the conference. Western scholars who wanted to do research on Chinese women were not welcomed. Meetings held jointly by women in China and women from abroad on the topic of Chinese women could no longer get official approval. Women who had attended conferences abroad were visited and questioned by public security personnel. In short, the situation in China embodied a paradox: the country was about to host the largest international conference in world history; meanwhile, the state was taking the most severe security measures in the reform era to keep Chinese people isolated from the outside world.

To many Chinese women scholars and activists, the drastically changed political situation threatened to close up the social space for women's spontaneous activism that they had created in the previous decade. To serve the best interest of their cause, they had to keep a low profile so they would not attract unwanted attention from the security system. Their strategy was to further "depoliticize" research on women. This depoliticization included (1) consciously keeping research on women away from politically sensitive issues, such as human rights, and (2) engaging in some seemingly "nonpolitical" projects for the time being.<sup>46</sup> The strat-

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<sup>45</sup> The most widespread rumor was that many foreign prostitutes would come to the conference and that foreign women were planning to parade naked in Tiananmen Square.

<sup>46</sup> When global feminists demanded that women's rights be treated as human rights, Chinese women researchers were very cautious. They preferred to deploy the officially approved phrases such as "improving women's status" and "protect women's rights and interests" rather than use the language of human rights. With the tremendous political tension around the human rights issue before the conference, an open identification with human rights could put one in the official category of antigovernment political dissident.

On the second point: keenly aware of their limited options in the repressive political atmosphere before the conference, women in the Shaanxi Women's Federation began a huge project—a gigantic silk wall hanging embroidered by more than

egy had its cost, as it meant that women researchers could not expect to have an open exchange with foreign women at the NGO forum on all the issues. Instead, in this historic event they had to perform within the political boundary drawn by the government. In other words, they had to treat the NGO forum like a showcase, as the government stipulated.

Moving from the initial stage of empowerment in 1993–94 to this later stage of repression, many women activists were filled with frustration, disappointment, anger, and sadness. It was heartbreaking for them to see that state power was able to straitjacket an international event that was meant to empower women. Yet they were not without hope. When I met my friends at the NGO forum, everyone said, “Just keep a low profile and wait for the paranoia to pass.” They sounded like seasoned farmers who know very well how to contend with bad weather. In this kind of unfavorable political climate, one should just do some repair work, preparing for a warmer, more productive season.

The political weather has always changed suddenly in China. Even before the adjournment of the official conference, the Chinese government leaders’ paranoia had already faded. The NGO forum ended without incident. There was no demonstration against the Chinese government; instead, there were some demonstrations against American imperialists! The Chinese government realized that most women from abroad were not coming to discuss China’s problems at all. None of the Chinese participants tried to make trouble. All those in the forty-seven panels read their lines according to the script that had been rehearsed many times. With their skillful performance, Chinese participants showed the state that women were not an oppositional force. The end of the NGO forum brought tremendous relief to government leaders. They were further thrilled by the gratitude and praise of foreign government officials at the UN conference. It seemed to government leaders that hosting the conference had gained them honor after all. Their nervousness was thus suddenly replaced by smugness when the FWCW adjourned. Quickly, officials at different government branches staged celebrations. All of them, in their different capacities of working for the conference, had contributed

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a thousand rural women. The collective embroidery project, to be displayed at the site of the NGO forum, was a way to inform rural women of the approaching women’s conference. This masterpiece of women’s art was sold after the conference and the money is to fund Shaanxi rural women’s development.

to winning honor for China. The Chinese preparatory committee also had a grand celebration, issuing award certificates to each participant in the NGO forum (there were five thousand of them nationwide) to acknowledge their great contribution to the nation.

This national farce amused many of the women who had participated. They understood that the celebrations signified a switch of official views of the conference. The official return to a positive assessment of the conference meant that Chinese women could move toward merging with the global women's movement. After the Platform for Action was solemnly signed by government officials all over the world, the national Women's Federation was quick to use the pledge of the Chinese government. It launched a nationwide campaign to implement the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration, the two documents that "voice the aspirations of women all over the world," as the Chinese media proclaimed. This campaign, though only heeded by the Women's Federation system, is creating legitimacy for expanding Chinese women's activism under the guidance of the two official documents. In other words, the two documents will serve as the measure of Chinese women's achievements from now on. And this shift to global feminism in the discourse of Chinese women's liberation is sanctioned by the government with its official boast of China's great contribution to the birth of the two documents.<sup>47</sup>

### The Emerging Gender Consciousness

In the congenial climate of post-FWCW China, women scholars and activists are openly discussing women's issues with increasing awareness of a feminist gender perspective. The official newspaper of the national Women's Federation, *Zhongguo funübao* (Chinese women's news), and the journal of the Institute of Women's Studies in China, *Collection of Women's Studies*, have become the major media to express feminist gender consciousness while promulgating the spirit of the World Women's Conference.

To "let every one share the treasure left by the conference," the chief editor of *Zhongguo funübao*, Wang Xiuling, invited a group of participants in the NGO forum to a discussion meeting in October 1995. The newspaper printed the abstracts of each participant's talk under the title "Seeing the World through Women's Eyes."

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<sup>47</sup> The official newspaper *Zhongguo funübao* is the best place to observe the evolution of the official discourse on women.

The topic was the concept of gender. A woman scholar expressed succinctly the major point of the discussion: "The greatest inspiration the women's conference gave to people is that we should look at things with a gender perspective." A woman writer described how her heightened gender consciousness enabled her to discern blatant sexism in the media. She emphasized that "by raising gender consciousness, you will notice all those things you have never been aware of before." Several women stressed the urgency of adopting a gender perspective in China. They called on Chinese newspapers to "develop the achievements of the conference to influence the society and decision makers so that they will consider the gender issue. We should use our pens, our voices, and our minds to spread gender consciousness."<sup>48</sup>

In 1996, the open discussion on gender continued, and top officials of the Women's Federation also joined the effort publicly. On June 20, 1996, *Zhongguo funübao* printed on its cover page the headline "Promoting the Concept of Gender, Awakening Women's Self-consciousness." The article reported the talk by the vice-chair of the National Women's Federation, Huang Qizao, presented at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the national Women's Federation and chairs of provincial and municipal branches of the Women's Federation. The reporter stated that the two documents passed at the FWCW raised the issue of the concept of gender, and "now, the concept of gender is already prevalent internationally. It has become the embodiment of progressiveness, justice, and wisdom." The article gave Huang's explanation of the concept of gender:

To incorporate gender into policy making, we have to begin gender analysis before a policy, a law, a program, and a project is made. We have to study what kind of effect they would have on women and men respectively. If a policy is only beneficial to men but not to women, then it is unjust and unreasonable. We also have to evaluate the actual implementation of our policies and programs. If women cannot benefit directly from them or men benefit more than women, that means the policies, programs, and projects are biased.<sup>49</sup>

Huang emphasized that for the concept of gender to enter mainstream society, it would have to be introduced to officials at different levels, and policy makers would have to be helped to

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<sup>48</sup> See *Zhongguo funübao*, October 30, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, June 20, 1996, p. 1.

grasp it. After making it clear that to promote women's development was the responsibility of all levels of government, Huang made a special call for Chinese women's voluntary participation in the cause of achieving equality, development, and peace. The talk, in short, reflected the strong effect the FWCW and NGO forum had on the Women's Federation system. Promoting a gender consciousness as well as women's voluntary participation in women's own cause was not only legitimized but also incorporated into the agenda of the Women's Federation. After the top official's call, *Zhongguo funiubao* began a series of discussions on how to promote the concept of gender. Women scholars in different fields as well as government officials were invited to those discussions. The focus of discussions was mostly policy oriented, revealing the eagerness of those women participants to affect the decision-making process as well as to make gender a mainstream concept.<sup>50</sup>

Such open discussions demonstrate that the FWCW has helped bring feminism to the forefront in China's official media. It also signifies the emergence of a new public debate that is qualitatively different from the public debate on femininity in the 1980s. Whereas intellectual women in the 1980s strove to separate women from the overarching category of class by appealing to femininity, in the 1990s they are turning to a feminist concept of gender for theorizing women's problems. This new focus of intellectual women's attention promises the development of a feminist gender discourse in China.

However, much intellectual interrogation is needed before women researchers in China can be free from the grip of the discourse of femininity. A serious impediment to promoting the concept of gender, as well as a sign of conceptual confusion, is that the term "gender" does not yet have a fixed Chinese equivalent among women's studies scholars in China. In the above-cited discussions, two Chinese phrases are used interchangeably to refer to gender consciousness: *xingbie yishi* and *nüxing yishi*. *Nüxing yishi* also means "female consciousness," and *xingbie yishi* reads literally as "consciousness of sex difference." The ambiguity in the meaning of the terms and women's indiscriminate usage of them suggest that there is little awareness of the conceptual differences in these terms and of the word "gender." Because *nüxing yishi* signifies the whole discourse of femininity, using *nüxing yishi* to mean gender consciousness

<sup>50</sup> See *ibid.*, July 9 and July 22, 1996.

means grafting a Western feminist concept onto a Chinese discourse without recognizing or admitting their incompatibilities. It is time for women scholars in China to start a theoretical and linguistic separation of gender from femininity. This separation will constitute a challenge to the discourse of femininity.

Significantly, some women's voices have begun to criticize the discourse of femininity in recent years. In "Fifteen Years, How Far Have We Come?" published in 1995, literary critic Chen Huifen challenged many prevailing views on women and pointed out that the "new myth of femininity" has created new dilemmas for women. She called readers' attention to the social process of creating women and emphasized that it was important to see "with what kind of value standards does the society regulate women and make women." Chen warned, "Behind women's natural and unrestrained 'individuality,' there is the aspect of compulsory roles. That is the cultural code of male society and commercial culture's secret code that guide and shape women in visible and invisible ways." Chen argued that women need an awakening of self-consciousness. However, what defined this awakening was "not an identification with and following of the new myth, but rather an interrogation of all prevailing views and a deeper analysis and understanding of social reality."<sup>51</sup>

This emerging intellectual interrogation by Chinese women is being facilitated by a dramatically increased availability of feminist texts in China. The official documents of the FWCW, which have been reprinted in many women's journals of the Women's Federation system; the huge quantity of materials disseminated from the NGO forum (each of five thousand Chinese delegates took home some of those materials); and feminist texts published in China in 1995 in welcoming the FWCW<sup>52</sup> all will stimulate further debate and interrogation in due course. Meanwhile,

<sup>51</sup> Chen Huifen 1995. It is not surprising that this new interrogation is from a woman literary critic. Feminist literary criticism has developed in China since the early 1980s. Chinese feminist literary critics have produced many important works. But often the effect of those works is limited to literature. For a more elaborate critique of the discourse of femininity, see Chen Huifen 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Before the FWCW, three books by members of the Chinese Society for Women's Studies were published in Beijing: Bao Xiaolan 1995; Sharon K. Hom and Xin Chunying 1995; and Wang Zheng 1995b. In the three books, the word "gender" is translated as *shehui xingbie*. The authors use this coined Chinese phrase to call readers' attention to the new concept. These feminist texts are regarded as the best books of 1995 by some women readers in China. See the survey "Wo du 1995" 1996.

increasing awareness of the limitations of the Marxist theory of women among women scholars in China is turning them more eagerly than ever to international feminist theories. The demand for translated feminist theoretical texts is high, though the supply is seriously restricted by limited resources. Hopefully, support from international organizations will continue so that important feminist theoretical works, Western or non-Western, can be translated into Chinese to aid Chinese women's construction of their own feminist gender discourse in China.

### Conclusion

Research on women in China has been carried on for more than a decade. Because this is the first time in Chinese history that women have taken the initiative to launch a movement on a national scale, the movement is one of the most significant things happening in contemporary China. It is aiming at both theory and social practice. Institutes and associations of women's studies everywhere are continually holding conferences on women. Women researchers including both Women's Federation cadres and women scholars meet frequently to discuss current women's situations, problems, and solutions. Through their activities, women have demonstrated their intention to carve out a social space for women and participate in decision making, at least when it directly relates to women's lives.

In contrast to contemporary feminism in the West, the contemporary Chinese women's movement began with research on women. It emerged from Chinese intellectuals' concerted efforts to dismantle Maoism. It has absorbed much of the language and ideologies of post-Mao political and intellectual discourses. Although the movement was successful in making a conspicuous social category out of gender (long subordinated to and overshadowed by class in the Marxist theory of women), ironically, it accomplished this by deploying the concept of an essentialized woman. It therefore also contributed to the formation of a discourse of femininity that expressed Chinese women's revolt against Maoist statist control in the 1980s. However, in the 1990s, when the market economy has drastically changed women's social and economic environment, the discourse of femininity has lost its original political edge as an oppositional force. Instead, it has been co-opted by increasingly powerful commercial forces. The mass media-promoted modern femininity, a mix of traditional

female virtues and consumerism, has become a dominant norm that regulates women's behavior and restricts women's choice. Against this background, an increasing number of women researchers have turned to Western feminism for sources of resistance.

Chinese women researchers do not need to bridge a large gap to embrace feminism, if we define feminism as a commitment to gender justice. Although feminism was treated in a derogatory way by the CCP after it assumed power in 1949, the Maoist discourse on women's liberation traces its origins to May Fourth feminism. It was precisely this influence that led the Maoist state to guarantee equal educational and employment opportunities, at least to urban women. Contemporary Chinese feminists, who came of age when these policies were in effect, are increasingly nostalgic about the gender justice they enjoyed (and took for granted) under Maoist socialism. At the same time, however, they object to two elements of that version of gender justice: the state control of its terms and deployment and the male standard by which equality was measured. Research on women expresses these Chinese women's firm commitment to gender justice, a commitment first shaped in the Maoist era, as well as their aspiration to take control of women's issues into their own hands.

Early in this century, Chinese male intellectuals found in Western liberal feminism a weapon to attack the dominant Confucian culture. With the core concept "women are human beings, too," they promoted a women's emancipation movement in China. Toward the end of the century, Chinese women intellectuals are discovering in contemporary Western feminism a new conceptual framework, gender. It has become a pattern in this century that Chinese intellectuals turn to the West to look for intellectual inspiration to form their own resistance to the dominant discourse in China. It has proven an effective strategy. Conceivably, they will continue to do so. In fact, in post-FWCW China, many involved in the movement for research on women express a strong desire to learn about Western feminism and to merge with global women's movements. Their interaction with feminists from outside China has taught them that Chinese women will not lose their own cultural identity by learning from others, but will be empowered politically and intellectually in their pursuit of gender justice. This new level of openness, facilitated by a state-sanctioned campaign to merge with global feminism, promises a continued growth of a women's movement with a feminist gender

consciousness and a feminist agenda in the PRC at the end of the twentieth century.

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