

Global Concepts, Local Practices -

Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women

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The Fourth UN Conference on Women (FUNCW) held in Beijing in 1995 marked a watershed in the history of Chinese feminism. Although Chinese feminists had been in communication with feminists outside China since the 1980s, it was the FUNCW that provided a crucial "transnational opportunity structure" that enabled Chinese feminists to use it as a powerful leverage to generate dramatic changes.ⁱ Today I will highlight feminist organizational and conceptual development in China since the FUNCW. We need to bare in mind the unique context in China where the Communist Party initiated the process of joining the global capitalism without a simultaneous political reform. This is a country that has witnessed the rapid rise of neo-liberalism, social Darwinism, capitalist consumerism in the process of privatization and class and gender polarization while the ruling party claims that it is socialism with Chinese characteristics. Much of the development of Chinese feminism I will discuss, thus, reflects "Chinese characteristics." But I hope some aspects of the Chinese feminist movement will contribute to our understanding of the dynamics between locally grounded diverse feminist practices and strategies and global circulation of feminist concepts and issues.

First, the FUNCW provided an opportunity for Chinese feminists to legitimize NGOs in China. In the early 1990s the Chinese government still put a halt on spontaneous organized activism in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989. It was feminists who used the opportunity of the FUNCW and NGO Forums on Women to popularize the concept of NGOs and to legitimize women's organized social and political activities. Feminists published many articles in the mainstream media, especially in the All-China Women's Federation's newspaper *Chinese Women's Daily* to introduce various women's NGOs in the world and to carefully argue that non-governmental organizations are not anti-government organizations. These discursive practices made the term NGO enter the public discourse in China for the first time in the PRC. Since the NGO Forum on women was part of the package required to host the UN conference, the Chinese government had no choice but to allow not only the circulation of the concept of NGO but also to allow the

formation of women NGOs as well as defining the ACWF itself as an NGO. In a time when the government was eager to find ways for China to re-enter the world and to join capitalist globalization, Chinese feminists successfully pitched the formation of Chinese women's NGOs as one of the mechanisms to "connect the tracks with the world."ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, the FUNCW provided conceptual frameworks for Chinese feminist activists in a crucial moment of the development of Chinese feminism. Since the mid 1980s Chinese feminists had been eagerly looking for new analytical tools that would enable them to break away from the constraints of a Marxist theory of women in addressing women's problems in China's social and economic transformations. The Marxist theory of women developed in the communist revolution and Mao era was the theoretical pillar of the Chinese state feminism of the socialist period and it had the exclusive prerogative in defining women's liberation. The limitation of the theory has shaped a limited understanding of equality between men and women that was sanctioned by the socialist state. Briefly, the Marxist theory of women comprises five points. The first is class (sexual inequality is an expression of class inequality); the second is private ownership (Engels' thesis on the roots of women's oppression); the third is the level of productivity (an economic determinist explanation of sexual inequality); the fourth is the influence of traditional views (a cultural explanation centering on an condemnation of the "remnants of feudalism" without conceptual tools analyzing structural inequality); and the fifth is women's low quality (an ambiguous notion that could be interpreted either as emphasizing women's lack of resources, or as disparaging women and blaming women for their own lowly social positions).ⁱⁱⁱ

Equality between men and women in the socialist state feminist discourse, accordingly, was to be achieved mainly by women's equal participation in production in public ownership, a theoretical position often appropriated by socialist statist agenda that led to mixed effects on diverse groups of women.^{iv} But in a time when it was apparent that thirty-years of public ownership and women's participation in production did not result in the elimination of sexual inequality, and even more unsettling, when the state began to privatize economy, discontent with the Marxist theory of women and a narrowly defined equality between men and women by socialist state feminism was on the rise among both feminist academics and officials of the Women's Federation. It was at this juncture that China hosted the UN conference, an international event that enabled Chinese feminists to discover the feminist concept of "gender" as well as other important concepts, such as women-centered sustainable development, women's empowerment, mainstreaming gender, and so on. All these and more transnational feminist concepts served to provide new theoretical standpoints from which Chinese feminists were able to examine their history and current reality in a new light. The concept of gender was enthusiastically embraced by contemporary Chinese feminists in their efforts to review the socialist state practices of equality between

men and women and to envision new gender equality. While the Marxist category **class** was abandoned as an analytical tool either because of its affinity to Maoism, or because of its critical challenge to capitalism, the feminist analytical category **gender** was made viable by Chinese feminists in mainstream discourse as a critical lens to expose social hierarchy and injustice.

Third, an equally significant development paralleling the legitimization of the concept of NGO was that international funding agencies increased their support to Chinese women's organized activism as part of or in consequence of their support of the UN conference in China. The Ford Foundation, with a feminist program officer Mary Ann Burris in charge of funding for women's issues, played a crucial role in promoting the development of Chinese women's NGOs by generously sponsoring activist projects as well as Chinese women's participation in multiple global preparatory meetings for the NGO Forum on Women. Such financial support from donors such as the Ford Foundation facilitated many women activists outside the WF system to revive activities that had previously been thwarted in the aftermath of the June Fourth Incident.

Gao Xiaoxian organized the first workshop on women and law in 1993 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, which led to the take-off of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family after the low ebb of activism in the post-June Fourth period. Today this association with an elaborate organizational structure runs multiple research and action projects mostly on rural women in the western regions with an annual budget of 6 million yuan and 23 full time staff members in its own two-suite office space.¹ Their intervention projects include women's reproductive health, legal aid, anti-domestic violence, and women's participation in rural village governance.

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

1. These feminist networks are independent of the state both in terms of financial support and identifying issues relating to women's interests. They are initiated and operated independently by women who may or may not have a position within the state system.

¹ The details of the Association's structure and activities can be found on its website: www.westwomen.org

2. They are creating mechanisms to transform official institutions with feminist ideas and practices, but without much fanfare. Gender training sessions for officials, rural women's leadership capacity building workshops, local taskforces on domestic violence, shelters, faculty training workshops, women's studies programs, women's counseling centers, feminist conferences, feminist plays, and so on, are among the wide range of activities taking place nationwide. Different from conventional definition of social movements, these feminist activities never take the form of protests or demonstrations in open spaces. They engage with the state system and institutions via *indoor* activities, and as such, they escape the attention from both Chinese public security and China watchers abroad.²

Aside from the rapid development of the feminist NGOs, the official Women's Federation has also been going through significant transformations **while retaining its institutional structure formed in the socialist period**. Taking on the major role in preparing for the FUNCW, the government funded China's largest NGO, or rather, GONGO, departed from its former position against so-called "Western bourgeois feminism," and advocated connecting the tracks with "the international women's movement." In the early days of the PRC, the term "international women's movement" was used exclusively for the women's movement of the socialist block. Now without changing the term, the ACWF has seamlessly grafted onto global feminist movements. The ACWF has played a major role in circulating the UN documents *The Platform for Action* and *Beijing Declaration* via the official channels of the Women's Federations. "Mainstreaming gender" has hence become an important agenda of the ACWF.

In the post UN conference decade, the ACWF succeeded in making a fundamental state policy of equality between men and women. Since the Chinese government sponsored the Conference and signed the UN documents pledging gender equality, feminists in and outside the official system sought to hold the government accountable. On March 8, 1996, *The China Women's News* reprinted President Jiang Zemin's welcome speech at the Fourth UN Conference on Women a year before. One sentence from Jiang's speech was selected as the title, 'Equality Between Men and Women is the Fundamental State Policy in Promoting Social Development in Our Country.' Following this reprint, presented as a new official document from the top leadership, newspaper reporters interviewed officials around the country asking what concrete measures they had taken to implement the 'fundamental state policy.' (15)

An Example of the effectiveness of feminist activism, Domestic Violence.

² Major works on contemporary political transformation in China generally overlook feminist organized activism, including such recent work *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China*, Merle Goldman, Harvard University Press, 2005. Feminist organized activism in China, in my view, poses interesting and serious challenges to theorizing Chinese political system.

At the UN conference in 1995 the Chinese government did not allow any Chinese women participants to discuss domestic violence in the international arena, since the purpose of hosting the conference was to show to the world that Chinese women were liberated. But soon after the conference, Chinese feminists were able to move domestic violence out of closet, into the mass media and into the law. In 2001 the revised Marriage Law includes a new term “jiating baoli” (domestic violence) and domestic violence is one of the grounds for divorce. In the new Marriage Law of 2004, Clause Three of the General Principles further stipulates that “domestic violence is forbidden.” Moreover, by the end of 2004, twenty-two provincial and municipal governments have passed local statutes against domestic violence. Nationwide local women’s federations working jointly with local police have set up over 400 women’s shelters, and more than 12,000 anti-domestic violence reporting stations.³

The success of feminist activism around the issue of domestic violence demonstrates a unique relationship between spontaneous feminist activism and state feminism. A gendered “bridge between the Party and the masses,” the WF has become the best channel for feminist infiltration of the state in the post FUNCW era. Since the early 1950s the WF system has set up grassroots organizations down to each rural community and urban neighborhood, the only mass organization other than the party itself to achieve such a vast spatial and population coverage. Since its hierarchical structure is modeled after the structure of administration, at each level of the government there is a corresponding women’s federation. Although it is not inside the government, WF personnel are nevertheless on the government payroll and its top officials are appointed by the Party’s organization department at the same administrative level with the same privileges as any other government official of the same rank. The WF’s non-governmental but official status gives this gender-based organization much more power than any NGO in China. Collaborating with the WF, women NGOs such as Stop DV can access both the human resources and official power of the WF.

The operation of the Stop DV project demonstrates interesting relationships between NGOs, GONGGO (the WF), and the Chinese state. Now named the Stop DV Network and Research Center, the NGO includes both individual activists nationwide and institutions such as women’s studies centers in universities, local women’s federations, bureaus of civil administration, hospitals, and local public security bureaus, totaling a national network of over 63 local institutions and organizations in 26 provinces. Local women’s federations are the major partners of the Stop DV Network. And individual members of the Network are either government and WF officials, or professionals from the legal, medical, educational systems, and mass media. Increasingly, women who received the help from the network

³ Huang Qingyi’s talk on ACWF conference on protecting women’s rights, Dec. 23, 2004.

have become activists to provide support for other women at the grassroots level. With ties to various official institutions in multiple locations in the country, the Network has swiftly brought feminist issues and concepts into the official system by running gender training sessions, workshops and conferences. In other words, a feminist NGO not only plays a role as advocator to change public discourse, but also penetrates the official system to generate internal transformations in gender values and norms and to establish institutional mechanism to implement new laws and to change local practices.⁴

The emergence and development of a national women's NGO has changed the political topography of China in meaningful ways. The very existence of this registered national NGO reminds us of the tremendous political strides Chinese activists have made since 1989. It has not only subverted state restrictions on spontaneously organized activism, but also, together with many other women NGOs, effectively broken the monopoly of the ACWF in "representing" women's interests. With such new rivals, the comfortable habitat for the ACWF has altered drastically. The GONGO now has a mirror to reflect on itself if it is truly an organization for women's interests. In other words, the emergence of women NGOs like Stop DV has induced transformations within the official women's organization. The ACWF has been eager to embrace issues and concepts from the "international women's movement" so as not to be left out in the process of a gendered modernization.

The Fourth UN Conference on Women, in the deft maneuvering of Chinese feminists in and outside the official system, has been turned into women's Olympic Games where Chinese national honor is at stake. It has become a frequent practice of Chinese feminists to hold UN statistics of women as a crucial index to measure Chinese women's advancement, and by extension, to measure the level of Chinese modernization. The consolidation of the connection between the status of women and modernity is a key strategy of Chinese feminists that has been deployed pervasively and successfully in feminist negotiation and engagement with the state.

Feminist activists are important players in China's dramatic social, cultural and political transformations since the 1980s. In the limited space here, I have demonstrated that they have enabled a decisive departure from gender politics of the Mao era. Institutionally, feminists have succeeded in breaking the monopoly of the WF by gaining the legitimacy to pursue gender interests collectively on their own initiative. Women's NGOs are now operating at local and national levels taking on diverse activities addressing gender inequality. While the WF is still located in the state bureaucratic system, possessing tremendous institutional and material resources, its long assumed position as the leader of the Chinese women's movement has been made tenuous by the growth of feminist NGOs

⁴ For detailed information on the Network, see its website, www.stopdv.org.cn.

who have often placed themselves in the forefront of raising new demands and articulating new visions. The WF still exerts much more influence than any single feminist NGO in China but officials at different levels of WF are forming partnership with diverse women's NGOs in collaborative projects, as the case of Stop DV illustrates. Designed as a "bridge" between the party-state and the "masses," the WF, in its close interaction with feminist NGOs, has made the state ever more porous. It has become a major channel for feminist negotiation with the state.

Conceptually, feminists have effectively expanded a Marxist theory of women that mainly focused on women's participation in production in the socialist period. Embracing gender as an analytical tool to dissect power relations in previously unquestioned gender norms, Chinese feminists have accomplished a paradigm shift in conceptualizing gender inequality. Feminist new understanding of gender hierarchy has led to a wide range of activism intervening in both public policy making and social practices. Many actions and programs centering on gender mainstreaming are taking place daily by feminists in and outside the official system throughout the country. Advocacy for gender equity is a rare area that has continued socialist principles of social justice and equality while simultaneously transforming socialist gender politics in the new global context.

In order to critically examine Chinese feminist NGO activism, it is necessary to ask not only what have been accomplished by feminist activists but also what have been neglected or omitted. In sharp contrast to transnational feminist emphases on multiple systems of oppression and intersectionality of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, the absence of "class" in Chinese feminist articulation is glaring. The rapid ascendance of the analytical category "gender" is, in a sense, at the expense of erasing the analytical category "class" in China. Feminists in China have voraciously embraced gender exactly at the moment when the term class has turned into a new political taboo. Women scholars in the 1980s contributed to the deconstruction of a Maoist class analysis that eclipsed and erased gender issues by presenting an essentialist notion of woman.⁵ In the 1990s feminists found in gender a much better analytical tool than an essentialized womanhood and femininity. In the post-Mao market economy, the state, with complicit help from elite intellectuals, has conveniently abandoned Marxist class analysis in the aftermath of critiquing the Maoist definition of class. Gone also were the previous socialist principle for social justice and equality. In their place we have witnessed the rise of neo-liberalism and drastic class polarization in the past two decades. And the state has placed severe surveillance on spontaneous organizational activities around class issues. However, class and gender often intersect, resulting in large female populations with little resources both in urban and rural society. In this context, the ascendance and centrality of "gender" in the past decade

functions both as feminist negotiation to maintain and promote the value of social justice against the dominant ideology of social Darwinism in an increasingly pervasive capitalist economy and a feminist evasion of more sensitive issues such as class.

In actual practices, a focus on gender could include class issues as well, such as gender and development projects that aim at poverty stricken populations and regions. Moreover, feminist projects generally are already conceptually oriented towards disadvantaged social groups and often pay attention to women in marginality, including laid off women workers, migrant women workers, domestic helpers, all those who have little resources to oppose economic injustice. However, unable to articulate a clear critical framework that addresses multiple hierarchies and inequalities, Chinese feminists run the risk of being co-opted by the state. Their success in engaging with the state via the official WF and their discursive legitimacy to pursue gender equality in modernity have been possible largely because most feminists consciously operate within the parameters of current political culture. In a time when women bear the brunt of practices such as downsizing, layoffs, early retirement, and severe violation of labor rights in private sectors, we have yet to see the emergence of national networks demanding women workers' rights, though some feminist groups at the local level have long paid attention to women's plight caused by economic injustice.⁶

ⁱ Myra Marx Ferree discusses this concept in her chapter, "Globalization and Feminism: Opportunities and Obstacles for Activism in the Global Arena," in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, Myra Marx Ferree & Aili Mari Tripp eds. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Literally translated as such, this phrase implies "integrating China into the world community." It frequently appears in official documents and media, meaning to modify or transform Chinese systems and institutions in order to either catch up or merge with the global system, in all aspects of social, political and economic lives. In the Chinese interviews, the interviewees mention how they take advantage of this official rhetoric to promote feminist work.

⁶ The Center for Women's Development and Rights of Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xian has organized laid-off workers who become domestic helpers to demand rights and benefits from the government. This effort of organizing working class women, however, is framed in the concept of women's rights and development.