# Women's Organizations in China

from Affiliation to Autonomy

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**Abstract**

China has stepped into a new phase of women's movement with the evolution of women's organizing context.  Women's organizations and activities in China have been mostly state-led., focusing on monolithic womanhood and socialist feminism. Since the mid 1980s, self-initiated women's organizations have developed to promote gender equality landscape, responding to various female identities, interests and social needs.  These emerging autonomous organizations make their debut as active women's participation in public domain. The thesis studies how the autonomous women's organizations have been set up, interact with state and market forces, and how they strategize for gender agendas and equality.  The opportunities and challenges faced by collective feminist agencies demonstrate the altering potential for gender relations in China.  The study is based on literature review and the interviews made on two forms of women's organizations; the autonomous women's groups and state-affiliated All-China Women's Federation (ACWF).  Feminists and women activists usually position autonomous and affiliated women's organizations in adversarial stances, yet the thesis elaborates that, under contemporary Chinese social context, another symbiotic relations between the both exists. Some recommendations for empowering the autonomous women's organizations are proposed. These recommendations consist of improving organizational representatives for women, extending constructive influence to the policy-makers, and creating the enabling environment for gender equality.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most notable changes in China for past decades has been the massive push for gender equality and evolution of women's organizations (Croll 2001: 25-41; Milwertz 2002; Wang 2004). Prior to the mid-1980s, the party-affiliated ACWF was the only legitimate women's organization for representing all women's interests and identities throughout the country. Though it is still a major stakeholder in gender politics, more articulated women's organizations have emerged outside the state apparatus. Awakened from economic reform and legal consolidation of women's rights, women activists and feminists for the first time organized on their own initiative for social changes, leading to a new wave of women's movement from the bottom-up. This new women's movement gained momentum from the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCF) in Beijing, which proved a breakthrough in mainstreaming gender, and sustained its influence on women's equal rights to public life.

Ever since the running-up to the Beijing Conference 1995, there has been an increase in the number, type and nature of autonomous women's organizations. By the end of 2000, there were as many as 3717 autonomous women's organizations registered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, as the response to the gradual acknowledgment of diversified women's identities, interests and social needs. The new women's organizations include women's professional associations, gender study centers, grass-root NGOs, religious groups, and informal conventions. The restructure of women's organizational context indicates how women's organizations reposition gender relations and perceive the altering state-society relations in transitional China.

The upcoming Beijing+10 Global Review will be hosted by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March, 2005. It is especially meaningful for us to revisit the ideals and practices of gender equality on the eve of the event, with the focus on women's equal rights to organize publicly and politically. As one Chinese women's activist indicates, "*Women's organizing of themselves is an on-going process of learning, rather than the final result, which needs continuous improvement until full gender equality is achieved.*" (Interview No.4) Therefore, the development of women's organizations can also indicate the gender equality that the country has achieved and has yet to achieve.

### Background

The Chinese women's journey "from thousand-year feudalism to emancipation" is a bittersweet success, engaged by both the state and women's organizations (World Bank 2002). The rapid change of the gender equality landscape is one of the greatest social changes in China's contemporary history. The fact that

in 2002, China ranked number 96th in the human development index, while 77th in the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and 40th in the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) is worth noting (Human Development Report, UNDP, 2002). The international index indicates China's gender empowerment has reached further advances than its human development, demonstrating the enabling environment for gender equality and the potential space for women's organizations to push the boundary.

Women's organizing is not a new invention in China, but its essence and development has undergone dynamic changes. It was originated in the 1910s with a dramatic essence change in the mid-1980s. The first women's mobilization, the May 4th Movement, was paradoxically organized by male intellectuals, whose enthusiasm for women's liberation was a protest against an incompetent warlord government, the invasion of foreign forces, and China's social underdevelopment. Women's organizations since then have been tinted with revolutionism, nationalism and social production, thus making women's liberation subordinated to a wider social movement (Barlow 1994: 353-355; Li 2001, Joshua, Weimin & Joan 1999). When the state-affiliated All-China's Women's Federation (ACWF) was created by and for the CCP in the 1950s, it was the only legitimate women's organization for representing all women's interest and identities over the entire country. Starting with a more authoritarian regime, China has achieved its rapid gender equality first by a "state-derived feminism" and its accompanying gender development policy. Thus, increasing educated women demand an alternative women's voice. Particularly throughout the reform era, Chinese women struggled to gain diversified identities and new interests. The empowerment of autonomous organizations has been solidly confirmed in gender policy at international, national and local levels. The 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference (FWCF) in Beijing proved to be a breakthrough of gender discourse in China. The concepts of "gender" and "NGO" were formally introduced to the public (Zhang 2001:159-180), inspiring more Chinese feminists to reflect on social construction of women's roles and the possibility of organizing themselves for social change. Bottom-up activism is not revolutionary in nature but more localized, professionalized and civil-based. However, in the process of organizational evolution, there's still space for re-negotiating gender and power, which allows women's organizations more representation and autonomy. The condition is pertinent to whether Chinese women are able to continue their journey "from emancipation to full equality."


**Objective and research questions**
**Objective:** The challenges and opportunities of the autonomous women's

organizations not only characterize themselves but also changing ideas of gender equality.   As women's activism is growing in contemporary China (Jaschok, Milwertz and Hsiung 2001:3), my research focuses on how women's collective agents, mainly autonomous women's organizations, promote gender equality and interact with the state-affiliated ACWF.    The aim is not to quantitatively see the frequency of interaction between the two forms of women's agents, but qualitatively to find out how women activists perceive the state, society, and women. The objectives of the study are presented as following:

- to review the overall development of autonomous women's organizations in terms of gender policy and setting evolution.
- to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by the autonomous women's organizations.
- to propose recommendations for improving organizational autonomy and enhancing gender equality.

**Some research questions:**

- *What are the gender discourses and policies behind the evolution of women's organizations?*
- *What are the major opportunities and challenges for autonomous women's organizations?* How do the distribution of power and political culture characterize the opportunities and challenges? How do women activists review organizational development?
- *How do autonomous women's organizations engage in strategy planning for gender equality and interaction with affiliated organizations?*

**Deposition**

The thesis is divided into six chapters.   Chapter 1 gives a general introduction.   Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework and methodology. Apart from the affiliation and autonomy approach, the thesis holds that the study of the political field can further depict the coordination and cooperation inherent between the two groups of women's agents.   Chapter 3 reviews the gender settings and policies since Mao's period, with particular focus on a typology of women's organizations in the reform period.   Chapter 4 describes the challenges and opportunities for women's organizing.   Chapter 5 reflects on how autonomous women's organizations adopt strategies to promote gender equality and to interact with the ACWF. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of developments of the new women's organizations and proposes recommendations and future studies.

## 2. Theoretical Concerns and Methodology

Asian women's movements deserve special attention for their common effort to rid society of feudalism and patriarchal culture, while there's a more struggling way for self-initiated women's organizations to achieve their full potential. At the regional level, Asian women all experience the rapid modernization of society and readjustment of the role shift between the private and public domains. Rose J. Lee indicates that "women's subordinate position in Asian cultures makes them vulnerable not only to purposeful barriers but also to the unintended side effects of policy-making" (Lee & Clark 2000: 185-193). In that sense, the positive scenario that the equal opportunities and various identities in which modernization (masculine-defined) bring to women might be offset by the reproduction of patriarchy in both economic and public domains.

Patriarchy refers to men's dominance in social relations, which in Asia, can be traced back to Confucianism in 551.BC. It states strict hierarchical gender orders, with women's inferiority to men and complementary role as domestic labor (therefore over-reinforcing women's unified identities as devoted mothers and good wives). Walby furthers a more institutionalized notion of patriarchy, arguing for the patriarchal modes of production, which brings gendered segregation of society, market discrimination, and women's subordination in politics (Walby 1990). In some sense, women's organizations' subordination to the party-state suggests another form of political patriarchy. It is the interlocking of the public and private patriarchal modes that reproduce the inequalities and exclusion of women's participation in public lives. The gap between policies of equality and social realities are cited as evidence that patriarchy has lived on through different gender settings and taken different forms to influence the process of women's organizing in China. As public institutions seldom preclude women's activism individually, this work is more directly carried out at home and the overriding political culture. Patriarchy is thus embedded, transforming, but recently challenged by autonomous women's organizations in the political field.

On the other hand, with political liberation and social transformation, autonomous women's groups in Asia have expanded and created more equitable representation since the mid-1980s. The distinction between affiliated and autonomous women's organizations is marked in Communist party-states, such as India and China. These Communist countries, by defining themselves as "the liberators of women", tend to set up state-affiliated women's organization for united women's interests. Raka Ray (1999) and Monica Erwer (2003) conducted fieldwork in India, discussing both women's organizations identically within the political field. On the other hand, most researches in China concentrate on the ACWF, whose structure is dominant but bureaucratic (Judd 2002). It is argued though the women's movement has been

quantitatively promoted by the ACWF, autonomous groups have retained insistence and won "qualitative participation by self-initiatives and fulfillment" (Li 1989). The works by Cecilia Milwertz, Qi Wang, and Ellen R. Judd re-affirm the evolving women's organizations in China. These empirically grounded studies document the process of a bottom-up women's movement and the altering of state-society relations.

**Theoretical Framework**

For women's rights activists, institutionalizing women's interest became the core strategy in the mid-1980s worldwide.  Women's activists and organizations had developed different positions in relation to the state and re-thought how their identities and interests could be organized and become a source of empowerment.(Erwer 2003)  The rise of autonomous women's organizations has several significant implications for "gender and power" and "the concept of autonomous civil society."  It has been widely studied which kind of female collective agency can efficiently propose gender agendas and what factors are playing a role for the negotiation of power.  The two influential positions within GAD are the debate between the integration (state-affiliation) and autonomy approaches.

**Integration Approach:** This approach holds that through the state's engagement women's liberation can be achieved by equal access to education and employment. The integration approach, as the former communist and East European countries promote, claims that the state as an accountable actor will strive for maximizing women's interests. In this view, the integration of political-affiliated women's organization within the state brings efficiency.  State-derived feminism develops strong relations to the state policy while questions how the social structure impedes the advance of women's full potentials.  Feminists inside the state institution doubt autonomous women's organizations' ability to mobilize women at large.   It is argued that autonomous organizations are often constrained by resources, regions and memberships (Ray 1999: 15-17), and thus they are not as influential as the state-affiliated organizations which could even develop in the far-reaching rural areas.

**Autonomy Approach:**   On the contrary, autonomous women activists contend that only by independent organization can gender equality be better achieved because women's empowerment can't be gained by state-derived policy but only by self-awakening. Autonomy means independence from the "political patriarchy", which avoids the tension created by interest conflict between the state and women.(Pettman 1996:13-15). The political patriarchy refers to male-dominated politics and continued gender-blind policies "despite the legal commitment to economic and political rights." (Lee & Clark 2000: 20) Thus, the autonomy approach

looks for gains in feminists' independence and more participation from the grass-roots. These are critical for the co-opt strategy, which may risk the inherent masculine organization culture (Erwer 2003: 96). In this view, autonomous initiatives of women's organizing are more appropriate for developing gender equality and women's awareness. They are concerned about the extent of autonomy, representation, and independence they (have yet to) achieve.  They propose women's citizenship and response to state-policy (like birth-control) which are different from men's.  Pettman further argues "Most states still translate women's issues into welfare issues, and contain women as a category or special-needs group, rather than analyzing the gendered impact of state policies"(Pettman 1996: 14). As for structural change, the autonomy approach holds there is much more to do than promoting women's employment and education as the integration approach prioritizes. New women's needs are often excluded from the integration approach's main concerns, such as the marginalization of queer women in official rhetoric. They regard the integration approach as "to move women's movement" rather than women's own movement (Milwertz 2002: 1). In even more radical views, state-derived feminism is like a gift inherited by nationalism rather than a fruit gained by women's collective struggle.

**Political Field:** However, neither approach alone can fully depict the women's organizations in China.  There is still room for coordination and conflict among different forms of women's organizations for the common pursuit of gender equality. The prospect for dialogue between "autonomy-integration" could be further enhanced. As Brigitte Young points out, "there's expanding interconnections between the state and nonstate organizations, and among domestic, international, transnational activities, which can no longer be analyzed with the single theoretical instrument" (Young 2001).  The two mentioned approaches over-emphasize the resource-dependent mobilization and the definite role of state to women's organizations, while neglecting the possible evolution of inter-organizational relations, localized institutional arrangements, and the political field in which all institutions have relative powers.  In this sense, the state also becomes dynamic and negotiable, which could favor or disadvantage a certain women's organizations.  The state and all women's organizations thus behave as the actors bargaining with one another, with shared cultural and political background. Besides, it is also difficult to discuss autonomous women's organizations without mentioning the state-affiliated ACWF in contemporary China (Milwertz 2000), for the latter *empowers the former on one hand but also limits full potential of its development on the other.*" (Interview no.6) Being regarded as a consultant or constraint, the ACWF functions as a

supervisor institute that autonomous women's organizations have to be affiliated with. Therefore, in order to understand autonomous organizations' development, attention should be paid to the political field which builds inherent chance and challenges and (un)makes women's interests.

### Conceptualizing the Study

Thus, conceptualizing interests, identities and patriarchy is necessary in this study. Collective interests and identities are intertwined factors behind the women's movement, and thus embedded in a broader political field. The content or the process of building the collective identity, as Melucci suggests, "comes to exist a part of movement culture"(Melucci 1985).This political culture factor further decides a women's organization's potential channels, both to the wider women's public, and to policy-makers. While women's identities are relational, so are their interests. Molyneux distinguishes women's practical and strategic interests (Molyneux 1996; 1998: 231).The former allies women on their universal perception of their own identities as class-free mothers, daughters, or wives and their concerns about poverty-alleviation, education, employment, and childcare. On the contrary, strategic interest allies women on the base of economically divided classes, from elite women's intellectual to female migrant . Since the identities are not family ascribed but socially achieved, the interests are more specific and transforming, like individual rights, anti-domestic violence, and equal political participation. In a country like China when the "class" is sensitive for "making" women, the women's organization that seeks the "larger good" (ACWF) is more articulated, legitimate, and politically reliable. Another reason is that the practical interest does not seek fundamental changes and directly challenge the existing male-dominant politics, even though politics are gendered. Individually, women account for only 5 out of 198 newly-elected 16th Central Communist Party Committee memberships (*Time 2003:27*). Organizationally, the subordination of the ACWF to the CCP and autonomous women's group to the ACWF also indicates how women's interests are negotiated among the state, the ACWF, and autonomous women's organizations. The collective interests, in a sense, constitute the cultural factors that are embedded in a political field. Yet as Molyneux claims, "women's interests were seen culturally and politically constructed, reflecting but not reducible to, the special placement and priority of particular groups of women at a particular moment" (Molyneux 1998: 231). It should be noted that both interest and political field are not fixed but full of a changeable nature, this is where the organizations' opportunities and challenges arise.

### Method and selection

This thesis is a multiple-case study including empirical fieldwork in China from August to October, 2004, which involves the qualitative method in order to study how autonomous women's organizations form, function, and interact with the state-affiliated organization. The major reasons for me to choose a case study are:

1) As the research questions are mainly proposed in "what and how" form the case study is more advantageous than other kinds of study strategies.

2) Case study is an often employed strategy for the relevant situation which is beyond the researcher's control while keeping the high extent of the contemporary phenomenon, like the opportunities and challenges faced by women activists.

3) Qualitative methods are better suited to the study of subtle social complexity, like the development of women's organizing and state-society relation. As Yin points out, "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." (Yin 1984: 13)

Other Methods Combined:

As Yin points out, "Case studies need not be limited to a single source of evidence; most combine with formal observation and other methods to produce quantitative and qualitative data" (Yin 1984: 20). As a case study along with other methods can be proved a winning combination in fieldwork, the mix of methods is more mutually reinforcing than mutually exclusive for further interpretation of the findings. It is essential to include interviews, observations, and document analysis in my research to get a more thorough understanding of the dynamic within and between women's organizations. In this way, the study protocol can be established, directing systematic procedures for each case concerned.

Qualitative Methods:

Interview and Observation: The fieldwork in China involves in-depth interviews (seven women's organizations) with representatives from both autonomous and affiliated women's organizations. Though I can't generalize all kinds of women's organizing only on the basis of seven cases, the paper finds cross-case challenges and opportunities faced by women activists, which characterize autonomous women's organizations role to the state and vice versa. The thesis includes an interview protocol for looking into women organizations' missions and intra- or inter-organizational operation. Systematic semi-structured interviews have been

conducted with a number of respondent and informant interviewees. The significance of interview is that it is the construction site of knowledge.  As S. Kvale says "interview is literally an inter view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interests, a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue" (Kvale 1996:13-14).

In addition, I also joined a forum named "Women's Media and Women's Development" in Beijing, which was to mark the 20th anniversary of China's Women's News (1984-2004).  The forum was hosted by the ACWF and also included many women's NGOs and scholars, which provided me a golden opportunity to observe their interactions and common challenges.  The common grounds of attention suggest the possibilities are there for further dialogues and mutual coordination among different women's groups.

Quantitative Methods:
Official Statistics:

As mentioned above, qualitative methods open the possibility to study the opportunities and challenges faced by women's organizations. However, it runs the risk of returning only a limited number of respondents' interpretations. Therefore, it is important to supplement with quantitative methods to obtain more nuanced data. To make the thesis more complete, updated official statistics are presented, mainly from the ACWF, international index, and gender scholars.  The primary statistics gathered by the ACWF have the advantage of broad samples nationwide, which means the results of the survey presents the average experiences of women and men in contemporary China.

**Reliability and Validity**

To fathom the diversity of Chinese women's organizations today, the thesis is primarily based on systematic interviews and observation of various women's organizations, under the principle of case study protocols and ethical considerations. The selection of representing organizations is based on their capacity to demonstrate diversified female interests.

The case study protocol was developed in order to produce systematic procedures for each case and cross-case findings. Developing this protocol was beneficial for standardizing the questionnaires, thus reliability can be inherently achieved.  The anonymity of interviewees was well protected and most interview contents were re-affirmed by the interviewee.

**Limitations**

While it was my intent to make the study as complete as possible, there are still some limitations.   First, due to time and space constraints, I conducted interviews mainly in Shanghai, although two occurred in Beijing, and one in Xi'an.   Xi'an was the most distant stop of this academic journey, but it was where the Women's Mosque could be accessed.   If I had more time, I would have liked to visit more women's organizations in more provinces. Second, this was my first time visiting Muslim regions.   With the local people's hospitality and enthusiasm, I was able to complete the interviews smoothly, however, I feel there is an underlying deep culture and values that I could have studied further to enhance my understanding of the region. Third, as pointed out by Alvesson "in the context of organization, it is valid to support [that] the respondents are politically aware" (Alvesson 2000). Nevertheless, the limitations should be made up for by the trust-worthy nature of the interview design, which gives the interviewee sufficient confidence in idea exchange and freedom of expression.

**Design of the Study**

Concerning the topic of "women's organizations", I should first contextualize gender and power, i.e. the power of culture and institutional factors behind the collective women's agency. Raka Ray provides a method to study women's organizations by a typology of political fields.   A political field is the "structured contested environment in which various institutions, like the state, organizations, and activists, are embedded in and constantly interacting with" (Ray 1999: 6).The two analytically distinct axes; the political culture (the acceptable and legitimate way of doing politics in a given society) and the distribution of power (the pattern of concentration or dispersal of forces in the field) specifies political field. (Ray 1999: 8-10; Erwer 2003:103) This is illustrated in below:

|  |  | Culture | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Heterogeneous | Homogeneous |
| Power | Dispersed | Fragmented | Pluralist |
|  | Concentrated | Segmented | Hegemonic |

(by Ray 1999:11)

The method of analysis is useful to move beyond the assumptions of the "autonomous" versus "affiliated" debate, the definite role of the state to either organization, and the "absolute power of resources" for mobilization.   Instead, the field is the place where all institutions have relative power and negotiate with one another by the shared culture and power factor.   The field concept encompasses both

structural and process elements. Thus, to situate women's organizations in force field helps us identify what opportunities and challenges are **first inherited** and **then arise** from a certain field. For example, a field that inherits a homogeneous culture and concentration of power can be thought as hegemonic, in which the dominant support, reflect and maintain their dominance by interacting with other subordinated groups (such as the CPC's preference for dealing with the ACWF and China's state-led civil society). In contrast, the field that inherits a heterogeneous culture and dispersed power relations can be categorized as fragmented, in which neither monolithic discourse nor a domination/subordination divide is salient.

The first overview of the inherited field indicates the factors which pre-conditioned both the emergence of women's organizations and the interdependent position of other field players (Erwer 2003:78, 103) However, as a political field is open and developing, there are external factors arising outside/within a field (such as socio-economic transition and international exchange) that all field players may not fully control but constantly act in response to (autonomous groups perceive those factors as opportunities, yet the state regards them as a political threat by engaging the containment policies) (Ray 1999: 6-9, 165). It is the external changes and players' internalized perceptions of the "game" (the ongoing competition for maximizing the power in the field although at the same time accepting the rules of play) that constitute the process of negotiations among all field players, which further maintain or transform the nature of the field. (Swingewood 2000: 211-217; Rydstrom 2003) My argument is though the de-centralization of power is still unforeseen in the near future, the diversification of women's identities and interests possess some potential to transform the field to a segmented one, if the state's supremacy--the institutional patriarchy in this case-- is lessened.

### 3. Policies, Settings and Women's Organizations

Gender policies are closely related to women's social participation and gender equality worldwide. They may be explicitly labeled as gender equality policy, but more often the policy concerning women's status prevails in many realms of public policies, such as quota systems, birth control and marriage law. (Kjeldstad 2001) The evolution of gender policy redefines gender relations, on the way from basic livelihood chances to political participation. It also backs up the development of women's new interest and identity with the transformation of society. Gender policies, as a great pillar for women's social rights, especially provide the legitimate sources for autonomous women's organizations in China.

China's legal system has been advantageous for women. Women's social participation has been guaranteed in the Constitution since 1949 when the CCP came

to power. However, to have specific gender policies which ensure women's rights and associated freedom is one thing; to fully implemented is another. In terms of women's organizing rights, there is still a gap between the ideal and practice of gender policy. This study finds due to the gender settings, the development of autonomous women's group has been delayed. Some interesting questions are "Since there have been no constitutional barriers to women's participation in the public domain, why has the development of autonomous women's organizations been delayed until the reform era (since mid-1980s)?" "Weren't they interested in organizing for changes before?" "Does the movement rise or is it pushed?" The questions are meaningful for understanding the evolution of women's organizing patterns. This section begins with concrete policies and underlying gender settings since 1949, followed by a typology of women's organizations in the reform period.

**Gender policies and settings**

For more than a half-century, gender equality has been a continuing source of attention and common pursuit for both women's organizations and the government. This section argues the gender setting is a decisive factor behind the pattern of women's organizing and realization of gender policies in China. In the socialist period, women were treated as a homogeneous group oppressed by class exploitation. In the Revolution period, they were expected to behave as men. Both gender settings recognized neither "gender as an analytic category" nor "diversification of women's identities", and thus preclude the articulation of autonomous women's groups. It was not until the reform period when both discourses were recognized and China's women's organizations underwent dynamic growth both in scope and variety.

Socialist Period (1949-1965)

Gender equality has been a priority in China's national policy. Stated earliest in the 1949 Constitution, "men and women are equal, and are equally entitled to education, health care, political participation and employment." However, in Mao's China, gender policy basically originated from Frederick Engel's work, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State", which argues the man's monopoly on private property. To liberate women is to encourage their labor participation and socialize domestic labor. Gender inequality was explained by the exploitation of class, and thus women's liberation was equivalent to proletarian revolution. During this period, feminism was state-derived, and the first women's organization, the ACWF, was established to achieve the goals of the state. It bore dual identities: to pass down the party policy from above and to represent women's interests and needs from below.

As the ACWF is essentially affiliated and funded by the party-state, their guiding policy is to implement the basic line of the party and insist on Marxist-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. Though the appeal of socialist construction, surpassing gender equality, mobilized women to participation in workforce (Joshua, Weimin, Joan 1999), there is no denying that the party-state quickly eradicated outdated patriarchal customs which fettered and discriminate women in public areas. Official statistics indicates "there appeared a nationwide upsurge of women stepping out of their homes to take part in social production," corresponding to Mao's envisioned China in which women would hold up half the sky. However, there was an inseparable relation between feminism and nation-building, in which a new sense of womanhood was perceived as homogeneous and identified as "national women" (funu). As Rofel summarizes, "the national women became the only viable feminists under Maoist politics. She was a revolutionary and whole-heartedly for state policies"(Rofel 1994: 227-237).

Revolution Period (1966-1978)

There were no gender policies related to women's public participation in this period. Furthermore, the Revolution period witnessed the silent hours of women's activities. Gender development was de-naturalized, as women were expected to "accept and adopt" masculine roles. Under the gender sameness discourse, the best model of women should be man-like (iron-lady), thus excluding the possibility for women's self-initiated organizing. Class conflict still surpassed other social categories, like gender, as the dominant tool to examine social inequality problems. The slogan "what men do, women can do, too" obliterated sex difference and ignored fundamental gender-based discrimination. Though under the de-gendered political context, the ACWF, as women's representative, had scarce room to function and came to the edge of disbanding, it was a time for individual women to cross long-existing gender boundaries in the pursuit of political power. According to Wang Zhang, "for the years 1966-78, women became for the first time better represented in party-government leading positions" (Wang 2004). However, many feminists, when reviewing the pre-reform periods, criticize women's liberation at that time as appearing masculine and the ACWF for being weak (Barlow 1994: 345-349).

Reform Period (1978-present)

In this period, consolidating autonomous women's organizations has been promoted in a multi-layered regulatory framework and positive settings from international to local levels, which is illustrated below:

| Level | Policy | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| International | (UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW 1993) (UN Fourth World Conference on Women; Beijing Platform for Action International, 1995) | *concept evolution from WID to GAD |
| National | (Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, 1992) (Program for the Development of Chinese Women 1995-2000) (Program for the Development of Chinese Women 2001-2010) | *gender sameness to gender differentiation *diversification of women's identities *gender as an analytic category |
| Local | ( programs by ACWF at hierarchical administrative level) | |

*() represents relative gender  polices  *the settings*

Internationally initiated in 1976, the UN Decade for Women was aimed at enhancing women's participation in all spheres of society. The theme decade influenced the world by promoting women's awareness and mainstreaming the gender perspective. However, the Decade didn't get public attention in China because the open-door policy (1978) started ever later.   The main actor involved in the event was the state-affiliated ACWF (Min 1999:211-222 ; Croll 1991). Though most Chinese women didn't catch the Decade, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCF) in Beijing greatly speeded a new wave of women's activism. First, in 1993, the state rectified The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the first UN Human Right Treaty applied to domestic policy in China. The significance of the Convention as regards to women's organizing is written in article 7: "the States parties shall ensure to women, on equal terms of men, the rights…to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country." Secondly, new women's organizations were encouraged by the 1995 FWCW, its accompanying NGO forum, and  Beijing Platform for Action (PFA). PFA, a grand agenda for women's empowerment, consolidates "women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through equal share in decision-making." During this period,   worldwide perspectives on gender and development have also undergone a substantial evolution from WID to GAD, with  women's role shifts from "passive recipients of development assistance to agents of change"(Visvanathan 1997).   The concept evolution justified women's association rights worldwide.

Nationally, as part of the preparation for FWCF, the National People's Congress promulgated the Law on the Protections of Women's Rights and Interests in 1992. This law confirms "women's equality in the political, economic, and social spheres." It continues promoting the Program for the Development for the Chinese

Women 1995, which advocates "women's participation in the decision-making and management of state and social affairs." Subsequently, at the turn of the new century, the Congress updated a decade Program for the Development of Chinese Women 2001-2010. It reaffirms "women's participation in administration, management and decision-making," and furthers guarantees "to expand channels for and enhance women's democratic participation." Along with the progressive legal development, gender setting also stepped out of the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. The concept of gender sameness evolved to one of gender differentiation. However, the initial reforms period has seen the opposite development of women politicians and women's organizations. Women's role in public domain is questioned and re-examined from a gender perspective. The rising women's organizations prove there is hardly any single women's organization which can "take care of all." On the other hand, the sudden drop in the number of individual women politicians indicates the diversification of women's interest and initial identity crisis as being both "women" and "politicians". Women's identities are established both intra-personally (like female politicians) and interpersonal (like rural/migrant/urban women). Women's interests have also been reconsidered, meeting the polarization of women's development. During this time, cross-cultural exchange has been increasing; discourses such as "gender" and "feminism" have been introduced into China. When gender theory was officially recognized by the CCP, the foci of policy-making gradually extend from class to gender factors. Mainstreaming gender has eventually proved to be the foundation of the state policy.

Locally, ACWF has promoted the "four selves" policy and the "two studies, two competitions" campaign at all administrative levels. The former is official rhetoric asking individual women to seek self-reliance, esteem, confidence and improvement. The latter has operated since 1989 for mobilizing women's participation in economic reforms by peer learning. The pursuit of raising "quality" (suzhi) and success in transforming the marketplace became a distinctive feature of rural women's organizing (Judd 2002). The campaign is both state-initiated and demanded locally because women themselves are also active in eradicating the "feminization of poverty" phenomenon. This campaign proved a catalyst for subsequent similar campaigns, like "model women, significant contribution" in cities and "exemplary units, exemplary performance" in the service sector (Jin 2001: 123-140). Though the campaigns are more market-oriented, the promotion of self-awareness and teamwork is crucial for women's organization at a local level, which contributes to women's rights from the bottom-up.

The settings enhance our comprehension to what extent the concrete gender policies can exert an effect on women's organizing. The policy becomes the rhetoric

for women's activism if activism finds no standing place in a monolithic gender setting. On the other hand, gender policies empower organizations if the setting recognizes both women's diversity and gender as a category. Although in actuality, there's a distance between policies and practices, the policies still keep "a hidden impact on subsequent rounds of collective actions"(Staggenborg 1995:353).

### Types of Women's Organizations

As Irene Tinker observes women's activism worldwide, she indicates "two types of organizations predominated among those set up since the 1970s, women's research centers and groups working as agents to change the way women think or act"(Tinker 1999: 88-104).   The finding is reaffirmed by Chinese gender specialists Du Fangqin (Du 2003) and by reality.   In the reform period, women's organizing context experienced great change with the rise of new women's groups and the restructure of the existing ACWF.   The new wave of women's organizing broadened gender concerns with migration, health, media watch, full citizenship, and theory-searching.   Religious, lesbian and even some informal women's conventions were able to find venues for public discourses. China's women's organizations are more like a co-existing spectrum, ranging from official organizations to informal conventions. Besides, they are also quite localized, corresponding to regional history and culture. For example, Beijing is exceptional for women's NGOs; Shanghai for professional associations, and west China for women's Mosques. These women's organizations can be differentiated from one another in terms of intra-organizational development, including their formations, functions, structures and decision-making processes. The following is a typology of women's organizations and their respective intra-organizational development.

ACWF: Initiated in 1950, the ACWF has been the most influential women's organization in China.   They are hierarchical organizations ranging from national to county level with 98,000 women's activists working full-time. (ACWF website) The candidates for chairwomen are nominated by the state and elected by members. They recognize themselves as government officials, whose job is "*to support the party guidelines and to bridge the state and women*" (Interview no.1). Recently, due to the swiftly transforming society, the state-affiliated ACWF seeks   ways to innovate their activities   by setting up 1) CCP's women's committees in various institutions, 2) women's cadre schools, 3) "Marriage, Family and Theory Research" study groups, and 4) publications and on-line campaigns.   The above organizations are identified as new elements of government administration.

Professional Association: Since the 1980s, professional associations became active by mobilizing career women for quality promotion, socializing, and mutual learning. Professional women's associations are mostly concentrated in coastal urban areas, restricted in membership, and distinguished   by profession. In Shanghai and Beijing, professional associations are more prosperous than those in other provinces, and include female journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs and so on.   The urban women's professional associations and the ACWF usually have mutual supportive connections and sometimes, a shared workplace.   ACWF in Shanghai even terms them   the "ten golden flowers" and actively encourages new forms of association, like Shanghai Policewomen in 2005 (Women's Committee 2003). The close links among various professional associations even demand a mediating women's organization like the Women's Intelligence Association, the umbrella organization which governs and co-ordinates all regional professional associations. The activists include both employed and retired professional women, most of whom are part-time activists. They elect a committee for   policy- making and annual working plans, while both the committee and any critical decisions have to win the ACWF's approval.

Women/Gender Study:   Initiated in the mid-1980s, Women/Gender studies programs keep increasing in numbers. They are organized by scholars, professors and retired specialists in universities.   Research centers are mostly affiliated to the schools with part-time activists engaging in research, lectures, producing publications, and practical services. They are paid through their regular work or by special research project grants. The structure of the organization is flexible because staff comes from different academic disciplines, covering gender studies to the applied social sciences like population and legal studies. Until 2000, there were 34 Women/gender study programs introduced in China's tertiary education. (Du 2001: 237-249) Interactions between domestic gender study groups and overseas Chinese women's studies are also frequent, which led to the first International Conference on "Chinese Women Organizing" in Oxford in 1999. (see website reference)

Grassroot Women's NGOs: These groups are mostly charity-based, service-oriented and idea-advocated. Inspired by FWCF, most of them are concentrated in Beijing, and include Peking University Law Counseling, Maple's Research Center, Migrant Workers Home, Women's Media's Watch and so on. The regular staff are involved full-time, with the engagement of part-time voluntary workers.   The structure is relatively loose with high staff mobility.   Though all termed NGOs, each develops different ties with the ACWF, ranging from strategic cooperation to independence. Foreign sources, like Sida and the Ford Foundation, also provide them with

substantial sponsorship with the aim of promoting philanthropy and democracy worldwide. The initial organizers usually retain the titles of leadership, while the Boards of Directors possess decision-making power (鄧 2003). The level of democratization is usually related to the individual organization's developmental phases.

Religious Women's groups: Women organizing as Buddhists, Taoists, Christians and Muslims have existed in China's society for a long time. Though they are different in their beliefs, those women's organizations share some identical characteristics. (1)There are closer ties between organizational and individual life; faith is well incorporated into life. (2) They have different interpretations of religious ceremony and customs. For ethnic Hui women, veiling is regarded as common religious practice, which protects Muslim women's well-being. (3) The tendency to oppose lesbian groups and prostitution is generally stronger among women's religious groups. (4) Though every group has developed different strategies for gender equality, they show mutual respect to each other and similar yearnings for dignity and self-fulfillment. Though religious women's organizations have had a long history, their re-emergence since the political relaxation in the mid 1980s raises a concern about how these members transcend their religious/secular experience and pick up multiple identities in daily life (Shui 2001:101-117).

Informal Women's Organizations: This category includes formal or informal women's meetings, conventions and on-line campaigns. The informal women's organizations usually fall outside mainstream gender concerns, like lesbian groups, unemployed or pre-retired women, divorced women, foreign brides, and single mothers. The organizations mostly have a mutual-help nature. The organizations' members appear to share similar concerns, worries and life experiences. They organize mostly for seeking legal aid, socialization, and individual growth. The organizations themselves reflect the new corporate identity in a transforming society. Because of their relatively flexible structure, most decisions are made by general consensus rather than formal voting mechanisms. The organization's nature usually evolves "from self-help to mutual support, from struggling for survival to seeking liberation." (He 2001:55-57)

## 4. Opportunities and Challenges for Women's Organizing

Autonomous women's activism arose worldwide in the 1980s, especially in former Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The new form of organization stirred the debate between affiliated and autonomous women's organizations, such as

"who is the real representative for women?" (Basu 1995) Affiliation/Integration approach looks upon the state as an accountable resource-provider who strives for maximizing women's interest while the autonomy approach contends that only by independence from masculine state machinery can gender policy be better examined. However, neither approach takes the relational notion of the whole. In the following section, I will use Bourdieu's theory of fields to study first the inherited political field, which conditions the interdependence of all the field players (like the reproduction of power relations), and then focus on how the potential tensions and opportunities arise from outside/within the field (like how each agent perceives and responds to changes).

**Political Field**

*"Organizations are not free agents, but rather they inherit a field and its accompanying social relations, and when they act, they act in response to it and within it. In Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term, fields are understood both as configurations of forces and sites of struggle to maintain or transform those forces (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:1001). These nature of fields makes it particular analysis of social organizations."* (Ray 1999:7)

In Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus, the primacy of relations and "socialized subjectivity" are stressed. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 55-79, 135; Swingewood 2000:211-213; Rydstrom 2003) First, the analysis of the distribution of power and political culture helps us identify a certain political field in which the autonomous organizations are embedded and interact with other field players. It regards spaces of position, which conditions the new women's activism and sustains reproduction of the domination-subordination relations. Second, since Bourdieu rejects the political field as a seamless unity (Swingewood 2000: 212) I will extend the discussion to some tendencies that bring new tensions, opportunities and potential change in the field. The latter part of the discussion is grounded in the organizations' perception of the correct way for doing politics. The perception carries the historical "socialized subjectivity." In a sense, through women's organizing, the internalized perception of the past enables each agent to situate itself and its action appropriately at the present. As Helle Rydstrom elucidates, "Being a participant is a matter of having a "feel for the game" within a certain field… It is a matter of having a feel for the responses, performance and expressions." (Rydstrom 2003: 29)

**Distribution of Power**

As it is difficult for the CCP to abandon Marxist thought, it is rather not easy for them to discard the role of women's liberator. The ACWF is indisputably the most

powerful women's organization in China. Established in 1949 as one of eight mass organizations to build socialism with Chinese characteristics, the ACWF is a major force to bridge the state and women. The CCP and the ACWF have developed through a half-century of close relations and have built mutual trust. First, it is a hierarchical organization extending from all administrative levels from the nation, province, township to villages under the sponsorship of the CCP. The latest statistics indicate that there are about 60,000 federations at or above the township level with 980,000 women's representatives' committee at the grassroots levels (ACWF website). Besides the large scale, they are also authoritative safeguarders of women's rights. It is the ACWF's negotiation that led to the law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (formulated in 1992), two-staged Programs of Development of Chinese Women (implemented between 1995-2000 and between 2001-2010), and the Marriage Law (revised in 2001). Third, the CCP favors the ACWF as the representative women's organization for international occasions. So in terms of the capability to channel the gender agenda, push legislation, and demand resources from the CCP, the ACWF has centralized power.

**The Political Culture**

Historically, China's women's movement has been colored with revolutionism and nation-building. Though women have been active in organizing, they risk being regarded as "assents" rather than "agents" in a wider social movement. Since the mid-1980s, the polarization of women's development calls for an expansion of class-based women's organizations. However, in a society where the "class" remains sensitive and unspoken for "making" women, only women's organizations that seek the "larger good" (ACWF) is more articulated, legitimate, and politically-reliable. Moreover, party-state, rather than autonomous civil society, carries more authoritative weight in Chinese people's lives. The homogeneous political culture is embodied in official statement of the "Three Representatives", which reasserts the party's monopoly on the interest of people. Thus, there are very few autonomous social groups completely independent of the state. Due to the Civil Affair Law, any social group is required to be affiliated with the state institution. Thus, most women's NGOs anchor their legitimacy on their affiliation status to the ACWF (a so-called "government-organized NGO"). This poses an intriguing question. If the ACWF is regarded as a state organization, can the ACWF-affiliated new women's groups claim NGO status? Or if the autonomous women's organizations are recognized as NGOs, can the ACWF also claim itself to be an NGO? (Milwertz 2002:24) Scholars have a debate over whether GONGOs are genuine civil society or only part of a "state-led civil society." And sometimes female activists are former ACWF members or have a dual role in both organizations.

The phenomenon "outsider within and insider without" is popular (Hsiung 2000:10-11), leading to an even more homogeneous political culture.

**Domination and Subordination**

In China, there are multiple agents joining gender politics. Based on this analysis, the concentration of power and homogeneous culture leads to a more hegemonic field, where the ACWF occupies a dominant position and the newcomers (autonomous organizations) subordinated ones. The precondition for entering the field is to recognize the existing values and choices, and thus sustain the domination-subordination reproduction. In this way, while the field newcomers aim to bring more fundamental change, they unconsciously bear the "acquired" rule of the game, which is already embedded in the field. As one activist says, "*one challenge is our organization has been often questioned "why are you working outside the state?" especially at the initial phase of our organizing*" (Interview no.6). The interview pinpoints the high cost to enter the hegemonic field and the conditioned social practice, sensed by all of the field players. By contrast, the ACWF enjoys the privilege of the dominant as Bourdieu indicates:

" *the privilege of the dominant, who move in the world like a fish in water, is that they need not engage in rational competition…all they have to do is to follow their disposition, which being adjusted to their position naturally generates practice adjusted to the situation*"                                            (Bourdieu 1990: 108-109)

However, the ACWF's position is neither unchallenged nor fixed. It can act as a friend or foe for autonomous groups, depending on the state's practical considerations for maintaining the political status quo. In this sense, the state functions as the most powerful player to act in a field, "in which goals and ends are not determined solely through conscious, deliberate and rational practice but flow from the socially constructed feel for the game"(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:126) Thus, the party-affiliated ACWF's stance in the women's movement is justified and well-defended by the state and daily routine. Its abundant possession of capital allows it to reproduce its privilege, even without this reproduction "willed". Obviously, the rising power of autonomous organizations is quite different from that of the ACWF, yet it is the power differences that lead to our reflection, "How and from where can this dynamic change occur from a hegemonic field?"


**Arising Opportunities and Challenges**

Besides the reproduction function which is illustrated in the previous section, the field (even as hegemonic one) is also dynamic and contextualized within various social aspects related to gender equality. As power is not unlimited, neither is the political field seamless. (Ray 1999; Swingewood 2000)   Several tendencies provide

evidence of tensions, opportunities and dynamic change arising outside/within the field, which in other ways change the players' feel for the game, the existing balance of forces, and struggles for power.   For example, international cooperation manifests a new mode of exercise of power that highlights the bottom-up movement and participatory approach.

Interviews with feminists and NGO experts verify that women's organizations are embedded in a matrix of social settings.   In the matrix, the development of women's organizations is pushed by the principle of new demand and supply (such as socio-economic transition, political relaxation, and international cooperation) but also hampered by the internal weak structure and external proscribed environment (such as limited resources, patriarchal culture revival, bureaucratic registration and regulations). The matrix is presented as the following:

Patriarchal culture

‖

Structural weakness

(internal)                         *Political relaxation*

*Socio-economic transition* -> Women's Organizations <-*International cooperation*

*(demand)*                  ‖                    *(supply)*

Bureaucratic regulation
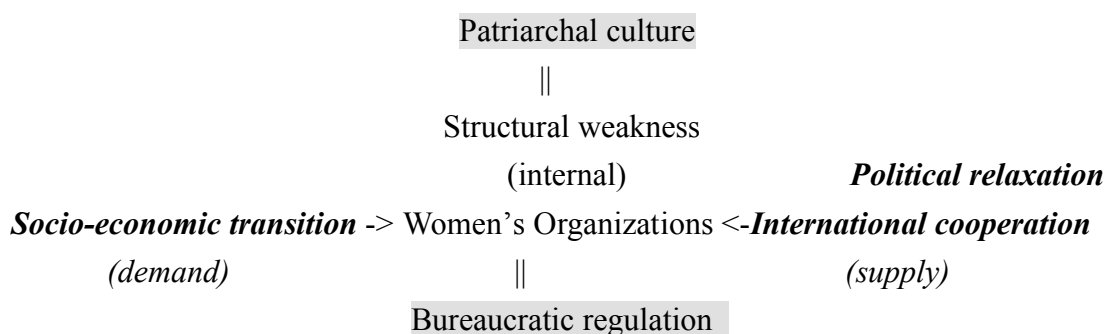
**Major opportunities**

Socio-economic Transition: The rapid socio-economic transition during the reform period creates favorable conditions for new women's organizations. On the one hand, with the push from the state and the ACWF, the educated female population keeps growing.   In the year 2000, female college students for the first time exceeded 40% , an increase of 5.6% compared with     1995.(ACWF statistics) This growth indicates not only just numbers but also in the diversified, achieved women's identities, which broadens the united and ascribed women's identities (like mother and wife). Particularly urban women, who benefit from unprecedented voice in public spheres, have more opportunities for action. Female intellectuals and leaders are feeling themselves association-minded (Wang 2000:14).   For example, Shanghai, with its great modernization, has "*the largest number of women's associations and gender studies in China.*" (Interview no.1)   On the other hand, the state's deliberate retreat from the market brings new pressure for social service.   As many associations target economically favored women, women's NGOs also set up to meet the new challenges from the market. These include such populations as oppressed female migrants, gender discrimination in the workplace, and over-commercialized women's images.

New issues emerge within the existing ones, such as girl student drop-outs and domestic violence. All of the above converge for wider public attention on gender issues and impetus for organizational (inter-) action. Therefore, the new women's organizations are called upon to mediate between the state and the market, between the benefited and the disadvantaged groups.

Political Relaxation: Apart from the economic reform, the political-legal development is also conducive to a more articulated civil society. First, social organizations improve their legal status with the evolution of the legal framework, featured by the consolidation of the "rule of laws" and full citizenship. For example, China's 1982 Constitution states that citizens all enjoy freedom of association. The Regulations on the Management and Registration of Social Groups (1998) further acknowledges these expanding social spaces. Though there's a debate over whether state-society corporatism is strengthened by the Regulation, the social organizations can't otherwise achieve wider social recognition sponsored by the state. Politically, government reform in the 1990s upholds "small government, big society", which has gradually taken effect. Due to the ongoing pressured social service, the state is more willing to permit and encourage social force, which functions to share loads and promote "development with equity." As an NGO worker and former ACWF member indicates, *"The participatory approach becomes more popular…ACWF knows it and seeks direction of inner reform from extending more informal, private interactions with us."* (Interview. No. 5) Reciprocally, the social groups also provide multiple-level participation that builds up more legitimate and competent governance. However, the fact indicates there's still room for Party and government to engage further liberation and acknowledge "civil society as an intrinsic good rather than a possible mechanism for achieving social economic goals in areas from which the state is withdrawing"(Young 2000).

International Cooperation:

*"I was amazed at the effectiveness and forcefulness of these English words in describing and de-constructing women's secondary position in societies"*

(Ge and Jolly 1999:64)

There has been an increase in the frequency, type, and essence of international cooperation among women's groups in China and worldwide. In terms of frequency, China's opening-up to the world and hosting of the FWCW breaks the isolation of Chinese women activists with international feminist communities. The FWCF proves a breakthrough by involving 35,000 women around the world in its NGO Forum. Many women rode the tide to organize and devote themselves to bridge Chinese

women's movements with the world. As one activist said, *"we organized when preparatory work for FWCW was in a full swing, when the state was eager to restore its human rights record* (which was seriously damaged by the 1989 Tienanmen massacre) *by promoting women's rights"* (Interview no.5). The event has sustained its impact on activating gender studies, information exchange and intra-organization networks. These horizontal networks go beyond the state's control and generate part of independence (Pettersson 2000). Besides, many foreign actors take part in funding China's fledging civil society. According to a HRIC paper, it is estimated that over 500 international NGOs and foundations give more than $100 million each year for projects in China. Many women's NGOs in Beijing are sponsored by foreign resources, such as the Ford foundation, human right groups, Sida, and the World Bank (Wang and Evasdottir 2003).

Equally distinctive is the changing nature of cooperation. Though there are divides among different women's camps, there's an identical trend to localize gender theory and action from global thinking. For example, as a part of women around the world, there are more gender studies engaging Chinese women's oral history and anthropological fieldwork. The eagerness to transplant all Western gender theory in the 1980s was then replaced by a self-reflective attitude: *"We are wondering whether there's cross-cultural compatibility."* (Interview no.4) The local value system was reviewed and incorporated into gender studies. Some trans-boundary issues like the trafficking of women, foreign brides and trans-national women's migration also raise local feminists' interests to engage in more multi-lateral cooperation and comparative study. In sum, the international cooperation not only boosts activists' enthusiasm but also sustains the learning process that women's agents, individual and collective, all have undergone and empowered.

**Major challenges**

Patriarchal Culture: China has an age-old and interlocking patriarchy. The private patriarchy excludes women's rights to public life. Though greatly eradicated in Mao's period, discriminatory patriarchal practices were revived with a more institutionalized public patriarchy when the planned economy shifted to market competition. The patriarchy reinforces gender inequality by utilizing the existing gender gap to replicate women in inferior status and retard their upward mobility. This results in segregation of society, market discrimination, and women's subordination in politics. (Walby 1990) In 2003, Time magazine released a finding that "in 1990, [in China] women earned 83% of men's pay, by 1999, that figure had dropped to just 70%." (Time 2003: 22-27) Downplaying the female role in the progress of China's economy is the regrettable backlash of development, which also enlarges the rural-urban gap of

women. Counter-intuitive it may sound, but the expansion of the gender income disparity eventually deviates from Mao's envisioned China, in which women would "hold up half the sky." The situation is worsened for rural women and female migrants, who are mostly over-worked and underpaid, and thus under-represented in social organizations and activities. Disadvantaged women are double-taxed as both bread-winners and domestic labors. Besides, gendered stereotyping and professional segregation still prevail, with the ideas that "a strong woman is not as good as a strong man" and "politics is a man's profession." As one activist indicates, *it's nearly impossible to devote to women's work without the family's support…especially for women activists, we are even triple-taxed.*"(Interview no.2) The quote is verified by the ACWF's latest national survey, in which 53.9% of male respondents and 50.4% of female respondents agree with the statement "men should emphasize more social life, and women family life"(Survey of the Status of Chinese Women in Society 1990-2000). The interlocking of the private and public patriarchy thus supports each other by gendered exclusion and segregation.

Furthermore, the patriarchal culture even extends its negative influences on the outcome of public policies, such as unequal retirement age limits and a distorted one-child policy. These two policies are the most criticized for their gender-insensitive nature and for revealing the state's patriarchy. While the former deepens gender tension and insecurity in the marketplace, the latter acts as a catalyst for an imbalanced sex ratio and deprivation of female infants' survival rights. The population scholars have sent a signal, warning the imbalanced sex ratio in China has approached 120/100, which will squeeze women into early marriage and prostitution. "*We have to initiate a "love girl baby" campaign…when men start to worry about the difficulty of getting married in the future, we have to remind them that the birth rights of female babies are badly deprived now…their worries still seem male-centered…*"(Interview no.1) In the near future, women's organizations will face a more difficult time dealing with the imbalanced gender population and its unexpected social burdens. Even still, the Chinese government is unwilling to release more space for autonomous women's activism. This raises the doubt that the state is fundamentally patriarchal itself, which systematically promotes the ACWF on one hand, but on the other hand ensures the institutional patriarchy which impedes women NGOs' advancement.

Bureaucratic registration:
*"We hope more autonomy from the ACWF… we also know they are just following the rules… In our view, affiliation doesn't matter, but autonomy does."*

(Interview no.5)

Besides the cultural environment, the tedious bureaucratic work for attaining an association's legal status and operation also put many women's activists to the test. Following the crackdown on the 1989 Democratic Movement, the CCP furthered their control by stipulating straitjacket regulations on NGOs in 1989 and 1998. The newly-decreed Regulation on the Management and Registration of Social Groups (1998) formalizes any social group, before filing the application with the Ministry of Civil Affair (MCA), have to attain approval from the relevant state-affiliated institute and receive its supervision. (China Labour Bulletin 1999) The dual registration and monitoring process expects to achieve "orderly, healthy and a higher standard of self-restraint in legal terms" at the expense of the organizational autonomy. Thus, the ACWF monopoly is consolidated by its supervisor status and fewer competitors. ACWF can also retract its approval for reasons of procedural irregularities, such as hosting inappropriate activities and deviating from the Party guidelines. Detailed regulations of the MCA required that women's organizations existing before 1989 had to renew their status, and for those who organize around gender issues post-1989 have to be affiliated and supervised under a party-organ. The Article 16 of New Regulation further states "identical or similar social groups cannot be set up within the same administrative area." Women's activists outside the party usually find themselves situated in the embarrassing position of losing autonomy. To avoid bureaucratic work, there are also women wishing to organize informally, leading to asymmetric legal status and entity. In general, women organizers, when struggling for true autonomy, have to tread carefully along the Party policy line and realize the state's practical considerations to maintain the political status quo. These practical considerations, or the state's perception, results in "an inherent tension between the policy objectives of on the one hand encouraging "social forces" and one the other hand strictly controlling them."(Young 2003) As one women's activist says *The major challenge is, sometimes…we feel that good will is not enough."*(Interview no. 5)

Internal Structural Weakness:
*"At the beginning, to survive is more a problem, let alone development..."*

(Interview no.6)

The internal structural weaknesses are characterized as "four shortages" (siwu), namely, the lack of regular staff, funding, facilities and time. (Du 2001: 237-249) These challenges for institutions usually put women's organizations in a periphery status, both in society and academies. In society, women's organizations have to maintain normal operation within these constraints. While the high mobility of voluntary workers challenges grass-root women's NGOs, the recruitment of "qualified" members also upset urban professional associations. Funding is another

problem for all autonomous women's organizations. Those who receive foreign funds try hard to maintain the sponsorship while avoiding over-dependence and interference from the donor groups. Those with no funds struggle for their survival through activity or seeking potential financial support. No matter which path the organizations take, they risk losing the feminist principle of equal participation and collective action for financing their development. Besides, the vulnerable institutional power also leads to public bias that they have questionable accountability, transparency and morality. The most apparent cases are lesbian and religious organizations, which are often stigmatized as sick and superstitious women's groups. One religious group says, "*We respect people's free choice of religious affiliations, but we don't like to be misunderstood or labeled as some mysterious group.*"(Interview no.7)

In the academic world, gender study and women's research centers are also marginalized because of scarce administrative resources and unstable operation. As Du argues, "Gender studies which lack resources have to rely upon the school leaders' personal morality and integrity" (Du 2001:241-243). The finding is verified by my interviewees, who expressed identical feelings that the school leader's gender awareness and support is decisive for a center's fate. (Interview no. 4) In order to become effective, gender studies also introduce courses for college students and struggle to push and test the boundaries of culture. While confronting the homogeneous culture with so many constraints, the studies must find some way of working with the dominant discourse. Though the political culture recognizes gender studies' legitimacy in educating students, there is an implicit consensus on what can or can not be put on the curriculum. For example, the discussion of the one-child policy is a bit sensitive if it involves the state's role. Meanwhile, the "over-enthusiasm" in promoting women's rights is an ineffective strategy in this cultural context, and might easily be misinterpreted as threatening One director of gender studies even points out, "*to make gender studies become culturally resonant, we often give our first lecture on how men have also suffered from gender stereotypes, …to let them (male students) know gender studies is not to promote women over men… the men are oppressed by patriarchy, NOT feminism.* " (Interview no.4) However, because there is still horizontal segregation by areas of study between women and men in campus, male students have less accesses to gender courses which, due to their tightened financial situation, is only offered to students majoring in sociology.

## 5. **Strategies for Gender Equality**

How autonomous women's organizations promote their visibility and voices is strategic in today's China, when the state-affiliated ACWF still asserts its dominance

over women's representation.   Though autonomous women's groups can't change the political field overnight, they can pursue qualitative participation by developing their own brands, cooperating with the ACWF, exploring alternative or virtual space, and redefining the problems. Rydstrom draws an analogy between the competition of powers and game, all the agents try to maximize, or optimize, their position in the field (Rydstrom 2003:29).   This section explores the most employed strategies by each kind of women's organization and their inter-organizational relationships, especially that with the ACWF. The interactions between autonomous and affiliated women's organizations vary, ranging from the extremes of total cooperation to independence (Pettersson 2000:12).   This complexity reveals the uniqueness of each organization and their common but differentiated pursuit.

In this section, I argue despite some debates among women's organizations, most of them tend to maintain harmonic co-existence.   Second, women's activists are well-connected within and outside the ACWF. This corporatism illustrates "a civil society with Chinese characteristics." One noticeable fact is whatever strategies are adopted (or adapted) by autonomous organizations the ACWF ensures interactions with politically-reliable ones.


**Cooperation**
*"We are like sisters. We're working, growing, and dreaming a better future together."*
<div align="right">(Interview. no 3)</div>

Historically, women's professional associations and the ACWF have had symbiotic relations. They are tinted with strong official colors, because many of them have been established on the ACWF's initiative or composed of party members. The ACWF grants the associations most institutional power and support by demanding loyalty, thus leading to full cooperation, less autonomy and identical interpretation of gender policies.   Their cooperation was initiated early in the reform period, when women were the main losers of economic transition. At that time, the ACWF appealed to the Women Entrepreneurs Association for assistance for laid- off women workers (Wang 2000: 174-177). They fought together in the 1980s against the state's proposal of "women return home" to solve the unemployment crisis.   Since the 1990s, their concern extends to the women's opportunities in school and politics. Take the China Female Mayor's Association for example. It prioritizes women's equal rights to employment and education as the ACWF does.   On the other hand, it was not until the ACWF admitted the existence of domestic violence that the Women Lawyer's and Judge's Associations started to engage these originally sensitive gender agendas and revise the Marriage Law. The Female Lawyer's Association in Shanghai even provides regular legal counseling in ACWF branches.   Most importantly, they share

the same belief that "raising women's quality" is the key to gender equality. Thus, they hold annual elections for a "women's role model" in society and expect that through successful women's experiences, women in public can get inspiration for "quality-raising". In sum, as the ACWF helps associations access higher levels of the state and its resources, associations also help the ACWF revitalize through links with powerful and new elite women in society.

**Alternate space**

"*Today's college students will become tomorrow's policy-makers. A primary task of gender studies is to cultivate students' pioneering spirits.*" (Interview no.4)

This strategy is widely used by women's research centers, informal groups and religious groups. The strategy is recognizable by its strong appeal to identities and specific brand-building while avoiding head-on coalition with ACWF policy-lines. In reality, they develop their own interpretations and action for gender equality, most of which are innovative and deep in meaning. First of all, gender studies programs in higher education are usually entrusted by the ACWF to conduct social research. Based on the pursuit of truth, the findings may not meet the state's expectation, while the centers build themselves an authority in alternative academic space. Another example is the controversial drama, Vagina Monologues, which was supposed to debut publicly in China in March 2004, but was called off by officials and the municipal government. Still, the drama had already been performed in the Guangdong Arts Academy and Shanghai Fudan University but only to a restricted number of students and gender research scholars (Watts 2004). This privilege shows that intellectuals have enjoyed a more relaxed political culture in a given society (the campus). This granted favor is strongly influenced by but not reducible to the interdependence of the state and academy. Besides, informal groups use this strategy to improve their marginalized status and condition, which are non-issues or too sensitive in official discourse, like lesbian groups and the Tienanmen Mothers Campaigns led by Ding Zilin (Wang and Evasdottir 2003). Ding's association is recognized globally and even nominated for the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, which claims its alternative international space. Likewise, women of religious affiliation also ensure their alternative space in mosques, churches, temples, and so on. The aim of those organizing is on education and group learning, while they put more emphasis on raising "women's consciousness" instead of "women's quality."

**Redefining problems**

"*Initially, people didn't have any idea of domestic violence. There was only the word called "wife-battering" in the 1980s...even until now we finds that the ACWF's*

*campaigns for "raising women's quality" is improper, since it (violence) is a social*
*problem, rather than any women's quality problem…"* (Interview no.6)
Many gender issues are redefined by the endeavors of grass-root women's NGOs. Those groups are sensitive to existing gender inequalities and power relations. They have a certain amount of autonomy and popular support. Although identified as subordinated groups in the political field, they have distinguished issue areas and have precise insights. One women's NGO illustrated the point by redefining domestic violence from non-issue to public concern (Milwertz 2000:5). In the eve of the FWCF, the state was reluctant to recognize the problem was in existence and "wife-battering" was something regarded as a private affair. Through the NGO's long efforts, domestic violence turns out to be a social problem that involves concerns from the ACWF, legal professionals, and the state. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the TV series "Don't Talk to Strangers", with a storyline on the issue, was a hit and invited public discussion on anti-domestic violence action. Women's Media's Watch is another pioneering women's NGO, which devotes itself to "gender and media." They monitor the press and "keep women's eyes" on how women's images are and should be presented in media. Besides, they also exert their influence in a regular CCTV program, "Half the Sky." Most women's NGOs are inspired by the FWCF in Beijing and thus nicknamed "Beijing-style women's organizations" by other groups. They are characterized by horizontal participation and their mutual-help nature. Their interactions with the ACWF vary, depending on the compatibility of gender agendas from both parties. For example, many women's NGOs acknowledge self-empowerment and knowledge as the fundamentals of gender-equality. Therefore, they show little interest for voting on women's role models, since it is irrelevant to self-empowerment. "Raising women's quality" is something controversial for women's NGOs. They are sensitive to the negative connotation of the phrase, which might refer to the inferior status of women genetically. On the contrary, they share common ground for anti-domestic violence campaigns and raising women's consciousness with the ACWF, thus leading to deeper cooperation and dialogues. Generally, women's NGOs keep moderate ambitions by limiting their concerns to a certain group of women or a certain aspect of all women. They don't intent to replace political power, but endeavor to reposition gender relations. In the sense, they have more flexibility for strategic cooperation (and are also involved with the media), tolerance for public debate, and awareness for self-governance if not interfered by external forces.

**Virtual Space**

 The advantage of this strategy lies on its anonymity, efficiency and geographically

unlimited outreach. Based on these reasons, virtual space becomes the new strategy for all women's organizations in China, with particular attraction for lesbian groups, women dissidents, Falun Gong women's groups, and Tibet Women for Independence (Tibetan Women's Association). The women groups over-adopting this strategy usually fall out of the mainstream. They are oppressed in reality due to the existing political atmosphere and social conventions. In virtual space, they review why they are de-voiced and pursue their political or personal claims, most of which are labeled anti-social and politically-unreliable. These groups are often isolated, scattered in power, and defensive of their existence. Though the internet is their major way to access the public, it is often interrupted and shut down for the official's media censorship. In their view, gender equality is realized through the pursuit of political justice, which is decisive for the voiced and devoiced.

**Coalition**

Coalition is the strategy that newly emerged in 1999, with the aim to generate the resources, staff, and powers among women's organizations with overlapping interests. The coalition strategy has recently flourished in China under the project "Domestic Violence Research, Intervention and Prevention," with the sponsorship of foreign funds and women's activists within and outside the ACWF (Young 2003). The project coordinator is The Institute for Law at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which is in charge of an umbrella structure and a broad range of agencies. The participatory agencies include most Beijing women's NGOs, feminist scholars, ACWF cadres, community committees, police, medical practitioners, and legal professionals. As domestic violence is a multi-faceted problem, the coalition against violence also combines various sub-projects in advocacy, research and social action. Their networking is greatly involved with gender training, that is, educating both abusers and victims and institutionalizing professional intervention. They also adopt proactive measures, like introducing concepts to the public. The coalition has a very inclusive and accountable nature. As Young observes, it believes "(involving ACWF)… may well be a more effective form of civil society in China, than the isolated efforts of a sprinkling of atomized NGOs" (Young 2003). Above all, by building a mutual-support network within, the coalition exemplifies a breakthrough and the changing nature of the strategy, relations, and potential shift of the political field.

**6. Concluding Discussion**

There are multiple actors involved in gender politics. The political field offers a better description of the relative power of all the field actors, whose effects are limited

in the political culture and distribution of power while producing constant interactions with one another. The interactions include both conflicts and coordination. This study shows there is no oppositional official-civil duality in China's women's organizations (though there is a domination-subordination divide), in which the rise of the one does not necessarily lead to the wane of the other. Though sporadic and limited in institutional power, autonomous women's organizations seldom regard the dominant ACWF as the main obstacle. Moreover, the ACWF is neither unchallenged nor fixed, it can act as a friend or foe, depending on the state's practical considerations of maintaining the political status quo. In the field, the state functions as the most powerful player to set the institutional arrangements, which decides each organization's cost to enter and quit the field.

Meanwhile, the state's power is not unlimited, nor the political field seamless. (Ray 1999; Swingewood 2000) Several tendencies provide evidence of tensions, opportunities and dynamic change within the field, which in other ways gradually contextualizes all the field players. For example, international cooperation manifests a new mode of exercise of power that highlights the bottom-up movement and participatory approach. As Raka Ray puts it, *"understanding how (women's) movements are shaped, constrained, and enabled by political field ultimately allows for a more optimistic and open view on the possibility of effective action for and by women."* (Ray 1999:166-167) It also holds true for women's organizations in China, which not only know that they need to keep moving but also where they are moving to (more balanced power and heterogeneous culture).

To push and test the field boundaries, both kinds of women's organizations should get involved and engage in further negotiation with the state. As a result, I would like to propose some recommendations for empowering autonomous women's organizations. These recommendations consist of extending constructive influence to the policy-makers, improving organizational representatives for women, and creating an enabling environment for gender equality.

For the ACWF: As a supervision institute to autonomous women's organizations, the ACWF should allow for alternative voices and systematize its management. It can also help autonomous groups by translating their voice to the policy-makers, promoting their visibility with official recognition, and channeling resources through co-operative activities. As a women's agency to the state, it can utilize its close association with the government to improve the participation of women in political decision-making and administration at all levels.

For autonomous women's organizations: As a women's agency with fewer resources and institutional power, autonomous women's organizations can change their periphery status with their activist commitment and transforming power. They

can also develop innovative strategies (like coalition or involvement with the media) to ensure the efficient expression of specific gender agendas and inter-organizational cooperation. The proliferation of women's NGOs and networks can gradually introduce a heterogeneous culture in which all field players enjoy more equal participation and autonomy.

<u>For the state:</u> As a communist country, China's government has paid much attention to gender equality, but there is also much space for improving the rights of women's organizations. The state should revise The Regulations on the Management and Registration of Social Groups (1998) and acknowledge rights for free association, as stated in the Constitution. The state can also empower women's NGOs by granting them tax-deductions and institutional power. The state should NOT regard organization as a potential threat in politics or merely providers of women's welfare. For gender equality and changing the political field, there should be greater interplay of commitment from both the bottom and the top.

**Future Research Questions**

This thesis has generally illustrated the main opportunities and challenges faced by women's organizations as well as their strategies and interactive relations.

I hope, as many women's feminist scholars and activists have contributed to the field of study, this thesis will invite more discussion on women's organizations in China. Due to the limited time and length, there are still some questions unexplored but quite inspiring. Based on this thesis, some areas for further study are:

1. To seek a larger picture in general, a comparative case study between official and civil women's organizations can be conducted by further interviews with both organizations, the state administrative department (Ministry of Civil Affairs), and female citizens.

2. To capture the dynamics of women's organizations, a single case study is suggested. As women's organizing itself is a process (Jaschok, Milwertz and Hsiung 2001:6), it's meaningful to study intra-organizational development and the roles played by the state, market and foreign sponsors with "the borrowed insider's views."

3. Finally, it is important to study Chinese women's organizations based on the point of Law. It creates an enabling environment for women's organizing but also barriers for further activism and autonomy. How the political-legal arrangement institutionalizes women's public life and constructs women's citizenship deserves further research.

In summary, women's organizations embody women's new consciousness and interests at the collective level.  At the same time, women's organizations in China all emphasize the process of learning. The activists not only learn in the organizations but also in the organizing process, which sustain their commitment for gender equality and perseverance through the challenges ahead.  Cecilia Milwertz says Chinese women's movements are a wave in the process of rising (Milwertz 2002:147). In a sense, the way that women's organizations travel from affiliation to autonomy is more like a process, rather than the result. Though it takes time to reach its peak, it is the ongoing input from various women's organizations that makes the wave keep moving upward.

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