THE ALL-CHINA WOMEN'S FEDERATION
IN CHINA'S TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY:
FROM "TRANSMISSION BELT" TO CIVIL SOCIETY?

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by
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ABSTRACT

China’s economic reforms, followed by loosening political control, have not only transformed the Chinese economy, but also restructured Chinese society. Chinese people enjoy more freedom and greater associational life. Indicative of this transformation is the establishment of a growing number of new social organizations, which articulate a variety of interests, and mediate between Party-state and society. For Chinese women, the process of reform has not only created new opportunities in the economic, social and cultural spheres, but also reinforced old patterns of gender subordination and created new gendered issues.

The All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) is an organization established by the Chinese Communist Party as a “transmission-belt” to reach all groups of women. It faces explicit challenges to reshape itself as a genuine representative for its constituents in the rapidly changing Chinese society. Particularly, the Fourth World Women’s Conference that took place in Beijing in 1995 and the Non-governmental Organization forum before the conference confronted the ACWF with new issues and different theoretical perspectives on gender issues. This thesis explores the efforts of the ACWF to seek autonomy and address women’s interests by taking a civil society perspective. This thesis will also comment on the changing process of the ACWF towards a civil society.

Prior to the reform, the ACWF was a top-down organization whose activities were generated from above rather than from below. When women’s interests conflicted with those of the Party-state, women’s interests were usually downplayed, or even
compromised. In the reform era, however, the ACWF has started to seek autonomy and independence from the Party-state, and to give priority to the interests of its members. The ACWF has developed an operative theoretical framework conducive to safeguarding women's interests: the Marxist theory of women. It has integrated and supported new women's organizations, which in turn has helped the ACWF extend its reach to women and increase its representative legitimacy. Facing the worsening political status of women and the discrimination in the work place, the ACWF has developed a number of new measures to increase the representation of women in politics, to protect women's legal rights, and to improve women's employment and education.

In so doing, the ACWF has taken some characteristics of a civil society organization. However, judging from the four features of civil society, i.e. autonomy, self-regulation, popularity, voluntariness, the ACWF is still not a fully-fledged civil society organization. It still remains a "transmission-belt" between the Party-state and women. Nevertheless, compared with the pre-reform period, the ACWF has established a two-way channel of communication that reflects mutual reactions between women and the state. The ACWF has become a mediator between the state and women. If this trend continues, the ACWF has a much better chance to become a civil society organization than trade unions. However, given the immense power and the heavy cultural sanction of the Party-state, it remains to be seen whether the ACWF would be able to claim itself as a fully-fledged civil society organization or not.
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DEDICATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACFTU: All-China Federation of Trade Unions
ACWF: All-China Women’s Federation
CEE: Central and Eastern Europe
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
FITUR: Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia
FSU: Former Soviet Union
FWWC: Fourth World Women’s Conference
KMT: Kuo-ming Tang
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
PRC: Peoples Republic of China
SOE: State-Owned Enterprise
TVE: Township and Village Enterprise
WF: Women’s Federation
1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, economic reforms in China have not only revitalized the Chinese economy,¹ but also brought about significant changes in society, fostering new needs, expectations and interests. Indicative of the process of social change is the growing realm of new forms of intermediary organizations, such as peasant associations, private entrepreneurs' associations, self-employed labourers' associations, professional institutions and academic societies. These organizations articulate evolving interests of their members and mediate between the Chinese Party-state and society, sowing the seeds of an emerging civil society.

For women, the implications of economic reforms have been mixed. The introduction of market reforms and opening of the domestic economy to international markets have created "new opportunities in the economic, social and cultural spheres."² At the same time, they have "reinforced old patterns of gender subordination and created new forms of oppression."³ This calls for stronger women’s organizations to tackle women's issues.

With the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, government organizations such as the All-China Women's Federation (the ACWF)⁴ were established. With branches all over China, the ACWF addressed women’s issues, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had long recognized gender discrimination and women’s

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ In China's official paper since mid-1990s, the ACWF is referred to as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). The concept of NGO in China is ambiguous and contested. Considering that the ACWF was initiated by the CCP, sponsored by the government, and its hierarchal organizational structure,
subordination. Such women’s organizations did play an important role in keeping gender issues on the political agenda. However, there is criticism of these organizations’ subordinating gender interests to national and party priorities. Doubts exist about the representativeness and effectiveness of state-sponsored women’s organizations.

In the meantime, new social organizations have emerged since the introduction of economic reforms. Due to their greater responsiveness to the diverse needs of new categories of women, these new organizations, such as women’s salons, clubs, teahouse, and hotlines, have posed a challenge to the old governmental women’s organizations. In 1995, the Fourth World Women’s Conference (FWWC) held in Beijing also confronted the ACWF with new issues and different theoretical perspectives on gender issues.

The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s resulted in the dismemberment and dysfunction of government organizations in these states, and thus underlined “the fragility of this particular breed of official women’s organizations and their unfortunate dependency on their respective communist parties.” Questions have been raised regarding the appropriate role of the state and society in handling gender issues.

Taking into account this domestic and international context which calls for an appropriate organizational structure in addressing gender issues and the respective roles of the Party-state and civil society, I focus my attention on the case of the ACWF. Given China’s long patriarchal history and the ongoing significant social, economic and

and its task to follow party goals, the ACWF doesn’t constitute a NGO by western standard. It is referred to as an official organization in the western literature.

6 Howell, 1996, 129.
7 Ibid, 129.
political transformations, it is of great importance to reflect upon the past experience of
the ACWF and its future prospects.

Like all state-sponsored women’s organizations in other communist states, the
ACWF was an integral part of the Chinese Party-state. It served as a “transmission belt”8
between the Party-state and society, communicating party policies downwards to women
and reflecting women’s interests upwards to the party. Yet, as a government
organization whose specific group interests were subordinated to national goals,
women’s interests were often downplayed when they conflicted with those of the Party-
state. Two decades of market reforms have radically altered the socio-economic and
political environment in which the ACWF operated. With the decentralization of the
CCP’s power and fragmentation of its influence as well as the diversification of society,
the ACWF has gained more freedom and autonomy from the Party-state, and has
refashioned itself to such an extent that it has now become part of the “plurality of voices
that undercuts the CCP’s totalising narrative of the success of gender equality in China.”9
The ACWF has become more responsive to its constituents. It has gradually moved
towards a civil society organization. Taking a civil society perspective, this thesis
analyzes the transformation of the ACWF since the market reforms.

In this study, the use of the term “civil society” in the Chinese context does not
imply the same meaning as Western civil society. Disparate historical experiences and
profound cultural differences between China and the West have given rise to
substantially different variants of civil society. To better understand the Chinese civil

Narrative.” In Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation, ed. by Louise Edward, and Mina
society, I present an overview of the historical development of civil society in communist and post-communism states. This overview also helps to establish a theoretical framework that explains the changing social-economic environment of the ACWF and explores the extent of the autonomy and independence gained by the ACWF during the reform period. The next section reviews the concept of civil society and its application in communist states. The following sections review two relevant bodies of literature, social organizations and women’s social organizations in communist and post-communist states.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Conceptualization of Civil Society

In the past two decades, the concept of civil society has gained scholarly attention world-wide. It has found numerous advocates in the West, such as John Keane in Europe, Daniel Bell in the United States, and Adam Michnik, George Konrad and Vaclav Havel in Eastern Europe. Robert Miller, in his book *The Developments of Civil Society in Communist Systems*, found that the notion of civil society is generally applicable to the study of communist systems, though civil society is a product of

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10 John Keane suggested democratizing European socialism by defending the distinction between “civil society” and “the state.” See John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1988).
western democracy. This application is valid as long as the different cultures and traditions of individual countries are fully acknowledged.\textsuperscript{13}

In China, after the Tiananmen Square event of 1989, civil society has become a fashionable concept that is applied to China because there have been widespread attempts to build a sphere of autonomous organizational space. For some Western scholars, the emerging social organizations in China display features of a civil society, i.e. voluntariness and autonomy.\textsuperscript{14} Some of these social organizations, for instance, the Capital Independent Workers' Union, and the Autonomous Students’ Union of Beijing Universities and Colleges formed in 1989, have a definite political purpose and “provide the new institutional context for a challenge to state control.”\textsuperscript{15}

Before we conceptualize civil society in a way that is useful to our analysis under Chinese context, we first review the history of the concept of civil society and look at how its definition is applied in the communist world, and then we explore the development of civil society in communist systems.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} Jude Howell, 1999, 74.

\textsuperscript{16} It would be useful to distinguish communism/communist and socialism/socialist here. Communism is a system of social organization in which property (especially real property and the means of production) is held in common. In modern usage, Marx and Lenin applied it to the movement that aims at overthrowing the capitalist order by revolutionary means and followed by the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat and state socialism. Ultimately there would develop a harmonious classless society, and the state would wither away. Socialism seeks similar ends but by evolution rather than revolution. It is a general term for the political and economic theory that advocates a system of collective or government ownership and management of the means of production and distribution of goods. Because of the collective nature of socialism, it is to be contrasted to the doctrine of the sanctity of private property that characterizes capitalism. Where capitalism stresses competition and profit, socialism calls for cooperation and social service. Marx-Leninism adopted it as a preliminary stage before reaching communism.
The concept of civil society dates back at least to the 17th and 18th centuries. It
began as an affirmation or recognition of human capacity to create political organizations
distinct from a state of nature. In the writings of Adam Ferguson, a leading theorist of
the Scottish Enlightenment, it came to be used to “emphasize the social or at least the
economic rather than the political, the pursuit of economic goals or even private interests
as distinct from the elevation of public order or control.” 17

Hegel, in his book Philosophy of Right and Law, written in 1821, effectively
reversed the positions of civil society and the modern state presented by Ferguson. He
portrayed the state as the repository of civic virtue, and civil society as the realm of
private vice. He defined civil society as a sphere of life-activity, that had historically
evolved from the interstices between the family and the universal state. 18 The state was
“concerned with generality and principle, with establishing the overall moral climate and
the physical and psychological security which the proper operation of civil society
required.” 19

For Marxists, civil society amounted to a complex association of individuals
joined with one another in relations shaped by personal interest, economic
interdependence, and legal and customary rules. 20 It was dominated by considerations of
narrow self-interest. Marists saw it as only a part of the story of human emancipation.

Columbia Encyclopaedia, [http://www.bartleby.com/65/co/communism.html], retrieved on November 10,
2004.
17 Chandran Kukathas, et al, The Transition from Socialism: State and Civil Society in the USSR
19 Robert F. Miller, 4.
Thought.” In The Transition from Socialism: State and Civil Society in the USSR, ed. by Chandran
Liberal theorists viewed civil society in a more complex and also more favorable way. Liberals praised the free market both economically and politically and they held that private interests would produce public benefits. Later, in the crisis of the welfare state, the realm of autonomous, self-organized shrunk.

The concept of civil society was revitalized in the 1980s by the Polish Solidarity movement and the subsequent wave of democratization around the world. The revival seems to "have been directly related to the upsurge in interest in the writings of Antonio Gramsci." Gramsci envisaged civil society as:

a realm of free social and cultural space to be carved out of the all-encompassing matrix of the totalitarian communist Party-state by conscious intellectual and social action. It was to be a sphere of autonomous, ostensibly non-political social activity, which did not seek to challenge the state's control over the main levers of power and, indeed, obtained its status through a tacit social contract with the authorities of the ruling Party-state.

In China, "civil society" has been used both in a strong sense and a weak sense. In the strong sense, the focus is on the "arena of political opposition to the state." The civil society "stands in opposition to the state as a forum for setting limits to..."
state power and checking excesses. In the weak sense, it looks at a realm of voluntary, autonomous, and associational activity, situated between the state and society.

The development of civil society shows that civil society has been understood differently in various historical contexts. Nevertheless, almost all authors concur that the term involves a sphere of private life independent of the state. Based on this finding, we need a concept of civil society that not only contains the essence of civil society, but also is useful in our discussion of emerging civil society in a post-communist society.

In such a context as China where the Party-state in the past had monopolistic control over society and economy, where the organizations were initiated from above, and where an autonomous market economy is now growing, employing the weak sense of civil society would help us better to search for the elements of civil society. Therefore, this thesis limits the use of civil society to the weak sense.

In this regard, Gordon White’s conceptualization of civil society would appear to be useful in our discussion. He focused his discussion of civil society on communist and post-communist countries, and suggested the following definition:

[Civil society is] an intermediate associational realm situated between the state on the one side and the basic building blocks of society on the other (individuals, households and firms), populated by social organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy from the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to defend or promote their interests or values.

This definition is useful in the discussion of a civil society in a weak sense. It denotes four features that analyze the varying degrees of associational qualities of civil societies in communist and post-communist states: autonomy; popularity; voluntariness; and self-regulation.

29 Ibid.
An "autonomous" organization has its own financial resources (although a certain amount of state funding is not excluded), chooses its own organizational structure, and sets its own goals and activities independently of the state. By "popularity" we understand that an organization has grown from popular initiative below rather than having been imposed from above, and is trusted by the members. "Voluntariness" refers to an organization whose members can join and leave at their own wills. A "self-regulating" organization can manage its own affairs with its own labour.  

These organizational features are specific qualities of social organizations that undertake a role as an intermediary realm of activity between individuals and the state, voicing the interests of the members vis-à-vis the state. This definition would be the most appropriate one in the discussion of civil society under communist systems. It could also be applicable to the analysis of the emerging societies of post-communist states.

Another concept that needs to be defined is that of the "Party-state," which is regarded as the opposite to civil society. Since the central topic of this thesis is focused on China, we will only present the "Party-state" concept in the context of China. In China, which adopts the one-party political system, the party organization deeply penetrates the state apparatus, and the party leadership tightly controls the state bureaucracy, it is of no analytical significance to distinguish the party from the state.  

In view of this, Shiping Zheng’s definition adequately captures the essence of the Party-

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state: the “Party-state” denotes “a type of state in which the communist party organization, as the core of the state, monopolizes state power over the direction and control of society.” The organizational structure of a Party-state is “bureaucratically based and hierarchically organized administrative, policing, military, productive and distributive organs of the state.”

Now that we have a clearer understanding of the two most important concepts in this thesis, I will move on to review the civil society and social organizations in communist and post-communist states.

1.1.2 Civil Society in Communist and Post-Communist States

According to Marxists’ interpretation, civil society, which stressed the “private” and “individualistic,” contradicted communism whose emphasis was on collectivism and the public cause. For Marxists, civil society was the unchecked pursuit of private interest in separation from any conception of the public good. Civil society was unable to achieve coherence or stability and carried within it the seeds of self-destruction. The communist state was a pervasive force, a managerial state, taking responsibility for all social development, controlling or seeking to control everything that was politically relevant. Lenin, in creating the monolithic party apparatus, further strengthened this opposition to independent interests. He maintained that the Communist Party had the most advanced ideas in society: “it knew what was best for the people.” Therefore,

34 Wank, 56.
37 Ibid. 184
organization for the sake of any particular interest had no place in communist societies. Given the specific historical experience and the ubiquitous adoption of Marxism-Leninism in the communist bloc, there were striking similarities among the communist societies when compared to western countries. We will cite the former USSR and China as examples to illustrate the elimination and resurrection of civil society in communist states.

In the former USSR, the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917. They immediately started the destruction of independent organizations. The Bolsheviks regarded the persecution and elimination of independent organizations as one of the most important elements of their model for society. Any organization independent of the state - from the appointment of its leaders down to the delineation of its program of activity - was dismantled. To win decisive influence and total leadership in all organizations of working people, the Bolsheviks established government organizations, such as Trade Unions, Women’s Federations, and Youth Leagues, which were obedient organs of the party. Until the 1940s, the Soviet Union was almost totally bereft of any element of civil society. Entering the Gorbachev era, Soviet society was a severely decayed social fabric, with only two major actors in play - the political elite and the isolated Soviet people. Between these two actors stood the government organizations, which were totally alienated from most people and were not thought to be interested in defending the interests of the people. Family and friendship were the only social institutions to survive the destruction of civil society.

China, as part of the communist world, underwent the same damage of civil society

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38 Kukathas, et al., 95.
39 Ibid.
after the inauguration of the PRC in 1949. Through land reform, the abolition of private enterprises, and collectivization, the CCP undermined the socioeconomic basis of autonomous organizations. The three government organizations, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the ACWF and the Communist Youth Leagues were established as state organs to reach out to different groups of people. China “turned the whole state/society into a single organization.”

During the Cultural Revolution, even the ACFTU and ACWF ceased to operate. Civil society in the communist world was then dismantled by the monopolistic Party-state.

The first evidence of a self-organized, independent civil society in the Communist bloc appeared with the emergence of Poland’s Solidarity in 1980. Since then, the communist bloc has experienced a sharp increase of grassroots nongovernmental activities in response to Gorbachev’s reforms of Perestroika (rebuilding, reconstruction, reorganization). Social organizations were organized and operated independently of the state. Following the dismantling of communist systems in the late-1980s, these newly formed organizations have cooperated with each other, forming horizontal links in their common quest to challenge the state.

Though civil society among post-communist states has striking similarities, studies show there are wide differences between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former Soviet Union (FSU). In Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, civil society seemingly has triumphed. Organizations have been established in deliberate

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41 Marcia A. Weigle, and Jim Butterfield.
42 Ibid.
opposition to the state, which have “brought down a row of one-party states.” In FSU countries and Russia, the civil society organizations appear to be weak, apolitical, and heavily dependent on Western assistance for support. In addition, according to the 1995-1997 World Values Survey, there is a higher average number of organizational memberships per person in CEE countries than in FSU countries, 1.09 and 0.61 respectively.

Studies also demonstrate that variations within post-communist Europe are not so stark compared to those in older democracies and postauthoritarian countries. There are generally lower levels of organizational activities in post-communist countries. The 1995-1997 World Values Survey indicates that people in older democratic countries have the highest average number of organizational memberships, followed relatively closely by the postauthoritarian countries. Post-communist countries lag far behind. There are some common elements that contribute to the weakness of post-communist civil society. They include communism’s legacy of hostility to civil society, the structural features of the highly concentrated economy, individuals’ mistrust of voluntary organizations, persistence of private friendship networks, and disappointment with the new political and economic systems.

44 Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, 47.
47 See details in Marc Morje Howard, Demobilized Societies: Understanding the Weakness of Civil Society in Post-communist Europe. PhD dissertation, University of California. 1999. The World Values Survey in 1995-1997 shows the average number of organizational memberships per person are: Older democracies mean = 2.39, postcommunist mean = 0.91, postauthoritarian mean = 1.82.
48 See Marc Morje Howard, 1999.
In China, economic reforms introduced in 1978 have brought about dramatic changes to Chinese society. The reforms have focused primarily on the “marketization” of the Chinese economy, which has led to expansion of the private sector and loosening control in the political sector. Following this, there has been a strong and growing intermediate sphere of social associations (shehui tuanti). These associations are officially registered, and formally recognized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. They embody in a number of ways and in various degrees, the basic characteristics of a “civil society”, i.e. autonomy, voluntariness, popularity and self-regulation. However, most of the social organizations are usually headed by party elites and retired leaders, and are only able to operate within the interstices or inside the realm of Party-state controls, which have significantly hampered their activities. Thus, it is difficult to find ideal-type “civil society” organizations in China that fully exhibit the four features.

In conclusion, civil society in post-communist states does not “play the same political or social role that civil society performs in other developed democracies.” Although CEE and FSU countries have in place a more democratic structure and have a more competitive political system in comparison to China, their civil society organizations remain weak. They are heavily restrained by structural, cultural and historical shackles, which have largely hampered their influence over state actions and

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49 The CCP considers China to be a socialist state. Usually western scholars refer to China as a communist regime. Although the reforms have transformed Chinese society, there are no major political reforms, and China remains a one-party political regime.


51 Ibid, 29.

52 McFaul, 109.
policies. As Michael McFaul remarked, they “lack capacity for playing a meaningful role in intermediating interests between the state and individuals.”

1.1.3 Social Organizations in Communist and Post-Communist States

Having discussed civil society, I will move beyond it to explore the specific parts of civil society — social organizations in the communist and post-communist bloc. As mentioned above, when communist parties took power, they turned the whole country into a mono-organization. Any social organizations that existed before were banned. Instead, official organizations were set up as a “transmission belt” from above to below and functioned as “schools of communism.”

Post-communist states have seen a dramatic widening of freedom of information, expression and association — surely key components of any civil society. There has been a sharp increase of de facto autonomous social organizations that enjoy varying degrees of voluntariness, popularity and self-regulation. In the Soviet Union itself, one estimates that more than 200,000 nongovernmental organizations have formed over the last decade, with well-developed organizations in every major sector of civil society. To what degree do these organizations enjoy autonomy from the state? How much do they represent the interests of their members? Can they neatly fit into the scope of civil society? We will address these questions by analyzing the evolution of trade unions in

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53 Ibid, 110.
view of the similarities\textsuperscript{56} between trade unions and women’s federations in the communist bloc. This should help shed light on our analysis of the ACWF.

Trade unions in communist systems did not serve as an independent voice representing the collective interests and bargaining rights of workers. Rather, they were state-run organizations, the party’s intricate apparatus for controlling many different segments of the population. The Communist Party enjoyed a monopoly of power. Trade unions’ paramount functions were to help maintain labour discipline and raise productivity.\textsuperscript{57} They could not adequately represent and defend the interests of their members. Hence, communist trade unions may not fall into the scope of civil society.

While trade unions in each communist country differ in some respects due to variation in the economic, political, and cultural milieus in which they operate, they are basically similar, given their Marxist-Leninist ideology and the unanimous application of “democratic centralism”\textsuperscript{58} in communist countries.

Following the fall of the Communist regimes during the 1989-91 period, trade unions did gain genuine independence and autonomy from the Party-state. A clear token of this is the declaration of Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR) of its political independence, breaking from the Communist Party in 1991. This change

\textsuperscript{56} These similarities are: they are 1) government organizations established at the foundation of the PRC; 2) state organs, rather than voluntary organizations; 3) mandatory membership; 4) trying to adjust their roles and reflect more interests of their members during economic reforms and have gained more independence.

\textsuperscript{57} Alex Pravde, and Blair A. Ruble, \textit{Trade Unions in Communist States} (Boston: Allen & Unwin, Inc., 1986).

\textsuperscript{58} Democratic centralism refers to the governance of political parties and groups. It is generally regarded as being an element of Leninism, and the term is sometimes used as a synonym for Leninist policy inside a political party. The democratic aspect of this methodology describes the freedom of members of the political party to discuss and debate matters of policy and direction, but once the decision of the party was made by majority vote, all members were expected to follow that decision unquestioningly in public. This latter aspect represented the centralism. See “Democratic Centralism”, [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/d/de/democratic_centralism.htm], retrieved on April 13th, 2005.
represents an enormous increase in the influence of trade unions and the growing freedom and autonomy from state. It also indicates a sharp break from the old "transmission belt" model. Nonetheless, much of the FITUR's activity, such as protests, lobbying and political campaigning, has been in concert with managers of enterprises and employers' organizations. Surveys show that Russian trade unions are not trusted by the public and are not seen as an effective institution.\(^5\)\(^9\) Trade unions have experienced a sharp decline in membership.\(^6\)\(^0\) This casts doubt on how far the unions have succeeded in becoming a voice of workers.

Trade unions in China are different from those in post-communist world as China is still in a transitional period. Since the initiation of economic reforms in 1978, Chinese trade unions have "played a more regularized consultative role in policy-making and there is some effort to restrain the growth of managerial power within enterprises and to strengthen the role of union branches and workers representative congresses."\(^6\)\(^1\) However, they have faced increasing pressures from the party to redefine their relationship with the party as the pace of the economic reforms has accelerated in the 1990s. In the analysis of policy role of Chinese trade unions, their autonomy from the Party-state and their role in enterprises, Gordon White concluded "at both macro and micro levels, the position of Chinese unions in the mid-1990s is weak." They in effect "became allies of conservative party leaders."\(^6\)\(^2\)

The above analysis shows that trade unions in the post-communist bloc, though have gained enormous autonomy, cannot fully represent and protect the interests of their

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\(^5\) Kubicek.
\(^6\)\(^0\) Ibid.
\(^6\)\(^1\) Ibid.
\(^6\)\(^2\) Ibid.
members. Though they have the largest membership, they still have little influence in the policy-making process. The communist legacy, the economic structure and the policy decisions of the state hamper their development and influence in society.

In most post-communist systems, government institutions hardly allow any input of social organizations. In some FSU countries, the government has tried to tighten control on citizens' activities in the political sphere by increasing surveillance and placing stricter registration demands on organizations.63 Hence, it can be concluded that post-communist social organizations hardly bolster a thriving civil society that shares an adequate amount of autonomy and independence.

1.1.4 Women's Organizations in Communist and Post-Communist States

Like other social organizations, independent women's organizations were not allowed under the communist rule. The governmental women's organizations that were established by the communist party were just "as much subject to party direction, as were agencies and enterprises formally belonging to the state."64 As was the case with trade unions, the Communist Party enjoyed the monopoly control of women's organizations during the communist period.

In the post-communist period, though women's organizations have seen encouraging signs that bode well for the gradual development of a more civil society, they have faced similar barriers to other social organizations. Besides this, the widespread anti-feminist ideas and perennial inequalities existing between men and women still confront women's organizations.

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid, 617.
Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of self-initiated women’s organizations in the post-communist world. This is a sign that female citizens are becoming more active in voluntary public life and that they see themselves as having important roles to play as political actors, philanthropists, social problem-solvers, and simply as autonomous citizens with diverse interests. These women’s organizations work on a vast range of issues and problems, from charity, hobbies, and professions to domestic violence, the trafficking of women, and gender stereotypes in the mass media. In large cities, women’s organizations are much more networked with one another and have managed to organize national campaigns on issues such as violence against women and the goal of increasing women’s presence in politics.65

Nevertheless, despite the optimistic signs, women’s organizations in post-communist states are still weak. They face a number of political and economic obstacles to development that are similar to those of other kinds of social organizations in post-communist states. In addition, they face moral barriers that render political and economic obstacles even more severe.66 Public opinion is generally hostile to women’s organizations. For example, in Russia, people frequently view feminist organizations as espousing an alien Western ideology that is unsuited to their conditions.67 Feminist organizations are perceived negatively and as being composed of radical, lonely, and probably lesbian women.68 Financially, women’s organizations largely depend on funds

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
from foreign sources that usually come with strings attached. In a word, women’s organizations in post-communist states remain largely dependent, depoliticised, fragmented, and detached from their purported constituency—women.

In China, until the early 1980s, the ACWF enjoyed a monopoly of representation with regard to women’s issues. In the period of economic reforms, with the articulation of interests of new categories of women and the expansion of social space, new women’s organizations have experienced a sharp growth. Nevertheless, the ACWF is still the largest women’s organization that officially represents Chinese women’s interests. With the challenge from the new women’s groups and the Party-state’s loosening control, the ACWF has started to rethink its direction, definition and interaction with its members.

However, there is limited academic study centered on the ACWF. Discussion of the ACWF is scattered in works that deal with Chinese women’s position and women’s studies. Useful literature which could shed light on our discussion of ACWF include Miriam K. Mills’ article “Women in Politics in the People’s Republic of China: Holding up Half the Sky?” Cecilia Chan’s article “Defending Women’s Rights in the Socialist People’s Republic of China: Services of the Guangzhou Women’s Federation,” Zheng Wang’s article “Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women’s Studies Research in Contemporary China,” and Jude Howell’s work “The Struggle for Survival: Prospects for the Women’s Federation in Post-Mao China.” Mills only briefly introduced the ACWF’s function during Mao’s period. Cecilia Chan discussed the new services offered by a local branch of the ACWF—Guangzhou Women’s Federation.

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
during economic reforms. Zheng Wang explored the theoretical research carried out by the ACWF. Jude Howell provided insight into the transformation and constraints of the ACWF, but did not go deep into it.

Since the ACWF is the biggest national organization that represents Chinese women's interests, a systematic and historical analysis of its changing role will provide a useful contribution to the literature on Chinese women's position.

1.2 The Research Project

1.2.1 Research Questions and Methodology

It is the purpose of this thesis to explore the efforts of the ACWF to address women's interests, and to comment on the changing processes of the ACWF towards a civil society. The thesis investigates the ACWF's attempts to seek independence and autonomy from the Party-state so that it can better represent its members: women with diverse interests during the reform period. This thesis also analyzes the ACWF's new theoretical framework and practical measures to address women's problems. Lastly the thesis discusses the future prospect of the ACWF towards a civil society.

The study begins with a historical overview of Chinese women's organizations. Women's organized power was first recognized "through the experience of group participation in specified goals" in the early 1900s. Early women's groups included women's rights organizations, philanthropic groups and nationalist organizations. The latter will be reviewed in more detail due to their greater political power. Nevertheless, the foundation of the PRC in 1949 marked the end of all these women's groups. Instead, a national organization – the ACWF – was established in an attempt to help to implement

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the Party-state’s policies on women. Like other state institutions, activity was generated from above rather than from below. The advancement of women’s status and gender equality remained within the confines of the communist ideology. Women were not allowed the public political space to debate and frame their own demands.

Two decades of economic reforms, however, have radically transformed the socio-economic environment in which the ACWF operated. The rapidly changing economic and social context has made the ACWF activities increasingly inappropriate and ineffective. Faced with new forms of discrimination and inequality and a much more socially heterogeneous constituency of women, the ACWF has come under pressure to reform. In particular, it needs to prioritize the interests of its constituency over those of the Party-state. The ACWF has made significant attempts to respond positively to the changing needs of women.

The central question of this study is concerned with the strategies employed by the ACWF to meet the interests of a heterogeneous constituency of women. How does the ACWF prioritize the interests of women? Is the ACWF seeking greater autonomy, thereby becoming a crucial part of an emergent new civil society, or remaining a “transmission belt” between the Party-state and women? This thesis attempts to answer these questions.

Document analysis, semi-structured interviews and surveys are the common methodological tools in the study of women’s position in China. In keeping with this practice, research methods of this study include extensive documentary search of relevant Chinese and English materials and analysis of survey results. In addition, the
historical approach will be employed to explore the development of the ACWF in the context of the evolution of Chinese women’s groups.

1.2.2 Overview of Chapters

Chapter II reviews the origin and evolution of Chinese women’s groups and organizations. The chapter explores the three categories of early women’s groups, their activities, the actual subordination of their interests to national concerns, and the CCP’s mobilization of women. In the analysis, the chapter demonstrates how the nascent civil society was developing in China and the official repression it encountered based on traditional hostile orthodoxy. The chapter also discusses the dismantling of all independent women’s organizations and movements, as well as the establishment and development of the ACWF with the foundation of the PRC, followed by its disbanding during the Cultural Revolution and subsequent resurrection in 1978. The chapter examines the reasons why the Chinese Party-state did not permit the existence of independent women’s organizations and movements. More specifically, this chapter explores the governmental rather than the popular character of the ACWF and its lack of legitimacy to represent Chinese women.

Chapter III provides an overview of China’s economic reforms and their impact on Chinese women. It discusses the positive and negative effects on women, and reveals the old pattern of women’s problems and new gendered issues that surfaced during this time, namely, gendered employment practices, the commodification of sexual relations, the deterioration of the political position for women and female infanticide. The chapter also outlines the factors that favour the expansion of the intermediary sector of social organizations, such as, loosening political control, and the Fourth World Women’s
Conference (FWWC) held in Beijing. This analysis identifies the social-political context in which the ACWF operates and new challenges it faces.

Chapter IV analyzes the ACWF’s efforts to seek greater autonomy from the Party-state and prioritize the interests of its constituents. The chapter discusses the ACWF’s attempts to establish a theoretical framework, its striving for new autonomy, its financial restraints and freedom and the practical measures to respond positively to the new needs. This chapter indicates that the ACWF appears to have become more independent and autonomous than during the Mao’s period.

The thesis concludes with the main findings of this study. By analyzing the ACWF’s degree of autonomy, self-regulation, voluntariness and popularity, this thesis concludes that the ACWF is still a “transmission-belt” between the Party-state and women rather than a civil society organization. Even so, it works differently from before. Lastly, the concluding chapter speculates on the implications of this finding for the future of the ACWF.
2. EARLY CHINESE WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS AND THE ACWF

In the decaying days of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Western impact fostered awareness and appreciation of Western legal systems, political parties, active associational life, philosophies of individual rights, and other elements of civil society. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the idea of women’s rights, especially women’s right to education, began to take root among Chinese intellectuals. Women’s schools and magazines had appeared to voice women’s rights and support the improvement of women’s situation. A number of women’s organizations were established. Along with other new study associations, academies, chambers of commerce and occupational associations, the women’s organizations bolstered a concept of the public realm that co­existed with private interests.

Using a civil society perspective, this chapter discusses the early Chinese women’s groups and the establishment of the ACWF in 1949. This chapter contains two sections. The first section examines the three categories of early women’s groups from 1900 to 1949. It argues that these early women’s organizations embodied a distinctive feature of civil society and posed a challenge to the government. However, they still suffered from hostile traditions and government restrictions. The second section looks at the disbandment of the nascent civil society of China and the establishment of the ACWF after the foundation of the PRC in 1949. A detailed analysis of the ACWF is presented to identify the nature of the ACWF as a state organ rather than a bottom-up civil society organization.
2.1 Women’s Organizations in Early Twentieth-Century China: 1900 - 1949

In the nineteenth century, Western missionaries came to China in an attempt to spread Christianity and “civilize” China. They established missionary schools including girls’ schools to “improve” the education of Chinese people.75 With the pressure from reformists and in response to the voice of women’s rights, the Qing government supported and established girls’ schools. These girls’ schools “offered a place for women to congregate, allowing them to talk about their views and exchange experiences.”76

Some women were sent to study in Japan, where they gathered with all Chinese students in the Foreign Students’ Center. In 1902, an independent women’s organization, the Humanitarian Society, was established in Tokyo for the purpose of “raising the consciousness of Chinese women about their rights, especially their educational rights……”77

In the following years, as the political situation in China deteriorated, many women’s organizations were set up in order to aid the nation in time of peril, protect women’s rights, and better the welfare of China. The majority of their members were educated women who had studied abroad, particularly in Japan, or the students in girls’ schools founded in China. These organizations represented the earliest women’s organized efforts to fight for their rights and the destiny of the nation, “indicating that women were, in fact, affected by the same sense of national peril that intellectual

76 Ibid.
Chinese circles felt after 1900. These early women’s organizations were often short-lived and left little record of their existence. For this reason, it is hard to find out the total number of women’s organizations in the early 1900s.

Early Chinese women’s organizations can be divided into three categories: the philanthropic groups, the women’s rights groups, and the nationalist groups. Table 2.1 illustrates the goals, activities and examples of the three categories of women’s groups.

Table 2.1 Three Categories of Women’s Organizations between 1900 and 1949

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Women’s Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropic</td>
<td>Charity purposes</td>
<td>- Raised money; - Published journals; - Supported opium elimination, etc.</td>
<td>- The Chinese Women’s Association (1906)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- The Women’s Reform Association (1910), etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s rights</td>
<td>Improve Condition of Women</td>
<td>- Offered training courses; - Made public speeches; - Published articles; - Held mass meetings, etc.</td>
<td>- The Humanitarian Society (1902);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- The Love the Masses Reading Society (1904);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- The Women’s Educational Protection Association (1906), etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>Aid the nation in time of peril</td>
<td>- Revolutionary activities; - Mass meetings; - Strikes; - Demonstrations; - Petitions, etc.</td>
<td>- The Anti-Russian Association of Women Comrades (1904);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- The Women’s Association to Resist the Loan (1907);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- The Alliance of Women’s Rights Movement of Beijing/ Shanghai (1922), etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Beahan, 215-225. Siu, 121-150.

77 Ibid.
78 Mills.
79 Beahan, 215.

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Philanthropic groups focused on “charity work or the reform of abuses.”

Examples of philanthropic women’s groups include the Chinese Women’s Association established in 1906, and the Women’s Reform Association set up in 1910. They raised money for charity purposes, published journals, and supported the elimination of opium import, etc. In the winter of 1906-1907, northern China suffered from a flood and the Chinese Women’s Association raised money for the victims at public campaigns in a Beijing Park.

Women’s rights groups had a primary goal to improve the condition of women. They focused on promoting women’s right to education, the right to be the only wife of a man, economic independence, anti-foot binding, fulfilling their duties as citizens, etc. The Humanitarian Society fell into this group. Other women’s rights groups included the Love the Masses Reading Society set up in 1904 in Guangdong; the Women’s Educational Protection Association built in 1906 in Shanghai; the Free Marriage Lecture Society founded in 1909 in Hunan; and the Alliance for Women’s Rights Movement of Beijing formed in 1922. Main activities of these groups included training courses, public speeches, the publishing of radical articles, organization of mass meetings, and school support.

Chang Chuchun, the founder of the Women’s Educational Protection Association, in her article in a journal Alarm Bell argued that the “ignorance and a correspondingly low level of maternal education had produced a weak race.” She called for women to “join together in effective groups to work toward some goal.”

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81 Ibid, 125.  
82 Beahan, 217.  
83 Ibid, 217.
Women’s Educational Protection Association to “promote women’s education, support schools, and provide some financial assistance.” She also established the Society for the Promotion of Hygiene which was considered to be a “preliminary step toward a medical school for women.” At the same time, Chang set up the Women’s Handicraft Training Centre where women studied sewing, and music, English, and composition.

The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 “openly demonstrated the collaboration of imperialist powers at the expense of Chinese sovereignty,” and ignited the patriotism and anti-imperialism of the whole nation. These women’s rights groups, along with other organizations, launched protesting activities such as strikes, demonstrations, petitions and telegrams. Membership in these organizations rose. For instance, in 1922, the Alliance for Women’s Rights Movement of Beijing, one of the larger ones, had a membership of 300.

Both philanthropic groups and women’s rights groups were dedicated to the welfare of China and China’s survival as a nation. They felt that “no question was as

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84 Ibid, 217.
85 The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 was the peace treaty which is named after the place that was signed: the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. It resulted from the six-month-long Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and put an official end to World War I. The treaty was ratified on January 10, 1920 and required that Germany accept responsibility for the war and was thus obliged to pay large amounts of compensation (known as war reparations). China joined in World War I with intention to oppose Japan's aggression and was among the countries who won the war. At the conference, China demanded the return of the former German concessions in Shandong and the abolition of unfair treaties such as the Twenty-one Demands. However, as a result of this treaty, the German rights in Shandong (Kiaochow) were formally transferred to Japan. The decisions of the Paris Peace Conference resulted in a great disappointment and anger among the Chinese people. Nationalist feeling and anti-Japanese feeling arose as a result. This eventually led to the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Columbia Encyclopedia, [http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com/encyclopedia/m/may_fourth_movement.html], retrieved on July 30th, 2004.
86 Siu, 128.
87 Ibid, 128.
88 Ibid, 128.
89 Beahan, 1981, 221.
urgent as the threatened autonomy of China."\textsuperscript{90} They even "subjugated feminist agendas to the greater good of the country."\textsuperscript{91} Especially after the May Fourth Movement,\textsuperscript{92} their earlier call for individual rights and freedom was switched to a call for national independence. Women’s rights were linked with, but subordinated to and defined by the interests of the nation.\textsuperscript{93} Women’s rights were to be fulfilled only if the nation survived the international struggle.

Nationalist organizations were mainly engaged in revolutionary activities so as to aid the nation in time of crisis. In the early nineteenth century, China’s political situation worsened due to a number of events. They include: the Russian treaty of 1901 which allowed Russian troops to station in Manchuria; the Sino-Japanese "Tatsu Maru" incident, which nationalists considered an insult by Japan to Chinese sovereignty;\textsuperscript{94} the considerable loans of the Qing government from foreign powers to construct the railway in 1907, which put more Chinese economic assets in the hands of imperialist powers; granting of the right to search and arrest in the Xijiang area of Canton to foreign powers.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} The May Fourth Movement was one of the famous anti-foreign movements in China. Some scholars call the May Fourth Movement "the Chinese Enlightenment." It marked the beginning of the upsurge of nationalist feeling. It took place on May 4, 1919 with about 5,000 university students in Beijing to protest the Versailles Conference (Apr. 28, 1919). The May Fourth Movement began a patriotic outburst of new urban intellectuals against foreign imperialists and warlords. The movement also popularized vernacular literature, promoted political participation by women, and educational reforms. Columbia Encyclopedia, [http://www.bartleby.com/65/ma/MayFourth.html], retrieved on July 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2004.
\textsuperscript{93} Charlotte L Beahan, "Feminism and Nationalism in the Chinese Women’s Press, 1902-1911," \textit{Modern China} 1, (1974), 4, 379-416.
\textsuperscript{94} Feb.05, 1908, a Chinese warship off Amoy intercepted a Revolutionary Alliance arms shipment from Japan and seized the ship – Tatsu Maru, which resulted in Chinese-Japanese friction. Japan protested the seizure of the Tatsu Maru and imposed five demands on China, including the release of the ship, an apology, and an indemnity. On March 19, mass meetings were held across Canton in response to the Tatsu Maru crisis and the anti-Japanese boycott spreaded throughout China. However, under pressure from Japan, the Imperial government ordered the anti-Japanese boycott to end. China 1904-1914, [http://cnparm.home.texas.net/Nat/China/China02.htm], retrieved on November 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2003.
in 1907. All of these created anger and revolt not only among women, but also in the whole nation.

Influenced by fellow male students who were active in nationalistic and patriotic activities, some women formed their own societies. One of them was the Anti-Russian Association of Women Comrades, an organization paralleling the male Anti-Russian Association of Comrades formed in 1904. Others include the Women’s Association to Resist the Loan set up in 1907; the Shanghai Women’s Association for the Protection of the Railroad; and the Association of Women Citizens in Opposition to the Loan.

In 1911, the overturn of the Qing Dynasty and upsurge of the “pro-Republican nationalism provided further sanction and opportunity for many more women to move into the public arena. Many organized to provide financial, logistical and moral support; at least six revolutionary auxiliaries appeared in Shanghai.”95 One example was the Women’s Behind the Lines Aid Society that “raised funds for supplies for the rebels.”96 In 1912, the Women’s Suffrage Alliance drafted a provisional constitution requesting women’s suffrage, but the request went unheeded.97 Following the signature of the Treaty of Versailles, at least 14 patriotic anti-imperialist organizations of women were founded,98 among which the Women’s Association of Salvation was predominantly anti-imperialist. These organizations organized “national shame” meetings, strikes, demonstrations, petitions, and sent protests to the government. For example, when Japanese soldiers landed in Fuzhou, the Federation of All-Shanghai Women sent immediate protest letters to the Fujian Government. At the same time, women students

95 Beahan, 229.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid, 230.
98 Ibid.
demanded the abolition of the Military Agreement for Sino-Japanese Mutual Defense and freedom of association, assembly and publication. Following these protests, there was a mass demonstration in Beijing with over 10,000 male and female student participants.99

It was in the early 1900s that Chinese women first organized independently and voluntarily for anti-imperialist purposes.100 These organizations usually consisted of educated women and they framed their own agendas. While their organizations were small in membership and often had a brief existence, they were a recognition of women as a social category and their organized power. They attacked “traditional culture and Confucian ideology as well as oppressive family and marital institutions,”101 and it brought wide attention to women’s problems.

As it was outlined above, in the early twentieth century, there was a growth of associational life and the increased elements of a civil society in China. The membership of these women’s groups was on a voluntary basis. Funds usually came from private donations and support of private schools. Activities were organized based on spontaneous responses to the worsening situation. These women’s groups, as well as other societies, clubs, guilds, and associations, displayed the features of a nascent civil society in the early nineteenth century China. They constituted part of the public realm which stood against the state and posed a pressure to the government during the late Qing dynasty followed by the republican government and warlord era. As a result, the Qing government responded positively to the requests of women. For instance, in 1902, the

99 Ibid, 129.
100 Siu, 130.
Qing government issued anti-footbinding proclamations. In 1907, women's education rights were officially sanctioned with the announcement of rules for girl's schools by the Ministry of Education. In 1931, the Kuomintang (KMT) government issued a civil code declaring free marriages and equality for women.

Nevertheless, China's traditional orthodoxy was hostile to the notion of an autonomous civil society, which hampered the full institutionalization of civil society. Martin K. Whyte stated:

The basic presumptions of rulers in the late imperial period were that all individuals should be enmeshed in hierarchies and networks of mutual obligation and propriety, and that the state and its officials should establish and enforce a political-moral orthodoxy that would provide guidance for the entire social hierarchy. In this view individuals were seen not as autonomous and possessing inalienable rights, as in the Western liberal tradition, but as malleable yet fallible, capable of proper behavior only when subordinated to the correct group influence and orthodox indoctrination. Similarly, social groups were seen not as properly independent and competing to defend and advance the interests of their members but as small links in a vast social hierarchy that should be guided by official values. Indeed, in most periods independent associations even of literati were prohibited, and parties or factions (dang) were equated with selfish partiality, if not outright disloyalty.

Therefore, throughout the early twentieth century, national and regional governments remained at best ambivalent and often downright hostile toward autonomous associational life and interest group activity. In December 1907, the Qing

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103 Ibid, 232.
104 The Kuomintang or Nationalist Party of China (KMT), founded in the Guangdong Province on August 25, 1912 by Sung Chiao-jen and Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the KMT stems from an anti-monarchy league, the Tongmenghui, as a democratic and moderate socialist party. This party is currently active in the Republic of China on Taiwan. Encyclopedia. [http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Kuomintang], retrieved on April 30, 2005.
105 Wutzke.
government announced it would strictly ban all student participation in activities such as “interfering in local government, opposing officials and demanding a voice in government.” During the early Republican period headed by Yuan Shikai, a series of laws were passed to restrict the freedom of the press, free speech, association and assembly, etc. Women were not allowed to join any political groups or attend any political meetings. In 1927, the KMT headed by Chiang Kaishek used strong coercive measures to close down unions, and placed restrictions on organizations and associations, which represented increased pressures and threats against the new forms of associational life. In 1929, the number of women participants in strikes was only 31,263, which reflected a big drop from 195,200 in 1927. Therefore, the autonomy of the groups that existed remained precarious, with official repression always a threat.

Since the 1920s, the CCP had made an effort to mobilize and organize women, including educated women as well as women workers and peasant women. A communist women’s action program was established soon after its First Party Congress in 1921, including an alliance with an established women’s organization in Shanghai, the foundation of a women’s journal entitled The Women’s Voice, and the setup of a

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107 Beahan, 235.

108 It refers to the period succeeding the Qing Dynasty from 1911 to 1949 in mainland China.

109 Yuan Shikai was a Chinese military official and politician during late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. He was infamous for taking advantages of both the Qing and the Republic for his authoritarian control by military superiority. Encyclopedia, [http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Yuan-Shikai], retrieved on April 30, 2005.

110 Siu, 127.

111 Chiang Kaishek (October 31, 1887 to April 5, 1975) was the leader of the Kuomintang (KMT) (or Nationalist Party of China). He was President of the Republic of China from 1948 until his death on April 5, 1975.
women’s school named the Shanghai Common Girls’ School. A female CCP member, Wang Huiwu was chosen to oversee the women’s program. The program intended to “encourage consciousness of class and gender oppression and foster independence.”

In 1922, the Second Party Congress decided to formally establish a Women’s Bureau and Xiang Jingyu, another female member of the CCP, was selected to develop the Communist Women’s Bureau. She proved to be very successful in establishing the Women’s Bureau and mobilized women for the national revolution. She spearheaded “a systematic organization of women workers.” Xiang believed that the “women’s movement should unite with the Chinese revolution, and that working-class women were the vanguard of women’s liberation.” After that, women became more organized and started to demand political rights and unions. In 1922, more than 100 strikes took place in China and thousands of women participated in them. They demanded “higher wages, shorter working hours and the rights to unionize, and others.”

In 1927, when the KMT ordered a violent purge against Communists, the CCP retreated to a remote mountainous area in Jianxi province, where under Mao Zedong’s leadership, the party proclaimed its independent territory as the Jiangxi Soviet Republic. In the Jianxi Soviet, women were especially active militarily. Women were mobilized into Women Guards, local women’s defense forces, women’s aid corps, women’s

113 Ibid.
114 Siu, 129.
115 Ibid, 130.
116 Ibid.
combat troops and propaganda teams. These women’s groups nursed the wounded, transported supplies to the front, and engaged in spying or guerrilla activities.\textsuperscript{117}

In October 1934, the KMT army encircled the Jiangxi strongholds, and the Communists had to start their 9600km trek (known as Long March) to the Shaanxi Province in north central China. They established a new base in Yan’an, Shaanxi province in 1936. During the Yan’an period,\textsuperscript{118} thousands of women were organized into political and military work as well as production work. In northern Shaanxi only, there were 7,000 women party members in 1937.\textsuperscript{119} Village women were organized into family groups, small clubs, and productive co-operatives.

The Japanese invasion provided a great stimulus for women to unite. By 1938, the CCP founded at least four umbrella women’s anti-imperialist organizations, such as the Patriotic Federation of Shanghai Women (Shanghai Funu Aiguo Lianmeng), the Patriotic Federation of Jiaodong Women (Jiaodong Funu Aiguo Lianmeng), the Federation of All-Women (Quanguo Funu Lianmeng), and the Federation of All-Northern-Shaanxi Women (Shanbei Funu Lianmeng).\textsuperscript{120} Each organization had branches and sub-branches. For instance, under the Federation of All-Women, the Village Women’s Representatives’ Organization was formed at the village level with special women’s groups attached to it, such as work teams, service teams, sisters’ associations, patriotic organizations, national salvation teams and resistance teams.\textsuperscript{121} Membership of these organizations increased tremendously. By 1943, there were

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 136.
\textsuperscript{118} It refers to the period from the end of the Long March in 1935 to October 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1949 when the CCP seized power. See Helen Foster Snow, Inside Red China (New York: Da Capo Press,1977), VII.
\textsuperscript{119} Snow, 192.
\textsuperscript{120} Siu, 137.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 164.
2,532,208 women in the women's organizations in the CCP's areas. At the end of 1945, 88 per cent of the villages had village women's organizations. In 1940, among 70 million women in the CCP areas, 1,386,780 joined the self-defense armies. At least 3000 women participated in the liberation army.\textsuperscript{122}

Throughout its mobilization and organization of women, the CCP addressed gender issues and sexual discrimination. In 1922, it acknowledged the right of women to vote, assemble, associate and strike and the right to freedom of speech and publication.\textsuperscript{123} Policies to protect rural women were implemented in Soviet district, such as prohibition of child marriage, polygamy, and wife-beating, and legislation was passed to give women access to land and equal rights to citizenship.\textsuperscript{124} In the CCP-held areas, women were given significant leadership positions to deal with women's organizations. “Speaking bitterness campaigns (\textit{Suku Yundong})”\textsuperscript{125} were organized to help women realize and free themselves from feudal restraints.

Nevertheless, the CCP mobilized women mainly for revolution. Anti-Japanese invasion and liberation of the nation were still the paramount goals of the women's organizations. Gender interests were largely compromised to the cause of national revolution. Women did assume visible political roles as leaders in grass-roots organizations, but these women did not “put a high priority on gender issues because of

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 138.
\textsuperscript{123} Siu, 152.
\textsuperscript{125} It was the CCP's strategy to mobilize women against landlords with an intention to create class consciousness by asking women to articulate experiences of labor and hunger under feudal exploitation. During the 1950s and 1960s, the speaking bitterness events were harnessed by the socialist state as a mobilizing tool to rally support for various national policies. “Speaking and enduring bitterness” became a socialist value to stimulate people's devotion to the nation. Kaming Wu, “Speaking bitterness,” [http://www.iisce.org/wuwennergren.htm], retrieved on June 19, 2005.

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their steadfast belief in the primacy of class-based revolution."\textsuperscript{126} It was reflected in Xiang Jinyu’s speech as she criticized feminist groups in general for “being individualistic and for being co-opted by the bourgeois political structure.”\textsuperscript{127} The above discussion also shows that the CCP’s organization of women displayed a different nature from the early Chinese women’s organizations. They were organized mainly on a mobilizational base, instead of a voluntary base. Women’s organizations served as weapons for the CCP in the anti-Japanese war and later civil war period.

2.2 The All-China Women’s Federation in 1949 - 1978

In 1949, with the foundation of the PRC, Marxism-Leninism was adopted as the basis for the new order, in which autonomy and rights for individuals and groups were not recognized. The CCP established the monolithic leading role in the country and turned Marxist-Leninist ideas into a totalitarian system of thought to judge culture and morality, public policy and private behaviors, organizational life and personal relationships. Marxists’ class-struggle analysis of historical movements meant that Marxists “had always been suspicious of separatist organizations. Special interests were thought to weaken class solidarity.”\textsuperscript{128}

Lenin, the creator of monolithic party apparatus, further strengthened the opposition to independent interests. He cast the Communist Party as repository of the “most advanced ideas” in society, claiming that it knew what was best for the people.\textsuperscript{129} Therefore, all social forces were supposed to be absolutely subordinate to the all-powerful leader and all-encompassing state. As Martin K. Whyte wrote, “all individuals

\textsuperscript{126} Siu, 151.  
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{128} Rai, 184.  
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 184.
should subordinate themselves to the groups which they operated, and all groups should be subordinated to the policies and goals of the Party-state."^{130} Personal relations were intensely politicized, and private interests were eradicated in the name of revolutionary commitment. Any independent organization that existed before 1949 was disbanded. Instead, government organizations were established to enmesh individuals into the social structure and to act as intermediaries to connect society to the Party-state, such as the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (Zhonghua Quanguo Funu Mingzhu Lianhehui), the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (Zhonghua Quanguo Zonggonghui), and the Chinese Communist Youth League (Zhongguo Gongchanzhuyi Qingniantuan).

The ACWF was established in 1949 on the foundation of women's groups set up in the years between 1937 and 1945 in the CCP-controlled areas and those in the KMT-occupied areas that worked closely with the CCP.\textsuperscript{131} Originally, it was called the All-China Democratic Women's Federation. It changed to its present name in 1957. It was set up according to the state administrative divisions. There are five administrative tiers of the ACWF, paralleling the national administrative structure: national, provincial, prefectural/municipal, county, and town/township. The Women's Federations (WF) at each level operated under the direct leadership and financial sponsorship of the Party Committee at its own level, as is shown in Figure 1. The Party officials decided the hiring, promotion, demotion, and dismissal of the WF's personnel.

The highest power organ of the ACWF is the National Women's Congress (Quanguo Funu Daibiao Dahui) held every five years. The Standing Committee is the

\begin{flushright}
^{130} Whyte, 85. \\
^{131} Naihua Zhang, with Wu Xu, 29.
\end{flushright}

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leading organ when the Executive Committee is not in session. Under it there is the Secretariat, made up of the First Member and several members who are elected by the Standing Committee and in charge of the daily work.

Figure 1. Structure of the Women's Federation and its Relationship with the CCP Committee

The *raison d'être* of the ACWF is for the CCP to reach millions of Chinese women and to fulfill the party's goals. Its main work has revolved around the government's general societal goals, such as land reform, reviving the urban administration and economy, etc., rather than women's specific issues. Activities of the ACWF have been state-initiated from above.
When new China was founded, the CCP sought to transform the Chinese polity, economy, and society. Based on the Marxist idea of women’s emancipation, the CCP attacked the old system of marriage associated with forced marriage, polygamy and bride-price by passing the Marriage Law in 1950. The Marriage Law prohibited child-bride, concubinage, and bigamy, legalized monogamous marriage, and gave women the freedom of choice in marriage, and the right to divorce and maintenance.

This was the first in a series of events that significantly improved women’s lives and raised their position in society. In response to this, the ACWF organized consciousness-raising activities among women, for example, “speaking bitterness” meeting, and made women realize the feudal oppression they suffered and the liberation and equality with men they enjoyed in the new socialist society. The CCP’s ideas about women’s emancipation became the guideline of all its activities.

The Marxist idea of women’s emancipation also includes women’s right to property and access to the public sphere. Based on this, women were largely mobilized into waged work after 1949 in urban areas. In 1950, the employment rate for Chinese women rose to 80 per cent. In rural areas, the Land Law introduced in 1950 allowed women to hold property in their own name and gave them a right to a share in the family inheritance, which helped rural women to overcome the patriarchal authority to which they had been long accustomed. These legal rights were seen as the foundations upon which to build a better life for women in the new Chinese society. Echoed with the reform, the ACWF actively mobilized women in confiscating landlords’ property. Women played an important role in the land reform. A considerable number of rural
women were promoted to local rural leadership positions, though female cadres were typically consigned to female posts in the women's associations or as "vice-head." In some areas, women were said to occupy 10-15 per cent of their leaders.133

In 1958, the Great Leap Forward134 was launched to speed up the progress of communism. Female labour was mobilized on an unprecedented scale through "socialization of domestic labor to contribute to the experiment for rapid economic development and social transformation."135 "Complete liberation" of women became part of the official ideology.136 Women entered commune production as individuals in their own right and earned their own "work points," giving them economic independence within the male-headed family structure. During this period, 90 per cent of women earned a wage of some kind.137 Moreover, the commune system facilitated women's entry into the state's local leadership structure. By the late 1950s, over 5500 rural women had served as leaders or deputy leaders of people's communes in villages.138 These female cadres in the commune system were sometimes cadres from the ACWF.

133 Bill Brugger, and Stephen Reglar, Politics, Economy and Society in Contemporary China (Stanford, California: Standford University Press, 1994), 51.
134 The Great Leap Forward in 1958-60 attempted to break with the Russian model of Communism and to catch up with more advanced nations by making a "great leap forward" into modernization. Mao suggested a militant five year plan to promote technology and agricultural self-sufficiency. Labour-intensive methods were introduced and farming collectivized on a massive scale. The campaign created about 23,500 communes, each controlling its own means of production. But the peasants had no idea how to actually use the new machines and what was once fertile crop land went to waste on a disastrous scale. The Great Leap Forward was held responsible for famine in 1960 and 1961. See "The People's Republic of China: II, the Great Leap Forward, 1958-60," [http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/prc2.html], retrieved November 23, 2004.
135 Naihua Zhang, with Wu Xu, 31.
136 Ibid.
137 Wutzke, 73.
As education was regarded by the CCP as an important means of granting women access to better jobs and a more independent life, flexible patterns of education were developed to provide a vast number of girls and women with some formal education. Under the leadership of the CCP, the ACWF launched three nation-wide literacy drives within a few years beginning in 1952, and as many as 1.6 million illiterate women learned to read and write.\(^\text{139}\) In 1951, female students in primary schools accounted for 28 per cent of total enrolment, while this share was 22.5 per cent in higher education. These figures increased to 45.5 per cent and 33 per cent respectively in 1976.\(^\text{140}\)

In Mao's China, women's status was dramatically improved. A share, albeit unequal, of most of the major benefits accrued to women as well as men. Nevertheless, the patriarchal Party-state only gave women the rights it thought appropriate. The ACWF, as an executive arm of the Party-state, did not articulate upwards women's needs based on women's free choice. It only executed and communicated downwards the Party-state's policy to women.

During the Cultural Revolution\(^\text{141}\) of 1966-1976, the competing radical Maoist groups castigated gender issues as "selfish" and "bourgeois," and tantamount to national betrayal. Women's issues tended to "be buried beneath the all-consuming emphasis on class struggle."\(^\text{142}\) There was concern about inequality, but it was assumed that gender equality would be the natural outcome of a successful class struggle. Thus, any

\(^{139}\) Edwards, 77.

\(^{140}\) State Education Commission, 1984, 40.

\(^{141}\) The Cultural Revolution in 1976-76 was a 10-year political campaign launched by Mao Tse-tung to eliminate political opposition. It plunged China into political and economic chaos directing savage attacks on intellectuals, teachers, researchers and CCP cadres. Many died and millions more were imprisoned. The result was massive civil unrest, and the army was sent in to control student disorder. It is also a period of economic stagnation. See more from Encyclopedia: Cultural Revolution [http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Cultural-Revolution], retrieved on October 12, 2004.

\(^{142}\) Naihua Zhang, with Wu Xu, 31.
separatist women’s organizations and groups were suspended and the ACWF was virtually stopped. A magazine, *Women in China*, was accused of “bourgeois” disregard of class and was closed down.\(^{143}\) The issue of sexual equality was characterized by the slogan “What men can do, women can also do (*Nanren Nengzuode, Nuren Yenengzuo*),” which masculinized women and obliterated natural sex difference. Women and men were to wear the same clothes, and use the same title—“comrade” instead of “Mr.” or “Mrs.” In Shelah Gilbert Leader’s words, “women were forced to perform the same physical labor as men, with alarming consequences to their health.”\(^{144}\) Gender equality was actually distorted.

This period also represented the high mobilization of women in the public sphere. Many women activists were seen to demand a say in decision-making in industry, educational institutions and local government. Women’s committees were set up by revolutionary committees to train women in skills. There was a drive to increase the proportion of women in the party. From 1966 to 1973, women constituted 27 per cent of those newly recruited party members.\(^{145}\) The chaos of Cultural Revolution also gave many girl students chances to leave their homes and travel all over China as Red Guards. For many, this was an exciting and liberating experience.\(^{146}\)

From 1957 until 1978, the ACWF did not hold national congresses, thereby leaving no national organization responsible for women’s issues. Any group interest without relation to class was not vocalized. In 1971, the CCP began again to pay attention to women’s questions under the slogan of “we must rectify the tendency to

\(^{143}\) Brugger, 283.


\(^{145}\) Brugger, 285.
neglect work concerning women.” Soon a few local federations had begun to meet again. However, it was not until 1978 that the ACWF was able to resume its activities on a national scale\(^{147}\) and a number of veteran women leaders returned to power, such as Kang Keqing, Deng Yingchao and Song Qingling, all of whom were wives of high-ranking revolutionary leaders.

The above discussion shows that the ACWF was closely aligned to the Party-state’s policies, and was subject to the vicissitudes of internal party politics. It was “a vehicle for the mobilization of women in the service of party goals.”\(^{148}\) A typical CCP’s perspective on the relationship between the ACWF and the CCP was:

The Party is a representative and guardian of women’s interests... the Chinese Communist Party has always been the leader of the Chinese women’s movement...women’s organizations are highly unified. Although there are women’s national, regional and industrial organizations...they are mostly affiliates of the All-China Women’s Federation... The Chinese Communist Party and the people’s government exercise leadership over the women’s movement via ACWF which acts as the spokesperson for all women in China. No other women’s organization in the country can substitute for the ACWF.\(^{149}\)

The ACWF was the official and exclusive organization representing women. It was very much a top-down organization with a hierarchal and centralized structure and demands transferring from top to bottom. Each WF under the ACWF was tightly linked with the Party-state at its own level, which meant that the WF structure was not autonomous. The ACWF was the Party-state’s mouthpiece on feminism and gender issues. Specifically, it was dedicated to communicate Party policies downwards to

\(^{146}\) Rai, 183.  
\(^{148}\) Ibid.  
women and, less commonly, to convey women's interests upwards to the Party. Its primary function was to "mobilize women to participate in government-sponsored political campaigns."  

The staff of the ACWF was assigned to work in the ACWF through the labour assignment system in the civil service instead of through a commitment to or activism on women's issues. They were paid by the state and could be transferred in or out of the ACWF. To be an official of the ACWF, Party membership was a must. All women in both urban and rural areas were automatically members of the ACWF, which meant that the membership was not on a voluntary basis.

The Marxist idea of women's emancipation subsequently "subordinated the independent interests of women to state policy." Nomination of cadres rather than election and the mandatory membership together cast doubt on the ACWF's legitimacy to represent women. Its top-down mode of operation allowed mobilization instead of participation for the purposes of the Party-state. It had monopoly of the right to organize women, and operation funds came from government allocation. As such, the ACWF, in Mao's period, was never conceived as a civil society organization, namely, an organization that was formed voluntarily by the public and representing the interests of specific groups or the public at large. It was only an integral part of the Party-state.

Nevertheless, as Ellen R. Judd stated, "the existence of the ACWF provides a publicly funded national framework for women, and one that is historically well

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151 Naihua Zhang, with Wu Xu, 31.
established." The ACWF officially incorporated women into mainstream CCP politics and social structure as members of a mass group with special concerns and needs. It played an important role in keeping gender issues on the political agenda. At the lower levels, rural ACWF cadres were much more at the forefront in dealing with the problems of women such as family disputes and divorce. As a state-organ in charge of Chinese women's affairs, the ACWF also provided a channel for women to participate in formal politics. It had the authority and resources to help interpret and implement state policy on women. However, in contrast with state organs, it had no administrative or legislative power, and its functions depended heavily on thousands of local-level activists throughout the five-tier system from the town to the center.

After the Mao's period, the introduction of market reforms and the expansion of the private sector have dramatically transformed the socio-economic environment in which the ACWF operated. It has resulted in certain gains for women. At the same time, it has brought a host of new problems and has made some of the previously existing problems more visible. The following chapter provides an overview of the market reforms and the societal change triggered by the economic reforms. These changes in turn have posed a challenge to the ACWF in meeting women's needs and representing women from a variety of categories.

3. CHINA'S ECONOMIC REFORMS AND THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

After Mao’s death, China started its ambitious economic reforms in 1978. These reforms have radically altered the socio-economic environment in which the ACWF operates. New socio-economic groups have emerged, such as independent farmers, private traders, private entrepreneurs, Chinese managers in foreign-invested enterprises, and rural migrants. The structure of society in post-Mao China has become more stratified, differentiated and pluralistic. This has given impetus to the growth of civil society. For women, the dramatic socio-economic transformation has “reconstituted the pattern of gender relations.” It has created new possibilities and opportunities for Chinese women as well as given rise to new gendered issues. The picture of Chinese women’s position in the reform period is complex, posing new challenges for the ACWF.

3.1 China’s Economic Reforms

In Mao’s era, China’s economic structure was basically copied from the Soviet Union during the latter period of Stalin’s leadership. Major problems that hindered the development of the Chinese economy were “over-concentralization,” and “egalitarianism.” These problems, along with the damaging effects of two radical campaigns, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, contributed to a sluggish economy and poor economic results in the late 1970s. In 1978, total nominal
GNP was US$44 billion or about 70 per cent of that of South Korea. 250 million people lived below the official poverty line.\(^{156}\)

In the countryside, after 1977, in some poorer interior provinces, e.g. Gansu, Anhui, a strong peasant movement began to press for decollectivisation.\(^{157}\) This base movement was to be one of the “first detonators”\(^{158}\) of the economic transformation in the countryside.

Internationally, the Soviet Union and East Europe started economic reforms in the 1950s, mainly by decentralizing the process of economic decision-making. Though these reforms, except for in Hungary, were halted for various reasons, the “reform movement” has continued, contributing to partial reforms in various countries.\(^{159}\)

When Deng Xiaoping’s new leadership entered the stage in 1978, the Party was exposed to tragic sustained poverty. The defects and irrationalities of over-concentration and egalitarianism of the planned economy were disclosed. Deng’s leadership felt the pressure for reform. On December 18, 1978, the CCP held the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, marking the beginning of China’s market-oriented economic reforms and the open-door policy.

China’s economic reforms were first initiated in rural areas, and then spread to the urban industrial sector. In the countryside, the people’s commune system\(^{160}\) was


\(^{158}\) Bettelheim, 18.

\(^{159}\) Ibid.

\(^{160}\) The term “commune” refers to an agricultural production unit including a number of farm households or villages working together under state control. In China, it was officially called the “People’s Commune System”, established in 1958. Twenty to thirty cooperatives comprising over 20,000 members and 40 to
dismantled in favor of the Household Responsibility System and town-village enterprises (TVEs), which have created a new group of rich peasants and town-village entrepreneurs as well as surplus labours who become migrant workers. In the cities, the Stalinist command and control of the economy gave way to decentralization of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). A share-holding system was created by which both SOEs and other enterprises might be "owned" by relatively passive private parties. Following it, financial markets have been developed within which "shares" of such enterprises might be floated, bought and sold, and private enterprises and foreign investment enterprises have rapidly expanded.

Economic reforms have led to state transformation, characterized by power decentralization, leadership rejuvenation, and the CCP's withdrawal from institutional structure. The CCP's overcentralization of power and dominant role have been replaced by its guarantory and supervisory role through monitoring the observance of policy and the extent to which other structures meet stipulated objectives. Local level officials have gained some degree of autonomy from party organizations and enterprise managers' power has been enhanced.

With the state transformation, the social control mechanisms and institutions were dismantled in the mid-1980s, namely, the household registration (hukou) system and the

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100 villages were merged into each commune. The land, equipment, and any property and cash became the property of the commune. In each commune an economic and administrative unit controlled the labor force and all means of production, providing central management of industry, commerce, education, agriculture, and military affairs. Wages and perquisites were controlled by the state, and all products were marketed through state agencies. Columbia Encyclopaedia, Sixth edition (2001), [http://www.bartleby.com/65/co/collecti-f.html], retrieved on September 8, 2003.

161 Under this system, individual households contract for the use of a plot of land, a piece of machinery, or even a workshop or enterprise. Each individual household specifies the quantity of grain it would sell to the state at the fixed procurement price in the contract. After fulfilling its contractual obligations, and keeping enough food for its own consumption, the surplus (if any) could be sold to the state procurement agencies at premium prices. The system has to some extent created incentive and initiative. It links

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work unit (danwei) system that were established in Mao's era. Moreover, as the state attempts to promote the private sector and foster economic relations with the world economy, Chinese people are given more opportunities to travel abroad and there is more tolerance of a liberal atmosphere of debate. Chinese people enjoy more social space and freedom of domestic and international mobility.

The tremendous changes in the economic and political sectors have altered virtually all aspects of Chinese life. A public sphere, though still monitored by the state, has emerged, and individuals are allowed to interact and discuss social issues. The FWWC held in 1995 in Beijing has provided a further stimulus to the understanding of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and has fostered the development of women's NGOs in China. The Chinese people have seen enormous growth in associational life. For the ACWF, the changing social terrain has not only provided opportunities for restructuring its institution, but has also posed a challenge to its role as sole representative of women's interests. Before we discuss the changes that the ACWF

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162 The Hukou system was established in cities in 1951 and the rural areas in 1958 for overall social control. Based on the place of birth or work, each citizen is required to register only one place of regular residence and the place of registration defines one's social and economic activities in this specified locality. This system set up the priority of the city over the countryside, and precedence of large cities over small-visible in the differential allocation of state resources. The Danwei system is another institutional arrangement for the Party-state to control social, political, and economic behavior of residents in Mao's China. Danwei refers to China's basic work units. They operated as employers as well as providers of a range of social welfare services. This system, together with the Hukou system, controlled job assignments, housing, education, travel, medical care, and other basic goods and services of the citizens. Workers became dependent on their workplace and therefore on the officials in charge of it. Movement between work units was rare. See Gungwu Wang, and John Wong, 68-72.


164 Gungwu Wang, and John Wong, 68.
has gone through, we review the positive and negative impacts of reforms on women. This will help us understand the new gendered issues that have confronted the ACWF and the changing context in which the ACWF now operates.

3.2 Positive Impacts

The benefits of market reforms have reached men as well as women, including a higher income, more employment opportunities, more resources of education, and better representation of women’s interests by new women’s groups, etc. Chinese women have seen a general improvement of social status.

3.2.1 Expanded Employment Opportunities and Increased Income

Economic reforms and opening-up policy have created new options and expanded women’s employment fields. The development of tertiary industries offers more job opportunities for women. Better education accompanied by increased capabilities in competition ensures that more women can seize opportunities in the growing new economy, e.g. computer, telecommunications, finance and insurance, legal services, etc. The total number of women in the labour force has experienced an absolute increase.

As shown in Table 3.1, an additional 20.47 million women were employed from 1980 to 1996, which accounted for 38.7 per cent of the total employment in 1996. Women’s share of employment exceeded 40 per cent in industry, commerce, real estate, healthcare, education and banking. Although these jobs belong to areas that have traditionally hired a large percentage of women, the expansion of opportunity is apparent.

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Table 3.1 Employment Share of Women by Sector - Staff and Workers (in millions)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Staff &amp; Workers</td>
<td>104.44</td>
<td>36.98</td>
<td>140.59</td>
<td>52.94</td>
<td>148.45</td>
<td>57.45</td>
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<tr>
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<td>35.41%</td>
<td>37.66%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>47.62</td>
<td>18.73</td>
<td>63.78</td>
<td>26.43</td>
<td>67.96</td>
<td>28.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>39.33%</td>
<td>41.44%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Geological Survey &amp; Prospecting</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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<td>20.47%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport, Postal &amp; Telecommunication Services</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>2.24</td>
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<tr>
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<td>21.98%</td>
<td>24.08%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce, Food, Material Supply, Marketing, Storage</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>18.13</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>18.07</td>
<td>8.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>39.46%</td>
<td>44.53%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real Estate, Management, Public, Residential and Consultancy Service</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>2.44</td>
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<td>46.23%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Care, Sports, and Social Welfare</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>2.53</td>
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<td>56.1%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education, Culture, Art, Radio &amp; TV Broadcasting</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>11.44</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>34.76%</td>
<td>36.94%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Research and Comprehensive Technical Service</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>34.29%</td>
<td>34.48%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking and Insurance</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>29.21%</td>
<td>35.89%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government, Parties and Social Organizations,</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>10.75</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>16.12%</td>
<td>20.52%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: China Statistical Yearbook (1991), 86, 95; (1997), 102 -106

The promotion of private enterprises has opened new channels for women to be self-employed. More and more women have started to run their own businesses, such as

53

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clothes manufacturing and sales, beauty parlors, advertising companies and restaurants. "Strong and capable women (nu qiang ren)" emerged from this group as entrepreneurs and millionaires.166

Though market reforms have dismantled lifelong job security, they have created more mobility and freedom for women to apply for a desired job and to change jobs at will. As Barbara Einhorn and Janes Eileen Yeo wrote, "women have started to make conscious efforts to choose those positions that can advance their social status."167

Women’s vigorous action to seek jobs in the market is surely an important movement towards the "economic liberation"168 of Chinese urban women.

At the same time, statistics indicate Chinese citizens have gained a continuous rise of total income and wages ever since the reforms started. The figures in Table 3.2 show dramatic wage increases in all three ownership categories from 1988 to 1996. In the state sector, average annual wages grew from 1,853 yuan in 1988 to 6,280 yuan in 1996. Wages in the collective sector also experienced an important growth, though lower than the wage paid to workers in the state sector. In the other ownership sector, wages had the biggest rise, from 2,153 to 8,261 yuan between 1988 and 1996. This ownership sector usually includes private enterprises, joint ventures between state-owned enterprises and foreign investment, and foreign enterprises.

Table 3.2 Mean Annual Money Wage by Ownership, Type and Year
(in Chinese yuan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Sector</td>
<td>1853.33</td>
<td>2279.14</td>
<td>2876.76</td>
<td>4786.33</td>
<td>6280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Sector</td>
<td>1423.36</td>
<td>1680.09</td>
<td>2110.08</td>
<td>3246.66</td>
<td>4302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Ownership Sector</td>
<td>2153.18</td>
<td>3009.24</td>
<td>4123.67</td>
<td>6071.72</td>
<td>8261</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

China Statistical Yearbook (1997)

Although we do not have data on women’s wages, it is safe to say that the increasing wage trends are also valid for Chinese women. Increased income has brought about important changes in their family life. For instance, they live in better housing conditions, with modern appliances such as washing machines. Increased income also allows urban families to employ a babysitter or a house cleaner. Therefore, the burdens of child care and house chores that might detract women from building a career are less than in the past.

3.2.2 Improved Education Attainment

With the introduction of market reforms, there has been a dramatic improvement in women’s general education attainment. In December 2000, an ACWF survey carried out jointly with the National Bureau of Statistics showed that 50.7 per cent of women between 18-64 years of age had junior middle school education, which indicates that half of all women have obtained the basic education degree. The ratio of illiteracy has been reduced from 30.1 per cent in 1990 to 11.1 per cent in 2000.\textsuperscript{169} The number of female

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid, 197.
students in various schools has increased over the years. In 1999, over 113 million girl students were enrolled in schools, 25 million more than in 1980. School attendance of school age girls also reached 99.04 per cent, and 1.69 million female students attended university, which is 6.3 times higher than the rate of 1980.170

Table 3.3 illustrates the expansion of female education in China from 1951 to 2000. The percentages of women and girls enrolled as students show an obvious increase in the past three decades. Particularly in the cities, the success of the one-child policy means that girls get a better chance for education, as they have no siblings competing with them for parents’ resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th>Secondary School</th>
<th>Primary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Furthermore, women have become more conscious of the importance of education. They have been inspired to “tap their own potentials through participation in education. They have been inspired to “tap their own potentials through participation in

170 Feng.
development and to strengthen their competence.”171 Around 200 million rural and urban women have attended vocational and practical skill training over the years.172 According to a 1990 ACWF and the State Statistics Bureau survey, 26.2 per cent of the poorly educated were in adult education such as technical training and literacy classes.173

With women’s achievement of better education, potentially they could continue to compete for better jobs and higher income. The proportion of female professionals in science and technology in the total employed population rose from 1.9 per cent in 1982 to 2.4 per cent in 1990, while the figure for male professionals decreased from 3.3 per cent to 2.9 per cent respectively.174 Education attainment also helps women to channel their inner power to the frontline. A study of Chinese women in state-owned enterprises shows women’s managerial motivation is as high as that of Chinese men.175 In 1998, women in management reached 420,000, which was 35.3 per cent of the total, doubling that of the pre-reform period.176

Better education and extensive involvement in the employment field has extended women’s horizons, changed their values, and raised their expectations. Chinese women are becoming more articulate of their needs and wants and more conscious of women’s common interests. Many Chinese women study abroad and are open to Western feminist ideas. They bring back fresh ideas regarding “equality,” and “women’s rights.” Alternative perspectives have developed. More and more women seek to protect and

171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
176 Feng.
defend their interests through organized efforts, implicitly and explicitly challenging the capacity and legitimacy of the old governmental women’s organization – the ACWF.

### 3.2.3 The Rise of Women’s Groups

Economic reforms marked the Party-state’s attempts to step back from the effort of total control of society. Chinese society has been more mobile and revitalized, which is reflected in many aspects of social life, especially in people’s growing interest in associational life and increasing freedom to express their views through the media.

Since the early 1980s, there have been a growing number of trade and business associations, religious and professional groups, pet-raising clubs, learned societies, sports clubs and foundations. By the end of 1997, total social organizations registered at the national level increased to 1848, and at the provincial level 180,000, which is in contrast to none in 1970.

Like other social organizations, women’s groups have seen a dramatic increase over time, and have diverse relations to the Party-state. In October 1993, women’s groups reached a total of 5000. The women’s organizations emerging first were usually set up by intellectual or professional women, for example, the Women’s Research Institute, the China Women Entrepreneurs Association, and the Women’s Committee of Western Returned Scholars Association, etc. They are not completely autonomous, as they have to formally register with the state and affiliate to a state agency. Jude Howell categorizes these forms of groups, as semi-official organizations as the state is usually involved in setting objectives, management, and funding. The intervention

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of the state in these groups reflects the continuing subordination of women's interests to class and/or national concerns. However, compared to government organizations such as the ACWF or trade unions, they are initiated by individual women, referred to as nonofficial organizations, and enjoy more freedom from the state.

In the mid-1980s, looser forms of women's groups were set up in urban areas, such as, salons, clubs, hotlines, etc. They usually address gender issues that traditional institutions do not deal with. They rely on their own fund-raising efforts, set their own goals, and manage their own affairs with volunteer labour. However, they are still seeking state approval, or have not sought official approval. The Party-state tolerates the existence of these looser forms of organizations. Compared with semi-official organizations, they stand more towards the pole of greater autonomy, voluntariness, self-regulation and popularity—the four features of civil society.

The 1989 Tiananmen event led to a clamp-down on all social organizations. However, the decision to hold the 1995 FWWC in China boosted the development of women's organizations. The conference provided a context "where unregistered women's groups were tolerated, where supervisory departments and larger associations were more willing to take on a women's group and where the ACWF and the CCP actively encouraged the formation of such non-governmental groups." China saw a proliferation of new research units, women's studies centers, women's discussion groups, and feminist symposiums across the country. Many of these women's groups can be also grouped into looser forms of organizations. They are voluntary in character, relying on

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180 Ibid.
181 Naihua Zhang with Wu Xu, 37.
182 Jude Howell, 2000, 360.
183 Ibid.
their own funds and self-regulating. However, as they are still under state scrutiny, their freedom and autonomy are restricted.

The above analysis demonstrates that the women's groups have considerable diversity in legal status, origins, popularity, voluntariness, and degree of autonomy. The various types of women's groups reflect both voluntary initiatives from below and the deliberate efforts of the state from above. They have complex relations with the Party-state. While state intervention may stymie the initial enthusiasm of the members and undermine their voluntary and autonomous dynamism, they are all dedicated to improve the status of the members. They all have the ability to address sensitive issues, develop flexible ways of dealing with women's problems, and explore alternative theoretical perspectives on gender discrimination. They have "opened up the debate around gender issues and constitute a inclusionary, though still elitist, public sphere of critical comment on gender matters and government policies to address inequities and injustices."184

This has posed challenges to the Party-state and changed the state-society relationship. They have "altered the institutional structure mediating between society and the Party-state."185 Though none of them could be adequately captured into the framework of civil society, they embody, to varying degrees, the associational qualities of civil society. Given the desire of the Party-state to withdraw from total social control and transformation, as well as the need to cut back on state expenditure, a more favourable environment within which a more developed intermediary section could flourish.

3.3 Negative Impacts

The market economy has resulted in certain gains for women as a result of general economic growth and improvement in the life of Chinese people. The logic is “as China becomes wealthier the status of women will improve.”\textsuperscript{186} The government has made no special efforts to address gender concerns, as gender issues are always secondary to the Party-state’s policies. Consequently, the market reforms have inevitably brought a host of new problems and made some of the previously existing problems more visible.

3.3.1 Sexual Discrimination of Women in the Workplace

Under the planned system in Mao’s period, women in China enjoyed equality in employment guaranteed by the state. However, as the state began to withdraw from the economy, women’s place in the work force, too, began to slide.

The statistics on the employment percentage of women shown in Table 3.1 indicate positive effects, but the figures are somewhat misleading. Officially the employment percentage of women increased from 35.4 per cent in 1980 to 38.7 per cent in 1996. During that period, however, many women were either effectively laid off or marked for dismissal as redundancy. Although they still hold onto their jobs, i.e. remain in the payroll list, these women will probably lose their positions when the layoffs actually occur. In 1995, 60 per cent of laid-off workers in cities in state-owned enterprises were women.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{186} Edwards, 63.
Women have difficulty in getting the better jobs. A survey conducted by the ACWF indicated that “75 per cent of employers preferred to hire men and sometimes required the women candidates to pass employment exams with 12 per cent higher grades than male counterparts.”188 Women with higher education face the same discrimination. In 1988, among the graduates of the Chinese People’s University rejected by employers, 80 per cent were women.189

Early retirement is another pressure faced by women. They are encouraged to take retirement at the age of 42 or 45, when the official retirement ages are 50 for women in manual work and 55 in non-manual work.190 Currently, women account for 70 per cent of the urban jobless.191

Costly maternity and health care benefits are cited as the main reasons for preference of men due to government-mandated paid maternity leave and childcare. According to estimates, maternity leave and ensuing child care costs amount to 1,259 RMB (152USD) per year, while a male can earn 10,600 RMB (1,282USD) in a two-year period that a woman worker who takes maternity leave and requires childcare.192 Managers of the enterprises argue that the losses caused by women “bearing children for the regeneration of the human race should not be borne by factories...”193

Table 3.1 also reveals that women concentrate in those areas with the least job security or those linked to womanly skills such as health and welfare. Women only

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188 Edwards, 71.
189 Zhongguo Laodong Kexue (China Labour Science), China Education (Summer 1989), 41.
193 China Education (Summer, 1989), 28.
comprise 23.4 per cent of CCP and government staff. In the high-tech area, women’s ratio is far lower. Shirin M. Rai, after analyzing Chinese women’s employment situation, remarked that concern with “profitability, cultural and social prejudices, and the lack of a state supervised policy on female employment is creating a situation that is squeezing women out of the job market.”

While women share the general growth of personal income brought about by market reforms, income disparities between men and women persist despite the implementation of “equal pay for equal work” (*tonggong tongchou*) throughout the market reforms.

### Table 3.4 International Comparisons: Female Wages (Percentage of Male Wages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China 1988</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Switzerland, 1993</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China 1991</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>Czechoslovakia, 1991</td>
<td>70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China 1997</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>United Kingdom, 1993</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan, 1991</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>Germany, 1994</td>
<td>74.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea, 1993</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>France, 1993</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong, 1994</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>Denmark, 1991</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore, 1994</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka, 1994</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: 199 Wenfang Tang, & William L Parish; Bohong Liu, & Rong Sun; *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*.

As is shown in Table 3.4, in Asian countries, women’s earning is 51 to 82 per cent of

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that of men, with Japan being on the low end and China at the very top. These figures also provide clear evidence that, while China is obviously better in this regard, income inequality between women and men remains a worldwide issue.

Though China has a relatively smaller gender gap in the workforce than many other countries in the world, there are signs of potential deterioration. While the absolute job opportunities for women increased, women usually concentrate in new light industries doing manual work or piece-rate work with lower pay, such as in textiles, electronics, clothing, automobile components, or export processing plants, usually operated by private owners. With the increase of these industries and a concentration of female workers, the general wage level of women tends to drop in comparison to men wages.

The situation of “pink-collar” women is not encouraging, either. These are the women who work as clerks, sales persons, nurses and elementary teachers, usually in the area of service trades, shops, guest houses and catering units, all characterized as women’s jobs. Wenfang Tang and William Parish discussed the “tipping” patterns that existed in the West, “with wages in jobs declining as those jobs move from employing mostly males to employing mostly females.” The two authors found:

There was already some evidence of this in the early 1990s. The sales and service sector, which suffered relative income declines in recent years, is increasingly female. Also, in the 1992 firm survey, firms with more females provided lower pay to both male and female employees. Compared with a firm that was only one-quarter female, a firm that was three-quarters female paid employees on average 25 per cent less.

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196 Tang, and Parish, 229.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
They concluded, “increasing concentrations of women in specific types of jobs and firms could eventually lower women’s wages.”\textsuperscript{199} A similar argument was made by Marvin Harris in his book titled \textit{Why Nothing Works: The Anthropology of Daily Life}.\textsuperscript{200}

The above discussion shows women’s wage disparities persist despite the fact that women share the general growth of income and increased job opportunities. With the intensified market competition, it remains to be seen whether China’s urban labour market might be pushed in the direction of increased income inequality between men and women or not. This is an important point to investigate in the future.

### 3.3.2 Education Lag

Table 3.3 reveals the expansion of female education in China since 1950s. In 2000, women students occupied 41 per cent of the total number of university students in China compared to 22.5 per cent in 1951. However, this also shows that women’s percentage in higher education has not even doubled since the 1950s. Female students enrolled in primary school accounted for 47.6 per cent, but dropped to 46.9 per cent in secondary school and 41.0 per cent in higher education in 2000. The higher the education level is, the fewer female students there are. Table 3.3 also shows girls enrolled in schools are less than a half in 2000, with 41.0 percent in higher education, 46.9 per cent in secondary school, and 47.6 per cent in primary school respectively.

Despite uniform entrance examinations and rules instituting equality of opportunity, discrimination against female students has been reported in some

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.

universities, where boys are admitted with lower scores than girls are. At the professional training level, the same discrimination confronts women, with the exception of traditional feminine skills training such as nursing, secretary and pre-school education, etc.

While there is a remarkable growth in the girls' enrollment rate, the increasing drop-out rates among school girls are starting to cause concern. In 1987, among 2.7 million children between the ages of 7–11 who dropped out of school, 83 per cent of them were girls. Women accounted for 70.07 per cent of the total illiterate and semi-literate people (127,249,000) over age of 15 in 1990. There is even more serious gender imbalance of illiterate rate among the younger group, as is shown in Table 3.5. Between age 15-24, women were 72.94 per cent of illiterates and semi-illiterates; 78.22 per cent between age 25-34, 74.37 per cent between age 35-44; 67.60 per cent over age 45.202

Table 3.5 Women’s Illiteracy and Semi-Illiteracy Rate by Age in 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of illiterate population</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female illiterate population</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female percentage of illiterates</td>
<td>72.94</td>
<td>78.22</td>
<td>74.37</td>
<td>67.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China's Second Report on the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. 1994; Ellen R. Judd.

Regional and sectoral disparities also exist concerning girls' education availability. The more prosperous the region is, the more resources there are available for education which girls can take advantage of. In 1997, "in the bustling and wealthy

201 Xie Heng.
metropolis of Shanghai 51 percent of primary school children are girls whereas in poor
provinces like Yunnan and Qinghai only 45.2 percent and 40 percent respectively are
girls."203

Moreover, girls’ education is usually sacrificed in a family with several school-
aged children. When the family encounters budget constraints due to multiple school-
aged children, the daughters are usually pulled out of school.204 Repeating patterns are
found in East Asia. Each extra sibling reduces school attendance by six percentage
points. Boys remain unaffected.205 This is why the success of the one-child policy
ensures that girls attain the same chances for education as boys do in urban areas. “If
you only have one child you make sure ‘s/he’ gets the best education possible.”206

As can be seen, the main problems regarding women’s education are: the high
illiteracy rates among young women in rural areas; lower female enrolment rates; low
attendance rates and high female drop-out rates in primary schools. All these lead to low
proportions of female students in higher levels of education.

With insufficient education, Chinese women are placed at a disadvantageous
position in the job market due to the increasing demand for more talented and better-
educated people. Adding to the magnitude of this situation is the fact that female
university graduates have difficulty finding jobs. This has discouraged academic units
from accepting women. Some universities have started to reduce the number of women
students. Less education again reduces the opportunities of women to compete for better

202 Judd, 56.
203 Edwards, 79.
204 William L Parish, and Robert J. Willis, “Daughters, Education and Family Budgets: Taiwan
205 Tang, and Parish, 68.
206 Edwards, 78.
jobs. This is a vicious cycle for women, and one of the most important women's issues that confront the ACWF.

3.3.3 Worsening Political Position of Women

The reforms have also impinged upon Chinese women's political status. Despite the rhetoric slogans such as “Women can hold half of the sky,” women have always occupied fewer leadership positions in the government than men. The situation has not been improved during the reform period; instead, women’s political position has worsened.

During Mao’s period, women’s political participation was a “prerequisite for China’s post-1949 political development and the regime’s thrust to transform society, the Chinese state was the major force behind women’s political participation.”207 The state created an institutional basis for women’s participation, such as the quota system established in the 1950s, which accounted for the noticeable increase in women’s position in government organs during a relatively short period of time. However, as Molly Padgett-Cross put it, this equal status in the political arena “was bestowed upon the masses and not integrated or accepted into society’s fabric.”208 When the Party-state’s support withdrew in the reform period, the vulnerable women’s political achievements in Mao’s period largely lapsed. Political adjustment and decentralization in the reform period allow greater political autonomy in order to stimulate economic development.209 The reintroduction of election in local government has opened women’s political participation to direct competition. Women have found it hard to compete

207 Qi Wang, 39.
successfully against men in open elections. The Standing Committee of the Politburo is the highest ruling body of the CCP structure. No woman has ever joined the Standing Committee and the whole Politburo had only 10.5 per cent women in 1969. Yet, this tiny portion fell to 0 in 1992. In the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, women’s share decreased from 25.1 per cent in 1975 to 12.68 per cent in 1993.

One ACWF official cites four salient characteristics of women’s decline in politics. One is that women generally account for a small portion. The second is that fewer women are in the positions of leadership, and the higher the level, the lower the percentage. Thirdly, few women take top decision-making positions. Lastly, there is a trend towards a serious generational gap among women officials.

The leading positions are mainly taken by men. Women, if at a higher position, usually hold positions related to the “soft issues” of family planning, education, health, and culture. Of all government staff and workers in 1992, women have a percentage of only 16.1 per cent (790,000). Among them, only 3 were ministers, 13 vice-ministers (7.1 per cent of the total) and 13 were vice-provincial governors (6.2 per cent of the total).

With regard to the age of female governmental staff and workers, statistics show a phenomenon of “peaks at the two ends, a valley in the middle.” At age 25, women’s political participation is almost equal to men’s. At age 25 – 35, women dramatically

209 Ibid.
210 Ibid. 3 women have been full members of the Politburo and they were the wives of extremely powerful men – Jiang Qing (wife to Mao Zedong), Ye Qun (wife to Lin Biao), and Deng Yingchao (wife to Zhou Enlai).
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
213 Edwards, 69.
214 White, et al, 78.
215 Ibid.
drop due to childbirth, childbearing, and house chores. After 35, women are recruited back, but usually at the lower level.\textsuperscript{216}

The roots of women's worsening political position not only lie in competitive election that is disadvantageous to women, but also in traditional perceptions of the sexual division of labour. Politics is perceived to be an essentially men's world while women are expected to remain in domestic household arena. Surveys show that both men and women are reluctant to take a female leader.\textsuperscript{217} In China, this traditional prejudice is the main reason for women's failure in political field.\textsuperscript{218} Lack of experience is cited as another reason. Even if they have experience, they find,

Their areas of expertise (education, health and welfare) are not regarded as evidence of "real experience." These soft portfolios are "extras" rather than "earners" for the economy. Male candidates often have the experience in the prestigious portfolios of industry or agriculture that ostensibly demonstrate economic and financial management skills.\textsuperscript{219}

In addition, the burdens of child-care and house chores severely limit women's time to take on public roles. Lack of motivation in political participation also contributes to women's worsening political position. A survey of women indicates that there is general acceptance of women's under-representation in China's formal politics, and there is some reluctance on the part of women to participate in politics.\textsuperscript{220}

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} Molly Padgett-Cross.
\textsuperscript{219} Edward, 67.
\textsuperscript{220} White, et al, 74.
The decline of women's position in the political sphere has put "the ACWF in some instances very much on the defensive."\textsuperscript{221} It requires the ACWF to respond to the new forms of political discrimination.

### 3.3.4 Commodification of Chinese Women

The marketization of the economy has also started to penetrate the domain of sexuality and redefine women's subordination, which has presented the ACWF with new gendered issues, such as female infanticide, prostitution, trafficking in women, "second-wives," the spread of commercial sex, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The one-child family policy introduced in 1978-1979 has reinforced the age-old subordinate status of daughters and has resulted in shocking incidents of female infanticide. As Gordon White stated, "the lesser value attached to female labour in a context where the size of family is subject to state control underpins the increasingly widespread practice of female infanticide in the rural areas."\textsuperscript{222} In a village of inland Anhui province, over 40 baby girls were drowned in 1980 and 1981.\textsuperscript{223} By 1994, there was a noticeably unbalanced sex ratio in China.\textsuperscript{224} Moreover, the abuse of rural women who gave birth to daughters is another consequence of this policy.

Prostitution is an undesirable consequence of opening up to the capitalist world by the late 1980s, and it has become a national concern which is found in most urban China. Many of these prostitute girls come from poor areas in China, being tricked by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{221} Howell, 1996, 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{222} Ibid. 76.
  \item \textsuperscript{223} Croll, 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{224} White, \textit{et al.} 76.
\end{itemize}
phony offers of jobs and sold into prostitution in big cities. This leads to another growing concern in China—the trafficking of women. 225

Rural migrant women becoming “second wives” (er nai) to Hongkong businessmen is another result generated by the rapid industrialization of China’s coastal cities. 226 This phenomenon is called “keeping a second wife” (Bao Ernai), and it became a common practice of many Hongkong men. Graeme Lang claims this is a de facto polygamy and in the long run they “undermine traditional gender roles and family structures.” 227

The commodification of sexual relations is justified and sustained by the images of women appearing in the popular press and media. In Mao’s period, we saw a “state-imposed image” 228 of women which was strong, manlike and plain. They wore blue, padded Mao jackets, and looked steely-eyed with an expression of “looking expectantly and confidently towards the future.” 229 Now the female images we see in advertisements, fashion and beauty contests, popular journals, films and videos are “sexual, coquettish, homebound, and feminine.” 230

Sexual harassment in the workplace has become very common among females recently, and it has attracted the attention of the entire society. In a social survey carried out by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 87 per cent of women participating said they had experienced different forms of harassment. 231

227 Ibid.
228 Qi Wang, 33.
229 White, et al., 78.
230 Ibid.
There were also increasing incidents of family violence. A survey jointly conducted by the ACWF and National Statistics Bureau in 1990 shows that 1/3 of women has suffered family violence. However, in China, family violence and breaking the law have long been considered two unrelated matters. Beating wives and children is commonplace in many families and is considered "no one else's business." Local police stations and neighborhood committees are usually reluctant to get involved.

3.4 Summary

As outlined above, the process of reforms has served to "reinforce old patterns of gender subordination which had continued in post revolutionary China" as well as to create new gendered issues. Sexual discrimination against women in the workplace, education lag of women, declining representation of women in politics, and commodification of women all point to new manifestations of gender discrimination. This means that the ACWF has to deal with not only the old gender issues, such as women's small share in government positions and unequal salary, but also new forms of economic, social and political discrimination against women. It has to speak out openly on behalf of women and recreate its own discourse to argue for women.

The above discussion also indicates that the reforms have had impacts not only on women's status, but also on the intermediary sector. With the initiative of the Party-state and the stimulus of marketization, the intermediary sector is fast growing, fostering a sphere of associational activities. The ACWF, as well, has benefited from the increasing

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233 White, et al., 79
freedom of associational life, and has taken steps to redefine itself as more representative of its members—women.

In the meantime, the ACWF faces implicit challenges from the emerging new women's associations. Many new women's associations are usually formed spontaneously by popular initiative, and driven by enthusiastic and committed leaders. They are becoming increasingly autonomous, challenging the attempts by the relevant government offices to control their operation and activities, which testifies to the existence of a relatively independent sphere of association. They are able to raise issues that are "perceived as too sensitive and face-losing for the ACWF,"234 to reach out to women that the ACWF could not reach, and they "have explored new methods of communication."235 Jude Howell believes this has posed not only a challenge but also "a threat to the capacity of the ACWF and its legitimacy to represent."236 The ACWF has had to explore diverse ways to meet the challenge. The tightening control of organizations after 1989 gave it more constraints with regard to its development. Under this changing context, how will the ACWF meet the diversified interests of its members and address women's issues? We will discuss this question in the following chapter.

234 Howell, 2000, 362.
235 Ibid, 362.
236 Ibid, 362.
4. THE ACWF'S RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE

Since the economic reforms have worsened women's status, created a number of new gendered issues, and diversified women's interests, the ACWF has faced increasing pressure both to speak out for women and to maintain its legitimacy as a representative organization of women's interests. At the same time, the ACWF has been increasingly confronted with the dilemma of its organizational structure, which requires the ACWF to struggle for a more autonomous role. This chapter examines the efforts of the ACWF to seek autonomy and independence in order to meet the interests of diverse groups of women. In addition to fulfilling its old tasks - propagandizing and implementing party policies - the ACWF has taken new steps to ascertain its role as a representative of women's changing needs, such as strengthening research on women's issues, integrating new women's groups, and prioritizing women's interests. In this process, the ACWF has begun to take on features of an organization of civil society.

4.1 Striving for Autonomy and Independence

In its attempt to adapt to the changing social context and reconstitute itself as an organization more sensitive to the diverse interests of women, the ACWF feels its close link to the Party-state has increasingly become a source of tension. As a "transmission belt" of the Party-state to reach all groups of women, it is often confronted with an organizational dilemma, particularly around issues where the interests of women and the Party-state policy clash. Which one should be given priority? Historically, the ACWF subordinated gender concerns to national goals. An example of this is the implementation of the government's one-child family policy. Although the policy is 237 Howell, 2000, 357.

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unpopular with the public, the ACWF has had to take on the responsibility of propagandizing and implementing it, for which the ACWF has come under attack. Rural women have become further alienated from the governmental women’s organization. Obviously, the ACWF needs a more independent and autonomous position to represent women’s interests.

Since the resurrection of the ACWF from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the ACWF has been struggling to move away from being a “transmission belt” for the Party-state to being a representative of women that focuses on defending women’s rights and interests. This trend is apparently reflected in its main discourse of several annual congresses.

At its Fourth Annual Congress in 1978 when the Cultural Revolution was just terminated and the policy of economic reforms was just initiated in the countryside, the ACWF voiced support for Party policy as a key objective. It mainly mobilized women to participate in state-initiated political campaigns, rather than to represent the interests of women to the Party-state.

Nevertheless, as the economic reforms have been moving on, at the Fifth Annual Congress in 1983, the ACWF voiced the need for an independent role to represent and protect women’s interests. The main task of the ACWF was changed to “closely associating itself with women’s interests in order that it might investigate, study, and solve the problems.” Gender-specific issues were heatedly discussed, such as female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual discrimination in the workplace, etc. In 1985, a “network for women’s problems” was established by a women’s federation branch in a

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238 Howell, 2000, 358.
239 Croll, 140.
county in Shanxi. It takes complaints from women about parental interference in marriage choice and husbands' abuse of wives. It conducts an investigation when there is a complaint, and helps the women to pursue legal procedure.240

Whilst the Fifth Annual Congress marked the beginning of the ACWF's attempts to prioritize women's interests, the Sixth Annual Congress of the ACWF in 1988 was a turning point in the ACWF's efforts to alter its relationship with the Party-state.241 This congress was held at the time of the Party-state's commitment to reforms in the political arena. Since the 1980s, practical measures have been taken to rejuvenate leadership, decentralize political power, and withdraw the party's operational responsibilities from institutional structures. With the relaxation of political control, the Party-state has gradually loosened its grip on all social organizations.

At the same time, there has been growing pressure within the ACWF to take on women's interests actively. At this congress, there was a heated debate about the "relationship of the ACWF to the Party and considerable reflection about the most suitable form of organization to deal with the increasing and changing demands of women."242 Representatives from all over the country voiced their visions of the types of organizations to represent women's interests, such as a separate Ministry of Women's Affairs, a government department, or a non-governmental organization with full independence from the Party-state.243 Other visions include the proposals that the ACWF should act mainly as a bridge or intermediary between the Party-state and women, and that the ACWF should have the ability to manage its affairs, have autonomy, and be

240 Honig, 297.
241 White, et al., 84.
242 Howell, 2000, 358.
243 Ibid.
free of interference by Party-state. Following the congress, there was a flow of articles in the magazine of the ACWF, Chinese Women (Zhongguo Funu), discussing how to represent women's interests better.

The Sixth Annual Congress demonstrated the ACWF’s efforts to carry out an overhaul of the organization and genuinely take on women’s interests.\textsuperscript{244} Subsequently, a new Women’s and Children’s Work Co-ordination Committee\textsuperscript{245} was established by the State Council in February 1990, and the Law Protecting Women’s Rights was enacted in 1992, which has “strengthened the ACWF’s position within the formal political structure.”\textsuperscript{246} Much greater independence has been given to the ACWF to set its own agenda.\textsuperscript{247} The ACWF has seen growth of autonomy. It has recruited many young and educated women and become more vigorous and militant in protecting and representing women’s interests.\textsuperscript{248}

A compelling example of this is the ACWF’s open and firm attack to a traditionally-biased proposal to send women home from the work force in the 1980s. This was a solution from some economists to the problem of surplus labour. The ACWF denounced and eventually scuttled the proposal. Another example is the “Two Study Campaign,”\textsuperscript{249} which was the first initiative where the ACWF was able to enjoy some independence.\textsuperscript{250}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[244] Howell, 1996, 132.
\item[245] The name was changed to “the Women’s and Children’s Work Committee under the State Council” in 1993.
\item[246] White, \textit{et al.}, 85.
\item[247] Benewick, \textit{et al.}, 189.
\item[248] Naihua Zhang with Wu Xu, 41.
\item[249] This campaign was launched in January 1989 by the ACWF. “Two studies” refer to literacy education (xue wenhua), and technical and scientific training (xue jishu). Literacy education was mainly targeted at rural women, providing them with basic education. The technical and scientific training program mainly referred to practical technical skills, i.e. skills that were simple, could be taught and learned quickly. It aimed at illiterate and semi-literate women and was geared toward income-generation. See Ellen R.Judd, 36-42.
\item[250] White, \textit{et al.}, 85.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}

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However, the ACWF’s efforts to prioritize women’s interests and seek greater autonomy suffered a setback after the 1989 Tiananmen event. Right after the event, the Party-state took political liberalization off the official political agenda. Gordon White described:

The subsequent clampdown on democracy dissidents, on organizers of autonomous trade unions and students’ organizations, and on cadres in the official mass organizations who had shown support for the movement served to suppress any open discussion of the need for a more autonomous Women’s Federation. Cadres in mass organizations retreated into their familiar Party-speak. 251

Nevertheless, the ACWF began to show its spirit of openness and desire for more autonomy when political control started to loosen again in 1991. In the countryside, where the Party-state has greater difficulty extending its reach, the ACWF enjoys more autonomy.

While the 7th Annual Congress of the ACWF in 1993 did not hear the voices for greater autonomy, it showed the growing concern over women’s needs. Gender-specific issues were specifically addressed, such as “the protection of women’s rights, prostitution, female infanticide and the household division of labour.” 252 However, one could constantly hear the words “promote socialist civilization,” “promote the unity of the country and international peace” and “support Party guidelines,” which suggests “the ACWF had still not carved out an independent role for itself.” 253

In 1995, the FWWC that took place in Beijing not only compelled the government to be more accountable to women, 254 but also provided a further stimulus to the rethinking

251 White, et al., 85.
252 Howell, 1996, 133.
253 Ibid.
of the ACWF’s role. In preparing for the conference, the ACWF was exposed to foreign women’s groups, which raised its self-consciousness and sharpened the contradiction between its actual governmental character and its acclaimed non-governmental nature, further stimulating demands for greater autonomy.\textsuperscript{255} The ACWF’s officials discussed possible future roles of the ACWF, such as becoming a ministry which could increase its authority or a non-governmental organization (NGO) which would enjoy freedom and autonomy. Nevertheless, restrained by the CCP’s official discourse, the ACWF’s high-ranking officials described the conference as an opportunity to display the achievements of reform and construction of socialist modernization, which reflected the “continuing subordination of the ACWF to Party objectives.”\textsuperscript{256}

Financially, the ACWF has developed from depending solely on government funding to multiple channels of finance, suggesting a more autonomous position for the organization. Since the 1980s, it has started to raise its own money. It has interceded with banks on behalf of larger borrowers and encouraged successful women entrepreneurs to make loans.\textsuperscript{257} Many local WF offices have started to run factories and industries, and to use the profits to pay local cadres, provide services, and establish profit-making facilities.\textsuperscript{258} Meanwhile, the ACWF reaches out to tap international resources. For example, the ACWF set up a joint venture hotel complex with foreign investors and use some profits to provide housing for women cadres.\textsuperscript{259} The China Children and Teenagers’ Fund, one of the ACWF’s secondary associations, raised money

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{257} Judd, 23.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{259} Howell, 1996, 135.
overseas for an educational project. In 1992, the Institute of Women’s Studies which was set up by the ACWF in 1983 got sponsorship from the Ford Foundation to hold its first conference on reproduction and health.\textsuperscript{260}

The above analysis shows the ACWF has made significant attempts to seek autonomy and to respond to the changing needs of various groups of women. The Party-state has granted greater independence to the ACWF to set its own agenda and raise its own funds. Stimulated by the Party-state’s initiative, and driven by members’ pressing needs, the ACWF has placed members’ interests as one of the most important issues in its agenda. Financially, those branches that run successful businesses have gained increased revenues and social influence, thus acquiring greater power and autonomy from the state.\textsuperscript{261} For the first time, the ACWF possesses its own property – enterprises and assets. The enhanced economic power and political autonomy have important implications for the future of the ACWF, which would be able to make it a more independent and autonomous organization and prepare its way toward a civil society organization.

4.2 Developing a New Theoretical Framework

The economic reforms and opening-up policy have increased contact between Chinese women and the outside world through both official and unofficial means. They have provided an opportunity for Chinese women scholars to look at Western feminist ideas. Western feminist essays and books have been introduced to China, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s \textit{The Second Sex} and Betty Friedan’s \textit{The Feminine Mystique}. Facing the pressure of addressing new women’s issues and being influenced by Western

\textsuperscript{260} Croll, 147.
feminist ideas, the ACWF increasingly feels the constraints of its past principles of addressing women's issues and needs. It needs to develop an operative theoretical framework that is useful to safeguard women's interests in the new age.

China's official theoretical discourse on women originated from the May Fourth Movement and Marxist theories of communist revolution when women's emancipation was carried on as a badge of modernity in Chinese political discourse. The CCP, formed by a group of cultural and political radicals in 1921, committed itself to women's emancipation and institutionalized the ideas of women's emancipation first in the National Revolution (1924-1927) and the Red Base Areas (1929-1949), and then in the PRC.

During this long process, a coherent theory of women's emancipation was developed. This theory was based on the assumptions by Engels and other classical Marxists about the automatic emancipation of women under socialism. It held that women's oppression resulted from the rise of private ownership and class society. Women would be automatically liberated when the proletariat overthrew the old social and political institutions and gained power. Women's emancipation was regarded as part of the emancipation of the whole humankind, and it would be achieved only when women were enabled to take part extensively in social production. The CCP, as vanguard of

\[261\] Naihua Zhang, 48.
\[265\] Zheng Wang, 1996.
the proletariat, was the only party that showed the path to the women of China to liberation.267

In these discourses, gender equality was virtually subjected to revolution, and later socialist construction. Gender relations were placed in a secondary and dependent status to political and economic conditions.268 Gender inequality and discrimination against women were labeled as a remnant of feudal ideology in China. This meant that the discourse about gender equality “remained within the confines of communist ideology and did not become a gender issue challenging the various modes of power within Chinese society. Women were not allowed the public political space needed to debate and frame their own demands.”269

Since the late 1970s, when the political restraints on academic research lifted, Chinese women scholars have engaged in conscious efforts to reconcile women’s studies with Marxist theories so as to find an operative theoretical framework for the new age. Zhang Naihua, in her study of the Chinese women’s movement, found that Chinese scholars have appealed to “Marxist historical materialism’s emphasis on gender difference as a social, rather than a biological, phenomenon and its stress on equality and emancipation for humankind.”270 The ACWF adopts women’s emancipation theory as the most important site to negotiate with the Party-state in the interests of women.271 By reformulating, reiterating and promoting the theory of women’s emancipation, the ACWF actively engaged in bargaining for women’s interests with the Party-state. In the process, a new term – the Marxist theory of Women – was coined. The Marxist theory of

267 Edward, 79.
268 Weeks.
269 Rai, 184.
women essentially adopted the Marxist class theory and materialist model. It adopted the CCP’s totalizing narrative that a successful Chinese women’s movement could only be led by the CCP, and that women’s emancipation was a necessary and inevitable part of socialist revolution. However, this theory is used as a catch-all term with vague meaning. By shifting emphasis in its exposition, this term is used flexibly at different times by its advocates for their political purposes. It serves as a reminder to the Party-state of its commitment to gender equality.\textsuperscript{272} For example, when women were called upon to return home in the early 1980s by some economists and sociologists due to the problem of surplus labour, the ACWF used the Marxist theory of women to contend that:

Women’s participation in social production is the precondition of women’s liberation, that without women’s economic independence equality between men and women would have no material base, and that a socialism with Chinese characteristics has to guarantee women’s equality in employment.\textsuperscript{273}

By emphasizing women’s role in social production, the women’s emancipation theory was used as a powerful weapon to safeguard women’s right to work. The Marxist theory of women serves for the ACWF in a flexible way to argue for women’s interests.

There have been conscious attempts of Chinese women scholars to stretch the theoretical boundaries beyond the strictures of Marxist methodology, especially during the period of the FWWC in 1995. When preparing for the FWWC, Chinese women were further exposed to global feminism and new gendered issues such as gay rights, women’s rights, and different theoretical perspectives on gender oppression.\textsuperscript{274} The women’s NGO forum before the conference popularized the idea of NGOs, the concepts of “women empowering women,” “sustainable human-centered development,” and other major

\textsuperscript{271} Zheng Wang, 1997.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
issues raised by women all over the world. Many Chinese women scholars saw the conference and the NGO forum as “the greatest opportunity of the century for them to break China’s intellectual isolation and to push the boundaries of women’s activism in China.”

Following the forum, a string of publications regarding women’s issues has appeared. Concepts of “feminism” and “gender” have been hotly debated in journals and newspapers. The word “feminism,” which had negative meaning and was completely avoided in Mao’s period, has become acceptable to Chinese society and applied to the Chinese situation. Chinese women scholars are beginning to examine theories of women’s social oppression not bound to the materialist model and class theory. They are discovering in contemporary Western feminism a new conceptual framework, gender, which they are finding “useful and enlightening.” Zhang Naihua noted, “their discussions on women’s issues are no longer confined within parameters set by the state.” Some women scholars have begun to explore more controversial issues, such as the family planning program and its effect on women’s health. This has challenged the Marxist theory of women and undermines the totalizing CCP narrative that gender equality has been achieved. However, the introduction and application of Western-feminist perspectives are still in the initial stages in women’s studies in China. Also, though Chinese women scholars are interested in feminist thought, they are afraid of

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274 Howell, 2000, 358.
277 Ibid, 42.
278 Ibid, 38.
being labeled as “feminists.” For many women, feminists are radical opposites to “virtuous wife and good mother” (xianqi liangmu). 279

While Western feminism focuses on feminist critiques of male-centered culture and gender analysis in research, the Marxist theory of women in China dominates the “entire discourse of women’s liberation of the Maoist era.” 280 It emphasizes gender difference as a social, rather than a biological phenomenon. “Equality-based” feminism exemplified by Western feminists is rejected, and class analysis remains the dominant theoretical framework in Chinese women’s studies. Moreover, Chinese women’s studies programs are focused less on political goals such as agitation for gender equality than those in the West. Their main task is academic, which is termed as discipline building (xueke jianshe). It is to promote the discipline as a new, “objective,” and scientific subject, not to emphasize “women’s studies critical edge and challenge to the establishment of traditional academic studies, as happened in the West.” 281

However, the government still holds “gender specific campaigning as treasonous, bourgeois selfish.” 282 Therefore, many women’s questions have not been sufficiently addressed. As Zhang Naihua found out,

Despite the growing range of perspectives and topics for inquiry, many important issues are under-discussed. Take the issues of sexual orientation and the politics of sexuality, for example. Homosexuality is still considered taboo by the general public, and there have been few studies of it. 283

While Western feminist ideas will take some time to filter through into a wider Chinese discussion, Chinese women scholars will need to adapt selectively from the

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281 Naihua Zhang, 37.
282 Edward, 61.
range of theories, “tailoring analyses to the cultural and historical specificities of China.”

Despite women scholars’ effort to stretch beyond Marxist methodology, Marxism remains the dominant theoretical framework in women’s studies. The core of the CCP’s discourse of women’s emancipation is not challenged. Women’s issues are still subordinate to the dominant national development. As demonstrated in the ACWF’s description of the FWWC, to keep in line with party’s official rhetoric remains on its documents:

This is a big event for the government and for the people of our country. It has an important meaning for encouraging our women to take part in all aspects of social development, for propagating the great achievements of our country’s reform and opening up and its construction of socialist modernization and for raising the status and function of our country in international affairs.

This indicates the ACWF is still bound to the restrictions from the dominant Marxist ideology. It is slow in changing its discourse. It does not look promising that the ACWF could develop its own theoretical framework in the near future to address women’s issues systematically and comprehensively.

However, the rapid growth of women’s studies has shown positive signs for Chinese women to create a new theoretical framework. Under the banner of Marxism, the women’s studies “does give the involved people legitimacy, and even some prestige, which they need to carry out researches on women and to form organizational networks.” A large number of women scholars inside and outside the ACWF have consciously adopted Marxism as a strategy for change. Collaboration and exchanges in

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283 Naihua Zhang, 38.
284 White, et.al., 77.
285 Edward, 59-84.
286 Howell, 1996, 133.
research between scholars inside and outside China have been carried out. A growing number of Chinese women scholars are studying Western feminist theories and methodology and have introduced them to the general public.

As noted before, a new theoretical framework genuinely safeguarding Chinese women’s interests is unlikely to emerge at this time. Nonetheless, the existence of the discipline of women’s Studies serves as dynamism for the ACWF in the process of seeking a new theoretical framework.

4.3 Integrating and Supporting New Women’s Organizations

Having recognized it could not serve the particular needs of various women’s groups, the ACWF has not only initiated, encouraged and supported the foundation of new women’s groups, but also has established links with them and involved them in their own campaigns.

The ACWF provides financial assistance to some women’s groups, such as starting-funds, and activities funds. Some organizations are provided with office space and equipment, and staff. Examples of these organizations are the China Women’s Science and Technical Worker’s Federation, and Women’s Trade, and Business and Professional Associations. The ACWF also plays a key role in the set-up of some women’s groups, for example, the China Socialist Women’s Entrepreneurs’ Association. This means these new women’s groups could enhance their status by affiliation with the ACWF. It also means that the new women’s groups are not totally independent.

Some ACWF officials are actively involved in women’s groups. This kind of involvement of the ACWF officials provides some support and protection to the

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287 Naihua Zhang, 38.
activities of women’s groups. For instance, the magazine Rural Women Knowing All was initiated by an ACWF official who is in the publication department,\(^{289}\) which partially contributes to the success of circulation of this magazine. Apart from active involvement in the foundation of new women’s groups, the ACWF seeks to establish links with many more women’s groups. It “has increasingly consulted different women’s associations about their particular interests and the need for regulatory and legislative change and has invited such organizations to meetings and conferences.”\(^ {290}\)

Affiliation with the ACWF enhances the status of smaller women’s groups, particularly given the pressure to conform to strict registration requirements after 1989.\(^ {291}\) Connection with government organization allows new women’s groups to enjoy more representative legitimacy and to have better political access to higher levels of the state. However, it also means these women’s groups are not totally free in their goal-setting, management and funding. The ACWF shapes the constitutions, and sends representatives to the meetings of these women’s groups. Moreover, officials from relevant ACWF departments usually participate in the leading councils of such organizations.\(^ {292}\)

Gradually, the women’s groups began to lose their original impetus and former activism. Thus, the involvement of the ACWF has undermined creativity, voluntariness, and grass-roots characters of the new women’s groups. A typical example of this is the China Women’s Science and Technical Workers’ Federation set up by the ACWF in 1993. Gordon White and Jude Howell commented on this federation, “apparently this

\(^{288}\) Howell, 2000, 356.
\(^{289}\) ibid.
\(^{290}\) ibid.
\(^{291}\) For detailed discussion of the registration of social organizations, see Gordon White et al., 1996, 93.
organization is very much an empty shell, made up of very high-level administrative officials, who were contacted upon the initiative of the ACWF.\textsuperscript{293} That's why some women's groups choose to stay away from the ACWF.

Although tension exists between the ACWF and new women’s groups, the cooperation and collaboration have continued and further expanded since 1990s.\textsuperscript{294} From the perspective of the ACWF, it extends the range of effective organizing and the reach of women through close links with these new women’s groups. The development of these women’s groups, especially those consisting of entrepreneurs and managers, “gave the understaffed and underfunded government organization opportunity to draw upon the abilities and influence of powerful women who would otherwise have no connection with the Federation or their work.”\textsuperscript{295} Furthermore, these new women’s groups, compared with the ACWF, enjoy greater autonomy and are able to operate more flexibly to reach out to women. They address specific needs of women and are able to take up sensitive issues that traditional institutions do not deal with. By drawing them under its wing, the ACWF extends the reach to women and increases its representative legitimacy for Chinese women.

Although the ACWF enjoys less autonomy and freedom, it has its own advantages, namely, resources and legitimate position, “which allow it to advocate the formation of policies and measures to advance women’s interests.”\textsuperscript{296} With regard to power and influence, none of other women’s groups is comparable to the ACWF now. In addition, with the decentralization of political power, local women’s federation branches have

\textsuperscript{292} Howell, 2000, 356.
\textsuperscript{293} White, et al., 1996, 94.
\textsuperscript{294} Naihua Zhang, 41.
\textsuperscript{295} Judd, 172.
enjoyed more freedom. They stay at frontlines in dealing with women’s problems and are more inclined to address gender issues than national level women’s federations.\textsuperscript{297} Further, the ACWF has been given the right to set up its own agenda. Interests of its women constituents are moved to its priority list. Thus, the ACWF has started to shake off the image of a state organ and appear to take on the “characteristics of a civil society organization as opposed to a state organ.”\textsuperscript{298}

4.4 Addressing Women’s Interests and Needs

In its efforts to meet women’s emerging needs and raise the social status of women, the ACWF has developed a number of new measures so as to increase the representation of women in politics, protect women’s legal rights, and improve women’s employment and education. In response to women’s worsening political status, the ACWF nurtures and promotes women officials by improving the qualifications of women targeted for official responsibilities. Since 1988, the ACWF has launched a campaign of “four-selves” (\textit{sizi})\textsuperscript{299} and held a variety of training programs for the staff of local WFs. These programs are relevant to woman-work or indirectly relevant through professional preparation.\textsuperscript{300} For instance, the WF of Wuqing County in Tianjin Municipality has established a training program for 67 county people’s congress delegates. The program provides delegates with knowledge of how to properly participate in politics and discuss politics and government.\textsuperscript{301}

\textsuperscript{296} Naihua Zhang, 41.
\textsuperscript{297} Howell, 1996, 130.
\textsuperscript{298} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{299} “Four selves” refers to self-respect (\textit{zizun}), self-confidence (\textit{zixin}), self-reliance (\textit{zili}), and self-strength (\textit{ziqiang}). This campaign focuses on the responsibility of women themselves to develop the desired character attributes for a higher political position.
\textsuperscript{300} Howell, 1996, 130.
\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.
The ACWF has also used its own personnel as the source of supply for official positions. In the last three decades, WFs at various levels have “developed ‘talent pool’ (rencai ku) of women suitable for recommendation for official position or for promotion within the official hierarchy.” At the same time, the ACWF has established women’s committees in state organs in order to train women officials and press for their promotion. According to Gordon White, “as of October 1993, there were 50,000 women cadres’ committees operating in government departments.”

The quota system is criticized by Li Xiaojiang as an “offer of politics,” and not a true participation of women in politics. However, this system can serve as a temporary measure to guarantee women’s quantitative participation in politics and staunch women’s retreat from the political arena. The ACWF has used it effectively to bargain for women’s political status. For example, in a district of Shenyang city, at a local People’s Congress election, the WF put forward 325 women candidates, instead of the 25 percent quota of 300. Consequently, the district raised its representation of women from 25.8 percent to 31.7 percent. With the detailed measures to promote women’s political positions and the implementation of the quota system, the decreasing trend of Chinese women in politics has been brought under control. Between 1997 and 2001, the total proportion of women in government increased by 2.3 percent, from 34.4 percent in 1997 to 36.7 percent in 2001.

302 Judd, 23.
303 White, et al., 87.
304 Ibid, 87.
305 Qi Wang, 38.
306 Ibid.
307 White, et al.
In response to violations of women’s legal rights, the ACWF has actively promoted the protection of women’s rights in the legal sphere since the early 1980s. The ACWF has set up a network of legal centers to provide services to women, such as legal counseling, legal advocates, and legal publicizing. They advise female victims of violence, collect evidence and pursue offenders through the courts. These legal centers have been set up at provincial, city and county levels, and they recruit lawyers and legal workers whose majority are women. Women’s protection committees have been set up in urban neighborhoods and rural areas. Guangzhou Women’s Federation established a Women’s Rights Department and a Female Lawyers Society, which “receives and investigates complaints of abuses of women’s rights and helps individual women out of hardship situations.”

In order to provide a better service to women, training programs are held for WF officials to study the pertinent provisions of the Constitution, the Marriage, other civil laws, and the procedural laws to be followed on criminal cases. In 1998, a Sino-Canadian joint project was set up to improve the protection of women’s legal rights. One important part of this project is a training program. Between 1998-2000, this program trained nearly 30,000 teachers, law practitioners and ordinary residents to protect women’s legal rights.

At the same time, the ACWF works to increase the legal consciousness of the public. In 1983-84, short and concentrated publicity programs were set up in many cities.

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309 White, et al., 88.
310 Croll, 143.
311 White, et al., 88.
312 Cecilia Chan, 101.
provinces. In 1992, following the promulgation of the “Law of the People's Republic of China on Protecting Women’s Rights and Interests (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Funu Quanyi Baohufa),” the ACWF launched a month-long women's right campaign to study and publicize the new law. Public forums were held in educational institutions. People saw legal booths in the street corners and in parks where legal advisors were answering queries and investigating grievances. These publicity campaigns have been successful. An increasing number of women are seeking legal protection instead of turning to their husbands, relatives, or sympathetic factory leaders. Cases brought to the attention of the WF during this campaign in a single month totaled that of half a year before.

In its effort to improve women’s education and employment, the ACWF has not only continued to promote the literacy training since Mao’s period, but also has introduced a number of new measures to improve women's professional skills during the reform period. It has combined the literacy-reducing project with the “two studies” (shuangxue) campaign, which was launched in January 1989 by the ACWF. By 1999, the ACWF had helped over 10 million Chinese women shake off illiteracy, which represents a 2.5 per cent reduction from 1995. As a result, the gap in adult illiteracy rate between men and women was also reduced from 19 per cent in 1990 to 13 per cent in 1999.

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314 This is the first law specifically defining a set of women's rights in China. It sets out the rights of women in political, economic, cultural and social life, and with regard to property, marriage, divorce and the family. It protects the rights of women to life and health, outlawing infanticide, abuse or any form of abduction. It states clearly that women should be equal with men. This law marked a milestone in the recognition of women's separate needs, interests and demands by society. See Elisabeth Croll, 142-144.

315 Croll, 143.

316 Judd, 36.


318 All-China Women’s Federation website.
Since the mid-1990s, there has been increasing emphasis on more sustained technical education for women who already have a lower middle school education. Much of it is relevant to women's "self-improvement or their acquisition of basic education and vocational skills in order that they enter the workplace on an equal footing with their male peers." A wide range of local schools was established, such as winter, seasonal, evening schools, and distance learning. For example, the Shandong WF set up special classes for women through the Beijing-based Rural Correspondence College. This college increased women's access to its regular programs and created a special program for women. The better-trained women and more successful models are recruited into "research associations" which are to convey "technical knowledge and entrepreneurial encouragement to other rural women."

The ACWF's efforts have achieved some success in addressing the legal, economic and political barriers to gender equality. The views and voices of Chinese women in the reform period are much stronger than ever before in modern Chinese history. This also indicates the ACWF's active search for a more independent role to represent women's interests. Though many of its measures to advance women's interests are still subject to the defining of the Party-state, the ACWF has been able to transmit women's perspectives from the bottom to the top and has exerted influence on the formation of state policies. For example, after the fifth annual congress, the ACWF raised the issue of writing a new Chinese law on the rights and interests of women in 1985. This resulted

319 Judd, 23.
320 Croll, 136.
321 Judd, 53.
322 Naihua Zhang, 44.
323 R.C. Keith.

With the advancement of economic reforms, the ACWF is likely to continue its transformation. In the process, the ACWF might "lose some of the benefits of official status, but it could also gain more autonomy and make itself an organization first and foremost for women."324 While it is difficult to predict, the ACWF’s transformation appears to have explicit indications that it will take on more characteristics of civil society.

324 Naihua Zhang, 48.
5. CONCLUSION

During the reform period, the whole of Chinese society has gained more space and freedom as the Party-state continues to loosen political control of and retreat from the society. This has enabled the ACWF to take steps to respond to its constituents—women, and to become more representative of women. This, in return, has reinforced its legitimacy to represent Chinese women. On the other hand, as is shown by the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, the Party-state is still dominant. The ACWF has remained a part of the state organs. It is obliged to maintain the party line, which has hampered its adaptation to the changing society. Based on our discussion in the previous chapters, the following section analyzes the associational qualities of ACWF from the four features of civil society—autonomy, self-regulation, popularity, and voluntariness. Next, the future prospects of the ACWF will be given.

5.1 The ACWF— from “Transmission Belt” to Civil Society?

In the reform era, the introduction of market forces has led to the transformation of the state sector. Although China remains a one-party political system where the party has control over all state organs, the state sector has been reformed, and has become more flexible and interactive with the market. This has led to the emergence of a “market-facilitating state,” as has been mentioned in the previous chapters. At the same time, Chinese society has become increasingly differentiated and pluralistic. The state is no longer able or even willing to control all forces in society. Instead, the state has had to accommodate the existence of various interests within society. It has accepted

325 Howell, 1994, 92.
that official organizations such as the ACWF are slipping from its grasp and gaining some autonomy.

This has made it plausible for the ACWF to take steps to prioritize women's interests. As the grasp of the Party-state is further weakened at the local level, the local branches of the ACWF are particularly more inclined to safeguard women's interests. In addition, the 1995 FWWC provided a significant stimulus for the ACWF to change. Its close encounter with international NGOs has pushed its activities further in the direction of acting more vigorously for women. The ACWF has started to raise its own money to subsidize its employees and some activities, and is becoming more independent. It has wielded some influence on state policy in the interests of its constituents. In a sense, the ACWF in the reform period has shed its image of a "mouth-piece" of the Party. These changes have taken place gradually and quietly through the 1980s and 1990s. During the process, the ACWF has become a more autonomous association.

Nevertheless, the ACWF is still caught in the same contradictory position which has bedevilled it since its foundation in 1949. The purposes and organizational structure of the ACWF have changed little since its foundation in 1949. The ACWF still has a hierarchical structure, from the national level downwards to township level. The expenses of the ACWF mainly come from the Party-state, though it is allowed to raise its own funds. The ACWF officials are still government employees and its top officials are appointed by the government. When the Party-state tightens its control, usually these officials immediately retreat to their former comfortable zone. If the head of an ACWF branch feels the need to satisfy her boss, namely, the Party-state, she could make the whole branch focus on Party-state's directives rather than women's interests in order to
secure her position.326 This suggests a continuing and considerable dominance of the Party-state. This also explains why the impetus for the ACWF to change mainly comes from the Party-state, instead of the pressure from various interests of women. In addition, in order to exert greater influence on state agencies and sway policy in favour of the members, the ACWF leaders often feel that they need to be more intermeshed with the Party-state. As the director of a WF in Xiaoshan Zhejiang province put it: “To get as close as possible to the city Party committee is exactly what we want for the sake of women’s interests and to improve their status.” 327 This has further compromised the ACWF’s autonomy. The ACWF does not yet represent all social categories of women. It remains a top-down, government-sponsored organization, rather than an independently formed women’s organization. The ACWF functions as an intermediary between the Party-state and women. It possesses limited autonomy and offers no challenge to the state. In a word, the ACWF still does not enjoy the independence and autonomy, the characteristics that are essential to a civil society organization.

Another crucial characteristic of civil society is self-regulation. Although the ACWF has been given greater freedom to set its own agenda, it still does not set its own goals and is not totally free to manage its own affairs. The ACWF has not yet resolved the “dilemma of having to represent the oft-conflicting interests of the party and their constituents.” 328 In altering the focus of its activities and the emphasis on its constituents’ needs, the ACWF still proclaims their adherence to broader national Party interests. Most of its efforts on behalf of women are still undertaken in conjunction with

state policy, and serve the party goals. Carrying out state policies and demands is still a major part of the ACWF's work, as is demonstrated in its preparation for the FWWC. Hence, its self-regulatory power is very limited.

In addition, the ACWF was founded on the initiative of the Party-state, rather than emerging from popular initiative. Its mode of operation still "bears the hallmarks of a 'mobilization' style of participation." Members are more mobilized rather than actively involved. There has been little evidence that members initiate activities, voluntarily raise funds or regularly attend meetings. Membership is still on a mandatory basis, and members have little power of voice and exit. Thus, the voluntary feature of the ACWF is largely compromised.

Although the ACWF remains a top-down rather than a bottom-up organization, it has gained more popularity among Chinese women as a result of its active approach to reach out for women, including the provision of legal counseling booths in the street, telephone hot lines, and training classes. The discussion in previous chapters shows that an increasing number of women are seeking assistance from WFs instead of turning to informal networks like relatives, friends, and company managers. In rural areas, local women's committees set up by WF have gained more credibility and trust among women for dealing with gendered issues. However, the growing number of new independent women's groups, that have the ability to address women's issues more vigorously in an organized effort, constitutes an explicit challenge to the popularity of the ACWF. In addition, many officials in the ACWF are "unwilling to break the umbilical tie with the Party," and "are unwilling or unable to seek greater autonomy from their state

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329 Ibid.
330 White, et.al., 216.
sponsors and assume greater accountability to their members."331 This contributes to the loss of credibility and popularity of these officials in the eyes of the ACWF members.

In conclusion, elements of "civil society" can be found in the ACWF. Nevertheless, these elements are still embryonic judging from the four features of civil society. Then, the question is:

Is it still a "transmission-belt"?

Our discussion centered on the ACWF shows the ACWF remains primarily a "transmission belt," although it no longer works in the same way. During the Mao's period, the ACWF was a one-way "transmission-belt," a vehicle to mobilize women in serving the party goals. In the reform period, the ACWF has had an opportunity to represent the interests of women more effectively in relation to the Party-state. It has broadened its activities, increased its membership, and supported the foundation of new women's groups to further the interests of women. This shows the ACWF now acts more as a two-way channel of communication. While it communicates party policies and goals downwards to women, it has also served as a channel for women to communicate their needs and interests upwards to the policy-makers. Thus, there are more mutual reactions between women and the state, with the ACWF mediating in the middle. The word "mediator"332 introduced by Wang Zheng would be reasonably accurate in describing the position of the ACWF in the Chinese society. As a mediator, it stands closer to the end of a civil society organization than the one-way "transmission-belt."

331 Ibid.
332 Zheng Wang, 6.
Our discussion also demonstrates that the ACWF’s search for a more independent identity reflects its contextualized choices and realities. It has operated within a one-party dominant political environment and sought to respond to the impact of rapid socio-economic changes on its own constituency. The current achievements result from accommodations with the state as much as from resistance to the state. In any case, we could not assess the ACWF by the Western model of civil society which enjoys an open democratic structure and a competitive political system. The ACWF develops its strategies and agenda as it goes along. The advancement of economic reforms will dictate more changes for the ACWF. To what direction will the ACWF move? The next section discusses this question.

5.2 Future Prospects

China’s economic reforms and the political transformation are ongoing processes. It is difficult to visualize their speed and path at present. Clearly, the Chinese Party-state still retains immense power. Under this circumstance, the emerging civil society is relatively weak.

China’s political and economic spheres are in transition. The Party-state is gradually retreating from its omnipresent control over society. According to Wang Zheng, the Party-state has acted as “a leading player in promoting something analogous to civil society,” and has become more accommodating to civil society. At the same time, there have been increasing market forces that “underpin a proliferation of new forms of social organization and maintain a relatively liberal political atmosphere.” Chinese society is gaining more resources and capacities. These two dynamics for civil

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333 Ibid.
society, i.e. retreating Party-state and growing market, are beginning to reinforce each other.  

The local is where the Party-state first loosens and loses control. With the advancement of the economic reforms, the market will continue to expand, and the reach of the Party-state will further shrink and its grasp will weaken. Under this situation, “new combinations of state and society, public and private, would emerge at the most local points of interface.” Moreover, at the local level, township and village enterprises are usually marked for experimentation of new policies and open to changes. It is at this level that “state power is either reassembled or dispersed.” Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic believe that it is at the foundation of “the changing matrix of local/national/global that future elites will coalesce and contend for power.” That will be the time to reconceptualize civil society in China. It could be expected that a more powerful civil society could emerge at the time.

As for the ACWF, the Chinese Party-state has been more accommodating and tolerant to its demands, compared to those of trade unions. The interests of women are complimentary, rather than contradictory, to those of the government. This explains why there are number of women’s groups which function independently from the government control, while no unofficial trade unions are allowed to set up. In this regard, the ACWF has more chances to become a civil society organization.

In the short and medium term, this could involve a growing role for the ACWF as a mediator between the Party-state and its constituents. In the long run, the political and

335 White, et al., 210.
336 Brook and Frolic, 14.
337 Ibid, 15.
338 Ibid.
market dynamics would lead to constant changes of the ACWF. As it accumulates more of its own funds and relies less on the state for financial support, there would be more pressure for a role independent of the Party-state. On the other hand, some would argue that with the continuous political relaxation, the ACWF as well as other Chinese women's groups would grow stronger, and such groups would become important players in advocating women's concerns. It could be expected that the ACWF would develop in the general direction of a better form of civil society: become more autonomous and independent from the Party-state; be more accountable to its constituents who would have voluntary membership and enjoy greater powers of voice. Ultimately, the ACWF would likely cease to be a mediator between the Party-state and women and become a genuine representative of women in relation to the Party-state.

At present, however, the Chinese Party-state, although retreating from a monopolistic control over society, still has enormous power and heavy cultural sanction. As Jude Howell noted, "overall developments in political system and especially leadership attitudes toward political liberalization" 339 are decisive factors for the emergence of a civil society. There is little evidence to show that, at least in the near future, the Chinese Party-state will give way to pluralistic politics and democratization which would nurture a fully-fledged civil society. It appears that the ACWF has to work within the constraints and opportunities of the current political system, and it has done fairly well so far. It is still unclear at this juncture whether the ACWF and other women's groups would present themselves as a civil society organization in the Western sense under a more liberalized political system.

339 Howell, 1996, 139.
5.3 Summary

This thesis explored the transformation of the ACWF during the period of economic reforms and political relaxation from a civil society perspective. This approach has suggested that with the decline of the control capacity of Party-state, social organizations such as the ACWF have gained some independence over their resources. It has also shown the changing society has created strong forces that drive the evolution of the ACWF. It is evident that the ACWF has evolved from a one-way “transmission-belt” to a two-way communication channel between the state and the women and has taken on features of a civil society organization. However, it remains to be seen whether it will become a fully-fledged civil society.
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