25 Years of Feminist NGOs in China: Reflections on Neoliberalism and its Resistances

Sharon R. Wesoky

Arthur E. Braun Professor of Political Science,
Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

This article traces the development of post-Mao independent women's organizing in China, especially through the evolution of the concept of the non-governmental organization (NGO) and the (de) politicization of feminist organizing. In the 1980s and 1990s, new women's organizations were founded in China, creating a vibrant community of feminist researchers and activists that existed alongside, and often in cooperation with, the Party-state. As "gender" emerged as a sphere of critique of post-Mao inequalities, much of this organizing demonstrated tensions between creating collective concepts of women's liberation and promoting women's individualistic selfhood. This contributed to elements of women's organizing being compatible with neoliberal, privatized, "depoliticized" modes of governance, and thus continued de facto gender discrimination in China's political and economic realms.

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Just prior to Spring Festival in 2016, after over 20 years of providing legal services to victims of gender discrimination, the Zhongze Women's Legal Counseling Service Center（眾澤婦女律資訊服務中心）, founded by award-winning lawyer Guo Jianmei（郭建梅）, announced in a WeChat message that it had been ordered to close by the "relevant authorities"（Cao 2016）. About a year later, the regime closed down the popular Weibo account of the group Feminist Voice（女權之聲）for 30 days（Beach 2017）, though it was revived after this closure. Both of these events are part of the Xi Jinping（習近平）regime's overall suppression of Chinese non-governmental organizations, especially those receiving foreign funding, and a general diminishment of China's fragile post-Mao civil society. The closure of these women's groups is especially striking given their close ties and even accommodating treatment in recent decades by the Chinese Communist party-state, which is explicitly committed to promoting gender equality.

In this article, I look at the evolution of independent feminist organizing in China, and the ways that it has undergone periods of politicization, de-politicization and pragmatism, and re-politicization in response to its complex relationship with the Chinese party-state. The centrality of "NGOs"—as a conceptual frame and as an identity category—for post-Mao Chinese feminism is a core issue in relation to its complex relationship with the party-state but also turns back on itself to compromise the movement's achievements due to the ultimate imbrication of "nongovernmentalism" and "neoliberalism." In other words, those seeking to engage in "nongovernmental" activism in China in some ways inescapably end up acting in concert with the statist program of neoliberal privatization and individualization of social responsibility. Chinese feminist efforts to establish a legitimate and lawful space of autonomous activism ultimately founder on the shoals both of authoritarian power and neoliberal, market-oriented ideologies and practices, which on the surface seem opposed but are actually quite compatible. The *politicization* of Chinese feminism has thus in the end led to its *depoliticization*.

I use the term "depoliticization" in two primary senses. First, in almost all spheres the balance of power and discursive authority between state, collective, community, and individual almost always means the rhetorical victory of individualism over community-oriented and collective action alongside the de facto victory of statist power. Second, social problems become issues to be resolved through modes of technocratic governance and self-help rather than questions of altering the relations of power. These notions go hand in hand with "privatization"—the ways that various aspects of life that used to be socialized in their provision are increasingly left up to individuals who must of necessity be focused on "private accumulation and self-interest—expressed in profit making, entrepreneurialism, and self-promotion"（Ong and Zhang 2008, 1）. This process is a result of the increasing "neoliberal" character of China. While "neoliberalism" is most frequently used by scholars

and intellectuals critiquing the logic of market hegemony in the West, numerous scholars both in the West and in China find "neoliberalism" to be an apt term to describe (and often critique) China's current socio-political configuration. ① These observers indeed often note the mutability of neoliberalism's forms across diverse political and cultural systems while also insisting on its validity as a category of analysis for China, although there are some who do critique its applicability to the Chinese context. Here, I especially draw on the ways that Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang elaborate on how neoliberalism operates in the Chinese context and closely connect it to the aforementioned notion of "privatization." Ong and Zhang especially examine neoliberalism as a number of characteristics: (1) "a set of techniques that optimize economic gains by priming the powers of the private self," (2) "a mode of governing subjects that mobilizes their individual capacities for self-government," and (3) in the Chinese case as "a mix of self-governing and socialist governing at a distance" (Ong and Zhang 2008, 3-4).

Two decades ago, in the time leading up to and following the 1995 hosting in Beijing of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), Chinese feminist activism was developing on a knife's edge between politicization and depoliticization, a necessary tactic for feminist activists who truly sought to create new forms of feminist thinking and organizing in reform-era China. To be sure, feminists in China are brave, committed, and energetic activists who have creatively used their local connections and global discursive and financial resources to promote their work on behalf of women in all walks of life, even while facing ever-changing political restrictions and structural constraints on their work. While the FWCW succeeded in opening up new activist and discursive spaces, these spaces also in the end merged with the overall depoliticized character of public discourse. Thus, privatized and individualized feminist activism has proved ineffective against various new and revived forms of gender discrimination in China. In this paper, I trace the causes and consequences of this *depoliticized neoliberalization* of Chinese feminism.

In the paper that follows, I will discuss this process through answering the following questions. First, why and how was feminism in China "depoliticized"? The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of an important autonomous (or quasi-autonomous) sphere for feminist thought and organizing, culminating in China hosting the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and its concomitant NGO Forum; these new formations created a space for critique,

註① For instance, Chinese thinker Wang Hui (2004) identifies Chinese neoliberalism as emerging in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square student movement, and thus as a direct outgrowth of particular dynamics in state-society relations. For more on the gendered aspects of Chinese neoliberalism, see Rofel 2007. Meanwhile, Bernal and Grewal (2014) examine the various ways that neoliberalism has blunted though not totally erased the potentiality for feminist activism in "NGO" settings.

but in a distinctive relationship to the Chinese Communist Party. Second, what did the new Chinese NGOs really look like in terms of practical activism, and how did this relate to their critical potential? The quite worthy work of the hotlines, research, and "training" activities that these NGOs pursued was also quite compatible in the end with the "privatization" and thus neoliberalization of women's issues; indeed, even as they critiqued, for instance, discourses on women's low *suzhi*（素質）or "quality," they also at the same time instantiated these discourses in their own programs. Third, what effects did such privatization have on feminism in China and its larger relationship to critical discourses? Chinese New Left intellectual Wang Hui argues that we are living in an era of "depoliticized politics, from East to West"（Wang 2009）; one consequence of this depoliticization is the further marginalization of Chinese women. And, finally, what are the consequences of these processes of privatization and neoliberalization for China today? How does the individualization of the self as well as the political *invert* the idea of the social totality in 21st century China, where instead of individuals acting on behalf of the social whole in Maoist mass movements the power of the state is rather acted through their daily and atomized conduct? How is this mode of power ironically more effective than it ever was in Maoist aspirations toward communism, as it operates through the illusions of individual "freedoms"?

I. Why and How was Feminism（De）Politicized?

Feminism has a long history of interconnections with the Chinese Communist Party and indeed with larger questions of China's path to modernity. The "woman question" was central for male intellectual figures as well as pathbreaking female activists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They promoted the liberation of women as a central component in China's reckonings with Westernization and modernization, even while for much of the 20th century this question was often subordinated to the imperatives of nation-building and class politics while the Chinese Communist Party battled the Japanese and the Nationalists to take power. ② After Liberation, whilst the CCP was rhetorically committed to gender equality, women were asked to take on a posture of "self-sacrifice," in Gail Hershatter's terminology（2007, 97）, with respect to realizing the socialist and nationalist revolutions.

After the Mao era, "women hold up half the sky" state-led emphasis on gender sameness, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a more independent women's movement,

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註② For more on this, see, e.g., Barlow 2004; Hershatter 2007; Judge 2008; Liu 2013; Rofel 1999; Wang 1999; L. Wang 2010.

beginning with "women's studies" and then moving into more concrete realms. This expanded space for feminist organizing emphasized more autonomous manifestations of feminist activism as well as more individualist expressions of female identity. For instance, Li Xiaojiang (李小江), perhaps the most important founder of this first wave of post-Mao women's studies and feminist thought, was the leading proponent of a movement to reclaim women's subjectivity and individual personhood, what she sometimes termed "female consciousness," from the grip of state-promoted "male-female equality." ③ The potentiality under the emergence of the market in China for more "privatized" identity forms allowed for wider feminist activism, but activism which also allowed a certain "collusion" between feminism, the state, and the market economy (Wang 2010, 31-32); indeed, Li Xiaojiang's emphasis on "personal/*geren* (個人) revolution" proved to be quite compatible with "the Chinese government's call to its people to govern their own affairs" (Xu 2009, 210).

At the same time, marketization and the retreat of the state were also contributing to renewed discrimination against women in various spheres of life, and Li Xiaojiang's academic explorations of the "woman question" coincided with the emergence, beginning in the late 1980s, of new women's organizations to complement the work done by the quasi-official level All-China Women's Federation, one of the three "mass organizations" under the leadership of the CCP. ④ So, for instance, in Beijing the independent Women's Research Institute was established in 1988 and this organization created a Women's Hotline in 1992. The Hotline's goal, in the words of its founder Wang Xingjuan (王行娟), was to "help women adjust themselves to the changing times, build a new mental support system, and to become victors in social competition and promoters of social progress" (quoted in Wesoky 2002, 72). This message was not at all out of line with the Women's Federation's program of the "four selves" (self-respect, self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-improvement) meant to promote women's self-development in the new, competitive, market-oriented Chinese economy. We can thus already see the alignment of feminist concerns in early reform-era China with individualist visions of female subjectivity and personhood and thus their potential compatibility with neoliberal forms of subjectivity as well.

The Women's Research Institute/Women's Hotline was one of a series of new foundings of women's "popular" or *minjian* (民間) organizations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a result of multiple factors including increased social space due to the marketizing reforms and state withdrawal from many spheres, acknowledgements of the problems many women were

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註③ E.g., Wang 1999, 22. For more on Li Xiaojiang's feminist thought, see, e.g., Barlow 2004; Rofel 2007; Shih 2005; Spakowski 2011. In her own words, see, e.g., Li 1994; Li 1999; Li 2000.

註④ These groups were never wholly "independent" of the state, but I use the terminology here to denote organizations that were autonomously founded and organized even as they maintained close relations with the party-state.

facing, the dissemination of foreign feminist discourses, and the availability of funding through the entry of foreign organizations such as the Ford Foundation（Wesoky 2002; Zhang and Hsiung 2010）. These organizations were careful to maintain their "nonpolitical" stance in terms of their desire to work *with* rather than against, the CCP and its Women's Federation, and yet at the same time they were pushing against certain discursive and organizational frontiers in the China of this period. They introduced new terms and discourses, such as "sexual harassment" and "domestic violence," indicating increased awareness of the complexities of gendered social patterns（Milwertz and Bu 2007; Milwertz and Wang 2011; Z. Wang 2010）. They promoted women's political participation at a time when women were increasingly marginalized in the official structures of the PRC（Edwards 2007）. And they began to create a collective feminist identity that acknowledged limitations in the CCP's approach to "women's" liberation" and emphasized the need for women's own "empowerment" to truly promote women's emancipation（Wang and Zhang 2010）.

These foundings coincided with Beijing's preparations to host the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, a gathering that was to include an official, governmental-level meeting and a parallel NGO Forum. At first the Chinese government seemed untroubled by this fact, planning to host the NGO Forum at a site near central Beijing; it also generally took the stance of embracing the new women's organizations as manifestations of the fact that China, too, had "NGOs" to participate in the NGO Forum. But then Chinese Premier Li Peng（李鵬）attended a similar NGO meeting, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995 and was confronted by critics of China's human rights record. Subsequently, rumors swirled that the NGO Forum would feature foreign prostitutes flooding into Beijing, and foreign activists demonstrating in the nude in Tiananmen Square, an extra-sensitive space after the massive demonstrations there in spring 1989 were violently crushed by the state on June 4th. "Non-governmental organization" thus came to be conflated with "anti-governmental" forces. So, suddenly, just six months before the conference, the Chinese government decided to move the NGO Forum to Huairou, a distant suburb more than 30 miles from central Beijing. Despite the Forum occurring in hastily constructed buildings and tents in muddy fields, it was regarded as largely a "success" by both the Chinese party-state and the Chinese women's NGOs. ⑤ In the words of Wang Zheng,

> Even before the adjournment of the official conference, the Chinese government leaders' paranoia had already subsided. The NGO forum ended without incident. There was no demonstration against the Chinese government;

註⑤ More on this tale can be found in Wesoky 2002; see also Wang 1996.

> instead, there were demonstrations against American imperialists! China was obviously not the target of attack, much to the relief of Chinese leaders. They realized that most women from abroad were not coming to discuss China's problems at all. On the side of Chinese participants, there were no troublemakers…With their skillful performance, Chinese participants showed the state that women were not an oppositional force against the government (Wang 1996, 197-198).

Thus, Chinese feminism at this moment weathered the brief storm of "politicization" due to the success of the women's conference and the Chinese government's brief emergence from its solipsistic trance to realize that not everything is directed at its own power and position. The collective aspects of activism in this period were evidenced in the emergence of a vibrant feminist *community* of researchers and activists, along with the ways that many of these NGOs engaged in cooperative projects with the more official-level Women's Federation. Yet, this period already featured certain tensions between affirming women's own individual (and individualist) subjectivities and the acknowledgement of the value and need for continued statist interventions in feminist concerns.

II. What were the Effects of Depoliticization on Practical Feminist Activism?

Following the general success of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Chinese women's organizations were thus able to continue and expand their activities into the early 2000s. Much of the discourses as well as the material resources shaping this period of Chinese women's organizing derived from China's "connecting the tracks" with international organizations, at the United Nations level as well as in the nongovernmental sphere. ⑥ Lin Chun, a Chinese feminist political philosopher, conjectured at the dawn of the new century that new modes of participation under a globalized and marketized socialism defined a "realm, where women's rights are fought through community support, public deliberation, and grassroots movements, and gender norms are exposed, contested, and transformed" (Lin 2001, 1285). This hope for collective activism manifested in forms such as hotlines, training and research programs, legal aid centers, and networks dealing with specific issues such as domestic violence. These "projects" both created greater discursive and organizational practice for gender politics, and they emphasized the central role for NGOs in this politics;

註⑥ For an overview of organizing in this period, see, e.g., Wang and Zhang 2010, Zhang and Hsiung 2010 and Wang 2017.

both of these developments offered an implicit challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's analytical and organizational frameworks. Acknowledging "gender" as a system of social stratification moves beyond the contemporary paradox of the Party's historical tendency to have a one-dimensional emphasis on "class" as a source of inequality and struggle, but also the contemporary situation of "class" being a taboo subject in neoliberal, "postsocialist China." As Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang（2010, 66-67）note:

> As neoliberalism has risen to replace socialism as the dominant political discourse of postsocialist China, no legitimate language exists to express concerns for social justice and equality without suggesting a "backward" identification with a Maoist past. When freedom of association is granted only to select social groups by the state, embracing "gender" functions both as a feminist effort to maintain and promote the value of social justice in the capitalist economy and a feminist evasion of more sensitive issues such as class inequality.

At the same time, NGOs allow for self-initiated forms of social organization not dependent on statist authority.

For one example, allow me to briefly examine the organization *Nongjianü*, or "Rural Women," which began as *Nongjianü Baishitong*（農家女百事通）, "Rural Women Knowing All," an organization that sought the "empowerment" of the more than half of all Chinese women originating from the countryside, and including both those continuing to reside there and also those who entered the cities as part of China's vast process of internal migration that began under the reforms. This population is important not only in relation to its vast size, but also due to the various factors contributing to its social, economic, and cultural marginalization; these factors include China's urbanist and modernist *telos* in its developmentalist philosophy, as well as the very materialist dynamics of rural women's higher rates of poverty and illiteracy. ⑦

Nongjianü began as a Ford Foundation-sponsored magazine in 1993, intended as a forum for the "subaltern voices" of the women of China's countryside（Wesoky 2009）. The magazine featured not only practical agricultural advice but also material on legal consciousness and political participation. Its activities, based in Beijing but with projects in several provinces, later expanded to feature a job-skills training center, a club for migrant women, and rural women's political leadership training. Its projects and discourses sought to value rural living as well as rural women's *lives,* in some cases quite literally due to the organization's attention to the often-taboo issue of the high rate of rural women's suicides. The intent for all of its projects were "aimed at creating opportunities for self-empowerment

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註⑦　For more on rural women in post-Mao China, see, e.g. Jacka and Sargeson 2011.

and development together with rural women"—"In all our activities we seek to advocate awareness of gender and citizenship, and we aspire to maintain a dedication to openness, democracy and participation in all our work" (quoted in Wesoky 2011, 194).

Thus, in intent, *Nongjianü* was interested in creating a *collective identity* for rural women despite the multitudinous ways that they are culturally, economically, and socially isolated from one another. *Nongjianü*'s overall vision indeed drew on discourses from the global feminist movement regarding the role of NGOs in "empowering" women but it also created a syncretic discourse regarding the roads to such empowerment that employed Confucian humanist notions of filiality and benevolent compassion, alongside calls for continued statist action on behalf of women's rights. ⑧ *Nongjianü*'s projects, for instance for increasing women's political participation, indeed aimed at "empowering" women beyond just the economic-participation-driven focus of much of Chinese life for the past 30 years, seeking, among other things, to challenge local gendered power dynamics, to collaborate with the Women's Federation and local governments in empowering rural women, and to utilize new forms of media (including the internet, blogging, and social media) in promoting greater social awareness of the conditions of rural women's lives. Yet the outcome of *Nongjianü*'s approach rested in many ways on advancing primarily individualized conceptions of selfhood. It has often promoted "gender training," a common approach of many NGOs in China in the post-women's conference milieu. ⑨ This idea of "training," while often useful in creating greater awareness for the trainees of gendered social dynamics, or in granting women new job skills, is ultimately rooted in *both* Confucian notions of self-cultivation *and* neoliberal conceptions of "governmentality" of the self. For instance, the organization frequently promoted the development of rural women's "self-confidence"; on the one hand, this is an absolutely useful approach to "empowering" a marginalized population, but on the other, it does not even begin to address the deep structural causes of that marginalization. In the reform area, a prevalent social discourse has been that of *suzhi* or "quality" as an explanation for China's and especially Chinese women's poverty, and a prescription for promoting Chinese social development through the cultivation of better "quality" citizens (e.g., Judd 2002). *Nongjianü*'s intent in its discussions of *suzhi* was often to intervene through proving by example the speciousness of the "low quality" discourses about especially rural women. So, for instance, when a young woman can write in the pages of *Rural Women* magazine that, due to participation in a rural women's correspondent's conference sponsored by the magazine in 1996,

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註⑧ This syncretism is discussed extensively in Wesoky 2009.

註⑨ For more on the importance of "gender training" in recent Chinese feminist NGO activity, see Wang and Zhang 2010 and Zhang and Hsiung 2010.

> I have separated myself from the sea of woes, and again *gained my own freedom*—I want to stand up, surmount all kinds of difficulty, rely on doing all I can to work hard, self-cultivate and *rely on myself* (Nongjianü Baishitong 1996; italics added)

this was both an inspiring and a depressing indication of the "individualization" of Chinese society and that even feminist activism seems to rest largely on empowerment of the "self." Many scholars, including Ann Anagnost (2004), Tamara Jacka (2009), and Yan Hairong (2003) demonstrate clear connections between the notion of *suzhi* and all of its attendant emphases on individual self-development and neoliberal economic, social, and political formations. *Nongjianü* is thus, though perhaps unwittingly, reproducing the *effects* of the *suzhi* discourses even as the magazine and organization sometimes critiqued the notion of *suzhi* as blaming women for their own problems. This has the ultimate effect of *individualizing* and *privatizing* feminist politics.

III. What Effect did Neoliberalization have on Critical Discourses and on Feminism?

As I discuss above, a prominent scholar of Chinese feminism, Wang Zheng, along with her coauthor Ying Zhang, has argued that feminist politics serve as a useful site for critiques of inequalities resulting from China's reform processes in a context where class is ironically a taboo category for reasons both of the socialist past and the neoliberal present. Discourses about "gender" allow for social justice concerns to remain part of critical intellectual as well as social activist discourse. At the same time, "gender" has itself been a complicated concept in the Chinese context in the past three decades. As I've noted already, while the popularization of "gender analysis" among Chinese feminist activists in the years following the UN Fourth World Conference on Women gave them new tools to analyze inequality in the Chinese context, the reclaiming of "women's subjectivity" in many cases has meant promoting women's "individual development." For instance, as I consider above, the important feminist theorist Li Xiaojiang emphasized a revived emphasis on women's own individual subjectivity, and so in the late 1990s she wrote,

> The *search for the self* was the real starting point from which Chinese women began to reflect on themselves from an active subject-position. Women's self-recognition was Chinese women's manifesto of rational awakening. To *disentangle women's 'self'* from the midst of "men and women are alike"; to retrieve women's

> experiences from the world of discourse constructed by men—these steps are unprecedented in the history of China（Li 1999, 272; italics added）.

However, Li's individualist emphasis has not gone uncontested. Another noted theorist, Dai Jinhua（戴錦華）, has tended to adopt a much more anti-capitalist approach to the consumerist culture, that now characterizes China, seeing this as among other things as "the beginning of the reconstruction of the patriarchal order"（Dai 2001, 178）. Dai in fact has echoed the views of Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang on the functions that gender can provide as an avenue of critique in postsocialist China, writing that

> By exposing and writing about the reality of class divisions and the hardships experienced by the lower classes, intellectuals who take the position of struggling against or criticizing society run the risk of breaking the political taboos imposed by the strictly controlled ideology...For these reasons, statements on class division became invisible writings everywhere in Chinese society during the 1990s and occasionally relied on different methods of cultural transference. The topics of gender and women have become one of the important ways of doing this, highlighting and concealing the existence of class reality.（Dai 2004, 297）.

These debates between what Tani Barlow（2004）terms the "market feminism" of Li Xiaojiang and the "poststructuralist Marxist feminism" of Dai Jinhua are connected to the broader intellectual debates in China between what are often termed the "New Confucians", the "New Liberals", and the "New Left." Yet, both the activist and the theoretical work of Chinese feminists is largely ignored by these male-dominated movements in intellectual criticism, and thus the "woman question" is removed from wider considerations of the question of "Whither China?", including in its moments where it offers critiques of neoliberalism, especially in the work of "New Left" thinker Wang Hui（汪暉）. This is in contrast with the early 20th century, when feminist issues were central to wider imaginings of "Chinese modernity," and which contributed to the Chinese Communist Party taking on feminist concerns as part of its agenda to transform China, however problematic the implementation of that agenda turned out to be.

The post-Mao feminist moves that I discuss above, including stressing the reclaiming of female subjectivity and femininity, the disavowing of the "political" character of NGO activism, the promoting of "gender training" and women's "self-confidence," and engaging in foreign foundation-funded NGO activism, have ultimately contributed to the creation of a "neoliberal" feminism in China, one that is thoroughly though perhaps unintentionally consistent with the "self-enterprising subject" native to "privatizing China" and its "socialism from afar." As Ong and Zhang note,

> The adoption of neoliberal reasoning has made possible a kind of socialism at a distance, in which privatizing norms and practices proliferate in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule. We argue that postsocialism in China denotes a reanimation of state socialism realized through a strategy of ruling from afar. Citizens gain increased latitude to pursue self-interests that are at the same time variously regulated or controlled by the party-state（Ong and Zhang 2008, 4）.

Maoist strategies of control have been replaced by privatized self-control as well as “nongovernmental” provision of social services and satisfaction of social needs, refracted in the case of gender through the discursive lens of “women’s nongovernmental organizations.” In the end, the autonomous feminism that emerged in China in relation to the Fourth World Conference on Women becomes a part of the “depoliticized” realm that New Left theorist Wang Hui argues characterizes “politics” not only in China, but also in the West:

> Over the past thirty years, their structural, internal and historical differences notwithstanding, both China and the West have been caught within a current of depoliticization. In contemporary China the space for political debate has largely been eliminated. The party is no longer an organization with specific political values, but a mechanism of power（Wang 2009, 6）.

Thus, for instance, NGOs providing social services and “empowering” women’s individual subjectivity ultimately become part of the larger configuration of private freedoms becoming individualized responsibilities, which ironically reinforces rather than diminishes statist power.

IV. What are the Consequences of Chinese Neoliberalism for Feminist Organizing Today?

Chinese feminists are of course all too aware of revived patriarchies in their country, and much contemporary activism, in the spaces that can be found for it, centers on the many ways women’s status is declining in the 21st century. Much of this regression can in fact be measured in the same sorts of spaces that Ong and Zhang term the “new social” as they discuss “privatized China,” with “individualization” meaning an expansion of “private responsibility” rather than of “liberal individualism, or Western values or individual rights.” This

> post-Tiananmen biopolitics requires a new kind of ethical training in order for self-promoting subjects to manage their lives through the pursuit of private interest, but within political limits set by authoritarian rule (Ong and Zhang 2008, 15-16).

The following examples of recent feminist organizational efforts show some of the challenges that women face in managing their lives through such privatized channels.

Women have *not* fared well in the "new social"; in many of the areas where we might hope that the "self-promoting" female subject could at least pursue her "private interest" in contemporary China, women in fact have not experienced "empowerment" by any measure, despite the many efforts of Chinese feminist NGOs to promote such. For instance, in 1990, 77.4% of urban, working-age women had jobs; in 2010 it was just 60.8% (Fincher 2013). These women's incomes also declined from being 77.5% of that of their male counterparts in 1990, to 67.3% in 2010 (Yang 2015). These declining employment and earnings prospects for women come in the same time frame that they came to represent over 51% of college graduates by 2012, an increase from only 37% in 1999 and of course a trend opposing the increasing male dominance in the country's sex ratio overall (Wang 2017, 174). Meanwhile, in what may be the biggest accumulation of residential property wealth in history as the private Chinese real estate market has boomed, and where real estate is most people's primary source of wealth, 51.7% of married men have homes in their own names, as opposed to only 13.3% of women (Fincher 2014, 45-46). Over 70% of women contribute to marital-home purchases, but only 30% of marital-home deeds include the woman's name (The Economist 2013). Other signs of retrogression in women's status include revived elitist and newly consumerist approaches to the traditional *zuoyue* (坐月), the postpartum month of confinement (Morris 2013), and the total absence of women once again in the highest stratum of China's leadership following the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, reflecting the general "glass ceiling" women still face politically in China (BBC News 2017).

The literal dearth of women in positions of political influence may not be solely or even primarily caused by neoliberal "depoliticization," yet these setbacks for women's status coming on the heels of an expanded feminist NGO sector would seem to indicate that depoliticizing women's issues does not necessarily contribute to changing the cultural and structural factors that ultimately cause them causing them. They do occur as "gender discourse" in China shifts, in the words of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences scholar Wu Xiaoying, from the Mao-era's "pan-politicization" to the reform era's"de-politicized" mode of "pan-marketization," a "kind of quality discourse consisting of two parts: competitive ability based on individualism and the physical consumer symbol based on women's special role in the relationship between the sexes" (Wu 2010, 161-162).

At the same time, new constraints emerge on any sort of political or civil society

activism, including new legislation regulating both domestic and international non-governmental organizations. These clampdowns have affected a new generation of feminist organizers even as feminists spent so many years seeking to minimize the political ramifications of their work. At the same time as the state was acknowledging some continued commitment to gender equality by deliberating a new anti-domestic violence law, which passed in 2016, a group of activists who came to be known as the "Feminist Five" were detained in March of 2015 in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou for allegedly planning to campaign on public transportation against sexual harassment; one anonymous Beijing activist termed these detainees "the core strength of the women's activist movement" (Wong 2015). Occurring right before a key Communist Party meeting in Beijing, the sort of time when the leadership especially fears "instability," these were the first activists ever actually detained for promoting women's rights, which indicates the "politicization," or "repoliticization," of feminist issues.

The "Feminist Five" were of a younger generation than the NGO activists of the 1990s and early 2000s, and more explicitly critical of patriarchy and Chinese authoritarianism. A leading member of this group Li Tingting (李婷婷) has noted "We don't educate people to chase their dreams; we just need to make more money. In China, we're just chasing GDP." While generally resource-poor, these younger feminists have engaged in creative social media and public performance modes of activism, along with a revival of a more "political" translation of "feminism," *nüquanzhuyi* (女權主義) (Wang 2017, 175-177). ⑩ In 2012, Li was treated to a fancy banquet to dissuade her from activism after her leading "Occupy Men's Room" protests for "toilet parity"; her father was also treated to a banquet by "stability maintenance" officers, and told she could have a job with the Women's Federation if she stopped her activism (Fish 2015). When they were detained in 2015 and following a transnational social media campaign on their behalf , the activists were later released on bail but are still subject to harassment and may still face future charges of "picking quarrels and causing a disturbance" (Fincher 2016). This charge is itself a broad one, which legally applies to public conduct but in its application covering the sorts of "political limits" on all sorts of potentially private behavior that Ong and Zhang note to be part of contemporary Chinese neoliberalism (Daum 2014).

The treatment and detention of these feminists is part of a wide crackdown on activism under the rule of Xi Jinping, whose "China Dream" slogan Hong Kong writer Chang Ping characterizes as "a 'Dream of a Patriarchal Empire', in the way it exhorts women to promote

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註⑩ Previous women's activists have tended to favor *nüxingzhuyi* (女性主義), as a translation for "feminism," seeing it as more related to being "feminine" and gender as a social construct. *Nüquanzhuyi* invokes both "power" and "rights" and is thus much more politically significant.

family virtues and cultivate good family traditions” (Chang 2015). Such a vision merges traditional Chinese cultural norms with neoliberal emphases on privatized responsibility for maintaining social order; it is evident in how the authorities sought to pressure not just Li Tingting but also her father. A few other aspects of this case are important in relation to understanding NGO activism in China today. Some believe that these women were detained because of their association with Yirenping (益仁平), an NGO founded in 2006 to "promote public health, eliminate discrimination, and defend the right of disadvantaged groups through legal means,” and engaging in anti-discrimination lawsuits against the government on behalf of those with HIV and Hepatitis B, women, and the disabled (BBC News 2015). Thus, the state’s distrust of Li Tingting’s feminist activism cannot be disconnected from her NGO activities at a time of closing space for civil society organizations. At the same time, pressure placed on Li Tingting and her father is an example of a novel way of controlling activists, which Chengdu political scientist Yanhua Deng and his co-author Kevin O’Brien term “relational repression,” which combines social power with state power to “preserve social order.”

> By filtering pressure through people the state has influence over, and then expecting them to be the familiar, friendly face that persuades a protester to give up an “inadvisable” course of action, social power is combined with state power. Putting the onus of “soft violence” on individuals whom protesters are related to, know, or at least share a hometown with, blurs the origins of repression, shields the state from owning up to its authoritarian impulses, and—when it succeeds—diminishes the need to rely on naked coercion. (Deng and O’Brien 2013, 549).

Feminists in China, while still seeking agency, are thus now the casualties of “socialism from afar,” of the complex ways that power pervades the social order under Chinese neoliberalism.

V. Conclusions

This paper seeks to briefly trace the interactions of party-state power and feminist agency in China for the past quarter-century in order to understand the ways that powerfully well-meaning and generous feminist non-governmental organizing formed part of neoliberal trends in refining how the party-state exerts power. Promoting individual female subjectivity and “empowerment” was both an essential aspect of post-Mao-era feminist thought and activism, but also proved to be quite compatible with statist withdrawal and the shift of social responsibility onto individuals and families. Today, as the Xi Jinping regime continues its repression of civil society, it occurs in a newly privatized social realm, where citizens can

neither rely on the state for provision of basic services nor count on the ability to freely organize to demand their basic rights. Groups like the Feminist Five are seeking to find new, creative modes of dealing with these circumstances; whether they can continue to do so remains to be seen.

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中國女權主義非政府組織 25 年：對新自由主義及其阻力的思考

Sharon R. Wesoky
（美國阿勒格尼學院 Arthur E. Braun 政治學教授）

摘 要

本文主要透過「非政府組織」概念的演變和女權主義組織的「『非』政治化」（（de）politicization）的演變來追溯後毛澤東時代獨立女性組織的發展。在 20 世紀 80 年代和 90 年代，新的女性組織於中國成立，創建了一個充滿活力、黨國共存、並經常與其合作的之女權主義研究者與社會運動者社群。隨著「性別」成為後毛澤東時代對不平等展開批判的主題，這些社群中產生對於創造整體女性解放的概念、與促進個體女性自主之間的緊張局勢。這造成這些組織成分的發展與新自由主義、私有化、治理的「非政治化」模式相通，且因此在中國政治和經濟領域中，繼續接受實際上的性別歧視。

關鍵詞：女權主義、性別、新自由主義、非政府組織

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