Interacting with the State

The Success and Vulnerability of the Feminist Movement in China

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Although social movements generally face suppression in non-democratic states, the dynamics of the feminist movement in China demonstrate how civil society groups may develop in an authoritarian state by utilizing the government’s agenda for their own goals. In the 1990s and 2000s, Chinese feminists seized opportunities to receive foreign funds, establish organizations, and develop a variety of programs on issues such as domestic violence and marginalized women’s empowerment. Activists’ aims dovetailed with the government’s goal of integrating into the international community. Nevertheless, the success of this tactic does not eliminate the vulnerability of movements when the state decides to reverse its tolerance of civil society groups.

As feminism became a politically sensitive issue in China in recent years, government harassment of progressive activists increased, and many programs were suspended under political pressure. Two major causes for these setbacks are as follows: First, the connections between the Chinese feminist movement and the government have diminished because prior activists have aged out and the younger generation has tended to be too progressive for the authorities. Second, the current Xi administration prefers conservative values and tends to revoke the political space for civil activism. As a double-edged sword, the interactive relationship between the state and Chinese feminists contributed to the initial success of the movement but also shaped the movement’s limitations.

Chinese feminists often refer to the 1995 World Conference on Women (WCW) as the start of contemporary feminist activism in China. The conference’s traditional appendant event, the non-governmental organizations’ (NGO) forum, boasted participants from feminist organizations across the world whose numbers exceeded those of the core meeting. Unlike their foreign peers who were more familiar with social movements, Chinese participants — including scholars from public universities, journalists from state-owned media firms, and clerks at the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF, an organization representing the Chinese Communist Party to deal with women-related issues but claiming itself as a NGO) — had promoted women’s rights only within the Leninist
At this forum, events such as demonstrations and bazaars provided unprecedented exposure to these women’s rights professionals and inspired them to see civil activism as a means to improve gender equality.

As the memory of the 1989 students’ protest was still fresh, and Chinese officials had no experience with NGOs, the authorities were concerned that the forum might cause political friction; however, they eventually allowed it in order to avoid giving the international community a negative impression of China. The officials decided to relocate the forum to the outskirts of Beijing, where it would engender fewer political risks if it triggered unrest. The Chinese government did not cancel the forum because the 1995 WCW symbolized much more than a women’s rights event. Since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, the international community had isolated China due to the regime’s civil rights abuses. To break this isolation, in 1992, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping went on his famous Southern Tour during which he claimed that the Communist Party should insist on the policy of opening up to international economy for a hundred years. As Deng signaled the future direction of China, the party-state waited to see if the international community, particularly the U.S., would resume diplomatic and economic relations with the regime. Therefore, because the 1995 WCW was the first global-level intergovernmental event that China hosted after 1989, the Chinese government begrudgingly allowed the NGO forum even though the event held some level of political and social uncertainty.

The 1995 WCW led to significant American re-engagement with China, provided a progressive image of the Chinese government, and aided in the eventual development of the Chinese feminist movement. U.S. First Lady Hillary Clinton attended the conference and gave a landmark speech in feminist history, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights.” Her appearance was the first instance of a high-ranking U.S. political figure endorsing a public event in China after the Tiananmen Massacre. Her trip also prefaced President Bill Clinton’s 1998 visit to China. In this case, the 1995 WCW marked a significant diplomatic breakthrough for the Chinese government. Echoing Hillary Clinton’s speech, Chinese President Jiang Zemin announced gender equality as a basic national policy of China at the conference. This announcement not only lent the Chinese government a progressive image, but also legitimized the later emergence and development of the Chinese feminist movement. This policy became the basis of interaction between the feminist movement and the government in China.

Beyond legitimacy, the 1995 WCW introduced critical resources for the Chinese feminist movement and civil society groups through the governmental approval for NGOs and foreign foundation support. In the wake of the conference, the authorities allowed NGOs and foreign foundations to support programs in China. Women’s rights professionals,

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1 Sipan Li, “中国版女权：从启蒙到自觉” [Chinese Version of Feminism: From Enlightenment to Self-Consciousness], Boke Tianxia, February 9, 2015.
2 Ibid.
inspired by activism and having established connections with foreign foundations at the NGO forum, became the first group of beneficiaries.\(^5\) They established approximately a dozen women’s rights NGOs, which were the majority of the first pack of officially-recognized NGOs supported by foreign funds. This policy-loosening also served as a prerequisite for the later birth and growth of China’s civil society beyond the feminist movement. A substantial component of Chinese civil society were the rights-advocacy organizations that emerged in the 2000s, such as the Open Constitution Initiative, which provides legal aid, the Beijing Yirenping Center, which combats multiple sources of discrimination, and the Transition Institute, an independent think tank. Since rights-advocacy NGOs could not raise funds within the country because of political sensitivity, most of them depended on funding from foreign organizations. The amount of NGO funding from foreign sources remains unknown, but it clearly had significant influence on Chinese civil society, as evidenced by the 2016 introduction of the Foreign NGO Law which allows authorities to punish NGOs for the acceptance of foreign funds.

The background of the first group of Chinese women’s rights NGOs determined their low-profile but effective approach to activism. This approach, however, suggests the founders’ lack of confidence in the durability of NGOs in the authoritarian state. The founders of these organizations tended to have various types of relations with the government, and they often collaborated with the ACWF on issues such as domestic violence, rural women’s rights, and providing services for migrant female workers. For example, Liang Jun, a former professor of the Women Officials College of Henan Province, took advantage of her extensive network among local female officials and established the Henan Community Education Research Center. Collaborating with the Henan branch of the ACWF, the center organized training programs, such as souvenir handicrafts production, to increase rural women’s income. Furthermore, the center assisted rural women to participate in formulating village-level regulations that lessened gender discrimination in the traditional succession system.\(^6\) Liang’s organization and other first-generation women’s rights NGOs were careful to keep low profiles and attribute achievements to the government or the ACWF.\(^7\) Considering the intrinsic relations between the veteran feminist activists and the government, this tactic suggests that the former officials felt that NGOs were not wholly compatible with the party-state.

Along with the subtle method of operation, the NGOs’ unique relationship with the government resulted in better development of Chinese feminist organizations, compared to other civil groups. Liang’s organization continued even when its work extended into political participation through the revision of village regulations, whereas rural women’s

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\(^6\) Li, “中国版女权.”

\(^7\) Ibid.
self-organized groups encountered suppression when requesting similar improvements. Feminist NGOs also grew gradually while organizations in other fields, such as HIV prevention and labor rights, faced constant harassment from the authorities. The comparisons indicate the effectiveness of feminists’ tactics as well as the inherent advantages of the feminist movement. If the veteran activists had not had initial relations with the government, they would likely have been unable to deliver grassroots change to society or would have been limited by the authorities in their advocacy.

The success of first-generation Chinese feminist NGOs, however, is not replicable or sustainable, as the younger generation of Chinese feminists become more progressive rather than inheriting their predecessors’ discretion and relationships with the state. As influential scholars and ACWF officials who attended the 1995 WCW have retired, feminist NGOs’ relationships with the government have declined over time and their influence over policy has diminished. Meanwhile, the younger generation of feminists would rather embrace modern activism than promote improvements via the rigid bureaucratic system. Born in the 1990s, young Chinese feminists grew up in the era during which the one-child policy was strictly enforced and the state was liberalizing. They had more opportunities to pursue education and acquire information from the rest of the world. This background tended to lower their tolerance for discrimination and made them more familiar with foreign social movements.

In 2012, Li Maizi, a college student, initiated the “Occupy Men’s Room” movement, which was inspired by “Occupy Wall Street” and called for an increase in the proportion of public ladies’ rooms. Li’s movement, which temporarily blocked men from the male bathroom and instead let women use the facility, was very small scale, but she increased its scope by notifying local media to report on it in advance. Mainstream Chinese media organizations were under censorship but still needed to attract readers. The image of young women advocating for a social issue supplied an interesting story with little political risk, so Li’s initiative was widely reported. Since then, young feminists have conducted similar actions on various issues, and a number of “feminist stars” have emerged due to media coverage. As these social movement–like actions seemed to have an acceptable cost-benefit ratio, this new approach to activism has the potential to motivate young women and propel Chinese feminist activism toward a more aggressive approach.

Simultaneously, Chinese authorities have turned in a conservative direction that suppresses civil society and undermines liberal values, including gender equality. Since

10 Li, “中国女权.”
Xi Jinping ascended to the presidency in 2013, the new administration has launched a series of crackdowns on opinion-leaders, NGOs, and human rights lawyers. The authorities have passed laws to legitimize extensive control over the internet, foreign funds, and other activities that the authorities recognize as threats to the regime. At his first meeting with the ACWF leadership, Xi Jinping stated that the goal of the party’s “women-related work” should be “upholding Chinese traditional family virtues.” 13 This assertion strongly affected the ACWF, with the group launching activities such as “The Most Beautiful Family Competition” to advertise stereotypical feminine values such as taking care of elders and children. 14 This policy change, in addition to the declining presence of the progressive political camp, has made the Chinese feminist movement lose its inherent advantages and become more politically vulnerable.

Growing activism and increasingly conservative authorities have disrupted the prior balance between the state and the feminist movement in China, as evidenced by the “Feminist Five” case that occurred on March 6th, 2015, two days before International Women’s Day. Chinese police detained Li Maizi, along with four other feminist activists, because they planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers in public transport stations. Shocked by Chinese police oppressing feminists due to mild tactics, activists across the world started to campaign for the Feminist Five. 2015 was also the 20th anniversary of the 1995 WCW, and President Xi Jinping was supposed to make his first speech at the UN headquarters in memory of the event. The international feminist community threatened to boycott Xi’s speech if the Chinese government refused to release the Feminist Five. 15 Hillary Clinton, who was then about to announce her U.S. presidential candidacy, reprised her 1995 role through a tweet calling Xi “shameless.” 16 Under extraordinary international pressure, Chinese police released the Feminist Five within a month, a short period of time compared to typical Chinese political prisoners, and President Xi made his speech in New York as planned. Although the history of the 1995 WCW once again put international pressure on the Chinese authorities and shielded Chinese feminists, it may be unlikely to reoccur in the future. In 2017, Song Xiuyan, the leader of the ACWF, announced that the institute should take political loyalty as the principle of its work and fight for the Communist Party against Western feminism. The feminist movement in China has ebbed as authorities force organizations to close and activists increasingly experience harassment. 17

The current struggle of the feminist movement in China demonstrates the vulnerability of social movements in an authoritarian state. The success of the first-generation of feminist NGOs depended on both their initial advantage of accommodating the state’s agenda and veteran activists’ efforts in maintaining a relationship with the state. This unique dynamic can hardly be preserved or recreated as the situation changes. The younger generation of feminist activists does not maintain the same connections with the government as their predecessors did and do not have the same modest approach to activism, having grown up in an era when society was gradually liberalizing. The progressive young generation has propelled the movement to more aggressive activism, alarming authorities. As the regime reversed its policies toward deepening reform, the feminist movement no longer enjoys the privilege of exclusion from state repression against civil society. The hardships of the Chinese feminist movement are inevitable as long as China remains an authoritarian state.

The feminist movement in China demonstrates how a social movement may develop in an authoritarian state by working with the government, but the history of the movement also suggests the potential limitations of such a relationship. Although activists can make use of the state’s agenda to obtain legitimacy, political space, and resources, the authorities may tolerate these activities as long as they are controllable and serve the regime’s interests. Once the movement is able to mobilize a population, incurring political risks, the authoritarian regime will revoke the space it previously acquiesced. As Chinese activists have failed to break the ceiling for civil society through interacting with the authoritarian state, it may be time for them to consider more fundamental changes.

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