

# Beijing Women Organizing for Change

A New Wave of the Chinese Women's Movement

CECILIA MILWERTZ



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*The hard part of dedicated social movement involvement lies in the recognition that it is the persistent tapping – sometimes a hammer, sometimes a feather – that leaves a mark. And it is through this process, a series of marks, that a new cultural reality is born.*

*– Barbara Ryan 1992*

*Regardless of what we can or cannot do in Chinese society, if everyone feels that we can't do anything, then we will never succeed. We have to work hard. We have to slowly work towards our goals. We will fail along the way – but in the end we will succeed.*

*– Beijing activist, December 2000*

*This volume is dedicated to the persistent tapping of women's movement activists in China.*

## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

International interest in women's organizing in China was especially strong in connection with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. I recall the exasperated e-mail sigh – 'so many of these women's organizations and civil society projects have come across my desk!' – expressed by a friend working with a donor organization in Beijing when I sent her a draft project description that year. Since she knew and worked with popular women's organizations, she watched in frustration as interested, even fascinated, but also often somewhat detached academic and media spectators, investigators and visitors imposed a drain on activist resources. However much they appreciate the attention afforded them (and need the funding that may follow upon this attention), activists have always found continuous visits by journalists, academics, students, donor organization representatives, politicians and their spouses and many others, whatever the main focus of their interest, relatively time-consuming. Though the stream of visits may have diminished since 1995, I hope that this book will be read by those who plan to visit the Jinglun Family Centre, the Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre and the Migrant Women's Club, and that in so doing they will be better prepared than I was when I started my interviews, thereby taking up less of the activists' precious time, perhaps asking more qualified questions and increasing the mutual benefit of the visits.

This book developed over the course of conversations and interviews with many scholars and activists in China, and I thank every one of them. I owe special thanks to Professor Qi Wenying at Beijing University who first introduced me, in 1992, to some of the people I met. As I proceeded, the effect snowballed, and I was introduced to more and more activists. Thanks go, first of all, to the three directors of the main organizations in this book – Wang Xingjuan, Chen Yiyun and Xie

Lihua - and to Wu Qing, co-initiator of the Migrant Women's Club, and to the many other activists in each of the three organizations and the other organizations, groups and networks that have offered their valuable time and hospitality.

In 1996 Lisa Stearns and I wrote a chapter on women's organizing in China for a Norwegian book, but on the request of the director of one of the organizations about which we had written, we never published it, since for her organization, it was politically a particularly sensitive time. My thanks go to Lisa for her friendship, her generous sharing of friends and knowledge, and for thoughts and even wordings in this volume which originate from our joint chapter.

Thanks are also due to the institutions that have supported my research. Two visits to China (one in September 1994 and one in August–September 1995, to prepare for and attend, respectively, the Women's Conference NGO Forum) were sponsored by the Danish women's NGO, KULU – Women and Development. A three-week visit in May 1996 was funded by a travel grant from the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) and an exchange agreement between NIAS and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. All visits since 1996 have been hosted by the Institute of Sociology, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where Zhao Kebin especially has been enormously helpful. Two visits in 1997 and 1998 were made possible by grants from the British Academy. The remaining visits in 1997 and 1998 were funded by the European Science Foundation during my affiliation to the Institute for Chinese Studies at Oxford University as European Science Foundation Research Fellow from 1996 to 1999. I am particularly grateful to Professor Glen Dudbridge for his support during the years I spent at Oxford University. This volume is a result of my research there. It is linked to the book *Chinese Women Organizing – Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Hsiung, Jaschok and Milwertz with Chanh 2001), proceedings of the Workshop 'Women Organizing in China' held at Oxford University in July 1999. The titles of the two books are perhaps confusingly similar. This reflects the fact that they were created simultaneously and that both address women's organizing for social change from the grassroots level upward. In terms of content, the two books do not overlap; on the contrary, they supplement each other.

The present book was finalized after I returned to the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in September 1999. I thank NIAS' librarians Marianne Espenhain Nielsen, Inga-Lill Blomqvist and Per Hansen for their help and the publishing unit, especially my desk editor Liz Bramsen, for warm support and patience. My grateful thanks go to



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C.M.  
Copenhagen

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ACWF	All China Women's Federation
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CASW	China Association of Social Workers
CSWS	Chinese Society for Women's Studies
CWLSLS	Centre for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services
EMW	East Meets West Feminist Translation Group
JFC	Jinglun Family Centre
MWC	Migrant Women's Club
MWPPC	Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
WRI	Women's Research Institute

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## *Introduction*

Since the 1980s a new historical phase of the women's liberation movement in China has developed. An important aspect of this evolution has been the rise and activity of various popular women's organizations (Liu Jinxiu 1991: 106). These organizations emerged when women began to organize again on their own initiative to support vulnerable social groups, to create social change and to challenge gender-based inequalities in society. For many years prior to this development, 'there was a top-down women's movement in China, initiated by the Party-led ACWF. It was sarcastically dubbed a "move women movement" instead of a "women's movement"' (Feng Yuan 2000: 1).

Three of these 'popular women's organizations' in Beijing – the Women's Research Institute<sup>1</sup> (which became the Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Center), the Jinglun Family Centre and the Migrant Women's Club are the focus of this book. In comparison to numerous other secular and religious women's organizations, groups and networks that have emerged or re-emerged in many parts of the People's Republic of China in the 1980s and 1990s, these three organizations and their formidable directors, Wang Xingjuan, Chen Yiyun and Xie Lihua, have relatively often been the centre of the attention from Western European and North American media, donor

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1. The Women's Research Institute (Funū yanjiusuo) is distinct from the All China Women's Federation-Women's Studies Institute of China (Quanguo fulian funū yanjiusuo).

organizations and academia. Internationally distributed English-language media have reported on the work of these three organizations since their very beginning in the late 1980s to early 1990s. *Newsweek* carried an article on the psychological counselling work of sociologist Chen Yiyun as early as 1990, several years before she set up the Jinglun Family Centre (Privat 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Reports for international donor organizations engaged in gender and development programmes in China, such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the US Ford Foundation (Fennel and Jeffery 1992, Stearns 1996, Rabb 1997, Croll 1998), and academic studies have also noted the role of or engaged in studies of one or several of these three organizations (Croll 1995, Howell 1997a, Wang Zheng 1997, Wesoky 1998, Cornue 1999 and Milwertz 2000a, 2000b). This focus has not always pleased authorities in China, and in 1995 the attention that the Women's Research Institute received from non-Chinese media and top level politicians from Europe and the United States of America in connection with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, very nearly led to closure of the Institute.

Feminist organizing is often marginalized in both Chinese and Western society, and the interest that these organizations have generated in Western media, donor organizations and politicians is in large part due to their existence and activities being viewed as expressions of the development of civil society and a transformation towards a democratic society in China. As in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Racioppi and See 1995), the transition in China from planned to market economy has had numerous negative political and economic impacts – especially on the lives of women. These developments have simultaneously given rise to opportunities for the establishment of a plurality of women's organizations. New forms of women's organizations in post-Mao China have been scrutinized with a view to analysing their existence as signs of the development of a less politically controlled relationship between party-state and society and the emergence of civil society, public space or a public sphere. China scholars have defined the women's organizations and women's studies which have been set up since the mid-1980s as a social movement associated with features such as autonomy and grassroots initiative on the one hand and, on the other hand, as lacking the core

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2. See also Burton 1990, Walker 1993, Brittain and Jakobsen 1995, MacLeod 1997, Elliott 1998, Forney 1998.

characteristics of such a movement. In the UK, Lin Chun hailed women's organizing activities in post-Mao China as 'the first autonomous social movement ever to flourish in our country' – a movement that is politically significant in terms of the role that it plays in creating and institutionalizing a public sphere as the basis for development of 'a democratic citizenship' (Lin Chun 1995a: 60, Lin Chun 1996: 286). Similarly, in the USA Wang Zheng defined the women's studies initiated in the 1980s by the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and academic institutions in many cities as 'a movement of research' that '... is one of the most significant developments in contemporary China because it represents the first time in Chinese history that women have initiated a national movement' (Wang Zheng 1997: 146). On a somewhat more restrained note, which is perhaps due to the particular reference to professional women's organizations, Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan state in their study of civil society in China that

As these organizations meet only intermittently and face financial constraints in organizing activities, their capacity to become fora to articulate women's interests and increase their participation in society is limited. As with other associations in the 'incorporated' sector, most of these women's organizations also reflect an attempt by the state to keep control of newly emerging interests and channel them into a body that can be monitored and contained. *For those looking for the development of a genuine feminist movement in China, with grass roots, voluntary women's groups, the wait is clearly going to be long.* (White, Howell and Shang 1996: 96, emphasis added)

Is there, then, a new women's movement in China? Or have donor organizations, journalists, politicians and academics merely characterized a few new organizations, which perhaps looked somewhat familiar to women's NGOs in other parts of the world, as signs of a new movement and nascent civil society, simply in order to confirm that a development they aspired to was actually materializing? The present volume introduces the establishment and activities of three prominent Beijing women's organizations – the Women's Research Institute/Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre, the Jinglun Family Centre and the Migrant Women's Club. The aim is to contribute to an understanding of women's organizing in the 1980s and 1990s. Why, how and by whom were these organizations set up? What aims do they have, and how have they worked to attain them? The central argument is that the three organizations are actors in a new

wave of the continuing Chinese women's movement. The practice of the three organizations constitutes part of a formative phase of a new social movement wave based on popular initiative in Beijing and beyond. As already mentioned, several studies have defined women's studies and other organizing activities by women in China in the 1980s and 1990s as a new women's movement (Lin Chun 1995a, Wang Zheng 1997, Wesoky 1999, Naihua Zhang 1995). However, vagueness in defining 'movement' and variations in defining the movement as including or excluding the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) adds to the confusion in understanding the nature of these new types of organizing in relation to the long term women's movement in China.

I shall adopt political scientist Drude Dahlerups's definition of social movement and of social movement waves to understand the new forms of organizing in China.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a social movement is 'a *conscious, collective* activity to promote *social change*, with some degree of organization and with the commitment and active participation of members or activists as its main resource' (Dahlerup 1986: 218). Dahlerup adds three characteristics to this main definition. First, '[t]o be termed a "social movement", the activity must represent certain fundamental interests, must last for some time, and must have a certain size and several component parts. It is characterized by a combination of spontaneity and organization.' Second, a social movement represents 'interests that, by definition, are not incorporated into routine politics. Social movements are marginal to the political decision-making processes. A social movement represents a protest against the established norms and values, and usually includes an attack on the power structure itself. Because it does not possess institutionalized power, it often uses direct actions and disruptive tactics. In this, the social movement differs from the routine politics of interest organizations'. Third, a social movement consists of 'an entity of activities by organizations, groups and followers who share a commitment to a common cause.' (Ibid.). In Chapter Five, I shall argue that organizing by women in Beijing qualifies as social movement activism, even though it does not fit neatly and precisely into this definition. It does not, for example, apply 'direct actions and disruptive tactics'. On the contrary, the movement applies non-disruptive modes of action, since these are effective in the Chinese

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3. For a critical discussion of the usefulness of applying a theory of waves to the study of women's movements, see Lønnå 2000.



political context. Movement waves are characterized first, by the establishment of many new feminist organizations and groups; second, by extensive debate within the movement and publicly; and third, by the fact that the ideas of the movement are making an impact in terms of new laws and/or changes in the discourse on women in society (Dahlerup 1998: 122). In her study of India, Gail Omvedt defines a new phase of the women's movement as characterized by 'new energies, new themes, new forms of struggle'. These are 'new' in that women themselves 'through the ideologies they generate, define their exploitation and oppression, the system that generates these, and the way to end this exploitation and oppression, in "new" terms' thus yielding new feminist articulations (Omvedt 1993: 77). Based on Dahlerup's definition of new waves within a continuous movement, this volume will analyse activities and modes of action applied by the three Beijing organizations in their effort to effectively address social issues and create social change. The emphasis of the analysis is on 'the transformative intent and impact of feminist organizations' (Ferree and Martin 1995: 7), in other words, on the process, context, content and culture of organizing rather than on the structure and institutional relationships of the three organizations. Structural relationships of these three organizations to the All China Women's Federation and other party-state institutions are addressed to the degree that these have an impact on organizational practice.<sup>4</sup> The new phase of the movement wave is characterized by the innovation – within the political context of the People's Republic of China – of women organizing on their own initiative. Women have set up groups, organizations and networks, and they have organized activities in the name of these. They have found office space and meeting places. They have sought funding. They have made their voices heard in the media and through recommendations to policy-makers. Less visibly, the wave is characterized by innovative understandings, thinking and knowledge, which form the basis for challenging dominant discourses on women and gender issues. Finally, the movement wave is characterized by innovative internal organizational practices.

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4. Liu Dongxiao 1999 provides a fine analysis of institutional heterogeneity in terms of '*tizhi nei*' [inside the institution] and '*tizhi wai*' [outside the institution]. This analysis shapes popular organizations with a dual nature which reflects both the influences of the communist state and limited socioeconomic pluralism.