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A Neo-Institutional Analysis of the All-China Women’s Federation Organisational Reforms in China’s Xi Era

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# “Being a Good Daughter of the Party”?

A Neo-Institutional Analysis of the All-China Women's Federation Organisational Reforms in China's Xi Era

YUNYUN ZHOU <sup>(1)</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Like other socialist institutions surviving in China's market reforms, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF or WF when referring to its local branches), as the only state-sponsored organisation representing women's interests, has been constantly refashioning itself to meet new existential challenges. In July 2015, the central leadership of the Chinese Communist Party commanded a new wave of mass organisational reforms, in which the Women's Federation's alienation from the grassroots and a weakening representation of women's interests were questioned. After three years of intensive reform, are the local structures of the ACWF being substantially improved to reconnect to its mass base? Drawing from extensive fieldwork in three provinces and a neo-institutional analysis, this article argues that in the short term, although the reform serves principally as a consolidation of Party authority, local Women's Federations are creatively using the reform to expand their popular base and broaden their representativeness. In the long term, however, local WFs are facing unreformed institutional problems such as political marginalisation, bureaucratisation, and ineffective implementation, which stagnate further development of China's state feminism.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese Communist Party, mass organisation, state feminism, Women's Federation, gender equality, political representation.

## Introduction

The year 2015 is often regarded as a series of setbacks for China's feminism. The arrest of five young feminist activists and the crackdown on feminist organisations constitute an important turning point for the evolution of China's feminist movement (Liu *et al.* 2015; Tan 2017; Zeng 2016; Hong Fincher 2018; Wang 2018). However, while the latest scholarly research tends to focus on the rise of a younger generation of feminist activists and the strengthened state repression they were facing, another influential campaign concerning tens of millions of Chinese women quietly emerged in the same year of 2015 but largely escaped scholarly attention: the reform of mass organisations (*quntuan gaige* 群团改革).

Since July 2015, the new round of political reforms targeting mass organisations,<sup>(2)</sup> including the All-China Women's Federation (*quanguo funü lianhehui* 全国妇女联合会 or *quanguo fulian* 全国妇联 abbreviated as the ACWF or as the WF when referring to its local branches in this article) was launched by the Central Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. The reform called for a re-articulation of the political loyalty of these “mass organisations” (*quntuan zuzhi* 群团组织) to the Party, as well as a reconnection and devotion to the masses. As a Party-led mass organisation originating from China's socialist era and the only women's organisation endorsed by the Party-state, the unique political positioning and the institutional design of the ACWF have created significant challenges for its operations in China's reform era.

The All-China Democratic Women's Federation<sup>(3)</sup> announced its establishment and held its first national congress in March 1949, where its organi-

sational structure and regulation were formulated. In 1957, the Third Congress decided to change its name to the All-China Women's Federation<sup>(4)</sup> (Judd 2002; Wang 2016). On paper, the ACWF defines its role, first of all, as “the mass organisation united for the purpose of further liberating and developing women from all ethnicities and all domains in China,” “the bridge and bond for the Party and government to connect to the female masses,” and an “important societal pillar of state power.”<sup>(5)</sup> In practice, the central task of the ACWF has shifted periodically, depending on the political and socio-economic contexts shaped by central Party-state directives (Rosen 1995). For instance, the ACWF at the beginning of the 1950s focused on the education and implementation of the new Marriage Law to lift

1. I thank sincerely all three anonymous reviewers and editors for their constructive remarks, and my supervisor Rachel Murphy and Yves Sintomer for their intellectual and moral support. I am grateful for Judith Audin and Jérôme Doyon's work to organise this special issue, as well as Camille Boullenois and Émilie Frenkiel's feedback on the early drafts.
2. See “中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见” (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian, The Central Committee's opinion on enhancing and improving the party's mass organisation work), *Xinhua*, 9 July 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c\\_1115875561.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c_1115875561.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2018). There are 22 Party-endorsed “mass organisations” in total. For the full list, please see [http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-05/24/content\\_18314.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-05/24/content_18314.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2018).
3. The original name was *Zhonghua quanguo minzhu funü lianhehui* 中华全国民主妇女联合会.
4. *Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui* 中华全国妇女联合会, or *quanguo fulian* 全国妇联.
5. See the Constitution of the All-China Women's Federation: <http://www.women.org.cn/col/col35/index.html> (accessed on 10 October 2018): “中华全国妇女联合会是全国各族各界妇女为争取进一步解放与发展而联合起来的群团组织, 是中国共产党领导下的人民团体, 是党和政府联系妇女群众的桥梁和纽带, 是国家政权的重要社会支柱” (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui shi quanguo gezugejie funü wei zhengqu jin yibu jiefang yu fazhan er lianhe qilai de quntuan zuzhi, shi Zhongguo gongchandang lingdao xia de renmin tuanti, shi dang he zhengfu lianxi funü qunzhong de qiaoliang he niudai, shi quanjia zhengquan de zhongyao shehui zhizhu*).

women from feudal and patriarchal families as a significant part of socialist state-building, whereas from the mid-1950s to the 1960s, the ACWF centred its work on promoting women's participation in collective agricultural and industrial production as the national development plan commanded (Davin 1976; Tsai 1996). After a brief history of suspension during the Cultural Revolution, the ACWF redirected its work in the reform era to a less politically charged but service-oriented approach, such as providing vocational training, healthcare aid, and counselling services, organising surveys and research on gender and women's studies, as well as proposing legislative and policy changes concerning discrimination and violence against women (Jacka 1997; Judd 2002; Howell 2008; Angeloff and Lieber 2012).

However, sandwiched between the Party and the masses it must represent, the ACWF's unique political positioning and institutional design has led to constant existential struggles throughout its history. As feminist historian Wang Zheng (2005, 2006, 2016) insightfully illustrated, the ACWF often has to carefully manoeuvre its way to gain support and trust from masculinist Party leaders. For instance, during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the ACWF faced a severe legitimacy crisis as the top Party leaders questioned the necessity of having a gender-based organisation in a socialist society such as China, where women were already liberated from feudal institutions. The ACWF's top leaders therefore had to compromise on its promotion of gender equality and turn to a seemingly conservative advocacy of women's role to "diligently and thriftily manage the family in order to strive for the construction of socialism," which was more in line with the Party's central work.

In the post-Mao era, the ACWF has also been facing unprecedented demands and challenges from its constituencies. In a series of investigations of gender politics in China, Jude Howell (1996, 2000, 2003, 2008) highlighted that the ACWF has been struggling to renew its socialist gender discourses and work methods to meet new gender interests and address new forms of gender discrimination in China's rapid socio-economic transformation since the 1980s. Furthermore, the proliferation of non-governmental organisations concerning gender and women since the concept was imported during the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing has started to "dilute the discursive, theoretical and practical monopoly of the ACWF" (Howell 2003: 208). Although a few other scholars have noted that the ACWF, relying on its mass base, has successfully organised a variety of campaigns, training programs, and legislative activism to improve women's agricultural and professional skills (Jacka 1997; Judd 2002), political participation (Gao 2001), and legal and gender consciousness (Angeloff and Lieber 2012) during China's reform era, it faces deep-rooted institutional challenges such as dependency on the Party-state (Rosen 1995), the lack of autonomous feminist consciousness (Lin 1996), and the struggle to collaborate with newly-emerged women's organisations in civil society (Jin 2001; Liu 2001).

Forty-one years after the beginning of market reform, 20 years after the Beijing World Women's Conference and six years after Xi's coming to power, what does the 2015 mass reform aim to achieve in its particular historical context? To what extent can the reform help the Women's Federations, especially locally, to restructure themselves to better represent their mass base? In what sense could the reform alleviate the tension faced by the local WFs, considering their unique political positioning? As these inquiries essentially deal with the reformation of a group of tangible organisations and their inner workings, this article adopts a *neo-institutionalist*<sup>(6)</sup> approach to evaluate the discursive, organisational, and normative aspects of how the ACWF

reform has unfolded locally. By referring to the *neo-institutionalist* approach, I argue that the ACWF and its local branches should be considered as *institutions* that are both formally defined structures, e.g. departments or hierarchies, and informally maintained structures, such as networks and rules (Gretchen and Levitsky 2004). I also see the WF *institutions* as socially and historically constructed structures, namely "humanly devised constraints" that are designed to serve the interests of certain social groups in a specific historical period (North 1991). Finally, I reflect on the WF system as a set of *institutions* that projects and reproduces the cultural norms, values, and discourses of a certain social group that are set to regulate patterns of human behaviours, shape individual identities, and generate differentiated practices (March and Olsen 1989; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Schmidt 2008).

This article draws on data collected mainly from one year of qualitative fieldwork that I carried out between September 2016 and August 2017 in five cities and six rural county-seats in Shaanxi, Hunan, and Guangdong Province. A brief follow-up fieldwork followed was conducted in March 2019. The research sites were chosen based on the principle of accessibility, namely existing contacts or contacts obtained in the fieldwork through snowballing, based on the principle of theoretical sampling, which aims to provide the most differentiated selection of cases possible to testify the observations and conclusions (Small 2009). During fieldwork, I visited 15 different local branches of the local Women's Federation and interviewed 36 Women's Federation cadres<sup>(7)</sup> at the provincial, municipal, and county or district levels. All research participants were fully informed of the researcher's identity and motivation and granted their consent to take part in this research. To protect the personal security and career prospects of these female cadres, only pseudonyms and unspecified geographical locations or job titles are mentioned in this article.

The article consists of three parts: it starts by analysing the context and key objectives of the ACWF reform, as well as how these new narratives and organisational initiatives are adopted by local WF cadres. Then the article examines the relative positioning of the local Women's Federations *vis-à-vis* the local Party-state, and the institutional constraints they face. At the end, the article moves on to explore the increasingly hierarchical and bureaucratic work ethic within the local Women's Federations and their disengagement from their claimed mass bases, based on observations of their personnel management, administrative procedures, and political culture. Following the inspiration of Wang Zheng (1999, 2016) and Gail Hershatter (2011, 2018) to "rewrite gender into history" and to reconsider women as "state subjects," this article aims not only to illuminate the collective efforts and setbacks of "state-feminists" (Wang 2016) when doing "women's work" in China's local political landscapes, but also to re-position these women's "institutionalised experiences" in the panorama of the Chinese Communist Party's contemporary attempt to re-constitute its ruling legitimacy and capacity through reviving the Maoist narratives and institutions of mass mobilisation in the President Xi's new era.

6. My research identifies with what Krook and Mackay (2011: 2) described as "an institutional turn in feminist political science," especially the organisational or sociological and discursive school of neo-institutionalism, in which the interaction between macro- and micro-level actors, mechanisms, and organisations is emphasised (March and Olsen 1989).

7. Originally, the French word "cadre" was widely adopted in various countries to refer to leading personnel and managers in enterprises, armies, and state apparatus. The Chinese word 干部 (*ganbu*), based on the latest definition of the CCP's "干部人事档案工作条例" (*ganbu renshi dang'an gongzuo tiaoli*) ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-11/28/c\\_1123780780.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-11/28/c_1123780780.htm)), refers to "leaders of the Party and government branches, civil servants, state-owned company leaders and other staff managed based on the Civil Servant Law." In this article, the term "cadre" refers to the personnel of local Party branches, governments, and mass organisations who are directly managed by Party leadership.

## ***“Listen to the Party’s words and follow the Party’s lead”: Key narratives and objectives of the mass organisation reforms***

In July 2015, the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee convened a conference to promulgate the “Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Party’s Mass Organisation Work,”<sup>(8)</sup> in which the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League of China, and the All-China Women’s Federation, among others, were the most underlined reform targets. Unprecedentedly, all seven members of the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo attended the conference, and General Party Secretary Xi Jinping gave an elaborate speech on the relevance of this reform, in which he stated:

The enterprise of mass organisations is an indispensable part of the Party’s cause. (...) [I]t is a great initiative and a major advantage of our Party (...). We must consolidate the class foundation and mass base of the Party’s governance based on the understanding of its political significance (...). We must build more dynamic and stronger mass organisations, making them an important force in advancing the modernisation of the state’s ruling structure and governance capacity.<sup>(9)</sup>

The conference articulated that, as the domestic and international environment and the economic and societal conditions of China have undergone profound changes, many mass organisations were considered unequipped and unqualified to fulfil their original missions. For instance, the grassroots organisations of many mass organisations appeared to be weak, and they no longer appealed to emerging social groups, especially in the non-state-owned economic sectors and social organisations.<sup>(10)</sup> Other issues such as political marginalisation, bureaucratisation, and the lack of methodological innovation were also mentioned. To address these issues, the reform proposed ten different strategies to enable and empower mass organisations, including enhancing support from the local Party-state, involving mass organisations in local democratic participation and social governance, encouraging mass organisations’ organisational and methodological innovation, etc.

The ACWF’s own reform program was issued in September 2016 and was followed by a press conference, where the scope, focus, and initiatives of the Women’s Federation reform agenda were explained. Compared to the general reform programme, the ACWF reform agenda had two main features: firstly, it reiterated meticulously Xi’s emphasis on the centrality of Party authority in supervising mass organisations, underlining the ACWF’s “political task of guiding all the female masses to listen to the Party’s words and follow the Party’s lead.”<sup>(11)</sup> Secondly, the ACWF’s reform agenda explored a number of organisational restructuring proposals, such as expanding the coverage of grassroots branches, sending leaders to the grassroots, and recruiting women with more diverse social backgrounds. All of these organisational reforms had one shared objective: to broaden the representativeness of the WF system.

### ***Trickle-down of reform in local Women’s Federations***

When I was starting my fieldwork with the local Women’s Federations in September 2016, the central ACWF had already issued its reform plan in Beijing, but the concept of mass organisational reform took almost two

years to trickle down to the lower-level Women’s Federations. Initially, the news of reform brought fear and uncertainty. Many leading local WF cadres were concerned about whether the reform would result in them being removed from their posts or replaced by part-time staff, because the ACWF agenda mentioned the intention to streamline its personnel and to bring more leaders down to the grassroots. Even in the provincial-level WF, few had any idea how the reform would be carried out until one year later, when the ACWF issued a paper specifying the operationalised reform targets in 2017. Subsequently each provincial WF finally formulated its own regional reform policy in 2018.

The long process of the trickle-down was not only an administrative procedure necessary to the Leninist Party apparatus, but also a gradual learning process for local WF cadres, where they actively and creatively re-invented the narrative of reform to assist their everyday work. On the one hand, many valued the reform highly as an unparalleled opportunity to promote women’s work; for instance, one departmental director of a provincial Women’s Federation told me proudly:

I have worked in the local WF for more than 20 years, and this is the first time there has been a reform that is initiated by the Party’s Central Committee and is specially designated for the ACWF. This really gives legitimacy to our work. As the Central Committee proposed the four main lines of work – the Party, the government, the army, and the mass organisations (*dang, zheng, jun, qun* 党, 政, 军, 群) – the ACWF was mentioned together with the other three: this shows the WF system has reached a historical new height in terms of its political status!<sup>(12)</sup>

On the other hand, the Party Central Committee’s reform agenda directly insisted on the absolute authority of the Party over the mass organisations’ work and emphasised strongly the “political nature” (*zhengzhixing* 政治性) of mass work. Considering the ACWF’s relative autonomy and freedom to collaborate with international women’s organisations and to adopt the global feminist theorisations of gender (*shehui xingbie lilun* 社会性别理论) instead of the Maoist slogan of male-female equality (*nannü pingdeng*

8. “中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见” (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gajjin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian, CCP Central Committee’s Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Party’s Mass Organisation Work), *Xinhua*, 9 June 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c\\_1115875561.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c_1115875561.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2019).
9. “群团事业是党的事业的重要组成部分 (...) 这是我们党的一大创举,也是我们党的一大优势 (...) 我们必须从巩固党执政的阶级基础和群众基础的政治高度,抓好党的群团工作 (...) 我们必须把群团组织建设的更加充满活力,更加坚强有力,使之成为推进国家治理体系和治理能力现代化的重要力量” (Quntuan shiye shi dang de shiye de zhongyao zucheng bufen (...). *Zhe shi women dang de yi da chuangu, ye shi women dang de yida youshi* (...). *Women bixu cong gongguo dang zhizheng de xianji jichu he qunzhong jichu de zhengzhi gaodu, zhuhao dang de quntuangongzuo* (...). *Women bixu ba quntuan zuzhi jianshe de gengjia chongman huoli, gengjia jianqiang youli, shi zhi chengwei tuijin guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua de zhongyao lilian*), from “习近平出席党的群团工作会议” (Xi Jinping chuxi dang de quntuan gongzuo huiyi, Xi Jinping attended the Party’s Mass Organisation Work Conference), 7 July 2015, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2010-03/09/content\\_1556306.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2010-03/09/content_1556306.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2018).
10. “中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见” (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gajjin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian, The Central Committee’s Opinion on Enhancing and Improving the Party’s Mass Organisation Work), *Xinhua*, 9 July 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c\\_1115875561.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c_1115875561.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2018).
11. “引领广大妇女听党话,跟党走” (*Yinling guangda funü ting dang hua, gen dang zou*, Leading all women to listen to the Party’s words, and follow the Party’s lead). In “全国妇联负责人就全国妇联改革答记者问” (Quanguo fulian fuzeren jiu quanguo fulian gaige da jizhe wen, The respondent of the ACWF answers journalists’ questions on the ACWF reform), 21 September 2017, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-09/21/content\\_5110514.htm#1](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-09/21/content_5110514.htm#1) (accessed on 9 October 2018).
12. Interview with Ding, 28 March 2019.



男女平等) (Wang 1996, 2010; Howell 2003; Wang and Zhang 2010; Hsiung *et al.* 2010) in the post-1995 era,<sup>(13)</sup> the new reform in 2015 undoubtedly signalled a tightened political atmosphere for the ACWF, in which it would have to tone down its previous theoretical innovations and international cooperation and return to the Party's ideological formulations on women. However, many local WF cadres were not overly concerned by this political transition, as they were accustomed to a periodic shift of narrative and work focus in the local WFs. The same provincial cadre explained to me:

Now the language we use has indeed changed. We don't talk about gender mainstreaming anymore; we use "listen to the Party's words and follow the Party's lead" (*ting dang hua, gen dang zou* 听党话, 跟党走). We are also having many fewer international exchanges than before. But the time is different now; which words to use is not important; it matters more that the WF system can have more resources and space to implement its work. There are two ways to interpret this new slogan we use: on the one hand, we need to mobilise women to identify more with the Party and the state, but on the other hand, the Party also has to give us more resources to achieve this, doesn't it?<sup>(14)</sup>

In addition to the intricate attitudes and sentiments held towards the reform in local WFs, it is noteworthy that each time that the reform agenda passed from one authority to another, both from the general mass organisation reform program to the ACWF agenda, and from the ACWF to the local WF project, certain content was filtered out and left unmentioned. For instance, in the Party central leadership's "Opinions,"<sup>(15)</sup> there was a series of items that required the local Party-states to "mainstream" mass organisation work by "establishing a system for studying and determining major issues in mass organisation work" and "holding a special mass organisation meeting during each term of office." If implemented, this could have been a good opportunity for local WFs to negotiate their work with local Party-state leaders, yet none of these items were mentioned in the ACWF's reform agenda. Similarly, despite the central ACWF's multifaceted reform agenda in personnel management that aims to improve its capacity to represent women's interests, many items on the reform agenda could not be thoroughly implemented locally. In local WFs, the major organisational reforms appear in the establishment of new WF branches in various new women's groups in both and urban areas.

In order to better understand how and to what extent these reform policies are reshaping local WFs, the rest of the article will elaborate on the encounter of "institutional innovations" with the "old regime" of women's work in contemporary China.

### ***"The department that does not harvest": The institutional dilemmas of local Women's Federations***

Women's Federations' *institutional position, structure, and culture* have raised serious challenges to their own claims to represent Chinese women's interests and rights. To what extent can the reform change these dilemmas? This section investigates both the physical and symbolic positioning of the local WFs *vis-à-vis* the local Party branches and people's governments. Then the local WFs' internal organisational issues which determine how women's work has been perceived and implemented locally will be analysed.

### ***The political positionality of the local WFs vis-à-vis the Party-state***

The institutional position that the ACWF holds defines its obligations and rights in the local political sphere and also restrains the resources and strategies it can mobilise to reach its organisational goals. One of the most critical dilemma of the local WF is its ambiguous positioning between the local Party-state, whose order it ought to conform to, and the women masses, whose interests it claims to represent. As a political in-between, the local WF represents neither the state nor society entirely, but both parties simultaneously. This dual-directional representation (Zhou and Sintomer 2019) inevitably leads to conflicts and tensions, especially in an economically and socially liberalising era where female citizens start to break free from the collectivist state narratives and demand for more autonomy in their lives in potentially controversial domains such as reproduction, sexuality and contentious politics. As for its relationship with the Party, the ACWF receives all of its annual income from the ministry of Finance of the central and local governments, and it has the responsibility to report on its work annually to the government; therefore, undoubtedly, the ACWF is a political organisation under the patronage of the Party-state. However, the Federation should not be compared to a department of the local Party branch or the local government; its lack of substantive power renders it inferior in various senses. To explore the relationship between the ACWF and the local Party-state in its everyday work, I use an example to compare the relative geographical location and physical embodiment of the local Party-state and ACWF (see pictures 1 and 2).

The pictures above serve as a visual clue to the relative relationship between the ACWF and the local Party-state in L county: the local Women's Federation occupies a *geographical position* that is separate or isolated from other state departments and a *physical space* of an inferior quality and with less accessibility for both employees and citizens. Just as the location and appearance of different neighbourhoods indicate their respective social classes, the physical differentiation and disconnection of the local state from the ACWF indicates the Women's Federation's lower ranking in term of its symbolic power, as well as its "outsider" status from the perspective of the local state, especially below the provincial level.

Despite physical isolation from the local Party-state, the ACWF does have several institutionalised links with the local Party-state, which already existed before the 2015 reform started: with respect to women's political participation, the ACWF is officially entitled to recommend the promotion of outstanding women cadres to the Organisation department of the Party Committee;<sup>(16)</sup> the ACWF receives guidance from the Propaganda department of the Party Committee; for all the rest, the Working Committee on Children and Women (*funü ertong gongzuo weiyuanhui* 妇女儿童工作委员会, often abbreviated as *fu'er gongwei* 妇儿工委 or WCCW), as part of the

13. For fascinating elaborations on how the ACWF has strategically used the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference as a political opportunity to refashion itself as an autonomous NGO and an active contributor to international women's movements and gender studies, see Wang Zheng's interviews with ten Chinese feminists in the Global Feminisms Project available on <https://globalfeminisms.umich.edu> (accessed on 15 February 2019).

14. Interview with Ding, 28 March 2019.

15. "中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见" (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian, CCP Central Committee's Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Party's Mass Organisation Work), *Xinhua*, 9 July 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c\\_1115875561.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/09/c_1115875561.htm) (accessed on 13 March 2018).

16. As Hsiung (2001) discussed in her article, this rarely happens because of the male leaders' disapproval.



**Photo 1** – Photo taken by the author during fieldwork in L county government in Hunan Province, 24 May 2017. This office building is part of the county government compound, located at the very centre of countryseat L's biggest and busiest road, guarded 24 hours a day. This building contains three floors of office space equipped with delicate wooden furniture and shining with newly painted walls. As shown in the photo, each office is assigned to one individual leader of the country government or its subordinate department. Each room has a balcony facing the garden. © Yunyun Zhou



**Photo 2** – Photo, taken by the author on 25 May 2017, of a passage that leads to an old and poorly-maintained building. This is where the county-level Women's Federation, together with several other semi-organisations, is located. The building is difficult to recognise or to access for outsiders, as it is hidden behind several residential blocks and has a narrow gateway on a street. When asked, the residents and shop owners next-door were not aware of where the Women's Federation was. Inside of the building, two first-floor offices were assigned to the county-level WF and 2-3 cadres shared the same office. © Yunyun Zhou

national or local governments' working groups, serves as an intermediary organ to operationalise and allocate the work of the ACWF into each department of the government. This includes publishing ten-year plans, such as the "Program of the Development of Chinese Women 2011-2020,"<sup>(17)</sup> which contains quantified national objectives for improving women's rights and conditions in the domains of healthcare, education, security, and political participation, and assigning these targets to each relevant ministry.

However, the existence of the WCCW office (often embodied by one extra office managed by one deputy chair in the local WF), instead of transforming the ACWF into a ministerial organisation with substantive executive powers, in reality has mostly served as a contact point and data-collection centre of the local WF to reach out to governmental departments – referred to as "member units" (*chengyuan danwei* 成员单位). Also, despite the formal establishment of the institution of WCCW, in which way and to what extent these "member units," i.e. the governmental departments, can act as good members and make tangible progress in their own arena of policy-making and policy implementation often depends on the negotiating power and communicative skills of the few local WF leaders who are in charge. For instance, there are exceptional cases where WF cadres have managed to take the institution of WCCW as a political opportunity to expand their influence through win-win strategies. One deputy chair of a provincial WF explained to me:

The WCCW is indeed useful in pushing the Federation's work in terms of coordinating with the government. There are provincial-level governments that need to participate in the Federation's work, based on the women's development programme, but how do we let them combine their own duties and capacities with the needs of the WCCW? You see here we already have a tie, which is the WCCW office, but we then need a work mechanism to do the real job. This is

what we are innovating on – to use data monitoring and big data as the thread that connects all the loosely organised member units together. We help these departments monitor this data, and report to the deputy governor, then the governor will eventually put pressure on these individual departments again.<sup>(18)</sup>

Compared with other mass organisations, such as the Youth League and the Federation of Trade Unions, which do not have a similar institution to the WCCW, this is definitely a strategic advantage of the WF system. The WCCW, as part of the local government, has quantified and clearly defined work guidance such as the Program of the Development of Chinese Women and is part of the stricter governmental performance evaluation system that is carried out annually. The WCCW regularly publishes cross-sectional gender statistics on women's education, healthcare, employment, and political participation based on items within the "Program of the Development of Chinese Women 2011-2020," and it has become one of the most comprehensive and widely-cited databases and sources of knowledge on the conditions of women in China.<sup>(19)</sup> This can effectively assign tangible and accessible work targets to each governmental department to carry out the part of "women's work" that is relevant to the nature of the department. For instance, the education department of the people's government at each administrative level needs to take charge of educational issues such as eliminating illiteracy and the completion of nine-year compulsory education for women and girls and report the annual progress to the WCCW. Other

17. It is often referred to as "Zhongguo funü fazhan gangyao" (中国妇女发展纲要).

18. Interview with Xiqing, 8 May 2017. On how gender statistics could be used to promote gender-aware governance in local politics, see Chen (2016).

19. For instance, see "中国妇女发展纲要(2011-2020年) 年度统计监测报告数据解读" (Zhongguo funü fazhan gangyao 2011-2020 niandu tongji jiance baogao shuju jiedu, The Program of the Development of Chinese Women: Annual statistical monitoring report and data interpretation), [http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2017-05/24/content\\_163728.htm](http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2017-05/24/content_163728.htm) (accessed on 2 November 2018).

departments and institutions, including the ministry of Health (*weishengbu* 卫生部), the ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (*renli ziyuan shehui baozhangbu* 人力资源社会保障部), the ministry of Civil Affairs (*minzhengbu* 民政部), as well as the people's courts and people's procuratorates (*renmin fayuan*, *renmin jianchayuan* 人民法院, 和人民检察院), are responsible respectively for public policy concerning the domain of women and girls' health, social security, civil participation (in autonomous organisations), and legal rights.<sup>(20)</sup> The WCCW office gives local WFs not only the precious opportunity to partially stay tuned with governmental officials and work agendas, but also the right to convene an annual meeting with all governmental departmental leaders to discuss the progress of women's health, education, employment, and future suggestions.

### **"The department that does not harvest": Negotiating local WFs' political status**

Does local WFs' political positionality have anything to do with their economic capacity? Economically speaking, the situation of the local WFs has improved significantly over the last two decades. One woman cadre told me that provincial WFs in the 1990s used to be a "money-less and power-less" organisation, but since 2011 most provincial governments have started to invest more in the Women's Federation based on the principle of "one yuan per woman" (*renjun yiyuanqian* 人均一元钱) in the annual budget. This means that in provinces with larger populations, Women's Federations at the provincial level have started to receive budgets of tens of millions of yuan per year. However, compared to the governmental departments at the same administrative level, the annual budget of the Women's Federation typically equals only 1-10% of a departmental annual budget, and 0.1-1% of the local governmental budget in total.<sup>(21)</sup>

It is rather the logic of economy-centrism in China's post-Mao governance that marginalises the WF as an institution in the hierarchy of prioritisation. The fact that the WF does not directly contribute to local economic growth, which is undoubtedly the most crucial political mission for local governments, prevents the WF from entering the inner circle of power. Most cadres I have interviewed agree with this hierarchy of governmental goals and think that their work is less important than the economy-related work of the government. This can be seen in the words of a female cadre who has been working in a district-level Women's Federation in Shaanxi Province for more than 15 years:

The Women's Federation is not comparable to the government: they have hard economic targets and political targets to meet every year, but we are a department that does not harvest grain (*buda liangshi de bumen* 不打粮食的部门), so it is natural that the state puts more emphasis on them.<sup>(22)</sup>

This sense of marginalisation and inferiority caused by the lack of "substantial" political impact within the local government is often internalised by the women cadres I interviewed. In Guangdong Province, a passionate WF cadre shared her disappointment during a conversation with me about the lack of power of the Women's Federation:

As an organisation, what power and rights does the WF have? Almost nothing substantial. Read through our constitution and you will realise we only have three kinds of rights: the right to make suggestions to the legislative bodies, the right to remind the government about

their duties, and the right to offer help in some individual cases. But none of these are "hard" powers, and none of these are compulsory tasks. So even when we realise there are certain needs and difficulties of women we should help with, we have few options apart from writing a proposal to the relevant departments in the government or to the legislative committees.<sup>(23)</sup>

As this woman cadre pointed out, legislation is one of the few areas where the WF prides itself on its work to represent women's interests, and in the last decade it has had several noteworthy achievements. For instance, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and the amendment of the Marriage Law were both launched because of intense commitment and effort from provincial-level WF cadres. One woman cadre involved in the entire process of promoting the Anti-Domestic Violence Law at the local government level told me:

We (the WF) rely on our own local networks, but a lot of work still relies on the local government to solve. For instance, when we found out about the problem of domestic violence in C city, we had to ask the municipal government to direct the whole thing. Because we, the Women's Federation, can't boss around and command anyone! We could only make suggestions. Plus, the problem concerns policy, the courts, legislation, finance, and the communities, so we had to rely on the support of the local government to take the lead and convene a meeting with all the leaders. There is no other option.<sup>(24)</sup>

This demonstrates that successful cases of the local WF acting in concert with the local legislative bodies and Party-state to draft and promulgate new laws were rare and often had to rely heavily on the legal education of these women cadres and their personal networks with local lawyers, police, journalists, and academics (Yang 2015). Although the 2015 reform at the central level actively sought to change this situation by "strengthening the Party's leadership over mass work," namely by requiring local Party-state leaders to regularly supervise and provide support to the WF's work, it seems that the power structure in local political structures remained untouched.

### **"An inverted pyramid" and problematic grassroots implementation**

Another organisational issue faced by the WF is the relatively fully developed and well-funded upper-level branches (i.e., the municipal, provincial, and central levels) and the understaffed, overburdened, and poorly-motivated personnel in its local branches and consequently its weak implementation of policies at the grassroots level. This was referred to by the women cadres I interviewed as the structure of an "inverted pyramid" (*dao jin zita* 倒金字塔). Typically, the number of personnel in the Women's Federation

20. For the detailed governmental responsibility list, see "中国妇女发展纲要 (2011-2020): 目标责任分解" (Zhongguo funü fazhan gangyao (2011-2020): mubiao zeren fenjie, Program of Development of Chinese Women: Target and Responsibility Decomposition), [http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2017-04/10/content\\_147918.htm](http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2017-04/10/content_147918.htm) (accessed on 20 May 2018).

21. This is a rough estimation based on the Guangdong Province Governmental Annual Budget 2018. See [http://www.gd.gov.cn/zwgk/czxx/sjczyjs/ys/content/post\\_2166225.html](http://www.gd.gov.cn/zwgk/czxx/sjczyjs/ys/content/post_2166225.html) (accessed on 8 May 2019).

22. Interview with Fan, 12 October 2016.

23. Interview with Shi, 12 June 2017.

24. Interview with Xiqing, 8 May 2017.



decreases as one goes down the administrative and geographical hierarchy; for instance, if the provincial level has 25 to 30 people, then the municipality has ten to 15, the county or district level has five to ten, and the township or street level has three to five. Meanwhile, the more understaffed grassroots branches of the WF often have to take charge of implementing not only the WF's own work but also the tasks assigned by the Party-state. Women cadres used a metaphor to describe the amount of work that each local Women's Federation cadre shoulders: “A thousand threads above and one needle below.”<sup>(25)</sup>

To illustrate this, I use the story of a woman cadre in charge of a street-level WF. After serving the community for more than 20 years, Ms. Zhu had still not received any promised promotion in rank and had a very modest salary. When I met her in a windowless office in the street government building, she told me it was her most stressful month of the year. She had to help the Party's propaganda division sell 7,000 state-owned local newspapers to departmental stores, restaurant owners, shop owners, landlords, and families. She also had to take charge of all the directives sent from the Party's Organisation Department, such as developing and contacting Party members in the streets assigned to her. Meanwhile, she had to receive petitions via phone calls or face-to-face meetings with local women about their failing marriages, and in addition to train a new staff member to deal with anti-domestic violence cases. She had been working in the same office since 1991, and the promised promotion never arrived. After 20-some years of serving in the same post, she felt that the work was not getting easier:

I don't know how I have made it through to today. There is so much work every day and we have nothing to show for it. Even today I am not one of the civil servant personnel.<sup>(26)</sup> There was a new boy who was recruited into the WFs office and joined us as the legal officer; I said to him, once you get a chance, transfer to another department as soon as possible – there is no future here. There are sometimes rumours that the wives of local Party leaders tend to get a position in local WFs, simply to enjoy a relatively easy, less ambitious, but stable job. I would say they never come to the grassroots WF: it is too much hard work for them.<sup>(27)</sup>

Furthermore, the absence of an effective performance assessment of “women's work” has been seen as the Achilles heel of the WF. A deputy chair of the district-level WF commented:

Our work at the district level is simply to follow orders from above, but what is hard is that we never know whether we have done well. When a new policy suddenly comes out, there is little preparation or explanation. Sometimes we do not understand how the leaders made the decision to launch a certain policy, but we tell ourselves that the leaders must have done good research on it. Another problem is that there are no concrete objectives we need to reach, and often we have devoted lots of time and energy to some projects but there is never feedback afterwards. All we could do is to follow the protocols used the year before and hope they will not be a big mistake.<sup>(28)</sup>

As a mass organisation working both under the guidance of and in parallel with the local Party-state, the political positionality of the WF remains as an outsider within China's local politics – often finding itself in a position that is too politically involved to be ideologically free but yet not central

enough to be considered of political significance. Its ambiguous political positionality generates difficulties for female cadres, but also leaves room for them to exert political influence over the Party-state.

## ***Disengaging with the masses: The bureaucratisation and professionalisation of “women's work”***

Whether the organisational reforms can fundamentally resolve the local WF's representative crisis depends heavily on how the individual women cadres realise the women's work from within, namely their codes of behaviour. These codes of behaviour often play a determining role in shaping the ways in which directive gender policies are interpreted and implemented at the grassroots level on a daily basis. The stories and narratives of women cadres demonstrate that the ACWF has seen a period of organisational reform and professionalisation during the two decades following the 1995 World Women's Conference in Beijing. However, the everyday work ethic inside the ACWF and the local WFs has not changed fundamentally and is evolving to becoming increasingly bureaucratised, which leads to a mechanical repetition of political propaganda tasks without substantive discussion or questioning of what women's strategic interests (Jacka and Sargeson 2015: 481) really are. Facing these institutional problems, the reform focused on the expansion of grassroots WF branches to broaden the “coverage” of women being represented by the local WFs.

## ***Political culture: Hierarchical order and rank-seeking***

Despite the ACWF's historical roots in self-organised and self-representative women's groups, the Federation is assimilated to the management style of a governmental body. This is first of all evident in its personnel management. Most WF cadres have governmental staff status (*xingzheng bianzhi* 行政编制), while a very few have governmental affiliated institutional staff status (*shiye bianzhi* 事业编制). According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2012 the entire ACWF system had 78,074 full-time employees, among which there were 357 ministry-level cadres and 4,213 bureau-level cadres.<sup>(29)</sup> The adoption of governmental staff status means that WF cadres receive the same salary, pension, titles, and promotion as other civil servants. This not only provides WF cadres with the same treatment as civil servants, which separates them practically and symbolically from other social workers and NGO workers, but also strongly shapes the political identities and incentives of WF cadres. This means that the WF as a mass organisation also does not escape the manners and norms regulated by the hierarchy of officials as in other state institutions in its everyday work.

The hierarchy of officials is visible in the office plan, the language spoken, and the authority-centred mode of thinking within the federation: in each WF branch, the chair and deputy-chair normally have their own independent offices, while other staff share a common office; they address their su-

25. “上面千条线，下面一根针” (Shangmian qian tiao xian, xiamian yigen zhen, A thousand threads from above with only one needle below), from interview with Fan, 12 October 2016.

26. Here Zhu is referring to two possible types of personnel status: governmental staff status (*xingzheng bianzhi* 行政编制) and government-affiliated institutional staff status (*shiye bianzhi* 事业编制); the former generally receives a better salary, bonus, and pension and has greater potential for promotion in the political hierarchy than the latter.

27. Interview with Zhu, 18 October 2016.

28. Interview with Fan, 12 October 2016.

29. For the data, see <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01> (accessed on 14 October 2018).



periors strictly based on their hierarchical title such as “Chairman X” (*zhuxi* 主席) or “Department Head X” (*buzhang* 部长); instead of launching activities useful for various women groups, the local WF organises most of its public events and activities with the aim of pleasing and demonstrating their “achievements” to the authorities. For instance, I attended a large-scale trans-national exhibition and conference on women’s ethnic hand-crafts in the rural area, which was organised by a provincial-level WF. After several months of careful preparation, the final one-day event was centred on the visit and speech by the provincial chair of the local WF. Throughout the one-day event, only a few rural women were invited to serve as vendors in the exhibition, but were not invited to take part in the conference discussion. This is the typical logic behind the WF’s public engagement, which aims at gaining the approval of their leaders rather than the support of the “masses.”

The WF system’s deep-rooted bureaucratic work ethic can also be observed from its vertical power structure. In other words, like any other Party-state organ, the local WF branches strictly follow the branch above, with little chance of bottom-up initiatives. A municipal-level WF cadre analysed:

The WF definitely resembles a state organ more than a civil organisation. Why? It is designed with a strictly layered and compartmentalised hierarchy (*keceng jiegou* 科层结构), which means the way it functions follows a top-down passage: the upper levels assign tasks and the lower levels organise meetings to learn the directives,<sup>(30)</sup> and then they distribute the tasks and let the grassroots implement them. All the way from top to bottom, which part tells you that it is a people’s organisation?<sup>(31)</sup>

Such a bureaucratised working method has created discrepancies between the central/provincial level WF and the more local branches. Several women cadres voiced their concern about the WF’s disconnection from social reality, as the decision-making process at the upper-level WF and the implementation process at the county or district/street or township/village level (*qu huo xian/jiedao huo xiangzhen/cun* 区或县/街道或乡镇/村) often seem to be disjointed. When asked to elaborate on this, they often speak of fear, risk-avoidance, and political sensitivity as the underlying emotional mechanisms that explain why certain WF leaders choose to turn away from the most apparent social issues regarding women and gender. One researcher at the provincial level explained:

In 2016, I was going to assist a colleague to conduct a survey on the scale and severity of domestic violence in our province, as part of the promotion of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. But after I finished the initial planning, citing the selection and research proposal, the leader (a deputy chair of the provincial WF) refused to sign off on the paper to give us permission. She was afraid that if we discovered all kinds of data about these negative social phenomena, we might risk disclosing them to the media and outsiders and be subject to popular criticism of these “dark sides of society” (*shehui yin’an mian* 社会阴暗面). This was her so-called “political consideration.”<sup>(32)</sup>

Many WF cadres find themselves caught in the rank-seeking culture: on the one hand, they suffer from and even despise the political culture they are submerged in and within which they have to wearily comply with, please, and impress higher-ranking leaders; on the other hand, they have

also internalised the values of the ranking system and themselves long for a higher political rank and status as proof of their worth. On the one hand, this corresponds to what Jie Yang (2018) described as a distorted form of emotional labour in China’s political institutions, which is particularly demanding and often leads to mental issues among individuals working inside them. On the other hand, the WF cadres’ rank-seeking dilemma is also a projection of the increasingly dominant neoliberal norms in China’s reform era, which stress efficiency, competition, and self-reliance.

For instance, the aforementioned provincial-level cadre Ying<sup>(33)</sup> has suffered from two years of depression because of the indifferent and isolated working environment in the local WF where she works. Her opinionated and outspoken character has been disapproved of by her superior, who suspended Ying’s research projects on violence against women out of fear of popular criticism. As a solution, however, she opted for another year of hard work in grassroots communities with a county-level WF, which is generally considered a favourable experience by the Party leadership, in order to get a political promotion. She reasoned that she does not aspire to power, but a promotion could help her circumvent this specific leader, improve her working conditions, and fulfil her potential. Yet after she achieved her goal and received the well-deserved promotion, new problems arose with her new position and colleagues. At the time of our interview, she seemed convinced that another promotion in five years would be her next goal and would be the ultimate solution to all her problems.

### The professionalisation of women’s work

The problem of the bureaucratic work ethic of the WF is not a new one, and a retired reformist provincial-level women cadre, Xia, recalled that since the 1980s, liberal intellectuals within the Party had already started to reflect on the problem of the bureaucratisation of the Party-state, including Party organisations such as the WF. She was also one of them. She contended:

During the 80s, I already made speeches in the ACWF openly criticising its bureaucratic working style, and saying that it took responsibility only for the people above but not people below! The discussions were active at that time about whether it was necessary for the ACWF to continue to exist, then the discussion revived after the 1995 Women’s Conference, in terms of the possibility of turning the ACWF into an NGO. We had some good experiments and projects, but in recent years, funding was cut and no one dares to reflect on these issues anymore.<sup>(34)</sup>

Xia’s account illuminated an important transformative point of WFs’ internal evolution. During the reform era, internal self-reflection and self-criticism on how to deal with the relationship between the Party and the people has always existed within the ACWF, and this was particularly influential in the 1980s and the post-1995 period. These reflections, combined with the political opportunities created by the support of the Party-state, the animated public interest and debate, and the influence of the interna-

30. She was referring to “全国妇女儿童纲要” (Quanguo funü ertong gangyao, Program of Development of Chinese Women and Children).

31. Interview with Mei, 16 June 2017.

32. Interview with Ying, 19 June 2017.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Interview with Xia, 26 February 2017.

tional community, assisted the ACWF's high tide of institutional reformation in the period from 1995 to 2015 (Wang 1996; Jin 2001; Xiao 2004).

During this period, the ACWF, inspired to become a nationwide women's NGO dedicated to gender equality, received a large amount of project funding from international organisations to support local development projects focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment (Wang 2010). These projects not only provided necessary resources and the means for the ACWF to expand its influence, but more importantly, they brought in professional project management skills, such as the operationalisation of a conceptual goal, streamlined planning, leadership training, result evaluation, etc. These standardised project planning and execution procedures were considered precious training for the women cadres working in the WF system, who had received limited management training in their careers. For instance, when the legal department head of a provincial-level WF reflected on her career path, she said:

I studied law at university and wanted to become a civil servant after my graduation, but the WF was my only choice because it was the only department recruiting women with a legal specialisation. So, I joined the Federation without having any idea what women's work was about. I was lucky when the departmental head at that time recommended me for international projects, and the Anti-Domestic Violence Project funded by Oxfam Hong Kong was the first one (...). Now I have to say almost all my professional training and my expertise in women's activism and women's movements came from participating in these projects.<sup>(35)</sup>

The political openness since the 1990s provided a generation of women cadres with a great opportunity to be equipped with gender perspectives and project management skills. For instance, many of these women cadres<sup>(36)</sup> mobilised the political resources gained from the WF system to launch gender NGOs and developmental projects against domestic violence, to promote women's political participation at the grassroots level, and to alleviate women's poverty and promote their development (Zeng 2016: 183). Such social projects were sponsored by international funding bodies such as the aforementioned Oxfam (Hong Kong), the Ford Foundation, and various departments of the United Nations, and were executed by local WF branches.<sup>(37)</sup> Along with the inflow of project funding, new gender ideologies and social-work or project management-oriented skills opened up new perspectives, but also created internal divisions within the communist state-feminism led by the ACWF.

They were the older women cadres without international project experience who held onto the Party's official gender ideology of “male and female equality” (*nannü pingdeng* 男女平等) and believed that their ultimate mission lay in the Party's socialist initiatives. On the other hand, there is a new generation of women cadres trained by international organisations who have a new understanding of feminism and women's rights, as part of the human rights and civil society discourses. They are familiar with the theory of gender equality (*xingbie pingdeng* 性别平等), believe that cultural and social discrimination have engendered disadvantages for women, and have learned to use “development talk” to frame their work and to justify gender as a useful tool in assisting economy-focused development in China's reform era (Jacka 2006). Some of them actively challenged the working methods of the ACWF and advocated for a transition towards a more NGO-like positioning of their organisation; others insisted on the political advantage

of the institutional position of the WF. This new generation of state-feminists have mobilised all the resources possible – ranging from the media, the people's courts, policy, and the government as well as social and human resources from society. As mentioned above, their achievements were most noteworthy in their legislative work (Angeloff and Lieber 2012).

Did these international projects fundamentally modernise and professionalise “women's work” and the WF in China? Unfortunately, the scope of influence is limited because not all provinces received such project funding opportunities, and it was often only one or two departments of the provincial and municipal WF who were involved. Also, many WF leaders who were well-trained and experienced in project management chose to leave the Women's Federation to launch independent women's NGOs and social enterprises, considering the grave ideological and administrative restrictions they were facing within the WF. Most importantly, the WF's brief history of co-acting with international funding bodies depended heavily on the permission given by the Party-state and the capital and resources from international organisations (Ye 2004). Such political acquiescence and resource-dependency were easily interrupted by the fluctuating political atmosphere in Beijing or the regional perceptions of Beijing's attitude, especially in the last decade.

### Representing new women's groups

As the latest reform agenda reveals, the ACWF was also required to restructure their personnel and institutional design and to come up with new means to reconnect to and remobilise the masses and to better serve the Party's directives. Among these reform initiatives, the ACWF promised to expand its representational power to the currently under-represented ethnic minority women (*shaoshu minzu funü* 少数民族妇女), working women (*laodong funü* 劳动妇女), and intellectual women (*zhishi funü* 知识妇女) by including more of them in the National Congress and Executive Committee of the ACWF. An improvement of the departmental structure and personnel system is planned, and leadership staff are expected to leave their offices for about three months each year to go down to the grassroots and understand the needs and experiences of the female masses. However, what is being neglected here is that the proximity of higher branch leaders to the grassroots does not change fundamentally the situation of the local WFs, but on the contrary further burdens the local WFs with carrying out the reception work (*jiedai gongzuo* 接待工作) for their visiting superiors.

Another institutional innovation was to reduce one deputy chair at each level of local WF and to recruit an external part-time deputy chair (*guazhi fuzhuxi* 挂职副主席), who is expected to be a non-Party cadre and from “new” social groups such as intellectual and professional women. These new practices did lead the local WF to become more open to receiving advice and drawing expertise from external staff, but as the newly selected deputy chairs are unpaid, their efficacy depends on both their economic situation and personal willingness.

35. Interview with Dian, 24 May 2017.

36. Key figures include Wang Xingjuan 王行娟, Head of Women's Studies Institute of China (WSIC) under the ACWF; Zhang Lixi 张李玺, President of China Women's University; Gao Xiaoxian 高小贤, Departmental Head of Shaanxi Women's Federation; Liu Bohong 刘伯红, Deputy Head of WSIC; and Wang Cuiyu 王翠玉, Head of Shanghai Women Cadre School under Shanghai Women's Federation. See Zeng (2016).

37. Sipan Li, “中国版女权主义：启蒙到自觉” (Zhongguoban nüquanzhuyi: Qimeng Dao Zijue, Chinese feminism: From inspiration to self-consciousness), *Sina Blog*, March 2015, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_53ebb0a80102vdex.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_53ebb0a80102vdex.html) (accessed on 18 September 2018).

For lower-level (below provincial-level) WF cadres, the priority of the reform has been pragmatically narrowed down to two main tasks: the transformation of village-level women's congresses into Women's Federation branches (*hui gai lian* 会改联); and the establishment of WF branches in new economic organisations and new social organisations (*liang xin zuzhi* 两新组织).<sup>(38)</sup> Both signify the local WFs' organisational expansion at the grassroots level, and while the former focuses on the countryside and the village level, the latter deals with the more urbanised regions. In an official news report of the ACWF, it was shown that by October 2017 there were nearly 5.6 million new grassroots WF teams nationwide in more than 510,000 villages and communities and 33,000 towns and townships.<sup>(39)</sup> These new institutions, which were convened over a few months or even weeks, naturally faced significant challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of financial support for these new women's representatives. The absence of financial reward has led some female villagers, residents, employees, and group members to lack a sense of identity in the WF and has resulted in a questionable status for others. Yet when the upper-level WFs are pressured to complete the task of reform, the authenticity and commitment of these new organisations remain questionable.

The ambiguous concept of representation in the ACWF reform hinders its attempt to broaden its "representativeness." As Sally Sargerson and Tamara Jacka's research in rural governance (Sargerson and Jacka 2015, 2017; Jacka and Wu 2016) discussed, the concept of "representation" in China's local political contexts often remains equivocal and is used interchangeably by cadres with notions such as "guiding," "managing," and "serving." But for the WF system to substantially "represent" women's interests, they need to go beyond merely multiplying new organisations to focus on redefining qualitatively who "women" are, and what "women" need in China's last decade of reform.

## Conclusion

The mass organisation reform initiated by the Party's Central Committee in 2015 has identified a series of challenges faced by socialist mass institutions surviving into China's capitalistic society, especially issues such as the lack of representation and alienation from the masses. The reform has been central to the ACWF's last three years of work and has enacted a series of serious organisational expansions and restructuring of the local WF systems. While more time is required to fully evaluate whether such reform will help to solve the institutional dilemmas faced by the local WFs, many of the WF cadres expressed their concerns, fearing that the reform would not change an institution's culture and "ways of being" overnight. This article highlights how these organisational reforms clash with the existing institutional issues of the local WFs and the ACWF's already-existing institutional problems, include its political marginalisation in relation to the local Party-state apparatus, its bureaucratic work ethic, and most importantly, its increasing disengagement from both the people it originally aimed to represent – the female proletarians – and the new social groups that have emerged in the reform era. This problem is faced not only by the ACWF, but by all socialist legacies surviving in China's market economy and society.

The first and foremost concern of the reform has been the "re-politicisation" of the mass organisations to uphold the authority of the Party. This revives a Maoist tradition of mass mobilisations and re-prioritises the Party-mass relationship as the social foundation of the Party's rule. This new orientation has dialectical consequences for the WF's everyday work: on the one hand, it increases the WF's relative political status and legitimacy in re-

lation to the local Party-state by strategically mobilising the reform narrative, but on other hand it limits the development of state feminism by limiting ideological innovation and compromising women's interests whenever they are in conflict with the interests of the Party-state. This means that the development of gender theories and gender mainstreaming in the ACWF's work, which took a generation of women cadres' efforts in the post-1995 period, must now give way to the Party's new ideological formulations on leading female citizens to "listen to the Party's words and follow the lead of the Party" (*ting dang hua, gen dang zou* 听党话, 跟党走) and "be the Party's good daughter" (*zuo dang de hao nü'er* 做党的好女儿). Although in the short term WF cadres might be able to find a way to circumvent these political campaigns, in the long run the "politicisation" of the ACWF will further subvert its discursive power and autonomy and isolate its "women's work" from both domestic and global feminist theorisations and activism.

Another key word in the 2015 reform is the representative crisis of the mass organisations, including the ACWF. As Wang Hui (2014) pointed out, the crisis of political representation in post-Mao China is closely linked to the decline of class politics and the depoliticisation of class categories, yet the ACWF's constituency in the socialist era was by nature a politicised, massified, and proletariat-based collectivity of *funü* (妇女 women) (Barlow 1991). This representational crisis is a fundamental existential challenge for not only these mass organisations but any other forms of "socialist legacies" in China's contemporary politics. How can the ACWF then remain "the good daughter of the Party" and pursue a Maoist mass mobilisation while actively seeking to transcend its former socialist feminist constituency that surpasses class during the current reform? To respond to this representative crisis and the profound ambivalence within its self-identification and the post-socialist epoch, the ACWF has proposed a large-scale expansion of grassroots organisations in villages and other emerging social and economic structures. However, the current understanding of "representation" (*daibiaoxing* 代表性) of women in the ACWF reform has been limited to a *descriptive* approach,<sup>(40)</sup> namely by fulfilling a certain percentage of gender quotas of various women's groups such as ethnic minority women, working class women, and intellectual women in the National Women's Congress and to expand organisations that cover the greatest possible variety and number of the female population.<sup>(41)</sup> I argue that this paradox inherent in the logic of the reform and the lack of reflection on the means to a "substantive representation" of women's interests in China remain the greatest impediments to the All-China Women's Federation's coping with its representational crisis.

While more time will be needed to fully evaluate the impact of the 2015 mass organisation reform, and this article studies the main features of the

38. New economic organisations refer to private enterprises, foreign-invested enterprises, and other non-state-owned economic organisations. New social organisations refer to non-governmental and non-Party affiliated social groups, foundations, community associations, as well as unregistered NGOs. See "两新组织妇建工作概述" (Liangxin zuzhi fujian gongzuo gaishu, Introduction to WF-building work in two types of new organisations), published by a municipal-level Women's Federation, January 2019.

39. "2017年度妇联改革任务全部完成" (2017 niandu fulian gaige renwu quanbu wancheng, The ACWF completed all of its reform missions in 2017), *China Women News*, 16 January 2018, <http://paper.cnwomen.com.cn/content/2018-01/16/045597.html> (accessed on 13 March 2018).

40. Here I am referring to feminist theories that distinguish between "descriptive representation" and "substantive representation." *Descriptive* representation stresses that the *ratio* of women and men's presence in decision-making processes should be consistent and proportional to the *ratio* of their presence in the population (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999; Dovi 2002). *Substantive* representation focuses on the content of decisions and whether women's interests are taken care of by political representatives regardless of their gender (Celis *et al.* 2008; Childs and Krook 2008, 2009). For more nuanced reflections on how Chinese women's interests could be *substantively* represented, see Sargerson and Jacka (2015, 2017) as well as Jacka and Wu (2016).

41. *Ibid.*



ACWF as an essential intermediary political body in contemporary China, it also needs to be stressed that the ACWF, including its local branches, is not an automated administrative machine but is embodied by a group of women cadres who are resourceful, creative, and take initiative even when faced with the most complicated situations. Their position in a political organisation “in between” the Party and the masses and the ambiguous identity of WF cadres could also be interpreted as a strategy to maintain a flexible organisation that can survive waves of restructuring without breaking down. Even if it could be labelled as bureaucratised or professionalised, the local work of women cadres in each Women’s Federation branch and

their “ways of being” in the long term are developing a collective “ethos” that re-defines the sphere of “women’s work,” and which will hopefully in return serve as part of the institutional “resilience” during a time of change.

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