

*Feminist Contentions in Socialist State
Formation*

A CASE STUDY OF THE SHANGHAI WOMEN'S
FEDERATION

FOUNDED WITH THE ENDORSEMENT OF top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in April 1949, the All-China Women's Democratic Federation (later renamed the All-China Women's Federation, hence ACWF) was designed as an umbrella of existing women's organizations to lead the women's liberation movement in socialist China. Led by senior women Party members (the first cohort of Communist women) who had gained extensive experience in grassroots organization of women during the Communist Revolution, the ACWF went through rapid institutional development in the early 1950s, setting up local branches at each administrative level, reaching down to rural villages and urban neighborhoods. By 1953 there were already over 40,000 officials of the Women's Federation (WF) system nationwide working at and above the district level on the government payroll.¹ How was such impressive institutional development accomplished? What implications did it have in the formation of a socialist state in the aftermath of revolution? Archival research and fieldwork confirmed the pioneering role that the Shanghai Women's Federation (SWF) played in feminist organizing in urban areas. Focusing on the SWF activities around its creation of a grassroots organization, the women's congress, in the early 1950s, this chapter explicates the power-laden and tension-filled process of the WF system's institutional building. Gender dynamics and contentions were replete in "socialist state building," a grand program in which state feminists inscribed their visions with their innovative, though not always successful, struggles.

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN'S
FEDERATION IN URBAN CHINA

One month after the People's Liberation Army had entered Shanghai, on June 26, 1949, the preparatory committee for the Shanghai Democratic Women's Federation (renamed the Shanghai Women's Federation later) was established. It immediately started to investigate and register existing women's organizations in order to "unify the Shanghai women's movement." Following the program set forth at the first national congress of the ACWF and inscribed in "The Resolution on the Current Tasks of the Chinese Women's Movement,"² the SWF identified women workers as the group it intended to organize first, followed by students, teachers, artists, professionals, and, last, housewives (*jiating funü*).³ Establishing six contact lines to connect these various groups of women in Shanghai, the SWF intended to be an umbrella organization unifying all women, although with a clear awareness that its efforts might "bump and press" (*pengzhuang*) others.⁴

Indeed, the emphasis on workers as the primary target group of urban women-work, although ideologically correct, soon brought the SWF into conflict with the newly established Department of Women Workers (DWW) of the Trade Union, which regarded it as its job to organize women workers. This conflict must have been a nationwide problem, for the ACWF stepped in, in 1949, to resolve it, by specifying that organizing women workers would be in the realm of the DWW of the Trade Union but that the DWW would be a group member of the Women's Federation at each of the levels of their hierarchical systems. Although this appeared to turn the DWW into a Women's Federation branch, by making the top officials of the DWW members of women's federations' executive committees, cooperation between the two organizations was guaranteed.⁵

This model of cooperation between the two organizations, however, created a challenge for the SWF not faced by other urban women's federations, because in Shanghai, the nation's largest industrial city with a population of more than 5 million in 1949, 170,000 women factory workers were removed from their agenda. The SWF felt compelled, therefore, to actively look for an alternative constituency, a constituency that would define and legitimate its role in socialist state building. Of the twenty-two existing women's organizations in Shanghai that had been either CCP peripheral organizations or sympathetic to the CCP before 1949, the SWF had identified six *jiating funü* [housewives] organizations and had combined them to form the Shanghai

Housewives Association on August 22, 1949. Although originally ranked last among the SWF's intended constituency, it was these housewives who by their sheer numbers—more than one million—as well as their detachment from any other branch of the CCP organizational apparatus, soon became the SWF's central constituency, with the Shanghai Housewives Association becoming the basis of further organizing at the grassroots level.

Although the strategic value of organizing housewives would seem compelling on its own, it nonetheless took some debate within the SWF before it decided to include housewives in women-work. The class standing of housewives, in the perception of the CCP, was dubiously close to bourgeois; so it was necessary for officials in the SWF to stress that of one million Shanghai housewives (all women without gainful employment at the time were lumped into this category), the majority were not “bourgeois parasites” but lower-class and poor women.⁶ Appealing to Engels's theory of women's liberation, they argued that “her work is unpaid and has no significance for social production, but she is not a sheer consumer in society.” A policy of preparing housewives for their liberation was articulated with mixed themes of representing both the interests of these women and the socialist state:

The long-term goal of organizing housewives is to liberate them from subordinate positions and to engage them in social production. The immediate goal is to prepare housewives intellectually and technologically so that our society will have a large reserve labor force. Meanwhile we should raise women's consciousness and make them understand that social liberation precedes women's liberation. Therefore we should closely connect social production with our work to support the front line. We should organize housewives and send some of them to factories and other occupations. The process of organizing one million housewives will gradually enable them to participate in various production departments.⁷

The shift in the targeted constituency of the WF would have unexpected long-term ramifications. Reclassification of “housewives” would be achieved eventually in socialist China by both the Women's Federation's redefinition of the class standing of this group and the theory of women's liberation that defined those participating in social production as “liberated women.” “Housewives” thus connoted not only a group of lower-class women but also backward elements (not yet liberated) in the public perception. The irony is that by identifying housewives as its main constituency, the WF failed to gain esteem in the eyes of “liberated women,” urban professional women.⁸

Nonetheless, there were positive consequences from this shift in focus that cannot be underestimated. The identification of housewives as its organizational base led the SWF to explore new methods of organizing that had far-reaching implications. By late 1950 the Shanghai Housewives Association (SHA) had set up twenty-one district branches with individual housewives as members and through them intended to reach women in all neighborhoods. Thus, in late 1950 when the ACWF urged local women's federations to speed up their grassroots organizing by forming "women's congresses" like those that had been created in the CCP-liberated areas to organize rural women, the SWF had an organizational structure already in place to accomplish this. Women's congresses already existed in the villages where representatives were elected to a "congress" that in turn elected an executive committee to manage routine work relating to women. These women's congresses were representative bodies responsible for expressing local women's demands to the government and, in turn, explaining government policies to them. As such, it was hailed by CCP women leaders as the best organizational form for connecting women broadly and democratically. With the CCP's power extending to urban areas, the ACWF hoped to establish women's congresses in cities as well as a new institutional base for a unifying national women's movement.⁹ The SWF was quick to see the utility of its neighborhood-based housewives associations in this endeavor. Thus the chair of the SWF, Zhang Yun (1905–1995), a Communist woman among the first cohort CCP feminists who had been a leader of women-work since she joined the party in 1925, sent out work teams of SWF officials to selected neighborhoods to explore new methods of organizing women in urban areas.

At the same time, however, the municipal government began implementing a "mode of spatial organization" to organize the unemployed, self-employed, and nonemployed and placed its Department of Civil Administration in charge of organizing residents in Shanghai lanes¹⁰ and streets into residents committees, constituted, initially, mostly by male residents. A district government branch, called the "street office," was set up in each precinct of a public security station to supervise approximately ten residents committees. And then, in December 1950, the SWF also decided to establish its grassroots organizations in the precincts of public security stations. In less than one year, women living in 10,009 lanes elected a total of 42,900 representatives and 6,000 chief representatives, and 120 housewives committees with 1,300 members were established. Was the scene set for another "bump and press" in the neighborhoods?

At first, at least, the SWF at the neighborhood level worked seamlessly with the municipal government's efforts to organize residents committees. The CCP's creative ritual of mobilizing women was a well-developed practice in the Party's long history, dating back to the early 1920s, of mobilizing the "masses." What deserve our attention are the responses of women. The archival documents and memories of interviewees reveal that women were highly enthusiastic about participating in SWF mass rallies. In 1951 the Shanghai municipal committee requested that the SWF mobilize women for its "central work," which at the time included a patriotic campaign against American imperialist intervention in Korea, suppressing counterrevolutionaries, promoting production, and improving state finances. A municipal directive called for a mass rally and parade on March 8, International Women's Day, with the theme of protesting the U.S. re-arming of Japan, for which the SWF successfully organized over 300,000 women, of whom 250,000 were housewives. The internal report reveals that many women joined the parade spontaneously.

Laoza District underestimated the number of participants. They thought five thousand women would come out, but actually ten thousand did. Among them were elements with complicated backgrounds such as prostitutes and bar maids, who created a sensation among the spectators. Although we originally decided not to ask old women to participate, there were also sixty- to eighty-year-old women traipsing along with the parade. There were also women parading with their kids. The spectators were so numerous that they crowded into the street and pressed the six parade lines into three lines. The police and guards were so busy keeping order that they were soaked with sweat.¹¹

Although the theme of the parade was patriotism and anti-imperialism, interestingly, the report commented on its effect on women's empowerment. "Participants in the parade all felt that women have power and status now. Even men said, now women are a big deal. The Communist Party truly has its way, and even women are organized by them."¹² Leaving the praise of the Party aside, it is still clear that the parade had a gender overtone that both women and men recognized. If the CCP intended to use women to demonstrate popular support for their politics, women were also quick to utilize the new government power to cross gender and class boundaries. Parading in a public space with official endorsement, women in households and women of various subaltern groups all symbolically staged their legitimate position in the new political order. A patriotic parade carefully designed by the CCP was

thus appropriated by women of different social backgrounds to produce political meanings important to them.

The parade had its special meaning for the SWF, too. From the beginning the SWF regarded it as a golden opportunity to mobilize women. Its plan for the March 8 celebration consciously aimed at combining the parade preparations with further organization of a representative system of women in residential areas. SWF's work did not rank high on the municipal agenda and ranked even lower at the district level. The municipal Party committee's attention and support was therefore a great opportunity not to be dismissed. Equipped with a mandate from the city authority, SWF officials were able to utilize district resources and assistance to extend its reach in neighborhoods and reportedly identified 5,792 new women activists in the process. Proceeding rapidly in the favorable political atmosphere, the SWF completed establishing the neighborhood women representative system and housewives committees in late 1951, which laid the institutional ground for the formation of women's congresses in the following year. Needless to say, the impressive performance of women on March 8 enhanced the stature of the SWF in the eyes of the municipal authority as well as the public. It demonstrated that the SWF had a large constituency and an important function in socialist state building.¹³

By 1952 the SWF was ready to restructure its neighborhood organization by replacing chief representatives and housewives committees with a women's congress in the jurisdiction of each residents committee (the local organization of the municipal government). Women representatives elected by women in several lanes on the same block or adjacent area (usually with about five to six thousand residents) formed a women's congress. They in turn elected a women's committee that paralleled the residents committee. By early 1953, women in Shanghai lanes and streets formed 1,684 women's congresses with 16,964 members of women's committees and about 50,000 women representatives. Since then the women's congress has remained the grassroots organization of the SWF.¹⁴ Zhang Yun's pioneering work in creating urban women's congresses and in organizing housewives was acknowledged by her supervisors. In 1953 she was promoted to the position of vice chair of the ACWF. Significantly, in 1953 its "Resolution on the Future Tasks of the Women's Movement in the Country" emphasized that work on housewives was an important part of urban women-work. Also in 1953 the revised Constitution of the ACWF specified clearly that the women's congress in rural townships and urban streets was the basic organizational unit of the

national organization.¹⁵ Thus in the first few years of the PRC, state feminists completed the institutionalization of a women's movement led by the ACWF.

This brief introduction to the development of the SWF inevitably fails to adequately capture the intensity and excitement experienced by SWF officials and housewives representatives in those days, encouraged undoubtedly by the pageantry the SWF displayed in establishing a women's congress. In order to attract housewives to the first congress meeting and to make elected representatives proud of their new identity, the work teams would advertise the agenda of the meeting, which usually included talks by the district head and leaders of the SWF and special shows by professional performers. On the day of the congress meeting, housewives in each lane were organized to send their representatives away with fanfare. "The representatives all wore silk red flowers on their chests, walking in an orderly line, entering the auditorium. Behind them, teams of gongs and drums and *yangge* followed into the auditorium with drum beating and dancing. Every representative had a smile of pride and pleasure on her face."¹⁶ Inside the auditorium, colorful silk flags were hanging all over and flowers were displayed on the platform. In some districts, representatives donated over one hundred silk flags and dozens of flower vases to celebrate the convening of the women's congress. But women's enthusiastic response could, at times, dismay SWF officials. One work report criticized, "Although it was the representatives' wish to celebrate the founding of their own big family, it was still too extravagant and wasteful . . . Shanghaiense like to fuss in a grandiose style."¹⁷

FUDAIHUI (WOMEN'S CONGRESS)—A PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE

The Women's Federation, nationwide Trade Union, and Youth Association systems have usually been perceived together as arms of the centralized state that enjoyed institutional security in socialist China. The assumption neglects a history of precarious existence for the Women's Federation system, a history that sets it apart from the other two organizations and sheds light on gendered contentions in the socialist state. The story of securing its grassroots organizations—the women's congresses—epitomizes the tensions this gender-based organization aroused in the early days of state building.

The SWF's rapid development of grassroots organizations among housewives in 1951 generated ambivalent responses from different branches of the municipal and district governments. Anxiously exploring the ways of local

governance in the big city, the municipal authority recognized the value of SWF's housewives associations; for when officials in the Public Security Bureau, the Department of Civil Administration, and the district governments were puzzling over whom to organize and how to approach residents, the Women's Federation at the level of each district had already hosted frequent meetings and workshops to train women representatives as grassroots activists in their neighborhoods. The gender-specific women's congresses with their emphasis on women's special needs were much more attractive to women than the early neighborhood organizations dominated by men. If a residents meeting was called by the male-dominated neighborhood organization, few women would attend; but if the meeting was announced jointly with the women's congress, many would.¹⁸ Because male residents were an unstable force for neighborhood work due to their higher employment rates and because many had dubious political or social histories pre-1949 and were therefore considered untrustworthy, housewives became increasingly valued by the government both for being a stable workforce in their neighborhoods and for their political "purity." Thus, the municipal government emphasized the importance of mobilizing housewives for neighborhood work and recognized the SWF's large role in organizing housewives to fulfill the Party's "central work."¹⁹ In fact, many women representatives of the women's congresses were elected to the newly established residents committees and even, in time, came to predominate in their membership.

Neighborhood work, a new term associated with the CCP's urban reorganization, encompassed all dimensions of urban management. Various orders and demands by different government branches were passed down through street offices to reach residents committees within their jurisdictions. A 1953 government report described the tasks of a street office:

Its major work is the campaign. After the campaign concludes, there is still much work to finish. Besides that, the civil administration section requests it to work on relief and help families of military personnel and martyrs. The health section asks it to work on street sanitation, public hygiene, and immunization. The culture and education section asks it to run literacy classes and investigate the situation of school-age children. The district People's Court asks it to work on accumulated cases. The district Political Consultative Committee asks it to send out meeting notices and to report on how well representatives to the People's Congress connected with residents.²⁰

The long list of tasks for residents committees also included collecting property and land taxes, rent, and scrap bronze; helping to sell insurance,

local products, movie tickets, and patriotic bonds; fixing hazardous houses, dredging sewers, and repairing street lamps and wires. In short, neighborhood work covered everything in urban life except the production of commodities. Within the boundary of the miniature city—the neighborhoods—tens of thousands of housewives stepped out of their domesticity and broke gendered boundaries by engaging in all sorts of work in civil administration and public security. Many parts of the city saw an increasing physical presence of women who were “running” neighborhoods as, literally, “domesticated” social spaces—spaces that a few years earlier had been associated with gangland violence. Moreover, these highly efficient local managers worked without pay. In other words, identifying housewives for neighborhood work, the CCP found the most economical and effective way to address myriad pressing issues early in its experience with urban governance.

Nonetheless, although the SWF’s role in mobilizing housewives for neighborhood work was initially valued by the government, its emphasis on women-work soon encountered problems. Facing the emergence of residents committees, the SWF’s strategy in 1951 had been to place their officials in leading bodies at district and street levels doing neighborhood work and to select women representatives to work in residents committees. However, the SWF organized housewives not simply to fulfill the Party’s “central work.” An important component of women-work was to address women’s special needs, such as women’s health and childcare, and to provide literacy classes and vocational training as a means toward women’s liberation. Women’s congresses were the vehicle for such women-work. But to the dismay of many enthusiastic SWF officials, they soon found that male officials in street offices and district governments were reluctant to deal with demands raised by SWF officials on issues relating to women’s welfare. Although the SWF emphasized that its women’s congresses were parallel organizations to the residents committees and should in no way be subordinated to or controlled by the latter, the residents committees swiftly became more powerful with their direct ties to district and municipal governments and public security bureaus. The SWF officials found the territory they first entered now being claimed by someone else.²¹ Wu Cuichan, who was the director of a district Women’s Federation in the 1950s, recalls, “When I was in the district, I worked with pilot sites in neighborhoods. I helped neighborhood Party secretaries and residents committees with their work. Thus people in the street office would welcome you. I could not singularly work on the women’s congress. If I only stressed the work of the women’s congress, people would see me as a

nuisance. . . . In our contact with the street offices, to use an unpleasant term, we had to act obsequiously. They had power but we didn't."²²

Department of Civil Administration (DCA) investigative reports described the women's congress and the residents committee as competitors who "vie for cadres, for the masses, and for work. If this one holds a meeting, the other will hold a meeting, too. . . . Even when both have worked on a task, they fight over who would give a talk on the work. Each regards itself as the one who accomplished the most."²³ Dealing with the messiness in neighborhood work became high on the DCA's agenda. Apparently, women in the women's congress did not see themselves or their organization as secondary to the residents committee. Moreover, this competition at the local level was paralleled at the municipal level; although the SWF never considered its role secondary to the DCA, SWF officials were keenly aware of unequal relations at play in their daily work. Now, not because women's congresses were emphasizing women's special interests, but rather because they refused to play a subordinate role in carrying out "central work" in neighborhoods, they also became a nuisance to the DCA.

Wu's memory of an SWF official being seen as a nuisance by male officials is well substantiated by many documents in the SWF archives. On September 13, 1951, the chair of the SWF, Zhang Yun, wrote a letter to the municipal Party committee, revealing that there was already strong sentiment against the SWF's work. The letter was to report on the consequences of a talk by the municipal leader Liu Xiao, with an apparently critical tone.

Liu Xiao in his talk suggested that the Housewives Association should concentrate on resident work in the neighborhood. We all think this is a glorious task. But because he did not make clear the relationship between work with housewives and other work, some party secretaries and directors of districts told district Women's Federation officials, "From now on you should not agitate for autonomy [*nao dulixing*]. Comrade Liu Xiao said clearly that you should concentrate on neighborhood work." Such opinion reflects that some cadres have inadequate understanding of why we need women-work, why women should have their own independent organizational system, and why we should show concern for women's special issues, and so on.²⁴

More than male officials' resentment toward women-work, what was at stake here was that male officials were denying the necessity of a women's organization. Significantly, in less than two weeks the municipal committee sent back a conciliatory reply to Zhang Yun's letter. Although it largely missed the point of her protest against male officials' hostility toward the

SWF, it did instruct district committee members that if they misunderstood Liu Xiao's talk and obstructed the SWF's work, the municipal committee should be informed so as to check and correct such behavior.²⁵ This exchange is remarkably revealing of the relaxed political atmosphere within the Party in the early days of the PRC when women Party officials felt safe to raise criticism of their supervisors. The daring criticism by women officials would disappear shortly when political campaigns intensified, especially after the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 when criticism solicited by the Party leaders for the improvement of their work would become criminal evidence of anti-Communist Party activity. In 1958 Wu Cuichan was demoted for her "rightist tendency" simply because she had complained that the district Party committee had not paid enough attention to the SWF's work.

The opportunity for the DCA to restrain the women's congresses came in 1953 when the municipal government began a campaign to "rectify residents committees." The campaign was to purge impure elements from residents committees as well as fugitives from the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries who were taking refuge in residential areas. The DCA used the campaign to resolve the problematic relationship between residents committees and the women's congresses. It called for "a unifying leadership" in neighborhood work and created regulations that defined women's congresses as integral but subordinate to residents committees. The chair of a women's congress should be the deputy director of a residents committee in order to coordinate work between the two organizations; but the women's congress was no longer allowed to conduct any concrete work on its own initiative beyond conveying women's demands to the residents committee and carrying out tasks assigned by the residents committee. In 1955 the municipal government formalized the DCA's regulation in an official document, "Tentative Regulations on the Organization of the Women's Congress in Shanghai Neighborhoods."²⁶

It is not clear if the SWF top leadership tried to resist this redefinition of the women's congress and its relationship to the residents committee that regulated its subordinate position in the administrative structure. What is revealed in the SWF's work reports is that the major setback was taken hard by many of its officials. A dispirited sense of "inferiority" seemed to suddenly emerge, which led to the SWF leaders' repeated criticism of officials' complaints that women-work was not valued and was inferior to other work or was meaningless. Addressing women officials' "inferiority complex" (*zibei sixiang*) appeared high on the SWF's agenda. Special meetings were held to

help women officials understand the “seriousness and peril in such thinking.”²⁷

The rising sense of “inferiority” was not only an expression of women officials’ negative experience in seeing the women’s congresses’ role curtailed and subordinated; it was also generated by the confusion over the nature of women-work and the crisis over the SWF’s identity following its defeat by the DCA. The SWF was formed for the double purpose of mobilizing women to carry out the Party’s “central work” and protecting women’s interests. In the first few years of the SWF, the part of women-work that served women’s interests included literacy education, vocational training, formation of small-scale cooperatives, finding employment opportunities for poor women and women with skills, providing information on women’s health and infant care, publicizing the new Marriage Law, mediating domestic disputes that jeopardized women’s interests, and so on. By the end of 1952, 40,000 women entered gainful employment through recommendations by the SWF. By mid-1956, 69,000 women in neighborhoods had become literate and 360,000 were in literacy classes. Although the SWF’s accomplishments in this aspect of women-work were impressive, its major efforts were in support of the Party’s central work. Large-scale mobilization of women called for patriotic donations for the Korean war (evidently housewives’ donations financed eleven fighter jets), reporting on counterrevolutionaries hiding in neighborhoods, participation in the five-antis campaign (by admonishing their husbands to be law-abiding),²⁸ support for the state-planned economy by not making a run on commodities controlled by the government, purchasing government bonds, and participation in the general election for the People’s Congress. In order to obtain housewives’ support for these “central” tasks, a major part of local SWF officials’ routine work was to raise women’s political consciousness. Newspaper reading groups, study workshops, and activist training sessions were regular activities organized down to the neighborhood level via the women’s congresses.

This lopsided work pattern that placed more energy on the Party’s “central tasks,” a result of the SWF’s having to follow Party directives, did not go unquestioned by women officials. In the biannual summary report on the SWF’s work in the second half of 1953, the section reviewing its weakness contains a revealing paragraph:

Because we have not done a good job on improving our cadres’ work, the Women’s Federation cadres sometimes do not have adequate understanding

of the important significance of raising women's political consciousness and improving their organizational capacity through campaigns. They often express doubts, such as, "It is correct to mobilize women to participate in the central political campaigns called by the Party. But what have women gained through these campaigns? What have they given to women? What can we say about our special work for women?" After discussions on the second National Women's Congress, and after repeatedly reviewing our work for the general election campaign, cadres generally have improved their understanding in this respect. Still we must educate them again and again.²⁹

These forceful critical questions by women officials cited with quotation marks contrast sharply with the vague generalization of "improved understanding." Instead of presenting a routine self-criticism to its superior—the municipal Party committee—the paragraph could be read as the SWF's top leaders' euphemistic way of conveying to the Party authority women officials' critical voices and discontent about being unable to focus on work relating to women's immediate needs. At the same time, the passage confirms that it was a common strategy for SWF leadership to use the Party's campaigns of "central tasks" to consolidate its organizational building.

If the SWF top leaders had misgivings about mobilizing women for the Party's central work because it overshadowed the work for women, they had more to worry about after the DCA placed the women's congresses under the residents committees. Inside and outside the SWF, questions emerged about the necessity of the women's congresses because they performed the same tasks as the residents committees; some even suggested that the women's congresses should be incorporated into the residents committees. The SWF's emphasis on the Party's central work, therefore, turned out to prove the redundancy of the gender-based women's congresses. Seeing the legitimacy of its grassroots organizations challenged, the SWF leaders took pains to present a coherent and legitimate identity of the women's organizations while attempting to justify its concession to the residents committees. In many talks given to local women officials, the SWF leaders made great efforts to explain the necessity of having a women's organization at the grassroots level. The primary reason was what later became a familiar story to people in the PRC: that women had been the most oppressed group in the old feudal society; that even though women's lives changed rapidly in the new society, feudal remnants still remained; and that a women's organization was needed to educate women to fight against feudalistic thinking and to protect women's rights in their struggle against feudalism. "Feudalism" in this context was

defined entirely in terms of oppressive and backward gender norms and practices.

The explanation of the relationship between women's oppression and the need for women's organizations often sounded negative in its depiction of women. One talk went on at length to describe how women's long-term deprivation of any rights resulted in "their narrow-mindedness, conservative stance, dependency, lack of courage to struggle independently, lack of desire for advancement, lack of common sense, slowness in comprehending new phenomena, and lack of concern for things around them." A women's organization was needed to educate them and raise their consciousness so that they would be able to become a crucial social force in the construction of socialism.³⁰ As the deputy secretary of the SWF Guan Jian insisted, "The residents committee is mainly to address residents' welfare issues, whereas the women's congress is a political organization that constantly fights against feudal ideology. It seeks women's thorough liberation along with the implementation of the Party's general line. This task is not what the residents committee can fulfill."³¹ As one SWF official explained, "In the past there were two systems of organizations in neighborhoods. Although they seemed to be two organizations, they had the same functions. Our women's organization did not have our own routine work. Moreover, in the central campaigns women cadres just played the role of a residents committee's cadre, without thinking from women's perspectives."

The idea of an autonomous women's organization with its own distinctive role to play at the grassroots was appealing; however, that was not the direction the SWF could take because declaring such autonomy would be political suicide. So in the same talk, this SWF official had to warn against that kind of enthusiasm. "We do not mean to separate from the residents committee now. In fact, although we have two sets of organizations, we still have one set of work. What distinguishes our work is only the perspective." She went on to explain what the different perspective meant. The examples given were all gender-specific services such as providing childcare for women who joined parades (the residents committee was responsible only for mobilizing women's participation); or, when mediating domestic disputes together with the residents committee, the women officials should approach the disputes from the perspective of protecting women's and children's rights.³² In such detailed demarcations of difference between the two organizations, the SWF gingerly but clearly advocated a woman-centered approach as the principle for the women's congress. Thus, retreating from the center stage of neighborhoods, the women's congress nonetheless acquired a more conscious gender identity.

The controversy over the women's congresses in Shanghai certainly alarmed Zhang Yun, who was now the chief executive official of the ACWF. In 1955 she organized the first national conference on urban women-work. Speaking to the delegates, she did not hesitate to directly confront the situation in Shanghai and other cities undergoing similar experiences.

Since residents committees were established in a few cities, some male and female cadres began to think of eliminating the women's congress at the grassroots level. This thought is not right. The residents committee is an autonomous mass organization of residents guided by the street office. The object of its work includes all male and female residents. The realm of its work relates to common issues and common demands of residents. Because the ideas and practices of valuing men over women still exist in our society, women still confront special problems in ideas, work, and personal life. Therefore, we must have a separate women's organization specialized in women-work. The women's congress is the grassroots organization of the municipal and district women's federations. Because the women's organization should not be eliminated, certainly its grassroots organization should not either.³³

Apparently, to Zhang Yun in 1955, the women's congress in an urban neighborhood was no longer simply an organization to reach housewives but a solidly established component of the institution of the Women's Federation. The idea of eliminating the women's congress was absurd in the eyes of the top ACWF official who had worked hard to build the federation's institutional bases nationwide. Opponents of women's congresses justified their position by referring to a 1954 formal regulation on residents committees, issued by the central government, that specified formation of women-work committees as a constituting part of the residents committees. To this challenge, Zhang Yun's reply was firm and clear. If any neighborhood found setting up a women-work committee within the residents committee generated organizational repetition and waste of resources, then it meant the residents committee's women-work committee was unnecessary. "They may advise the local government not to set it up." The message was simple: whatever you do, don't mess around with the grassroots organization of the Women's Federation. Zhang Yun added authority to her defense of gender-based women's congresses at the grassroots with a quote from Lenin without specifying its source. "We need appropriate groups, special mobilizing methods, and an organizational format to conduct women-work. This is not feminism. This is an effective means for revolution."³⁴

Not everyone heeded the ACWF leader's adamant words. In 1956 the branch in the Shanghai People's Congress that managed local administration

formally proposed a bill to eliminate women's congresses and to set up women-work committees under the residents committees as stipulated by the 1954 Regulations on Residents Committees. The Shanghai Women's Federation appealed to the authority of the ACWF and reported the issue to Cai Chang, chair of the ACWF, Zhang Yun, vice chair, and Luo Qiong, a member of the executive committee of the ACWF, when these top women leaders visited Shanghai that year (their timely visit might have been a planned action to lend their prestige to the SWF as well as to settle the disputes over the women's congress). Cai Chang—who had joined the CCP in 1923, held a party seniority surpassing any official at the municipal level, and whose husband was Vice Premier Li Fuchun—at a meeting with the top officials of the municipal Party committee, the People's Congress, and the SWF gave a long talk on the women's congress, directly addressing three proposals: merging the women's congress and the residents committee, eliminating the women's congress, and totally separating the women's congress from the residents committee. She defended the women's congress by appealing to the Party line: "It is not only beneficial for the work of the Women's Federation; more importantly, it helps to consolidate the connection between the Party and the masses and to consolidate the basis of the people's government."³⁵ Following this line, the women's congress should cooperate with the residents committee while clarifying its own functions. Cai gave detailed instructions on sorting out the institutional mess in neighborhoods that further confirmed the Women's Federation's presence along with the other two major municipal branches, the People's Congress and the Public Security Bureau.

With the senior leader Cai Chang's decisive support and advice, the SWF resisted the move to eliminate the women's congress. Moreover, the SWF requested that the municipal government give the same financial support to the women's congress as it did to the residents committee and that women's congress executive committee members should receive the same subsidies as the residents committee members. The municipal Party committee might have had a better sense of the relationship between the women's congresses in Shanghai neighborhoods and the ACWF that was led by top CCP leaders' wives. It accepted the SWF's requests. But the battle was not over. In 1959, when mobilizing women in neighborhoods for the Great Leap Forward became the main job of the street Party committees, suggestions to eliminate women's congresses emerged again. The SWF had to engage in justifying the necessity of its grassroots organization all over again.³⁶

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TUG-OF-WAR OVER THE
WOMEN'S CONGRESSES

What can we make of this tug-of-war over the women's congresses in the early 1950s in Shanghai? In what ways does it complicate our understanding of gender and the socialist state and "state feminism"? Most visibly, the story demonstrates that the relationship between the Women's Federation system and the Party was far from a one-dimensional story of subordination and dominance. The Women's Federation was no doubt an organ of the Party, and Women's Federation officials were firmly identified with the Party's goal of socialist revolution. However, their identification with the Party did not exclude the possibility of expressing their own gendered visions of a socialist state. Indeed, the early days of the PRC witnessed diverse visions of a new China inside and outside the Party. Women in the Party thought their long-awaited moment had finally come: women's full liberation in the new socialist China. Despite the limitations in their conceptualization of women's liberation, women Communists, especially those working in the Women's Federation, took it as their task to fulfill the Party's promise of women's liberation in socialism. The vision and methods of organizing housewives, as demonstrated here, were not granted by some abstract state patriarch but grew out of the Women's Federation officials' initiatives. The move to establish the women's congresses clearly expressed the top Women's Federation leaders' urgent sense of creating an institutional foothold for women in the incipient stage of a new state. With the Party's mandate of social reorganization, the Women's Federation grabbed the moment to make its own institutional claims in the social transformation. The landscape of a socialist state was thus inscribed with women's vision and accomplishments that are all too often overlooked or mistaken as the deeds of the state patriarch.

Exactly because of the Women's Federation officials' keen awareness of gender conflicts and gender hierarchy in the formation of the socialist state, they were constantly looking for opportunities to enhance the status of the women's organization and to gain institutional power. Understandably, the time when the Women's Federation had the most power and resources was when the organization was most useful to a particular central task of the Party. As a result, the Women's Federation repeatedly demonstrated its faithfulness to the Party by enthusiastically throwing itself into the Party's central work. This pattern, disappointing to feminist observers, was in part a result

of a conscious strategy theorized by senior CCP women leaders. In this regard, Deng Yingchao (1904–1992), a feminist leader since the May Fourth era who had joined the CCP in 1925 and married Zhou Enlai the same year, demonstrated her political prudence by playing a central role as a feminist strategist in the CCP.³⁷ In a talk to the Central Women’s Committee in 1948, even before the founding of the Women’s Federation, she elaborated on this strategy of emphasizing the central task when clarifying the nature of the Women’s Committee. It was to be an advisory unit with full freedom to do research and make suggestions, rather than a governmental policy making or executive branch. The committee should assist with general policies and ongoing campaigns and issues; only in this way “will our suggestions be timely and be considered by *others*” (*italics mine*). Timing was especially important.

In general, we should proceed with a consideration of the effect, not with our subjective enthusiasm. When we estimate that a suggestion won’t be accepted, we should rather postpone it. At the same time, we should grab the right moment. That is, we should be cooperative, have a focus, foster and prepare for the right moment. A suggestion will be effective only when the time is ripe and we calculate *others* may accept it. (*italics mine*)

Following these instructions, Deng gave a concrete example of an effective intervention by the Women’s Committee. The resolution of the land reform conference in 1947 included the importance of women-work after a long period of silence on the subject by the Central Committee. How did that happen? Deng explains:

- (1) At the time of the retreat from Yan’an, assisting in land reform, [we] asked the Central Committee in its telegram to local branches to request that they pay attention to women-work and collect material on women.
- (2) Before the opening of the land reform conference, [we] first sent a notice to each representative, asking if they brought the material on women and telling them [we] hope they would include women-work in their land reform work report to the conference.
- (3) [We] organized talks by representatives. Therefore, of 29 people reporting on their work, 19 talked about their women-work and mentioned the importance of women-work.
- (4) [My] own speech was after the 19 representatives’ talks. This is much more powerful than if I had shouted and yelled all by myself.

- (5) After the land conference, [we] held a meeting of the Women's Committee, sent out a telegram drafted by five WC members, and published a newspaper editorial on the subject.
- (6) To further improve and consolidate our work, [we] proposed to hold a conference on women-work in December.³⁸

Significantly, in the Chinese text the sentence describing each action is without a subject, which I note in my translation with square brackets. Subconsciously or not, the speaker was covering up her manipulative role behind the scenes by leaving out the subject of action. Agency is nevertheless expressed in the Chinese text in conveying a clear sense of careful plotting, a tone of secrecy, and a marginalized subject engaged in a subversive act. Similarly revealing in Deng's language is that she often used "others" to refer to male power holders. Even though the whole talk was "politically correct," in the sense that Deng emphasized that women-work had to be a part of the whole of the Party's central work, the use of "others" obviously indicates the presence of a gender awareness of "us" vs. "them."

Similar to Deng Yinchao's manipulative moves during the land reform policy-making process, ending with a drastic increase in rural women's participation in land reform and obtaining equal rights in land redistribution,³⁹ the SWF's active role in the CCP's reorganization of Shanghai also resulted in a rapid development of the Women's Federation's urban grassroots organizations. These cases demonstrate the agency of Communist women doing women-work and explicate gender negotiations within the Party power structure. More significantly, these cases reveal a pattern of the Women's Federation's strategy that has so far received little scholarly attention.⁴⁰ From land reform, the 1950 Marriage Law, and paid maternity leave, to the law to protect women and children's rights in the post-Mao reform era, every pro-woman policy or legislation resulted from women officials' successful maneuvering behind the scenes, rather than from some favor granted by a benevolent patriarch. The CCP's on-again, off-again emphasis on women's interests, observed by many feminist scholars, was not because the Party was simply unable to make up its mind, but rather was the result of successful or failed feminist maneuvers within the Party. In the least congenial political circumstances, CCP feminists adopted an inactive stance on promoting women's interests and withdrew to the bottom line of survival by following the dominant Party line. When the political atmosphere changed and new opportunities emerged, they would swiftly jump at the opportunity to raise women's

issues and to expand and consolidate women's organizations. "State feminism" in the Chinese socialist state, after all, is no less an expression of feminist contention within the state than it is in capitalist states.

The Women's Federation's enthusiastic work with housewives also led to redrawing gendered social spaces in socialist state formation. Historically, the local administrative system—*baojia*—had been run by men, and many neighborhoods in Shanghai had been gangsters' spheres. Mobilized by the SWF, women stepped into the male space and became managers of local governance and community service in socialist China. In 1954 women already constituted 54.6 percent of the members of residents committees and the percentage has kept increasing to well over 80 percent in Shanghai in the post-Mao era. Extending their domesticity to the management of the "socialist big family," these women turned neighborhoods into a female space.

Along with a gendered transformation of social spaces was the construction of new identities for many of the women involved. Many a lower-class woman who had been a subaltern by both gender and class became a speaking subject for the first time in her new role as a neighborhood cadre. As an example, the words of Wu Xiuying, daughter of a dockworker, expressed her meaningful experience of becoming a neighborhood cadre, "Oh, the happiest moment was when I organized residents to tour the newly built China-Soviet Friendship Palace. I was truly exhilarated! I organized several hundred residents, all housewives!"⁴¹ Leading housewives through a prestigious public space had deep symbolic meanings for her. Both her class and her gender could no longer exclude her from entering the social space to which she could not have belonged a few years before. She also emphasized the big meetings at which she was the honored speaker. "My husband went to a conference held by the East China Bureau. I was invited to give a talk about women's liberation. . . . Many of the attendees at the East China Bureau conference were quite high-ranking cadres." Explaining her devotion to neighborhood work, Wu emphasized, "I never thought of quitting, because I felt extremely happy. We women have power now. We can speak. In the old society, other people would say, 'You step to the side! I want to talk to your man! Go back into your house!' Women had no status. No one wanted to talk to you. . . . Thinking I can speak to the leaders, I can attend all kinds of meetings, how happy I was!" Transformed from a voiceless working-class housewife who was brushed aside rudely by men to a vocal cadre who had a public presence, Wu regarded those early years in the 1950s as the most cherished time in her life.

What should be emphasized here are (1) that the WF played a large role in making women into “state subjects,” a point stressed by some feminist critics in and outside China; and (2) that such state subjects, like the socialist state formation, were not made entirely according to a prescribed masculinist script (if there were such a script), but embodied tremendous contestations between gender and class at both institutional and individual levels. The contentious process produced empowered “subjects” such as Wu Xiuying. And feminists with state power were pivotal in such empowering process. In an interview with two veteran SWF officials, Wu Cuichan and Cao Shunqin, when Wu described how male officials in local governments sniffed at women-work, Cao cut in vehemently: “That is why we need a women’s organization!” Cao listed various strategies the Women’s Federation deployed to subvert the male monopoly of power in different branches of government, for example, creating the March 8 Flag Bearer (*sanba hongqishou*) in 1960 as a measure to break the male monopoly of “labor models.”⁴² “No one would fight with us over March 8,” she emphasized with a cunning smile.⁴³

The SWF’s contestation with masculinist power was not only expressed in what they did, but also in what they did not do. Zhao Xian, who succeeded Zhang Yun as chair, mentioned her disagreement with the pronatalist policy of the Party in the early 1950s. “At the time the Party emulated the Soviet Union, calling upon women to become glorious mothers. The Soviet Union lost half of its population in WWII. But China had a large population. Women had to go out to work. How could they be glorious mothers? So we did not advocate that women become glorious mothers.” (It was this interview that explained why I never came across any reference to “glorious mothers” in the SWF’s files.) Unfortunately, the quiet refusal to follow the Party’s policy in this case did not go unnoticed. It was listed as one of Zhao Xian’s “mistakes” in 1957 when she was labeled a rightist and removed from her position.⁴⁴ Yet this meaningful example would have gone unnoticed by this historian focusing on what the SWF *did*, were it not for Zhao Xian’s recounting of what meant so much to her. How many more such quiet resistances by women have been buried in history?

CONCLUSION

The WF feminists’ contentions in the beginning of the socialist state formation took place in a unique political context. In the early 1950s the heritage

of the May Fourth feminist discourse combined with Engels's theory of women's liberation, provided leverage for Communist women to maneuver for gender equality in their capacity as state officials led by the CCP. In contrast, in the West the emergence of state feminism was in the context of autonomous feminist social movements. Although a feminist discourse that had long been an integral part of the modernity project in China was not necessarily less powerful than political pressure from a feminist movement, the WF officials were, nevertheless, constrained by a history of the CCP's suppression of "bourgeois feminism" and an institutional structure that placed them in a subordinate position. They would always find themselves walking a fine line between advocating women's interests and being named "bourgeois feminists" for seeming to insist on the primacy of gender issues. Their intense efforts to theorize the relationship between women-work and the Party's "central work" reflected WF feminists' keen awareness of this central dilemma. In short, Communist women's legitimate fight for women's equality coexisted with the real danger of stabs in the back for that very fight.

This unique paradox largely explains the strategy of Communist women's intervention as well as the puzzle that such intervention has long gone unrecognized. To make a feminist maneuver effective, it was best to do so under the rubric of the Party's "central work" or statist projects, unnoticed by masculinist leaders. This *politics of concealment* was most clearly articulated by Deng Yingchao, who in her 1948 talk had this advice to women officials: "Because we cannot do women-work singularly or in isolation, the accomplishment of women-work cannot be expressed as a singular and isolated phenomenon either. Therefore, we should work in the spirit of a nameless hero."⁴⁵ Pursuing effective results in promoting women's interests within a male-dominated state system, therefore, required not only *disguising* feminists' real agenda but also *concealing* the actual agents who were actively and discreetly maneuvering behind the scenes. The necessity to be a nameless hero (appropriating CCP terminology again) speaks volumes about the treacherous political environment in which inside feminist agitators functioned. The clandestine behaviors consciously adopted by state feminists bear a striking similarity to subordinate groups' "hidden transcripts" theorized by political scientist James C. Scott in his study of domination and resistance.⁴⁶ But in the case of Chinese state feminists, the subordinate group based on gender situated inside the state power as part of the new ruling class further complicates the task of analysis.

A few points involved in excavating the *politics of concealment* should be highlighted here. First is the issue of discerning hidden feminist agendas embedded in non-gender-specific Party programs enthusiastically supported by state feminists. Evidence of their commitment to statist projects is abundant. Wendy Brown's caution against state-centered feminists' possible production of "regulated, subordinated, and disciplined state subjects" makes tremendous sense in the Chinese context.⁴⁷ Still, what is illustrated here is not an either / or case. The mixed effects of subversive actions coded in compliant language deserve our attention, a subject that will be further examined in the following chapters.

Second, the official discourses state feminists appropriated in the socialist period were not necessarily masculinist or anti-feminist. In fact, the CCP's discursive commitment to an egalitarian socialist goal was the source of feminists' discursive power. More specifically, CCP's agenda of anti-feudalism was most effectively deployed by state feminists in their massive contentions in and outside the state that resulted in the feminist redefinition of a key word in socialist China's political discourse. In this case, operating in a politics of concealment, state feminists nonetheless became co-authors of the dominant state discourse.

Third, the WF officials' subordinate status was not fixed but rather quite fluid contextually. Cai Chang's successful intervention in Shanghai reveals that provincial officials were subordinate to this ACWF leader in the Party's hierarchy based on seniority of Party membership in addition to the administrative hierarchy. Equipped with seniority of Party membership and informal power, the first cohort Communist women could utilize an uneven power structure with multiple hierarchies to push for their agenda behind the scenes. We will see that when second and third points listed here disappear in the post-socialist era, the dynamics between the ACWF and the Party will change accordingly, even though the institution persists.

Besides displaying concealed feminist contentions, the tug-of-war over the women's congresses can also be read as part of a process of demarcating institutional boundaries in the formation of the socialist state. Political scientist Timothy Mitchell suggests that we "examine the political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced." He emphasizes: "We must take such distinctions not as the boundary between two discrete entities but as a line drawn internally, within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained. The ability to have an internal distinction appear as

though it were the external boundary between separate objects is the distinctive technique of the modern political order.²⁴⁸

Although Mitchell's object of analysis is the postwar capitalist state, his insights are useful for thinking about the formation of the Chinese party-state. In the initial stage of building a state apparatus, various CCP branches had to negotiate and define their territories. By specifying the subordinate role of the women's congress to the residents committee, the municipal government drew a distinct line that curtailed the institutional capacity of the SWF and defined the secondary status of this "mass organization" to government branches although they were in the same Party. The SWF's summary of its work in 1954 reveals its recognition of such institutional containment in these words: "We have now further clarified the nature of women-work and found the correct method of women-work (mainly *assisting* work [*peihé gongzuo*]). We must conscientiously work on what we should do. For that which should not be done by the Women's Federation we should suggest the concerned party do. We have reduced our blind enthusiasm in our work."²⁴⁹ Regardless of its needed service to mobilize housewives and its proved capacity to work with women in neighborhoods, the Women's Federation was simply not allowed to play the leading role in local governance. This was the first hard lesson for the Women's Federation officials who were blindly enthusiastic about women's full and equal participation in socialist construction. At the institutional level, unequal gender relations in the Party were naturalized, consolidated, and legitimated by the internal distinction between the "government" and the Party-led "mass organization," a distinction full of ambiguity but nonetheless taking on "the appearance of structure" in the socialist state.

This CCP-sponsored nongovernmental women's mass organization apparently does not fit existing conceptual categories of women's organizations. It is within both the state apparatus and the local communities. It is to represent the interests of both the state and women masses. Recalling their work in the 1950s, veteran Women's Federation officials in interviews all insisted that the Women's Federation was a mass organization, not a branch of government. Wu Cuichan, who had worked both as a local government official and a Women's Federation official at different times, summarized the difference between the two most succinctly. "They had power, but we didn't." In other words, Women's Federation officials have always seen themselves as working outside the government, *assisting* the government but without governmental power. The Women's Federation officials' emphasis on their

nongovernmental status is not a new pretext invented for the 1995 Fourth U.N. Conference on Women in order to attend the NGO Forum. Rather it is substantiated by a long history of producing and maintaining boundaries between the government and the “mass organizations” in the CCP’s power structure.

The ambiguous location and elusive identity of the Women’s Federation system paved the ground for complicated dynamics and multiple power relations operating in the daily practices of this gender-based organization that aimed to serve as a “bridge” or “linkage” between the Party and women. The impulse and heritage of mobilization of women at the grassroots to enable their democratic participation in revolutionary processes, theorized in the Party as the mass line, would be aligned in the formation of an increasingly centralized socialist state. Situated inside the socialist state structure, the ACWF nonetheless often acted like a lobbyist maneuvering behind the scenes to intervene in policy-making processes. Epitomizing a historical process full of contradictions, challenges, and contestations of moving from a grassroots-based revolutionary group on the margin to the state power holders, the ACWF had to deal with an extra dimension of conflicts that was central to its existence. When gender conflicts and masculinist authority’s disciplinary power were expressed at the top echelon of the Party, that would be the real moment of crisis for the ACWF packed with the first three cohorts of Communist women with feminist consciousness. We will see that along with an accelerated tempo of socialist revolution in the following decade, these state feminists would confront grave challenges constantly.