

How do popular Chinese women's organisations meet social needs that the state doesn't cover?

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Abstract

This paper will focus on state-society relations in China, the ideal and the reality, through a case study of the Domestic Violence in China, Research, Intervention and Prevention Project (hereafter Network against Domestic Violence). In contemporary Chinese society, various popular women's organisations meet social needs that the state doesn't cover. These organisations represent a unique, close combination of research and direct action, tailored to meet both official requirements and popular (often women's) needs. The Network against Domestic Violence addresses a sensitive and 'recent' subject through their activities, and I wish to examine how they develop their projects, what kind of activities they run, and how they respond to 'new' issues in society. Through cooperation with other parts of society, such as the health system and the police, the Network aims to improve women's situation, and promote a different view of gender relations in China than the dominant one. The Networks fluid relations to ACWF and other state bodies provide the organisation with both legitimacy and recognition for its work, however, what kind of tasks the popular women's organisations should perform in society is an ongoing debate.

Introduction

Feminism in China has been a hot issue since the UN Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995. International activists and researchers have thoroughly described the growth of a Chinese feminist movement, or wave, consisting of a large variety of popularly initiated women's organisations alongside the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). There has been substantial research focusing on the relations these organisations have with ACWF - the official state representative concerned with women's issues. The research has identified fluid borders between popular activism and central power structures, and many popular initiatives receive acknowledgement from state structures for covering areas and needs that the state organisations have ignored. Gao Xiaoxian (in Hsiung et al. 2001) claims there is a space for popular women's organisations in China, but this space is not institutionalised. The space each organisation obtains is dependent on individuals, and on what kind of strategies that are applied to ensure funding and legitimacy.

Milwertz (2002) states that variations in structure and registration make it more interesting to look at the processes and relations within and between organisations. With new focus on particular feminine disadvantages in the Chinese society such as discrimination on the job market, reduction in political representation, and traditional views on gender relations, I wish

to study the Domestic Violence in China, Research, Intervention, and Prevention Project (Network against Domestic Violence). This organisation works with sensitive issues in cooperation with different state bodies and various women's organisations. So how does the organisation detect new needs in society, and how do they go about responding to these needs? Who is involved in the making of new projects, and how does the state react to this activity? With this project I would like to find the answer to some of these questions.

Following this introduction where I have outlined the background for this paper, and the issues I wish to discuss, I will look at the dominant Western and Chinese views on the relations between state and civil society. I will then move on to describe the Chinese feminist movement of today, and my research case study– the Domestic Violence in China, Research, Intervention and Prevention Project. To sum it up I will present some methodological thoughts concerning my fieldwork.

State and civil society

The most dominating feature of the Western perception of civil society is its absolute independence of the state. This sharp division has its origin in the Enlightenment era where civil society was seen to be an independent source of moral. More recently, experiences from Eastern Europe in the 1980s have been interpreted to show how civil society can stand in opposition to the state, and overthrow it if necessary. Andersen & Kaspersen (2000) state that in the West civil society is not used in the fight against totalitarian regimes, but grows as a consequence of public dissatisfaction with the state and markets' capability to solve social problems such as unemployment, environmental problems, and ethnic conflicts. The manifestation of this wide range of interests is usually seen in grassroot movements and other kinds of associations. Civil society is often linked to normative perspectives and political ideas of democracy. This is why there are so many different opinions on what civil society ideally should be like. All the differing views have one common perception of civil society; it should be a sphere for spontaneously organized social life that rests on voluntariness, and open and free communication of ideas (Andersen & Kaspersen 2000).

Tysdal (1998) does not agree with the common understanding of the relationship between state and civil society where independent organizations secure democracy and social welfare in opposition to the state and its institutions. She believes that organizations desire some

relations to the state and its institutions, at least enough to receive financial support. Even though the organizations are formally independent, the state regulates their activities. At the same time the state guarantees for the freedom of organisation and expression through the legislative system. Depending on the goodwill and the collaboration of government, the interaction between the state and the voluntary organizations will vary. Therefore, the border separating the state from the civil society is not static, but fluid and varies over time (Tysdal 1998).

The Western debate on civil society has largely been built on the stereotypic idea that civil society should operate completely independent of state and government. Supported by neo-liberal thought that advocates the reduction of the state to a minimum, this view has achieved to portray independent Non-Governmental Organisations as the only key to a well-functioning society. However, NGOs are rarely totally independent, and in a Chinese context this perspective is simply not relevant as the bureaucracy aims at controlling most organised activity. Many researchers and activists in the West wish to attribute the growth of popular women's organisations in China to the development of a civil society, and the subsequent democratisation of the Chinese state. And even though Chinese feminism is strongly influenced by international, and particularly Western, feminist thought, this view represents a simplified version of recent developments.

In an ideal-typical Marxist-Leninist system, civil society does not exist. The state includes everything. The Chinese state, through the Communist Party, has had a monopoly on organising the masses since 1949. Differing interests have been organised through a wide variety of organisations with very close ties to the state and Party – the mass organisations. Every group and organisation in China has to be registered, often with a mass organisation, and indirectly approved of by the Party. The control is tight, and unregistered organisational activity is considered illegal. Nonetheless, there has been a considerable increase in popularly initiated grass root organisations. This is partly due to the introduction of market forces to the Chinese economy. The economic reforms have had adverse effects on society. Social differences and unemployment have increased, but at the same time new organisational space has opened and given room for a larger diversity of organisations. Many of the new organisations are formed to counteract negative effects of the reforms, and they mirror the heterogeneity of the populations' interests.

The Chinese state is changing, but it still wants to stay strong and in control. To accomplish this there still has to be limitations to the development of civil society. The state itself has taken the initiative to establish several organisations to control and limit the consequences of the economic reforms. Brook & Frolic (1997) calls this state-led civil society, and they see a parallel to how Taiwan and South Korea managed society during their economic expansion. The state-led civil society is a strategy where the state cooperates with certain organisations on specific projects while the organisations at the same time get enough autonomy to develop more independent projects. The Chinese state of today has limited capacity to transform society, but most parts of civil society do not see themselves very different from the state, and their interests are largely concurrent (Lieberthal 1995). Civil society does not have a real opportunity to demand changes in the current situation, for that the state institutions are too strong.

The All-China Women's Federation is the only mass organisation for women in China. It consists of a hierarchical network with branches on every level from the national to the village. Women's groups on all levels are almost always full or associated members of the ACWF. The ACWF works to promote women's liberation in the Chinese society through cooperation with other mass organisations, or by running independent projects through their own network. The organisation also suggests amendments of Acts to ensure that women's formal rights are recognised. Women's liberation in China has largely been the monopoly of ACWF, however, recently this monopoly is challenged in many ways. Women organise themselves to a larger extent in other kinds of organisations, such as social welfare groups and professional associations. In addition to this, the organisation's members are changing; the women are younger and more educated, and this makes it more difficult to unite all the ACWF members in the same projects and behind the same slogans. Because the ACWF is closely attached to the state, the organisation has a unique opportunity to encourage women's liberation from above. At the same time this connection limits the organisation's freedom of action as state interests always come first (Zhang 1999). Even though the ACWF has represented women's interests since 1949 there have been few real changes to women's status in the Chinese society. Only in contemporary society has women's rights and the breaches of these received any widespread attention.

The new Chinese women's movement

Several of the 'new' women's organisations in China received a lot of attention in relation to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. This was mainly because of Western media, donor organisations, and politicians who almost automatically link the existence of a diverse civil society to the development of democratic government. Nonetheless, it is excellent that the Chinese population is given increased opportunities to organise themselves according to their interests, and thus counteract negative trends in society. The greatest growth in organisational activity has been within the women's movement. This could be because women's liberation is not considered very threatening to the state.

The new wave of women's organisations is characterised by women who organise of their own initiative, by innovative understanding, knowledge, and inter-organisational practice (Milwertz 2002). The women's organisations are not entirely new, they are a continuation of older movements. What's new is the feminist activists' manifestation of the fluid borders between state institution and civil society. The activists can be found both inside and outside of the ACWF structural network, as some of the founders of the women's organisation are members of the Communist Party and work for ACWF or other state institutions. Those who initiate the organisations are often urban academics or professional women (Milwertz 2002), and the aim of organising is to meet women's immediate needs when they find themselves marginalized because of economic reforms. Another goal is of course to improve women's status in society, to inform of women's rights, and to influence politicians to acknowledge feminist issues when drafting new legislation.

Despite numerous new initiatives, the ACWF is still by far the largest organiser and representative for women's interests in China (Milwertz 2002). The mass organisation's attitude towards local initiatives varies from cooperation to conflict depending on whether the new organisation is considered a threat or not. Organisations who run projects that overlap the work of ACWF are rarely allowed, and the new type organisations are not allowed to be too big, too popular, or too influential either. The individuals that initiate the organisations, and what strategies they chose to employ, decide how much operational space the organisation is given. By registering, an organisation becomes legitimate and is given a certain degree of autonomy in the choice of activities. The decisions of which organisations that obtain a registration depend on the contemporary political climate, and on personal contacts (Milwertz 2002).

The relations between Chinese women's activism and the country's centralised power structures are unique because the border of what is allowed, when and where, changes continuously. The organisations' status in relation to the ACWF is constantly reviewed according to the floating borders. Activists use deliberate strategies to pass over the web of rules and borders of the ACWF and other state institutions (Hsiung et al. 2001). However, the desire to bend the rules of registration is often due to functionalistic considerations. The organisations exploit the space created by the ACWF, and they employ several different cooperative strategies to complete their projects. They can plan and carry out some activities, such as educative courses without assistance or approval of the ACWF. More extensive projects can be executed in cooperation with the ACWF as an approving authority, or as a real gathering of resources.

Women's organisations have no real institutional power because there are no formal political channels for their work (Milwertz 2002). Protests, demonstrations, and boycotts are ruled out as methods in the process of creating attention and discussion around the issue of women's liberation. To be able to manoeuvre in the political context the organisations use indirect and non-disruptive methods. They copy the state's own forms of action, such as stands in the street or squares to make their methods irreproachable. Some organisations chose to make closer ties with state institutions to achieve an even greater legitimacy and space. Milwertz (2002) has identified three main objectives the popular women's organisations have for seeking increased contact with state institutions: The wish to influence those who shape the politics into focusing more on women's rights and gender equality, to influence the institutions to accept popular forms of organisation, and a wish to change discriminatory practice in society through education on women's rights.

Domestic Violence in China – Research, Intervention and Prevention Project

The Domestic Violence Network is a unique network consisting of women's organisations and groups both from Beijing and other parts of the country. Usually, popularly initiated organisations are only allowed a limited geographical diffusion, but this network enjoys more liberty than most of the other women's organisations. This is partly because the Domestic Violence Network is registered with China Law Society that controls organisational activity less frequently than the ACWF does. China Law Society is the national association for

lawyers and judges, and is therefore an equally formal attachment to the state as the ACWF. The Domestic Violence Network works to fight domestic violence that hurts women, children and elderly people. The organisation provides personal counselling, information on specific rights and laws, and works towards changing the prevailing discriminative attitudes in society. The Domestic Violence Network cooperates often with other women's organisations to reach a larger audience. They also cooperate with the police and hospitals on educative projects because these institutions frequently get in contact with victims of domestic violence.

The general level of knowledge in China concerning domestic violence is quite low as the subject has been taboo for a long time. It used to be considered a family matter. To achieve attention for their cause, the Network draws actively on their contacts, and they employ a human rights discourse to emphasise their point on equal opportunities (Milwertz 2002). They also use the media actively to distribute information on legal rights, and the organisation has updated and informative home pages on the Internet that journalists frequently search to find background material for their stories. The Domestic Violence Network has established contact with international researchers within a wide range of disciplines. This is because some of the organisation's members are professors and researchers in the science of law, medicine, sociology, and psychology, in addition to being activists and social workers (Domestic Violence in China: Research, Intervention and Prevention Project 2002). Many of these resourceful individuals are also members of the Communist Party, something that also contributes to further independence in the development of new projects.

In addition to rendering practical services to those in need, and fighting discriminatory attitudes in society, the Domestic Violence Network lobbies legislative and judiciary powers to reduce the gap between the officially declared gender equality, and the actual, everyday discrimination against women. Through contact with women who share their experiences, the organisation gathers information that is used for research. This information allows the organisation to develop services tailored to the specific needs of the Chinese society. The Domestic Violence Network also uses elements of the information they receive in campaigns to break the taboos surrounding the subject. Illustrating reality like this is the only way to start a thorough debate that can lead to real changes in society.

Methodology

I have received a scholarship to study Chinese language at a Chinese university for 11 months, starting in September 2003. This stay will give me a thorough understanding of the Chinese society that I can take advantage of when I begin my fieldwork in September 2004. I will also need to adjust my project according to the reality I face as this paper is mostly based on the pre-fieldwork reading I have done. I will aim at conducting semi-structured interviews with key staff and volunteer workers in the Network against Domestic Violence, as well as with journalists, researchers and others with strong views on the work of Chinese popular women's organisations. The semi-structured approach will allow me to compare differing views/answers while at the same time letting the conversation develop more 'naturally' and perhaps include aspects I haven't considered. My knowledge of Chinese language after one year of study will be inadequate to conduct the interviews myself. I will attempt to employ an English-speaking university student to interpret both questions and answers, and to transcribe the interviews afterwards. However, I do expect to master enough of the language to be able to exchange civilities with my informants, and to control the interpretation and translation of some of the answers given.

My questions will focus on how the Network against Domestic Violence detects 'new' needs in society, and how they are able to respond to them. Furthermore, I will look closer at the organisations' role in society, how they cooperate with other women's organisations on projects, and learn from each other's experiences. If allowed, I will try to participate in some of the work the organisation performs in order to be considered less of a 'stranger' than I normally would. This approach will also give me valuable insight that I can use to make my questioning more relevant. I have chosen to do this as a case study to be able to maintain a narrow focus and to look at the case in greater depth. Generalisation will thus be difficult, if not impossible, but this has to be sacrificed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the popular women's organisations in the complex context China provides.

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