THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN CHINA:
SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORIES AND THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

by

Linh Yen Trinh

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Department of Political Science

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The women's movement in China has experienced salient growth and development over the past two decades. Since the introduction of economic reforms in the late 1970s, it had begun the process of moving from being a dependent, state-led entity to becoming a more separate and autonomous one. This paper examines the factors that have transpired within the movement that have given rise to this development. Specifically, three factors will be explored: the shifting emphasis between the concepts of sameness and difference at various times throughout the history of the movement; the issue of agency – the proactive versus reactive nature of the movement; and, the renewed and expanding role of the All-China Women's Federation (a mass organization within the state structure).

The social movements approach will be used to analyze these factors. This approach lends itself well to the examination of the complexities that have characterized the transformation of the Chinese women's movement, especially if a synthesis of the various theories within the approach is carried out. The synthesis I will employ in this paper will take the form of a multi-level analysis of the movement's development – in particular: the macro- (the broader environment and structures encountered by women), micro- (the changes occurring within women themselves), and meso- (the participation and action of women) levels. A multi-level approach will not only reveal the peculiarities of the Chinese case of the women's movement, but will also show how the confluence of the various factors at each level has contributed to its increasing independence since the beginning of the Reform era. Ultimately, I would argue that analyzing the Chinese women's movement through the lens of the social movements approach could aptly inform debates and discussions about the prospects and process of change that has been taking place at a rapid pace in modern China.
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Chapter One: Introduction

If you go to China today, you may not recognize any signs of a women's movement. There are no demonstrations on the streets or in the schools; no women are loudly declaring their resistance to men and society; no such words as women's movement even appear in the media. Women's study groups and activities, however, are quietly permeating people's lives. Without statements, slogans, and other radical actions, the women's movement in contemporary China is emerging, and its influence is felt not less but more than any women's movement yet in Chinese history (Li and Zhang, 1994: 150).

This observation, made by Xiaojiang Li and Xiadian Zhang, challenges the fairly recent remark made by a well-known Western feminist that there does not exist a women's movement in China. This is simply not the case if one takes into consideration the massive changes in Chinese women's rights, status, and activities in the mere span of less than a century.

In fact, the subject of women and women's issues have been important features of Chinese history since the late 1800s. Women have been, in some form or another, active participants in most of modern China's national struggles and revolutionary projects. In her exploration of the many faces of Asian feminism, Amrita Basu notes that “[n]ationalist movements often provide the first opportunity for women's political activism,” and that women’s movements tend to emerge in countries where women have been active in powerful nationalist movements (Basu, 1995: 6). The Chinese women’s movement is especially instructive in this regard. If it were not for the state's insistence that women join in China's nation-building efforts, they would not have been as “free” to explore the outer realms of the private sphere as they have been.

The various national movements have afforded Chinese women the opportunity, however limited at times, to begin the process of realizing their oppression in the
centuries past, and take part in their “liberation,” providing for the emergence of a nascent women’s movement. Interestingly, this early form of the movement was sanctioned by the state, and thus had countervailing effects: on the one hand, it took on a mien of legitimacy that encouraged women to be agents in their own liberation; on the other hand, however, support from the state meant that it was ultimately to be co-opted by the state, thereby precluding any independence on the way that their liberation was to be realized. For the most part, the latter effect overshadowed the former, resulting in a “state-led” Chinese women’s movement.

This initial form of the Chinese women’s movement fits into one of Nanette Funk’s two models for women’s movements in general. The first model is characterized by “a change in the totality through the transformation of the particular,” as has been the case with the second wave of the women’s movement in the United States, where the movement of women transformed society. The second model is exemplified in the movements of Eastern and Central Europe and the former USSR, where it was “the transformation of the totality that created the possibility for a transformation of the particular” (as summarized in Zhang and Xu, 1995: 44). The Chinese women’s movement in its early years falls into this latter category; women’s equality and liberation were contingent upon the equality and liberation of everyone in society, which certainly accords with the socialist line of thought prevalent in China. Women’s status benefited from the manipulations by the state to bring its citizens into the revolutions needed to transform the whole of society, but it also served to bind the movement closer to the state, hence reestablishing the former’s dependency on the latter.
With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the Reform era, which had ushered in considerable economic, political and social changes, the women's movement was forced to undergo significant changes. This paper provides an analysis of these changes, arguing that they have contributed to the movement's shift from being a dependent, state-led entity to being a more separate and autonomous one. This analysis consists of three main parts.

In the first part, in chapter two, I will present a brief overview of the Chinese women's movement as it traverses its way through history, from the turn of the century, to the Revolutionary years under the leadership of Mao and the CCP, to the current Reform era. This overview gives a contextual background for my ensuing analysis of the aforementioned changes that have given rise to three factors contributing to the development of a more autonomous women's movement in China.

In chapter three, the second part, I will introduce an approach to analyzing this development: the social movements (SM) approach. This approach is conducive to the examination of the complexities that have characterized the transformation of the Chinese women's movement. Arguing for a blend of the theories within this approach, I will set out the manner in which I will carry out my analysis in the following chapter.

In the final part, in chapter four, a multi-level analysis of the movement will be carried out, bringing into stark relief not only the utility of a blended theoretical approach to the study of social movements, but also the confluence of factors that have contributed to a more independent Chinese women's movement.

I will conclude my paper by revealing how the case of the Chinese women's movement can provide a different angle from which to observe and research the process
of change still taking place in China today. It presents an interesting puzzle that necessitates further investigation, promises thought-provoking research, and exposes important implications.
Chapter Two: The Women's Movement in China

The women's movement in China can be traced as far back as the turn of the twentieth century. Since then, it has manoeuvred itself deftly through the oft-times rocky terrain of the Chinese historical landscape. Although, as Ellen Judd points out, “[w]omen and women’s issues figured significantly in most of the major initiatives and movements of the twentieth century” (Judd, 2002: 3), it has only been in the last two decades that the movement has experienced salient growth and development.

In this chapter, I will present a general overview of the Chinese women’s movement, discussing its advances and hindrances. In doing so, I hope to accomplish three inter-related objectives. One, I will show how the development of the Chinese women’s movement is intimately tied to the development of China. Two, as a result of this, I will show how the form and character of the Chinese women’s movement is very different from that of the West. Ultimately, my third and principal objective will be to discuss what I believe is the main turning point in the movement, which began in the late 1970s, and the fundamental changes that have ensued since then, lending credibility to the claim made by Maria Jaschok, Cecilia Milwertz and Ping-Chun Hsiung that “[a] new phase in the history of the Chinese women’s movement has taken shape.” (Jaschok et al., 2002: 3).

The Early Years: Women from the Turn of the Century to Revolutionary China

It was during the reform movement of the mid-1890s that the issue of women was first publicly discussed, albeit by men (Zhang and Wu, 1995: 27). In their efforts to strengthen China and raise her to the level of wealth and power seen, at the time, to
characterize European and American societies, these male reforming intellectuals sought
to cultivate one of China’s ‘undeveloped resources’: women. They believed that
“...China could never become strong while in each generation boyhood years were
predominated spent in the company of ignorant and crippled womenfolk” (Croll,
1978:45, 46). Hence, this cultivation took the forms of a movement against footbinding
and the argument for the education of women. The focus on these two issues, while
undoubtedly advantageous for women at the time, was nonetheless merely part of a wider
movement to reform what was “backwards” China. This trend of subsuming women’s
struggles into the wider revolutionary struggles of the nation continued into the decades
that follow.

The May Fourth Movement (1915-1921) once again brought women’s issues into
the spotlight, with new demands that included marriage reform; the eradication of such
feudal practices as polygamy and concubinage; women’s employment and education;
prostitution; and fundamental legal reforms affecting women’s suffrage and property
rights (Gilmartin, 1994: 199; Li and Zhang, 1994: 138). Alongside the open discussion of
these issues, various women’s groups and organizations were formed and numerous
women’s magazines were published. Although increasing numbers of women became
active participants in this distinctly “feminist” movement, an overwhelming majority of
the activists and reformers were male, and “…male intellectuals played the main roles as
the leaders of the movement” (Li and Zhang, 1994:138). In a vein very similar to their
turn-of-the-century predecessors, these male intellectuals set their advocacy of women’s
liberation within the context of the general liberation that was occurring in China during
this period. In the course of the nation’s simultaneous struggles against foreign
imperialist powers and domestic Confucian and feudal traditions, the emancipation of women became synonymous with national and social emancipation (Lin Chun, 1997: 13). As such, while the Chinese women's movement had gained substantial ground in terms of having their concerns publicly acknowledged and discussed, it became obvious that their problems and issues were not the end goals in and of themselves. Essentially, what motivated the male intellectuals in their quest to liberate women was “...their desire to change Chinese society and make China a stronger nation” (Yuhui Li, 2000).

The following years saw various gains for the women's movement. Special women's sections were set up within the political apparatus of the state. In only its second year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1922 established a women's bureau; and during the period of the United Front between the CCP and the Kuomintang (KMT) (1923-1927), a Women's Department was set up. This department spawned women's unions, reaching far into the countryside, serving to educate and mobilize women (Park, 1995: 140).

In the legal arena, the KMT (after its split with the CCP in 1927) adopted a legal code securing women equal inheritance rights (1930), and revised the criminal code allowing women freedom of marriage and monogamy (1933). The CCP, being relegated to the countryside at the time, also ventured into marriage and land reforms, establishing its first marriage law in 1931. The CCP went even further and established “...a political and economic quota system for women...so that “every local party should do its best to reach the goal set up by the Central Committee which requires that women cadres in the movement should occupy one-third to two-thirds of the party positions” (as quoted in
Park, 1995: 141). These legal and political gains were certainly a boon for women at the
time, but the backlashes that followed prevented any real enforcement of the gains.4

These years also saw the large-scale involvement of women in China’s nation-
building project. Women were called upon to actively participate in the national war of
resistance again Japan (1937-1945). From such rallying slogans as “...’Form a united
front against Japan to save the nation’ and ‘women can emancipate themselves only
through participation in resistance’” (Croll, 1978: 176), it was clear that, once again,
women’s liberation was contingent upon the nation’s liberation. Even so, this active
involvement of women in society led to a burgeoning of women’s organizations across
the country, fostering coalitions among groups of women and promoting women’s
interests (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 28). This active role by women became even more
pronounced in the Revolutionary Period in China.

Revolutionary China (1949-1978): Women Hold Up Half the Sky

Between the years 1949 and 1978, with the establishment of the People’s
Republic of China (PRC) under the leadership of Mao Zedong and the CCP, the Chinese
women’s movement experienced rapid development. The new government’s official
discourse on the women question was primarily drawn from the earlier May Fourth
feminist discourse, the nationalistic fervour that had its beginning at the time of the
CCP’s inception (1921), and Marxist theories (Zhang and Wu, 1995: 29; Wang Zheng,
1997: 129; Gilmartin, 1993: 305). The first two sources ensured that the CCP continued
to commit itself to the eradication of women’s subordination and, in doing so, fulfilling
its nationalist goals of strengthening and modernizing China. The third source gave the CCP a theoretical base for these objectives and a workable strategy for their realization.

Upon assuming power in 1949, the CCP “...faced the formidable task of economic reconstruction, political consolidation and re-establishing social order” (Howell, 2002: 44). To accomplish these tasks, the CCP dedicated itself to:

...a second revolution – the transformation of China’s backward agrarian society into an advanced socialist society. In Marxist-Leninist terms, the first steps toward that goal were the destruction of class relationships that had prevailed in traditional China, the expropriation of private property on behalf of the proletariat, the transformation of the agricultural sector along socialist lines, and the extraction of rural “surplus” to fuel urban industrialization and development” (White, 1994: 252)

For Mao and the CCP, the role of women figured prominently in this goal and these strategies for its attainment.

Derived from a Marxist class analysis, they saw the problem of women as having two sides; women were not only generally oppressed by men, but the women proletariat also shared the oppression of the men in their class. This observation aided the CCP in two ways. In one way, it gave the CCP a much wider base of support for its revolution by ensuring the participation all women, in particular the large number of rural women in China. In the second way, it provided them with an indicator of the goal’s progress. Essentially, “...the changing position of women was to be an index or symbol of the general historical and social progress...quoting the words of Marx: ‘the degree of the emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation’” (Croll, 1978: 118). Thus, echoing the trends of the past, women’s struggles were, once again, situated into the larger class struggles of society.
Informed by the unique “Chinese” blend of May Fourth feminist, nationalist, and Marxist discourses, the CCP began to introduce drastic legal, economic and political changes which would have dramatic impacts on women in Chinese society. In this respect, the Chinese women’s movement experienced rapid development under the CCP.

**Legal, Economic and Political Gains**

Legally, the period of CCP rule under the direction of Mao saw important gains for Chinese women. Firmly committed to ensuring equality between men and women, the CCP, in its basic law (implemented upon the establishment of the PRC), stated: “The People’s Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life” (as quoted in Yuhui Li, 2000). This decree manifested itself in the adoption of two legislative documents in the areas of family law and land reform. These two areas were believed to be key in their endeavor to transform the traditional Chinese social structure.

According to Chen Yiyun, “[w]hether one traces back through China’s history and traditional culture or investigates the social realities of contemporary China, one discovers that the fate of Chinese women is always tied to their marital and family circumstances” (Chen Yiyun, 1994: 69). Hence, it was logical that the Marriage Law was promulgated in 1950. This law “...emphasized equal rights and the right to free-choice marriages and divorce...It ended arranged marriages, polygamy, concubinage, buying and selling of women, child betrothal, and infanticide. It granted men and women rights to divorce, remarriage, property, and inheritance” (Park, 1995: 145). Through this
law, women legally gained marital autonomy, a huge feat in light of the centuries of patriarchal marriage practices that characterized Chinese society.

Equally important was the Land Law of the same year which reformed the allocation and ownership of land. The change in the distribution of land, to one based on the number of members in a family, allowed for the equal allocation of land between female and male family members. Indeed, if the family consisted entirely of women, they themselves became the 'masters of their own soil' for the first time (Hall, 1997: 11). This law also gave women the right to procure land equally with men. Even more than granting women equal legal rights, these land reforms also fundamentally changed women's economic status.5

These legal rights gained by women were not only achievements in themselves, but they also revealed the important role that national campaigns played in China to inform the public, and to mobilize support and implementation of new legislation throughout the country (Croll, 1983: 2). Thus, "[m]ore than three million CCP cadres were trained to implement the new laws" pertaining, in this case, to marriage and land (Park, 1995: 145). These campaigns were important in two respects. In one respect, they provided a venue where women were educated on their rights and were made aware of the recourse available to them through the law. In the second respect, the reach of the campaigns meant that even women in the furthest rural areas of China had the opportunity to be informed. Both features of these campaigns, and campaigns in general, are important elements in the later development of the Chinese women's movement.

Economically, women's roles in this period expanded exponentially. This expansion was predicated on the belief that "...paid employment outside the home was
the key to liberating women and building a society based on genuine gender equality...[Thus, in the cities at least], it was the rule, not the exception, for women to work” (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 243). As such, the level of employment for urban Chinese women reached almost universal levels under the CCP leadership. To illustrate, a survey conducted in Nanjing indicated that: whereas, 29.1% of women were employed before 1949, 70.6% of women married between 1950 and 1965 were employed, and 91.7% of women married between 1966 and 1976 were employed (Bauer et al., 1992: 350 – citing a survey done by Pan Yunkang et al.). As various scholars have remarked, the number of Chinese women in the labour force at that time had far exceeded that of most Western countries and other developing Asian states (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 243; Ping Zhuang, 1999: 2; Bauer et al., 1992: 333; Yuhui Li, 2000).

Although, this large-scale participation of women in the work force did not exactly translate into the liberation of women as Marxist theories had predicted, it did serve to pull women from their “traditional” place in the home, the private sphere of society, and propel them into the public sphere. In this public sphere, women were able to become wage earners, not merely dependents of their husbands, therefore giving them a degree of independence, and a sense (even if false) of “liberation”. In Lisa Rofel’s examination of the different meanings of liberation for different generations of women in China, she reveals how the Marxist discourse on women and labour (interpreted through the CCP) had created a dichotomy between being enslaved by domestic chores – the “inside” – and being emancipated through participation in “work” – the “outside”. Through this dichotomy, women were able to empower themselves; they were able to reverse the terms of pride and shame, and move from the social bottom of society (as
women who worked outside the home were relegated to) to a place of prestige – as revolutionary liberated women who were at the forefront of societal change (Rofel, 1994: 236-237).

Linked to women’s economic position in China is their education. Mao and the CCP regarded education as being vital to the modernization process of China and took measures to improve the status of women in this regard. The policy measures of promoting equal educational opportunities for girls and extending primary school education to the rural areas proved to have a considerable and lasting impact for women. Moreover, considering “...the extremely low levels of literacy and the large disparities between the sexes before the revolution, China’s early and consistent commitment to mass education has greatly benefited women of all regions” (Bossen, 1999: 305). Research into female education in China revealed two periods where there were peaks in the progress of female literacy. Both peaks took place in the years of Mao and the CCP rule: the first peak occurred between 1951 and 1957, and the second occurred between 1970 and 1974, during which literacy grew at a rate of 3.5 percent per year for both periods (Lavely et al., year: 70). The CCP’s open acknowledgement of women’s low educational levels, and their ensuing policies to correct the problem, contributed to the overall steady and continuous increase in women’s education levels. According to Lavely et al., the education of women is “...widely recognized as an important indicator of social development and the status of women” (Lavely et at., year: 93). Thus, this is definitely a positive step for the women’s movement.

During this period, women were also actively encouraged to cross over the private/public divide through political participation. To this end, the CCP had been
instrumental to the women’s movement. The political domain had, until the CCP’s emergence into China’s political landscape in the early 1920s, been strictly a male one where women’s formal access to political roles was denied (Gilmartin, 1993: 312). When Mao and the CCP ascended to power, they initiated strategies of official quotas and programs of affirmative action to accelerate the involvement of women in politics. This was amplified even more dramatically during the Cultural Revolution, a period considered by various scholars to have been a breakthrough, even if temporary, of women’s political roles (Rosen, 1995; Wang Qi, 1999; Howell, 2002). Thus, women began to make their presence more numerically palpable at both the lower, local levels and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the higher “elite” levels.

The various campaigns in the early CCP years, as well as the drive for economic reconstruction and land reform, drew large numbers of women into local leadership positions in both rural and urban areas, namely in the people’s commune system. The introduction of collectivisation of agriculture in the mid-1950s not only brought rural women into agricultural production, but also accorded them leadership positions in new agricultural cooperatives (Howell, 2002: 45). Hence, by only “…the late 1950s over 5500 peasant women had served as leaders or deputy leaders of people’s communes in the countryside” (Wang Qi, 1999: 23). The representation by women in the urban communes witnessed a similar growth; it was reported, at China’s Third Women’s Conference in 1957, that 80 percent of resident committee chairpersons were women (Wang Qi, 1999: 23). These were substantial figures in light of the dismal numbers of women in politics up until this point in history.
It was during the latter half of Mao's rule that women first entered into the higher levels of the political system. Their entrance into the Politburo⁹, the highest body within the CCP, during the Cultural Revolution was most notable. In total, five women were able to breach this distinctly and historically male domain; though three of them accomplished this through their marriages to three powerful men, specifically to Mao himself, Lin Biao, his designated successor at the time, and Zhou Enlai (Rosen, 1995: 317). Though it could be questioned whether these women actually made an impact while in these prominent political roles, the fact that they were there had positive effects. For example, in the case of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, she used "...her political position and personal connections...[to promote] an agenda of accelerating women's participation in economic production and politics" (Howell, 2002: 45). One of the two women who were alternative members, Chen Muhua, also had a positive, albeit latent, effect. As Stanley Rosen notes, Chen has been an influential woman in the political realm, holding numerous positions since joining the Politburo in 1977. Although she was not particularly well-liked by many women (due to her allegiance to the party line), she nonetheless was noted for "...her positive role, that she is the only women who has access to the central leadership and whose views they might seriously consider" (Rosen, 1995: 318).

The number of women in the Central Committee, where members of the Politburo are derived, and the National People's Congress (NPC), the national legislature of the state, also increased substantively, peaking during the Cultural Revolution. As such, the representation by women in the Central Committee as members reached 10.3 percent of the total members in 1973, and as alternate members to 18.2 percent in 1977 (when the Cultural Revolution was still being commended). In the NPC, the numbers were even
more significant. The number of women serving as representatives increased to 22.6 percent of the total in 1975, and in the same year, more than one out of every four members of the standing committee, the greater decision-making body of the NPC, was a woman (Rosen, 1995: 319-320). If "[a]n important gauge of the present government's commitment to redefining and improving the position of women is the degree to which it encourages them to participate in the political process and decision-making bodies" (Croll, 1983: 118), then women's increased participation during this time period is noteworthy considering their relative absence from the political domain in the recent years proceeding it.

The All-China Women's Federation: the "Official" Women's Movement in China

Perhaps one of the most important gains for the Chinese women's movement was the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 1949. In keeping with the classical Marxist-Leninist mass line approach, favoured by Mao and the CCP, to "...maximize enthusiasm and participation of the people in the revolution...[m]ass organizations were established to act as an intermediate structure to connect society to the party/state" (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 29). Essentially, the ACWF, as a mass organization, was set up as a transmission belt, a means through which the CCP could reach certain sections of its constituency more effectively. It has a dual, and oft-times conflicting, role: on the one hand, it dutifully transmits party/state policies to all women in society, and on the other hand, it is obligated to represent the interests of those women, "...lobbying for policy change and the improvement of women's lives in response to needs expressed at local levels" (Jaschok, et al., 2002: 9).
Suffice it to say, the ACWF necessarily finds itself in a quandary; if it leans more toward the side of the state, its perceived effectiveness in advocating women’s specific needs and issues is jeopardized, and if it opts for the other route, its legitimacy within the party/state structure is compromised. Despite this dilemma, however, even its critics have acknowledged the fact that “[t]he unavoidable reality is that the development of Chinese women is influenced by the operation, development, past, present and future of the Federation. To care about the fate of Chinese women means also to care about the change and development of the Federation” (Jin Yihong, 2002: 123). The symbiotic relationship between the ACWF and the women’s movement will be explored in more detail in the fourth chapter.

The ACWF was, and remains, integral to the advancement of the Chinese women’s movement. It has played an important role in disseminating and implementing the various reforms enacted by the CCP that benefit women, i.e., the marriage and land reforms discussed earlier; pushing for equal pay for women workers; and being actively involved in the numerous campaigns raising women’s awareness of their rights and their elevated status in the new society. In these respects, it ensured that the legal, economic and political gains for women did not fall completely through the cracks of state rhetoric.

Moreover, the structure of the ACWF gives it an extensive reach that it would never have achieved if not through the measures taken by the party/state. Thus, running “...from national level down to provincial, municipal, county, district, town and village levels, forming a hierarchical, tree-like network” (Jin Yihong, 2002: 125), the ACWF is able to embrace millions of women, even in the most remote rural areas of the country.
This impressive network will prove to be extremely beneficial to the Chinese women’s movement.

Owing its livelihood to the party/state, the ACWF has had to work within a confined and circumscribed space. Even so, it has carved out a niche for itself in the Chinese political landscape where women are visible and have the potential to truly liberate themselves. As it has been remarked by Elisabeth Croll:

...there is sufficient field evidence that, in a variety of settings and situations, women time and again turned to the Women’s Federation for aid in exercising new rights and claims while documentary evidence shows that it attempted to publicize and implement policies promoting at least some of women’s needs and interest. When and where no such organization existed, through neglect or suppression, then both documentary and field evidence suggest that women themselves and the government felt its absence and their loss” (Croll, 2002: 33)


All of these gains took place in a period of much change, and a leveling off occurred at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a massive campaign initiated by Mao in an effort to “reverse the retreat from socialism” and “push Chinese society toward greater integration”. This process of integration was to be achieved by eliminating the “…gaps between intellectual and physical work, workers and peasants, the city and the countryside, and man and women” (Park, 1995: 150-151). The effects of this on Chinese women were significant.

In order to close the divide between these categories, an emphasis was placed on social equality. Not only were women now entitled to concrete equal rights in political, economic, and domestic fields (most of which have been discussed earlier), they were inundated with slogans and images that reinforced this new-found equality with men.
Thus, slogans like ‘Both men and women are the same because the times have changed,’ ‘women are the equal of men’, ‘Women hold up half the sky,’ and ‘anything a man can do a woman can do also,’ were used to persuade women of their new status. The updated images were equally potent; men and women were now clad in similar outfits comprised of the “blue trousers and jackets of peasant and worker”, an attempt to “reduce or negate gender-specific difference.” Moreover, “...new female images appeared on billboards, on posters and in magazine or newspaper pictures portraying women central in space, large in size and strong, assertive and heroic in stance. She stood singly within groups or alongside her male peers, with arms reaching out to an outside world, assertive in her embrace of the future” (Croll, 1995: 70-71).

Equality also took the form of women's, specifically younger women's, direct participation in Mao’s revolution. The lives of young women in China were profoundly affected by the Cultural Revolution. As Red Guards, they were accorded a mobility that was previously withheld from them; “[f]reed from family control, young women Red Guards moved across the landscape more widely and in greater numbers than at an time in Chinese history. Like their male counterparts, they were encouraged to challenge parents, teachers, and officials, and to act with a confidence and enthusiasm probably never before permitted adolescent women in China” (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 4). Alongside the increasing numbers of women entering the work force and appearing in the political system, this unique experience drew even more of them, in this case the younger generation of women, out of the private sphere of family and home and into the public one.
Coupled with this new rhetoric of equality was a re-emphasis on the CCP’s socialist project – the entire reorganization of Chinese society under the banner of socialism. In this politically-charged atmosphere, the socialist focus on class struggle took precedence over all other struggles. Consequently, women’s specific issues and interests were subordinated, and in some respects completely neglected, by the singular category of class. This was justified by the belief that women were, for all intents and purposes, finally equal (as evidenced in the laws, policies and rhetoric of the government) and should shift their attentions to the more pressing struggle of the proletariat class.12

In fact, focusing on women’s “special” interests was believed to be bourgeois, and hence, politically suspect. In such an environment, Liu Shaoqi, a Party member severely attacked for taking the “capitalist road” by advocating women’s special interests, “…was accused of emphasizing sex distinction and neglecting the political work of women as a revolutionary force in the class struggle” (Park, 1995: 151). A similar line of reasoning was also used to justify the (temporary) suspension of “special interest” mass organizations, including the ACWF, for the duration of the entire Cultural Revolution. The ACWF was disbanded “…on the grounds that women should be enjoined to participate directly in economic and political affairs on the same terms as their male counterparts” (Croll, 1995: 84).

In spite of the state’s neglect of women’s specific issues under these conditions, the fact that women were finally made visible in Chinese society, and seen as an active participant in its development, was no small feat.13 This was a trend that will prove to be irreversible, however strong the resistance to it is.
Rhetoric versus Reality: The Chinese Women’s Movement in Transition

The course of the women’s movement in China appears to have been both rapid and progressive. Not only have Chinese women advanced in terms of drastic changes in their presence, roles, and rights in Chinese society, they have made these gains in an impressively short amount of time. In the case of employment for example, it has been noted by various Chinese scholars, such as Li Xiaojiang, that while it took women in the West one hundred years to achieve comprehensive employment, it took women in China less than ten years to accomplish the same (Ping Zhuang, 1999: 2). Despite this rapid pace of development and the many gains that were achieved for the women’s movement, however, it became apparent that, in some cases, what was, at face value, an increase to women’s status, was in reality short-lived or circumscribed.

When the Marriage Law of 1950 came into effect, there was widespread opposition from men. The high divorce rate that followed this law, and the resulting increases in incidences of women, who were seeking divorce, being murdered or committing suicide, compelled the government to enforce stiff regulations on divorce, and eventually curtailing the campaigns to implement the law altogether. In fact, campaigns were launched in the years that followed, encouraging women to be “socialist housewives and model mothers”. This rendered weak a potentially effective means for women to break away from patriarchal control and affirm their rights in the face of centuries of traditional, Confucian marriage practices (Bossen, 1999: 303; Yuhui Li, 2000).

Women’s increased participation in the workforce also had its negative effects, two of which are noteworthy: the double burden carried by women, and the sexual
division of labour. Communist theory took little account of the labor-intensive nature of household and child care duties. Women were expected to work outside of the home while still continuing their family responsibilities within the home. This affected their job performance and influenced their chances, or lack thereof, for promotions (Bauer et al., 1992: 364; Bossen, 1999: 304). In the labour scheme, women were (and are) concentrated in the "lesser skilled, the lighter though not necessarily less physically demanding jobs and the least specialized, mechanized and well-paid sectors of the Chinese economy" (Croll, 1995: 118).

The negative consequences of the double burden on time, energy, and responsibilities, and the sexual division of labour are problems that Chinese women have in common with most of the women around the world. What this indicates, then, is that the problem of women's inferior status has little to do with their presence in the public domain. John Bauer and his research associates' examination of gender inequality in urban China, in the areas of education and employment, reveals "...the pervasiveness of the system of gender stratification and contradicts any argument that change in that system can arise solely through increasing public roles of women" (Bauer et al, 1992: 366).

The numbers of women in the political system experienced a setback at the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the years after Mao's death, the new leadership under Deng Xiaoping shifted the state's focus from an emphasis on politics to an emphasis on the economy. As such, state-imposed structures in the political domain were removed to allow for greater political autonomy (Wang Qi, 1999: 29, 30). This has been detrimental
to women; without the quotas and the affirmative action policies commonly used under Mao’s leadership, the numbers of women in political roles have dropped.

Not only have the numbers of women in politics waned, but the type of work that women were assigned to in their political positions are, for the most part, circumscribed. Essentially, the majority of women engaged in politics are involved in women’s work, which entails focusing on “...the problems of education and public health, the ecological environment, the protection of the rights and interests of women, children and the disabled, social security and the general mood of the society” (Rosen, 1995: 322). This, to an extent, had re-enforced some of the stereotypes that the rhetoric of equality had meant to eradicate.

After the Cultural Revolution, there was a “…gradual and increasingly open acknowledgement that the rhetoric of equality did not match with female experience of inequality” (Croll, 1995: 110). Women began to see the flaws of this rhetoric in light of the impediments they encountered while drawing upon the benefits they had apparently acquired, as detailed earlier. Moreover, the rhetoric of gender equality belied any truth to its claim that Chinese women were truly equal to the men in society. Subscribing to this rhetoric, the state completely overlooked women’s specific issues and women were either hardly differentiated from men, or they were simply rendered masculine, thereby obliterating any natural sex difference (Barlow, 1995: 347). Men became the yardstick by which women were evaluated (Yuhui Li, 2000: 5). In this environment, it was not surprising that the women’s movement experienced a temporary period of suspension alongside the ACWF.
The culmination of decades of the state’s prominent role in liberating women came to a head at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Women’s experiences during this time “…taught them that socialism…[was] not a sufficient condition automatically bringing about a redefinition of the role and status of women in its wake. Women leaders say that they have learned this second valuable lesson from their own experiences. Women will only improve their own position if they fight for themselves” (Croll, 1978: 330). Consequently, this “awakening” provided an impetus for change in the Chinese women’s movement.

**Distinctiveness of the Chinese Women’s Movement**

What these gains and their accompanying setbacks reveal about the nature of the women’s movement in China, and what makes it very distinct from that of the West, are pertinent to its turning point in the past twenty years of its development. Essentially, there are three related points to be made in this regard.

First, the most obvious point to be made about the nature of the Chinese women’s movement is its intimate connection to nationalist movements in China. Women’s struggle and national liberation have been closely linked. This has been a trend since the end of the nineteenth century. Although there had been women organizing for change outside of this framework, “…it was those who linked women’s liberation with the socialist movement who were historically more influential in China” (Croll, 2002: 4). Furthermore, women have been used, at different times, as the indicator of China’s modernity, progressiveness, and social transformation.
Second, owing to this last point, the women’s movement in China has generally been a top-down, as opposed to bottom-up, movement. Sharing this characteristic with other socialist states, “China has established programs and organizations designed and organized from the top to protect women, increase women’s status and ultimately emancipate women completely” (Yuhui Li, 2000). This state-led movement was steered predominately by men in the state apparatus prior to 1949, and subsequently by the ACWF – still controlled by the same source. This fact has led some observers to sarcastically dub it a “move women” movement instead of a “women’s movement” (Feng Yuan, 2002).

The consequence arising from these two points for the Chinese women’s movement is reflected in the third point: the problem of dependency. Women’s dependence on the state was an inevitable corollary of the state’s embrace of Marxist theories. Special interests were thought to weaken class solidarity and were looked upon with suspicion. Accordingly, independent women’s organizations and movements were not permitted. The “...debate about women’s equality remained within the confines of communist ideology and did not become a gender issue challenging the various modes of power within Chinese society. Women were not allowed the public political sphere needed to debate and frame their own demands” (Rai, 1999: 184). As the setbacks discussed earlier have shown, this approach to gender equality has hindered any real advancement in the quest for women’s liberation. As Wang Qi has noted, “...while the communist regime succeeded in integrating China’s female population into the new social and political fabric, it also reinforced the political dependence of women on the state” (Wang Qi, 1999: 28). Thus, in the case of politics, when the state structures that
ensured women space in the political realm receded, so did women’s representation and participation.

What is particularly unique in the case of China is the existence of the ACWF, which by all accounts is a separate organization representing the interests of a section of society. This is very different from other socialist countries in that there had been no avid debates about the ACWF’s establishment, as there had been in the Soviet Union in 1917-18 (Rai, 1999: 184). This anomaly will prove to be one of the major means through which the women’s movement is able to overcome its dependency and separate itself from the state apparatus.

All the points discussed here reveal a fundamental characteristic of the movement up until the late 1970s. The trend thus far of being co-opted by the state/party has basically precluded a separate and autonomous women’s movement in China. In the post-Mao era, the changes to this trend will be the major factor in the turning point for the Chinese women’s movement.

The Chinese Women’s Movement in the Post-Mao (Reform) Era

The death of Mao and the passing of China into an era of economic reforms in 1978 ushered in a new phase for the Chinese women’s movement. More importantly, the movement had reached a turning point where the path it had until then been travelling had veered into a new direction and was no longer well-marked.

China has witnessed immense changes since the launching of Deng Xiaoping’s “ambitious programme of socialist modernization in the late 1970s”14 These changes “...have transformed virtually all aspects of Chinese life. The effects on women have
been among the most dramatic" (Zhao and West, 1999: 1). The introduction of the market economy, and the accompanying growth of the private sector, had mixed consequences for women.

The negative effects were obvious, bringing to the forefront new problems and exposing previously existing ones:

- increasing incidents of trafficking in women, of purchased and forced marriage, of intense pressures on women associated with the rigorous enforcement of birth control, leading to female infanticide and abuse of rural women who gave birth to daughters. Discrimination against women in state-sector employment increased as enterprises gained more control over personnel and hiring. Rural girls dropped out of school to help with family farming as agriculture once again was organized by households rather than collectives. The number of women holding political positions declined as a result of direct election. Prostitution and pornography became more prominent in areas experiencing the rapid development of a market economy (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 33-34)

Alongside the setbacks discussed earlier, these deleterious effects of the reforms on women called into question their "supposed" equal and liberated status; women's liberation was far from being realized and the specific interests of women had not been effectively addressed by the state. Thus, it became quite clear that state intervention and administrative measures from above alone had not, and could not, guarantee women's equality and liberation.

The economic reforms also had some positive effects for women. Among others, these included the re-establishment of the ACWF in 1978, the gradual retreat of the state and with this, a more de-politicized atmosphere, and the opening up, however limited, of China to outside influences and ideas.

The combination of these effects gave rise to a set of factors that are contributing to the development of a more separate and autonomous women's movement alluded to
earlier. A cursory examination of these factors will be done here (a more comprehensive exploration of some of these factors will be carried out in the fourth chapter in the context of social movement theories).

The first factor concerns the interplay between the concepts of sameness and difference. The shifting emphasis of one over the other at various times throughout the history of the women's movement is indicative of the party/state's varying agendas and the changing nature of women's self-consciousness. Prior to the Mao era, difference was the focus; women and men were different, and women were lower in status in comparison. As Christina Gilmartin points out in her discussion of the process by which patriarchy was embedded into the CCP in its formative years, "...the social expectations of Communist men were critical in shaping these women's political identities, but the self-images of the women themselves were also operative in their decisions to accept secondary political status that clearly distinguished them from their male counterparts" (Gilmartin, 1993: 320). During the years of Mao and the CCP, the emphasis was on sameness. Women were stripped of their femininity, since this would contradict the party/state's rhetoric of equality, leaving them to adopt male attitudes and behaviours and to emulate male standards (Ping Zhuang, 1999: 4). Consequently, their awareness of themselves as female was suppressed. With the retreat of the state's active role in defining women, difference once again took centre stage in the Reform years, but this time, with a redefinition by women themselves of their place in Chinese society. As a reaction to the androgyny of the previous era, women began to enthusiastically reclaim their femininity. Li Xiaojiang refers to this as an awakening of women's self-consciousness on the road to true liberation (Li Xiaojiang, 1994: 382). The development
of the sameness-difference concept has shaped the Chinese women's movement, and has contributed to its shift toward autonomy.

The second factor is the issue of agency - the proactive versus reactive nature of the women's movement. Although there had been instances in the pre-Reform era of women’s agency, for the most part, before this period, women and the women’s movement in China have mainly taken a reactive stance in their relationship with the state and society. Their rights, status, and terms of liberation were set by the forces outside of themselves; they have merely reacted to the changes and developments. This observation fits well with the top-down approach of the state’s relationship with the women’s movement in China. Since the early 1980s, however, more and more women have taken a proactive stance. The relaxed political atmosphere was conducive to increased levels of activities originating from the women’s movement at the grassroots level. These activities were further fostered by the opening up of China to women’s movements in other countries. Essentially, the development of women’s agency is taking place in “...a deliberately ‘porous’ and undefined new phase of political activism, a site of transit for ideas and people in which new initiatives flourish, challenging hierarchical and pre-existing structures” (Jaschok et al., 2002: 11). Connections between Chinese women, and between women inside and outside of China, have opened up discussions and exchanges on the effective strategies in advancing women’s rights and status on their own terms. This is especially important for the Chinese women’s movement in that it had already achieved many of the beneficial laws, policies and legislation before it had developed a political awareness to make substantial use of them (Li Xiaojiang, 1994: 119).
The third factor is the renewed and expanding role of the ACWF. After being out of commission for the entire ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the ACWF was restored to China's political landscape to assist in solving the myriad of social problems resulting from the economic reforms. Although there remained the paradox of it being both a branch of the state and a representative of women's interest, the ACWF has become more independent, vocal, and militant in its latter role. This significant shift in the ACWF's focus is reflected in the position taken by the then vice-chair of the ACWF's executive committee, Luo Qiong. She believed that "...the ACWF should function as an active, autonomous, and self-motivating agent. To do so, Luo urged the Federation to adopt a bottom-up approach in order to incorporate the concerns of ordinary women into the core of its agenda" (Hsiung, 1997: 9). In large part, the alarming increase in violence against women and children, despite the state's past intervention, acted as a wake-up call the ACWF needed to address the particular needs of women. Thus, in contrast to speeches given at the National Congress of Women in 1978, the speeches in the 1983 Congress stressed "...the role of the Women's Federation in defending and protecting women and their interests rather than primarily soliciting support for Party and government policies"; emphasis was placed on the gender-specific demands of the ACWF and the need to strengthen its organization in order to make and meet these demands (Croll, 1995: 139-140). Referred to by some scholars as the "official women's movement", the fact that the ACWF has shifted its role and function to reflect a more women-centred approach has encouraged the growth and development of a more autonomous and separate women's movement, working in tandem with its own apparatus.
The evolution of the Chinese women's movement can be summed up in the words of Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter:

Chinese women found themselves trying to absorb changes and social strains similar to those brought about in the West through the industrial revolution, late-nineteenth-century urbanization, several wars, and the feminism movement – all at once. It was as though Queen Victoria, Rosie the Riveter, Helen Gurley Brown, and a host of others had appeared simultaneously on the scene, all proffering advice (Honig and Hershatter, 1998: 8)

Essentially, the women's movement in China is charting a course in an ill-defined territory that is very distinct from women's movements in other parts of the globe. The shift that is still taking place in the Chinese women's movement from dependency to autonomy and the host of changes and developments that accompany this transition could be analyzed in various ways. In the following chapter, I will introduce one of these ways: the social movements approach.
Chapter 3: The Social Movements Theories

The politics of the masses, of contention, and of collective action have been on the historical scene for centuries, ranging from small-scale riots and rebellions to large-scale wars and revolutions. Only in the last several decades have there been wide-ranging and comprehensive attempts at understanding them, researching them, and ultimately putting forth theories to explain them. This flurry of activity is most apparent in the study of social movements (SM). This avenue of study has gained much currency in the field of contentious politics stemming from the belief of many scholars that SM represent important forces of social and political change (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald: 1988: 727). The increasing real-world political and social turbulence that are taking place around the globe in recent history attests to this belief. On a more temperate level, SM are, sometimes unwitting, agents in the less conspicuous processes of change that contribute to these more overt displays. It is in these varying and shifting roles that SM are important puzzles to be analyzed.

In this chapter, my purpose will be two-fold. First, I will briefly chart out the progression of this field so as to put these theories in perspective. In so doing, I will locate my own analysis (of the Chinese women's movement) within the debates, mainly in the new social movements (NSM) category. My use of term NSM does not mean, however, that features of previous theories are discounted and ignored. In fact, the "new" in NSM is misleading, suggesting a break with past theories of SM in general. This does not have to be the case.

Instead, in my second endeavour, I will argue for a blending or synthesis of various aspects of SM theories in order to gain a more complete and realistic picture of
movements – to get the most mileage out of this approach, if you will. Accordingly, I will discuss how the synthesis of the different elements from these theories could be accomplished, especially with respect to movements in China. Progress has been made in this regard in some insightful SM research done in the field of contentious politics in China (arguably, only a fairly recent venture, owing in large part to the much publicized, and deservedly so, protest movement in 1989). Accordingly, the peculiarities of the Chinese case will be explored, warranting a re-thinking of some of the theories of the SM paradigm to reflect these peculiarities, which I intend to set upon in the following chapter in my analysis of the changing nature of the Chinese women’s movement.

**A Brief History and Overview of the Social Movements Paradigm**

Put simply, SM are generally described as “...conscious, collective activities to promote social change, representing a protest against the established power structure and dominant norms and values” (Abeysekera, 2003: 2). The approach and theories developed to explain SM dynamics have had a most productive history. While there exists many variations in explaining the evolution of this paradigm, there appears to have been three major developments, within which are wide-ranging theoretical perspectives and empirical foci: the collective behaviour approach, the resource mobilization / political process theories, and the new social movement theories.

**The Collective Behaviour Approach**

This approach had its roots in classical social psychology and emerged in the 1940s and 1950s as an attempt to make sense of the crowds, panics, riots and mass
hysteria being witnessed at an alarmingly high level on the international stage. Under the rubric of this approach, much attention was placed on studying such themes as grievances, alienation, and relative deprivation, among others. While differing in specifics, these themes share in common certain assumptions about these early forms of SM, mainly that they were unorganized, dysfunctional, irrational, dangerous, and temporary aberrations in an otherwise stable social environment (Meyer, 2000: 37; Swain, 2001:2; Singh, 2001: 89-96; Shah, 2002: 22). Essentially, these SM formed in response to situations that were "...understood in terms of a breakdown either in the organs of social control or in the adequacy of normative integration, due to structural changes...[t]he resulting strains, discontent, frustration, and aggression lead the individual to participate in collective behaviour" (Cohen, 1985: 672).

Perhaps as a natural corollary of its tradition in psychology, "...the impetus to collective action was to be found at the micro level with the individual as the appropriate unit of analysis" (McAdam et al., 1988: 696). These individuals were purported to be lacking in agency and driven by the mass hysteria of the crowds. Accordingly, these short-lived protests were construed as being less of a political strategy (by the group) than as a way of lashing out, contending with anomie, or forming a dissident identity to satisfy psychological needs (by the individual) (Meyer, 2000: 37). However, as it has been pointed out by Ghanshyam Shah, this psychological emphasis, although important, was not sufficient enough an explanation. It glossed over the socio-economic structure in which the individuals act and relegated to the background any explanation of the nature and reasons for collectivity and collective actions (Shah, 2002: 22). This incisive critique,
coupled with the fact that this approach tended to focus mostly on the question of movement emergence, brought forth a new perspective on SM.

**Resource Mobilization Theories: The Rational Choice Approach**

This new perspective on SM came to be known generally as the resource mobilization (RM) approach and was the dominant paradigm, mainly in North America, from the late 1970s into the early 1990s.²⁰

RM theorists start from the assumption that there already exists grievances and dissatisfaction inherent in every society. What was important to the formation of SM, then, was the creation of organizations to mobilize this potential. Therefore, the focus of SM study shifted from the source of those grievances and dissatisfaction to the organizations that “...give meaning and direction to the movement” (Dalton et al., 1990: 9); whereas earlier SM scholars focused their attentions on the why of collective action, the new generation of scholars focused on the how – the ways and means available to the collective actors (Tarrow, 1997: 16). Thus, the questions to be answered became: “...where are the resources available for the movement, how are they organized, how does the state facilitate or impede mobilization...?” (Mueller, 1992: 3-4).

Carol Mueller provides an useful definition: RM theory is “...based in a strategic approach to the study of social movements; it emphasizes the mobilization and allocation of resources by movement actors in the context of opportunities and constraints imposed by the social and political environment” (Mueller, 1994: 234). Influenced in large part by the rational choice theory put forth by the economist Mancur Olson, the study of SM took on a more ‘objective’ and instrumental veneer, emphasizing rationality and interests over
previous emphases on irrationality and purposelessness. Thus, such factors as "...interest, organization, resources, strategies and opportunities..." became catchwords for proponents of this approach (Singh, 2001: 106).

A related approach to the RM theory is the political process (PP) model and, as its name implies, is a more explicit attempt at bringing politics back into SM research. Focusing on the broader political context, it analyzes the ways in which the opening up and closing down of the political system affect the movements' organizing opportunities. Research via the PP theory route ranges from studying "...how different political structures provide greater or lesser degrees of opportunity to insurgent groups...[to] how particular movements exploit the opportunities provided by institutions...[and] how the opportunities for a particular movement change over time" (Tarrow, 1997: 18-19).

The most notable concept to arise from this theory came to be recognized as "political opportunity structure" (POS). POS theorists focus on the important role of the state and emphasize the factors and resources that are external to the movement. They look at how movements vary in their structure, strategy and tactics, and outcomes in different kinds of states, and within a particular state, how these factors vary at different points in time (McAdam et al.: 1988: 699). As it will be apparent in the macro-analysis of the Chinese women's movement, this concept is especially useful in understanding how it has developed and changed due to the changing structures of political opportunity in China.

The RM theories ushered in a shift in "...the focus of movement analysis from microsocial-psychological to more macropolitical and structural accounts of movement dynamics" (McAdam et al.: 1988: 697). While this innovation was, and still is, no doubt...
a huge leap in terms of its contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of SM (the vast amounts of theoretically- and empirically-sound research resulting from this approach bears testimony to this), it was severely criticized for its structural bias. In its eagerness to act as a corrective to the ideological biases of past theorizing, the RM approach had erred too far into the other direction; in some cases, the actors in SM merely become calculating, individualistic, and resource-driven automatons. Hence, movements come perilously close to being just an interest group, and as Jean Cohen had pointed out, "[h]asn't the critique of the collective-behaviour tradition thrown out the baby with the bathwater by excluding the analysis of values, norms, ideologies, projects, culture, and identity in other than instrumental terms?" (Cohen, 1985: 688).

In true theory-building fashion, not only have RM theorists taken to heart the critiques launched in their direction by incorporating some of the factors they had previously ignored into their new work, but a new perspective emerged. This perspective sought to shed new light on some of the deficiencies of the RM approach.

**New Social Movement Theories: Identity and the Cultural Approach**

NSM theories were developed in response to the shortcomings of two traditions in the study of collective action; one tradition, the RM approach, has been discussed in the earlier section, while the other tradition had its roots in classical Marxism (developed in Western Europe). The latter tradition placed great significance on the class-based nature of SM, going so far in some accounts as to claim class movements as being the only true form of collective action. Moreover, in agreement with its North American cousins, the classical Marxist theory of SM emphasized the structural causes of mobilization, but in
In this case, the causes resulted from changes in advanced capitalism (Swain, 2001: 5, 6). Thus, NSM theories were developed as a backlash to what it saw as an over-emphasis on strategy and structure on the one hand, and class and structure-economy on the other.

In many ways, NSM theorists brought the focus of SM research back down to the individual level, but incorporated elements of culture and meaning to their work to offset the purely strategic elements of the RM approach (and the elements of irrationality of the collective behaviour approach previous to this). Hank Johnston et al. also note that, contrary to the Marxist theories, the social base of NSM transcend class structure; the participants “...find their most frequent structural roots in rather diffuse social statuses such as youth, gender, sexual orientation, or professions that do not correspond with structural explanations” (Johnston et al., 1994: 6).

Summarily, Steven Buechler sets out the following six themes characterizing NSM:

First, most strands of new social movement theory underscore symbolic action in civil society or the cultural sphere as a major arena for collective action alongside instrumental action in the state or political sphere...Second, new social movement theorists stress the importance of processes that promote autonomy and self-determination instead of strategies for maximizing influence and power...Third, some new social movement theorists emphasize the role of postmaterialist values in much contemporary collective action, as opposed to conflicts over material resources...Fourth, new social movement theorists tend to problematize the often fragile process of constructing collective identities and identifying group interests, instead of assuming that conflict groups and their interests are structurally determined...Fifth, new social movement theory also stresses the socially constructed nature of grievances and ideology, rather than assuming that they can be deduced from a group’s structural location...Finally, new social movement theory recognizes a variety of submerged, latent, and temporary networks that often undergird collective action, rather than assuming that centralized organizational forms are prerequisites for successful mobilization (Buechler, 1995: 442).
The catchwords for NSM theories, then, are: symbols, culture, autonomy, selfdetermination, postmaterialism, collective identities, social construction, and networks.

This approach enabled SM scholars to account for the qualitative changes in movements witnessed in recent years. Attempts to make sense of why people from crosscutting social positions participate collectively and with few, if any, resources prompted more in-depth looks at the individual her/himself and the movement inside movements, that is the interaction between these individual participants. This focus on the micro-level activities of movements begat a host of cultural analyses and increased research into the complexities of the concept of collective identity.

As with any theory claiming itself to be "new", criticisms of the NSM paradigm soon emerged. Jon Shefner, in his assessment of these new theories, argues that researchers are moving in the wrong direction in SM theory. Essentially, he finds fault with NSM theories on two accounts. First of all, he questions the newness of the theories. Shefner reveals how issues of collective identity and community, while insufficiently addressed by RM theorists, are, nonetheless nothing new (Shefner, 1995: 608). Remnants of these issues could be found in the collective behaviour approach and the class-based theories of SM.

Second of all, he voices the concern shared by many critics of NSM, that "...when we focus too heavily on identity and community, we may obscure other issues of power and politics. People organize around more than the right to define themselves and their communities autonomously – they organize around injustice" (Shefner, 1995: 609). This is a prudent observation since, as J. Craig Jenkins has astutely noted, "social movements are inherently political" (Jenkins, 1995: 16). When NSM disengage
themselves from the political sphere, they come dangerously close to being insular in nature and thus invalidating the purpose of their existence as a social movement in the first place.

Despite these critiques, however, NSM theories have (re)introduced alternative ways of studying collective action, and have opened up the field of SM research to avid debates, leading to subsequent modifications of concepts and ideas that had, heretofore, been givens. This active engagement of different and sometimes opposing theories under the rubric of the general social movement approach is most reflected in the study of the women’s movement.

The women’s movement is commonly accepted as a “new” social movement. Although it has been in existence for a substantial number of years (this varies, of course, with different countries), many would generally agree that it has experienced substantial changes that would warrant the use of this relative term of “new”. This is very true in the case of the Chinese women’s movement.

The women’s movement in China presents an interesting case for SM research, especially in the debates about what was “new” about NSM. As I have shown in the preceding chapter, this movement has undergone veritable changes beginning, more or less, at the onset of the economic reforms of the late 1970s. I would argue that it had, at that time, become a “new” women’s movement. In fact, the changes are reflected in most of the criteria set out by Buechler in his description of NSM (the specifics of which I will tend to in the following chapter). More generally, the novelty of the Chinese women’s movement lies in two features of NSM.
First, it has become much less a class based movement. As the Cultural Revolution has shown, the heyday of intense class based movements had halted any real progress in other movements. Women's oppression, discrimination and enslavement were chalked up as being due to feudalism and capitalism; the problems were associated with the working women and were distinctly class based. With the retreat from strict class adherence, however, women's issues had become more pronounced. They were reflected in the lives of women of every class and had become much more multi-faceted. So much so that it had prompted Li Xiaojiang to claim that women's problems, post-revolution, had created "...among those who concern themselves with women's issues a sense of crisis" (Li Xiaojiang, 1995: 363).

Ironically, women's involvement in the Revolution has also been an important factor in the rise of a new women's movement. As Sidney Tarrow notes, "[m]ovement participation is not only politicizing; it is empowering, both in the psychological sense of increasing willingness to take risks and in the political one of affording new skills and broadened perspectives" (Tarrow, 1997: 166). Chinese women's participation, however small, in the Cultural Revolution contributed to their "movement savvy".

Second and linked to the first feature is, in its quest for opening up the traditional political space, the women's movement's struggles are less overtly political and more "cultural", bringing to mind the oft-used feminist slogan, 'the personal is political'. In a hyper-politicized environment where the heavy hand of government can be observed in all spheres of society (which have been less the case since the economic reforms), it is not surprising that there has been a politicization of personal and social spaces. Thus, women, especially, are at the forefront in what Tilman Evers calls "new ways of 'doing
...the intellectual task for today consists in “thinking the construction of a new hegemony through direct action of the masses, undertaking a reconceptualization of politics that broadens its realm and recovers as valid action the vast popular field with its everyday life, thus accepting the challenge of visualizing a project of society from the viewpoint of the practice of the popular classes” (Evers, 1985: 46). In the more “traditional” sphere of politics, Chinese women have already gained many of the laws, legislation and administrative fiats that superficially guarantee women’s equality and liberation. But, as it has been argued in the last chapter, these have not translated to such in reality. The task remains for women to make use of the non-traditional spheres of politics, rooted in the everyday life, and the political sphere, to re-negotiate their relationship with the state.

As these two features of the women’s movement in China show, the “new” moniker in the field of SM research is, for the most part, convincing and justified. However, it can be misleading theoretically, for although I situate the Chinese women’s movement within the category of NSM, the theories that will be used to analyze it run the gamut from the collective behaviour approach to the RM approach to the NSM approach. As T. Dunbar Moodie rightly assumes, “…the proper function of social movement theory is to enable social analysts to understand social movements better” (Moodie, 2002: 48). Indeed, this assumption would appear to be simplistic and obvious, but in the midst of all the theorizing and expertise in the separate spheres of analysis, such an assumption gets lost in the fray. Thus, to better understand movements, a blending or synthesis of theories needs to occur.
Synthesizing Theories and the Case of China

In a recent compilation by David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, a call was made to "build bridges" in the study of social movements. This is a call that had been thrown out a decade earlier (See Mueller and Morris, 1992) and has been more consciously heeded by a new generation of SM scholars that do not subscribe to a specific approach, choosing instead to build bridges and cut corridors "...between generally separate paradigms in the study of social protest and advance synthetic understandings..." of the particular cases they are studying (Meyer, 2002: 4). This paper also attempts to heed this call.

As their name implies, movements are not static entities. They act and react, they are shaped by their environments and, in turn, they re-shape these environments, and their contingent nature discourages any one explanation. Because of these dynamic qualities, it is a more fruitful endeavour to mix and match the theories to gain a more insightful and comprehensive picture of the complicated nature of SM.

With this in mind, a particularly useful way to synthesize the various theories is to analyze movements at different levels – specifically, the macro, meso and micro levels. This method takes into account the individual, the cultural and the structural levels, and reveals the interactive nature of all three: "[p]aradoxically, social movements are simultaneously the dramatic demonstration of human agency – that is, they determine their own course, and we must take their internal dynamics seriously – and they are inextricable from their contexts, shaped by encounters with and structures of the state, dominant culture, and other social movements" (Whittier, 2002: 306). Further elaboration
of these levels will be carried out in the following chapter, in my analysis of the Chinese women's movement using this particular synthetic and pragmatic approach.

It has only been fairly recently that the SM approach, in general, has been specifically used to analyze and explain contentious politics in China. The events of 1989, considered by many observers to have been a watershed in China's modern history, was, for the most part, the fuel that fired the flames of scholars' interest in actively employing the SM approach to the case of China. These studies are extremely valuable in contributing to our understanding of the peculiarities of the Chinese case with respect to contentious politics, namely in the form of SM. However, the 1989 protest movement in Beijing was most definitely a more public and overt form of SM. Concentrating exclusively on these types of SM, at least implicitly "...assume[s] that people are generally passive, obedient, and acquiescent most of the time, while only occasionally becoming active under certain extreme conditions" (Brook, 2000: 1-2).

This is where an analysis of an on-going, long-term and historically-placed SM like the Chinese women's movement is particularly informative, and adds a new dimension to what is contentious politics in a closed-off country such as China.

China presents a distinct puzzle in the field of SM research. Characterizing most of her history is a long state tradition in which nationalism and continuous state-building campaigns (of which women have been an integral part) have figured predominately. In the state's efforts to involve the entire population in these projects (thereby solidifying its control over them), it had employed such methods as the mass-line approach and numerous consciousness-raising campaigns. For the women's movement, these particular characteristics of the Chinese environment – the prominent role of the state, the
encouragement of women to shed their inferior status in society, and the involvement of women in the nationalist projects throughout history – have been instrumental to its development and subsequent change.

These characteristics also render inadequate a straight-forward approach to the analysis of the women's movement. Thus, a multi-level approach is imperative: the importance of the larger environment and structures encountered by actors continue to be major factors in its development, and requires a macro-level analysis; the development of women's own ability to recognize their specific subordination is necessary if any true and substantial liberation is to occur, and thus requires a micro-level analysis; and, participation and action is vital to the process of change, for without which there would not be the belief that change can actually be effected, and this requires a meso-level analysis. Taking the advice of David Meyer, who cautions that “[i]f we allow research constraints to limit our focus to more easily reducible forms of politics, we will miss the animating forces of contemporary politics” (Meyer, 2002: 52), a multi-level analysis of the women's movement in China will be attempted in following chapter.
Chapter 4: A Multi-Level Analysis of the Chinese Women’s Movement using the Social Movement Approach

As I have shown in the second chapter, the women’s movement in China had experienced an important turning point in the late 1970s, when it became more separate and autonomous. The factors that contributed to this development, I argued, were: the self-reflection that was beginning to take place within the movement, prompting a change in women’s self-consciousness; the shift in women’s agency, from being merely reactive to being more proactive; and, the revival and renewed role of the ACWF. The question that emerges from this argument is: what were the conditions that gave rise to these changes in the women’s movement in China?

In the pages to follow, I will answer this question by analyzing these particular changes using a blend of some of the theories that have been developed within the three main SM traditions discussed in the last chapter. This pragmatic endeavour lends itself well to the multi-level approach that I will be employing in my analysis, an approach that will provide for a more holistic and dynamic picture of the women’s movement as it stands in the 21st century.

Suzanne Staggenborg notes that “[m]acro conditions create the potential for mobilization through their impact on organization, resource bases, and grievances”; however, the potential that macro conditions provide for mobilization, i.e. political opportunities, “…must be perceived and interpreted…” by movement participants (at the micro-level) as such (Staggenborg, 2002: 128, emphases added). While the macro-opportunities and the micro-perceptions set the stage for movement activities, the actual play – the real action in SM, according to McAdam et al. (1988: 729) – takes place at the intermediate level between the two, the meso-level.
With this in mind, my discussion will proceed in the following manner. First, I will look at the macro conditions in China and the opportunities for collective activities that they engender. This will entail a discussion of the state and its changing relationship with society, inducing a shift in the role of the ACWF. Second, I will turn to the micro-level where I will examine the change in women’s collective identity, without which the possibilities for collective action would not be recognized. This is most apparent in the shift from a focus on sameness to difference. The changes in the macro and micro conditions were necessary, but insufficient, for the transformation of the Chinese women’s movement. What was needed for this transformation is the actual interaction and confluence of these two conditions, which takes place at the meso-level. Hence, lastly, I turn to the meso-level, and with this the issue of Chinese women’s increased agency.

Macro-Level Analysis

Various SM scholars have remarked on the importance of the structure of political opportunities to movement activity; the successes of a movement are largely shaped by changes in the broader economic or political trends of the society within which it operates (McAdam et al., 1988: 699; Jenkins and Perrow, 1977; Tarrow, 1997). Equally important are the more stable elements of political opportunity, and this is reflected in the nature of the institutional structure in China, and in the particular case of the women’s movement, the state’s ongoing relationship to women’s issues and liberation. Both of these macro-level conditions have been contributing factors to a more autonomous women’s movement.
In a state socialist system like China, the state "...exert[s] considerable organizational control over society and effectively monopolize[s] the resources available for social mobilization in ways that liberal democratic polities do not" (Thornton, 2002: 664). These features of the Chinese system have, for the most part, effectively limited any independent organizing outside the purview of the state. Ironically, however, this strong organizational control has also served to increase the potential for collective action of various groupings of interest within society.

Chinese society is one of cross-cutting organizational structures functioning to bring together dispersed individuals under the umbrella of the party-state's strict control. It is a society in which these individuals are obliged to be members of multiple organizations, be they neighborhood associations, work units, or mass organizations (Guthrie, 1995: 431). By dint of this set-up, two important consequences emerge for the potential for collective action. First, due to the state's monopoly over resources, Chinese citizens are forced to contend with the government at some point in their lives, and hence, are inevitably drawn into the political sphere of society. A popular proverb is certainly revealing in this regard: 'even if you don't concern yourself with politics, politics will concern itself with you' (Shi, 1997: 201-204). Second,

...this similarity in structural dependency and vulnerability to the rhythms of state policies implies that social groups in China not only live in a similar political and economic environment but also tend to share similar life experiences. It is not surprising, then, that these macropolitical conditions have produced similar behavior patterns among individuals across the boundaries of work-places and localities (Zhou, 1993: 59).

Xueguang Zhou refers to this distinctly Chinese (although he does extend this theory to other state socialist countries) institutional structure as the "large numbers" phenomenon. These two consequences have, unwittingly, funneled interests and
discontent into “ready-made” mobilization structures which are then directed at a central target in the political sphere – the state. Thus, this more or less stable nature of China’s institutional structure has provided a valuable resource for groups of individuals, who might not otherwise be compelled or permitted to organize in such an authoritarian environment as China, to be involved in such forms of collective action as a social movement. This institutional feature is even more significant for one particular group of individuals, that of Chinese women.

Women’s inferiority and subordination are sewn into the fabric of Chinese history. This is due in large part to its long patriarchal traditions rooted in Confucianism. The core of this tradition rests in the belief that women were necessarily bound to their roles as daughter, wife and mother, which confined them to the private spheres of Chinese society, the family and home. Moreover, it has been repeatedly re-enforced from generation to generation through laws and social customs. It is not surprising, then, that “...the Confucian ideals of family, society, and women’s role have not significantly changed over the past 2, 500 years” (Xiaorong Li, 1995: 412-13). For women to overcome these deeply-rooted obstacles required a catalyst, a role that the state willingly and eagerly embraced.

Accordingly, as chapter two has shown, the state drew many women into the public spheres of work, education and politics, which served to place them in situations where Zhou’s “large numbers” phenomenon was applicable. This was most apparent in the case of women’s increased participation in the workforce, which afforded them an “outside” space to interact with one another more readily than would be the case if they were still bound to their individual homes in the private sphere. In this space, women
were able to share their ideas and experiences; express their hardships, frustrations and discontent; and form friendships and relationships (which will prove to be invaluable at the meso-level of the movement’s evolution).

In light of the centuries of repression and isolation that women in China have experienced, this particular development was no small matter. However, this needs to be tempered with the fact that these public spaces in which women have entered were not completely void of males, and thus did not cater exclusively to women’s particular interests. Moreover, women were, to a larger degree, still linked to their relationships with men through various social, political and economic ties. These ties have served to dampen the full impact that Chinese women’s new situation could have brought about.

In countries like the United States, feminists have recognized this unavoidable problem and have made efforts to offset these, often dependent, ties with men by creating groups or communities free from the influence of males, such as consciousness-raising groups or feminist communes (McAdam et al., 1988: 704). Interestingly, in China, it was the state that had made the efforts in this regard; this was most notably reflected in the creation of the ACWF. The state’s establishment of the ACWF was a further measure taken to legitimize women’s concerns and problems, and to concentrate and consolidate women’s interests into a central apparatus. In fact, this has served to amplify the “large numbers” phenomenon with respect to women.

As pointed out in chapter two, the ACWF is an important aspect of the women’s movement in China; the existence of such a structure “...provides a publicly funded national framework for women, and one that is historically well established” (Judd, 2002: 17). Additionally, it is in keeping with the institutional logic of Chinese society. The
ACWF was and, upon its return in 1978, continues to be a ready-made organized and legitimate infrastructure created by the state that can be taken advantage of by women to further their own interests.

Though it is questionable whether the intentions of the state’s support for women’s increased status were of an altruistic nature, the fact that it had translated some of its rhetoric into action was advantageous for the progress of the Chinese women’s movement. As it has been noted by various scholars, these more stable elements of the political opportunity structure for women in China – the institutional peculiarities, the state’s patronage of women’s interests, the product of this in the form of the ACWF – could not have come from “an autonomous and politically active women’s movement.” Consequently, “…[t]he situation of women could not change without state initiative. Undesirable as this situation might seem to feminists, it defined the possibilities for change in 1980’s China” (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 340; Zhang and Xu, 1995: 44). And change it did in the years following the onset of the economic reforms of 1978. Thus, the more stable structural elements discussed need to be seen alongside of changing opportunities.

Only in the last 25 years has the state’s iron-hold grip over society lessened in China. The introduction of economic reforms in the late 1970s opened the way for a relaxation, however circumscribed, of the state’s control in the political, social, and intellectual spheres of society (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 26; Jaschok, et al., 2002: 3; Nathan, 1997: 58). Accompanying these changes was the emergence and rise of new grievances among the general population; “…[t]he relaxation of economic restraints and improvements in the economy not only created rising expectations but also dissatisfaction
when those expectations were not met” (Zuo and Benford, 1995: 134). For women, owing to their historically unique (and dependent) relationship with the state, this situation was even more acutely felt. Government ideology, rhetoric and policies had created expectations of liberation and increased status for women that simply were not met by the end of the Cultural Revolution.

As it was shown in the second chapter, the retreat of the state had mixed consequences for women. The negative side was, at first glance, overwhelming, especially the new problems introduced by the marketplace; among others, “...women are more and more frequently turned into sexual objects, exploited, discriminated against, and abused” (Lin Chun, 1997: 12), and as well their welfare and benefits in the state sector began to erode. These new problems left women in a vulnerable position, one in which required an overhaul of existing beliefs on how women’s liberation was to come about. It became obvious to Chinese women that the days of riding on the coattails of the nation’s fate was no longer a viable, or desired, option. As Li Xiaojiang has adamantly argued, the defining characteristic of the Chinese women’s movement in the new era should be its separateness, urging women not to “…take equality between men and women as the eternal criterion” but instead to do what they can to contribute to society and to “find and create women’s own space in a changed world…” (quoted in Zhang and Xu, 1995: 45).

With the retreat of the state, especially in the ideological realm, the transition to “women’s own space” was more easily facilitated. Political study sessions in the post-Mao era were numerically reduced and were less intense, providing increased opportunities for new (or, in the case of women, renewed) groups of people to share more
critical views (Zuo and Benford, 1995: 135-36). It is in these spaces no longer occupied by the state and its ideologies that the positive consequences of the economic reforms for the women's movement were observed:

...autonomous activities, fresh information, unfamiliar concepts, and indeed, free thinking [were allowed to] flourish. Women welcomed these changes because they brought new possibilities for action. Their position is necessarily contradictory: They lost preferential treatment by the state but gained freedom and independence in their relationship to the state. It is in this space of contradiction that women's movements in China have positioned themselves in order to explore and renovate the meaning of liberation (Lin Chun, 1997: 13).

This space of contradiction which was engendered by the changing elements of the political opportunities in China can occur in two ways, according to Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald. The first way involves shifts in the broader economic and political trends occurring beyond the control of individuals (as discussed earlier). The second way is reflected in what McAdam et al. refer to as “political sponsorship by elite groups” – the development of a “political system that included agencies already sympathetic to the movement” (McAdam et al., 1988: 700). While it is doubtful whether it can even be classified as an “elite group” (owing to the fact that, in contrast with other government apparatuses, it has no legislative or administrative power), the ACWF, in its “official” status and in its role as the legitimate arbiter of women's affairs, continues to be an important instrument in the facilitation of an active women's movement.

Since its re-establishment, there have been avid debates as to the ACWF's changing roles and functions. While the well-worn critiques of its usefulness remains integral to these debates, many scholars have agreed that even if it had intended to continue along the path that it had traveled prior to 1966, the massive changes since then, which are affecting women specifically, would have halted this; the society encountered
by the ACWF upon its return has become much more complex and heterogenous. New
issues, new actors, and new challenges have complicated the more uni-dimensional
picture of the recent past, and the ACWF has come under fire to reform itself to reflect
these changes. More urgently was the pressure from its members to prioritise women's
interests over those of the party-state's, lest its reason for existing in the first place
becomes invalidated. To this end, the ACWF has:

- [set up]...new departments, such as the Township and Village Enterprises'
  Section, to deal with the issues facing rural women in factories;
- [promoted]...research into women's issues, and in particular the setting-up of an
  Institute of Women's Studies in 1983; [supported]...initiatives such as the Social
  Fund for Child-Bearing Women to address the problem of discrimination against
  women in employment; [pushed] through legislation to protect women's rights;
- [advocated] greater political participation for women; and [supported]...the
  publication of a new magazine entitled "Rural Women Knowing All," which is
  targeted at rural women (Howell, 1997: 239-240).

The relaxation of control in the ideological sphere also permitted ACWF researchers and
administrative staff to hold more frank and open discussions of issues that were once
taboo, i.e. love and sexuality, and in forbidden territory, such as the questioning of the
usefulness of Marxism to analyzing women's specific situations (Hsiung, 1997: 10;
Honig and Hershatter, 1988). In taking these varying actions, the ACWF has been a force
for change in the women's movement, and for Chinese women in general.

On a more introspective level, the ACWF has also held self-critical discussions
among its cadres. Most notable of these discussions took place in 1988 at the 6th Annual
Congress of the ACWF, where delegates explicitly expressed dissatisfaction with the
organization's current form and called for greater autonomy and self-direction. This was
followed by a flood of articles in one of the ACWF's journals Zhongguo Funu,
supporting such a radical viewpoint with prescriptions on how women’s interests could best be represented (Howell, 1996: 133).

This alacrity in activities and discussions generated by the ACWF met with a setback in 1989 due to the protest movement at Tiananmen Square. Following this extraordinary, yet tragic, event, the state took various measures to regain control and legitimacy over the nation, two of which had direct impacts on the women’s movement. The first measure negatively impacted any organizing outside of official channels. Specifically, Order Forty-three of the State Council, enacted on October 25, 1989, required “...all social organizations to meet a series of formal conditions for officially registering with the government and to submit themselves to governmental review and supervision” (Judd, 2002: 164). Thus, the only means by which unofficial women’s organizations were able to form and exist were to be registered with a mass organization, in this case, the ACWF. The second measure involved the reaffirmation of the state’s control over the official mass organizations. In no less than very explicit statements made by the state, the mass organizations were expected to play their traditional roles as the transmission belts between state and society, curbing any political advocacy contrary to the Party (Judd, 2002: 165).

The consequences of these measures highlight the importance of the ACWF to the survival and continued development of the women’s movement. In a country where the tools of repression are monopolized and actively employed by the state, any openings or channels available for movements to manouevre is valuable, and in this respect, the ACWF has been, and continues to be, beneficial to the movement.
Despite the severity with which the state reasserted its authority, the political tide in China once again turned in the early 1990s. In this eased environment, the ACWF resumed its discussion on the issue of autonomy, albeit very cautiously. The consequences of the 1989 protest movement had opened its eyes to the precariousness of the tightrope on which it walks between its member constituents and the state. Thus, while it continues to actively address crucial gender-specific issues on behalf of women, it does so with due regard to the interests of its benefactor, the state. This was reflected at the 7th National Congress in 1993, where specific gender issues were on the agenda, but were offset by references to “…the need to “promote socialist civilisation,” “promote the unity of the country and international peace” and “support Party guidelines”” (Howell, 1996: 133; Howell, 1997: 240).

This deference to Party speak would seem to suggest that the ACWF is no closer to being independent than at any time in the past. However, I would argue that this is more a case of double speak than Party speak. The fact that it has cloaked its discussions of gender-specific issues with state rhetoric and jargon shows its enhanced innovation and strategizing capabilities, revealing some semblance of autonomy, rather than blind adherence and dependence on the state. Chinese scholars and activists within and outside of the ACWF apparatus have used the expression “being strategic” to explain the ways in which they are able to “smuggle” in feminist ideas from the “outside”. To illustrate,

One scholar/activist describes how she goes about finding out whether the feminist ideas she ‘smuggles’ into her public lectures are ‘approved, disapproved, ignored, or welcome’. ‘I also listen very carefully to the concluding remarks made by a Women’s Federation official who has sat through my lecture’. In case of disapproval, she would proceed to adjust her wording, use different examples, or sometimes simply drop the message for the time being (Jaschok et al, 2002: 12).
Thus, through what Douglas Guthrie has called “organizational subversion” (Guthrie, 1995: 433), the women’s movement has been able to subvert the intended use of the organizational structure of the ACWF – its economic and political resources, its extensive reach and its spaces for interaction – to further its own ends in a more sophisticated and subtle manner.

The activities and preparations leading up to 1995 Fourth World Conference for Women held in Beijing, and the event itself (which will be discussed further in the meso section) had accorded the ACWF more opportunities to develop its autonomy and had seen it flirt with the concept of non-governmental organization (NGO). In fact, it has even referred to itself as the largest women’s NGO in China, which not only shows its shrewd awareness of the potential for funds and contacts that could be gained by donning this hat, but also its own internal search for a new identity (Howell, 1996: 133).

In these various ways, the ACWF is increasingly seeking a more autonomous role for itself, a niche in the male-dominated world in which it must encounter in a much more direct and conspicuous manner than its “unofficial” comrades in the women’s movement – the increasing number of women’s organizations emerging on the Chinese landscape. If looked at through the SM theory lens, this changing role of the ACWF within the movement is significant. Due in large part to the still unorganized and disparate nature of the different organizations within the women’s movement at the beginning of the Reform era, the ACWF had been the organizational rock for the movement, providing a holding structure until more independent forms of organizing were able to develop in the latter part of the 1980s. Accordingly, it has matured into a viable opportunity structure that women would be remiss not to take advantage of.
Moreover, its organizational structure as a mass organization established by the state lends itself well to the mobilization ends of the movement. As a result, not only is it connected to the state, but also "...to local communities, through Women's Federation leaders at all levels and the millions of women activists working at the grassroots level", extending its reach into the villages and urban neighborhoods, warranting the characteristic of "having legs" (you tui) (Zhang, 2002: 163).

As this macro-level analysis of the Chinese women's movement has shown, the structural environment in which movements manouevre is still relevant to NSM. This is especially germane in the case of China where the state's influence and control remains an important factor that SM must heed. For the women's movement, it means a more onerous effort owing to the fact that its history had been so intimately bound to that of the state's. Thus, the requisite shifts in the political opportunities, coupled with the more stable aspects of the organizational structure of Chinese society, have been favourable to the movement's attempts at extricating itself from this dependent situation.

However, these macro conditions alone do not provide for the translation of the women's movement into a fully autonomous entity; rather, they facilitate the possible eventuality of this transformation. As noted at the outset of this chapter, these shifting opportunities need to be perceived and interpreted as such for there to be any action to effect change. This requires a micro-level change.

**Micro-Level Analysis**

A leading advocate of a more independent women's movement, one that is divorced from the state and outside of "official" channels, is Li Xiaojiang. She has argued
that the Chinese route to women's liberation is ultimately problematic due to its top-down nature. Women themselves have not taken the initiative in the struggle for their own equality; instead, they have received this equality from above in the process of being assimilated into the world of men. According to Li, "...women's liberation largely involves personal fulfilment, which can not be given to women from the outside. Instead 'women ought to grow conscious of their special character and strive for their self-determined development within society" (as quoted in Wang Qi, 1997: 37). In short, Li calls for a micro-level, bottom-up change in the women's movement.

The top-down approach to women's liberation had precluded any substantial development of women's self-awareness and self-reflection. In the absence of these developments, the state had been the prime architect of women's identity. This is reflected in the concepts of sameness and difference discussed in chapter two.

During the Cultural Revolution, equality was bestowed onto women, but not without a cost. Women have paid this price in the forfeiting of their self-identity as women; they were invited to enter into public (read male) spaces, but on terms that were indistinguishable from or equal to men's, which meant very few concessions to qualities that were female-specific. Thus, the eclipsing prominence of the category of class (for the most part, set by male standards) rendered the category of women almost invisible, if not for the single identity of the working woman within the class structure. With the host of changes occurring in the 1980s, Chen Yiyun had noted that the rift between the official policy of equality of the sexes touted by the government and the actual day-to-day reality experienced by women have resulted in the latter's increased feeling of alienation (Croll, 1995: 85).
This sense of alienation has prodded the women’s movement into a direction that necessarily involves a search for a new identity independent of the state’s machinations. For Tilman Evers, in his study of NSM in Latin America, the formation of an autonomous identity is an important initial phase in the process of true emancipation. On both an individual and collective level, this consists in “...coming to a realistic self-perception of one’s own characteristics, potentials and limitations, overcoming offers of false identity from outside.” Echoing Xiaojiang Li, he claims that identity is a “…do-it-yourself matter that cannot be given to us by someone else – even less can it be passed down from the heights of political power. It has to be constructed from below, on the base of a conscious and self-determined social practice” (Evers, 1985: 56 and 58, emphasis in original). This he associates with new social movements, and this is the process that the women’s movement in China has been undergoing in its endeavors to reclaim the category of women, contributing to its shift from dependency to autonomy.

Gender in the post-Mao years became visible, audible, and more controversial. Reactions to the disastrous effects of the Cultural Revolution; the negative consequences arising from the policies of the economic reforms; and the continued failure of socialist politics to give due recognition to the specific circumstances of women’s lives incited animated debates (Gilmartin et al., 1994: 10). These debates have coalesced around gender difference, which has been the operative concept in the “new” Chinese women’s movement. This new emphasis on difference is an attempt by the movement to create a collective identity distinct from the state-induced one in years past.

The concept of collective identity has attracted much attention with the rise in the NSM approach, which holds that the search for and development of who “we” are is
central to the formation and mobilization of a movement. As noted above, the state had suppressed any development of a female-specific identity by effectively monopolizing the images, spaces, and consciousness – some of the building blocks of a collective identity – of Chinese women. All of these features were inextricably bound to their class identity.

Since the state's retreat from strict class adherence, the challenge for women have been to disentangle their own identities from those based on their class. While the jury is still out on how successful this endeavour has been, and whether there exists today a more or less identifiable female-specific collective identity, signs of this occurring are certainly noticeable in contemporary China.

The development of Chinese women's collective identity are reflected in three perceptible changes: the increasing number of women's separate spaces; the emergence of a female consciousness; and, the reclaiming of control over their images. Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier propose three factors that serve as analytical tools for understanding collective identity construction in social movements: boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation. These factors are also useful in analyzing the first three changes occurring in the Chinese women's movement that have contributed to the development of a new women-centred identity.

First, the construction of boundaries "...establish differences between a challenging group and dominant groups" (Taylor and Whittier, 1995: 173). Its purpose lies in heightening the awareness of commonalities and shared characteristics of members within the group. This aspect is central to identity construction since, in many ways, it is a salient confirmation of the shared sense of "we-ness" within the group. For Chinese
women, this boundary marking had begun by the mid-1980s with the increasing recognition by voices within the movement that women needed a "separate sphere." One such voice, in a 1985 article in a women's magazine, proposed the establishment of a "women's palace": "...Now almost everywhere there are 'youth palaces', 'workers' cultural palaces', and 'recreation centers for old cadres.' The only people who do not have their own center are women. 'Women hold up half the sky' should not be an empty slogan....Why don't women have their own 'women's palace?'" (quoted in Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 320). Since then, women have taken the lead in exploiting emerging spaces in order to build their own "women's palaces." These have taken the form of women's studies centers, schools, and professional societies; the establishment of women's legal aid and counseling services, hotlines, and media watch network; and, social clubs for groups of religious women, single mothers, and lesbians, among others (Jaschok et al., 2002). These are just to name a few of the various attempts at creating boundaries, or separate spaces, that sets apart women as a group identity from "outside" identities.

Second, while boundaries situate individuals as member of a group, it is "...group consciousness that imparts a larger significance to a collectivity"; the development of which is "...an ongoing process in which groups reevaluate themselves, their subjective experiences, their opportunities, and their shared interests" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 114). Until the end of the Cultural Revolution, women's consciousness had been tightly bound to class consciousness, leaving little, if any, room for the development of a female-specific one. This is what is fascinating about the case of China. For most of its modern history, the state had been the primary author of the collective consciousness of its
population. This was especially evident in regards to women, whom Mao considered an important political resource for the CCP. As such, the active and continuous promotion and encouragement of their political consciousness were central features on the state’s agenda (Tianjian Shi, 1997: 218-219). Consciousness-raising campaigns, meant to do away with the persisting vestiges of traditional beliefs and norms that meant ‘women were unwilling to fly though the sky is high’ (Croll, 1983: 8), were regular occurrences during the CCP leadership. Thus, while women were forced to delay the development of their own gendered consciousness, removed from that of their class, they were presented with numerous opportunities to develop their efficacy in terms of the process of building consciousness, however limited this may have been. This has meant that women were able to more easily shift their attentions to the reevaluation of their structural position, and supposed “liberated” status, at the dawning of a new era in the late 1970s when the emphasis on class struggle shifted to that of economic development.

The “awakening” of Chinese women’s self-consciousness as a distinct social category is a positive sign in their quest to separate their gender identity from that of class. Indicative of this is “[a] thriving Chinese women’s literature that describes women’s spiritual and material frustrations and their aspirations” (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 38; see also Li Ziyun, 1994, for a more in-depth look at how this awakening is reflected in women’s writing in the history of Chinese literature). There are also signs of this in the activities of the ACWF – i.e. the promotion of women’s “quality” by nurturing the “four selves” (sizi): self-respect (zizun), self-confidence (zixin), self-reliance (zili), and self-strength (ziqiang) (Judd, 2002: 24) – and in academia.
The activities in this latter sphere have been especially intense, spawning a new branch of the women’s movement some scholars have referred to as the Chinese women’s studies movement. This new avenue (with roots both in academia and the ACWF) has elicited much research on its origins, evolution and important contributions to the women’s movement. Pertinent to this paper is its specific contributions to the development of women’s consciousness. According to Min Dongchao, the renewed emphasis on gender difference, wrought by the realization that an equality which took men as the standard was, to some extent, an empty achievement, made it possible for women to realize their self-awareness and gave impetus to women’s studies (Min Dongchao, 1999: 213). New and more complicated research topics on women, arising from equally new and complicated problems they began to experience during the initial years of economic reforms, were enthusiastically pursued. This scholarly activity provides opportunities for women to seriously discuss their subjective situations, problems, and solutions, awakening their female consciousness in the process. Moreover, this dialogue has contributed to the still emerging formation of a women’s collective identity. Turning once again to Li Xiaojiang (who has been credited with establishing the first women’s studies program – outside of official channels – at Zhengzhou University in 1985), she insists that only by developing a Chinese women’s collective consciousness is it possible to find a “way out for women” in terms of their liberation (Li Xiaojiang, 1995).

The third change reflecting the development of a women’s collective identity is the reclaiming of control over their own images. This aspect is what Taylor and Whittier has called negotiation, or (what they have elsewhere called) the politicization of everyday
life. It involves actions that a group engages in to renegotiate the way it is identified and defined. Moreover, it involves “…the use of symbols and everyday actions to resist and restructure existing systems of domination”, thereby valorizing a group’s ‘essential differences’ (Taylor and Whittier, 1995: 173). Similarly, but coming from a cultural angle in NSM theory, Ann Swidler gives heed to the concept of “codes” (a set of relationally defined meanings). She argues that “[e]ven without conscious efforts at publicity, one of the most important effects social movements have is publicly enacting images that confound existing cultural codings...[the altering of which] is one of the most powerful ways social movements actually bring about change” (Swidler, 1995: 33). The point that these scholars make is that through “symbols and everyday actions” or “codes,” such as styles of dress and language, a political statement is made against hegemonic cultural standards, whether intended or not. These expressions of self-definitions that groups construct are significant in the development of a collective identity.

During the various political campaigns in China between 1957 and 1976, demands were made that everyone be plainly dressed to show their identification with the masses. From clothes to hairstyles, women were indistinguishable from their male comrades. Any interest in fashion and adornment were thought to be bourgeois, and thus counterrevolutionary (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 42). Consequently, women’s identity was subsumed under an androgynous (class) one which, in effect, neglected any serious discussion on women’s specific issues. This served to re-enforce the state’s control over the manner in which women were identified and defined, consequently impeding the development of a separate and distinct women’s collective identity and movement.
Since the early 1980s, this situation has changed, and women began to show the signs of reclaiming their ability to define themselves, most immediately, obviously and radically through a renewed interest in styles of dress and adornment. An observation made by Croll reveals this metamorphosis:

With the onset of Reform in the late 1970s, a single nation-wide image of women in blue receded to be replaced by a plurality of female images in the China of the 1980s and 1990s. In the first decade of reform visitors to China were frequently surprised by the variety of colour, style and fabric, the array of jewellery, cosmetics and hairstyles and the interest in fashion that contributed to the emergence not only of the ‘young and modern miss’ but also of the ‘smarter older woman’ and not only in the cities (Croll, 1995: 109).

The swiftness in which women traded in their androgynous images shortly after the Cultural Revolution seemed to indicate an almost immediate reaction against the forced austerity that they had endured in the previous era. Owing to the fact that self-definition was a fairly new concept (or activity) for women in the years after the late 1970s, the most logical step in the defining of a new identity would be to do so through the “othering” or demarcation of this new identity from the other – the male identity. Accordingly, the search for that which is distinct from the masculine does not begin with the questioning of assumptions about the masculine. Rather, it begins with the identification of the qualities unique to women (Croll, 1995: 153). Thus, it is not surprising that Chinese women after the Cultural Revolution have swung far over to the other side of the masculine/feminine continuum; conspicuous in, yet perhaps unaware of, their political statement against the dominant cultural code of the recent past.

The negative consequences of this “new” image of women have already revealed themselves in the rise of an essentialist tendency, reasserting old values while at the same time, ironically, rejecting them, and the emerging commodification and objectification of
women appearing on billboards, in magazines and newspapers, and in the general media. These are the challenges that the women’s movement has been dealing with in its quest for self-definition. In confronting these challenges, there is little doubt that the collective identity that it is fashioning for itself is affected in the process.

As this micro-level analysis of the change in the Chinese women’s movement since the end of the 1970s has shown, women within the movement have, slowly but surely, taken over the reins of constructing their own identities. Their new and still developing self-awareness and self-determination are vital tools in the building of a more autonomous and independent women’s movement.

The requisite shift in the political opportunity structures examined in the first section have opened up spaces for women within the movement to start using these tools. The top-down changes at the macro-level and the bottom-up changes at the micro-level have been coalescing in the middle arena, the meso-level. This level of analysis captures the movement’s more outwardly dynamic nature, the interactions and activities that have contributed to a new Chinese women’s movement.

**Meso-Level Analysis**

As its name implies, collective action is, fundamentally, a “collective” and “active” phenomenon. This entails the interaction between groups of individuals in activities of organizing and mobilizing, essentially the “move” in movement. Although there has been increasing interest and work generated in this regard beginning in the 1980s, analyzing SM at the meso-level remains a relatively new terrain for research. This is even more so for cases of SM outside of liberal democratic countries like China, for as
Naihua Zhang and Wu Xu has pointed out, "[t]he relationship between different groups within the women's movement need to be worked out further" (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 42). As such, and due to constraints of length and scope (for a deeper understanding of this level of analysis would require at least another chapter) the following analysis of the meso-level will necessarily be a cursory one.

As noted in chapter two, one of the factors that have contributed to a more autonomous women's movement in China is the change in women's agency; more specifically, the movement has become more proactive in its quest for liberation. Prior to the Reform era, women have had little need to actively rally for the recognition of their place and their rights in Chinese society. The state had taken pre-emptive measures that had rendered this unnecessary, in the forms of laws, legislation and policies beneficial to women. Owing in large part to the fact that women's "special" place on the state's agenda had been less of a priority with its retreat from society, resulting in the loss of much that was gained in the preceding years, women have come to the realization that they are in a precarious situation without the state's interference. Thus, in many ways, the women's movement has been compelled to become agents in dealing with the more complicated nature of women's problems in the new era. Moreover, this has had the consequence of encouraging more horizontal relations between women, in contrast to the strict vertical hierarchy imposed from above by the party-state in years past (Perry, 2001: 91).

There were two key meso-level developments that have been conducive to Chinese women's (re)new(ed) agency: the increasing significance of women's networks outside of the state's purview, and the growing importance of the international aspect of
collective action. The effects and consequences of these developments are still playing themselves out today in China.

As McAdam et al. note, “[i]t is there in the existing associational groups or networks of the aggrieved community that the first groping steps toward collective action are taken” (McAdam et al., 1988: 729). These groups or networks, both formal and informal, are the “cell structure” of collective action and constitute the micro-mobilization context, defined as a small group setting in which “…processes of collective attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organization to produce mobilization for collective action” (McAdam et al., 1988: 709, 711). These settings allow for the interpersonal exchanges of information, ideas and support between individuals that serve to consolidate ties, draw otherwise uninvolved individuals into the movement, and act as a base from which to launch collective action.

Despite beliefs to the contrary, the associations of Chinese women in such a context as described above have had rich historical precursors. From forming “sisterhoods” to women’s unions, women have always pursued the ways and means to meet and to nurture their collective interests. Moreover, common in both rural and urban areas is the act of swearing allegiance to a group of women in the formation of these sisterhoods. The role played by these associations had died down considerably under communism with the forced co-operation of the official women’s movement. However, the 1980s have marked a “…return to local associative behaviour as the nucleus for the empowerment of women across communities. Chinese women are increasingly aware that they owe their liberation not to the Chinese Communist Party, but to themselves” (Perry, 2001: 99). Thus, they have begun once again to (re)establish both formal and
informal women’s associations and organizations, which have contributed to a more lively micro-mobilization context.

The re-emergence of women’s associations took the form of mutual-aid organizations referred to as “friendly societies,” which ranged from a Women Engineers’ Friendly Society in Shanghai to a Women Journalists’ Friendly Society in Shenyang. The main impetus of these societies was to provide a forum for women to establish contact with one another and exchange information. Fundamentally, “...the friendly societies were intended to establish an “old-girls” network in a society based on “connections” (guanxi)” (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 320-321). These first associations were mostly based on shared professions and occupations, and have since then, mushroomed into diverse organizations representing interests as varied as those based on religion to recreation to sexuality.

While this particular development of the Chinese women’s movement was taking place within Chinese borders, a parallel one had begun to take place at an international level, with the announcement that the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and its accompanying Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations in the summer of 1995 were to be held in Beijing. Considering that over two centuries ago, “Emperor Qianlong demanded: “Be sure to prevent any contact between the barbarians and the population”, thereby ordering his authorities to block communication between foreigners and Chinese” (as cited in Brook, 1988: 26-27), advice that the state had adhered to up until the 1980s, this was a giant and historic step for Chinese women as well as for the country.

These dual events brought together over 30,000 women from around the world, including 5,000 Chinese women. Moreover, an unprecedented number of the latter were
drawn into the preparation of these events and related activities in the years before 1995, which entailed "...attending regional preparatory conferences abroad, organizing international conferences at home, and participating in numerous meetings to hear and talk about the FWCW" (Hsiung and Wong, 1998: 470). The term Jie Gui (connecting the tracks – in its dialogues and exchanges with the global women’s movement) gained wide usage by Chinese women. This connecting of tracks of the Chinese women’s movement with the “outside” world was unheard of as late as a decade ago. Thus, these events had presented it with an (macro) opportunity structure writ large, as well as stimulated changes at the (micro) personal level.

With respect to the former, Florence Passy would refer to this as a “supranational political opportunity.” The United Nations, in holding this event, has facilitated the “...the creation of transnational linkages between organizations by offering spaces where they can meet, exchange information and experiences and organize protests” (Passy, 1999: 161). Not only did this opportunity bring about the creation of many new organizations and gave them a space to connect, it also played an important role in the changes that were already being witnessed in the ACWF.

Jude Howell points out four noteworthy ways in which this event had made a difference to the ACWF: “…organisational prestige [having gained invaluable experience at an international level to an extent that exceeds that of other mass organizations in China], exposure to global gender issues [to less familiar topics such as sexual orientation and empowerment], experience of foreign women’s NGOs (diversity and style) [giving it an alternative role different from being an arm of the state], and material assets [for
example, a new building with a women's activity centre in the heart of Beijing]” (Howell, 1997: 240-241).

The FWCW also brought about changes at the personal level. Chinese women involved in the discussions with foreign women found the encounters enlightening, inspiring, and informative. They were given the opportunity to perceive their situations in ways that were new and different and they were able to share their own lived experiences with other women.

This brief look at the two meso-level developments in the Chinese women's movement is by no means an exhaustive one; they provide points of departure for more research into the intricate web that characterizes the meso arena. Despite the brevity in this level of analysis, however, it is obvious that Chinese women's agency – that is, the changes in their capability to be proactive in their search for liberation and true equal status in society – have benefited substantially from the social networks, the "foundations on which movements are built" (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 219), at both the national and international levels. Indeed, women's improved sense of agency contributes significantly to the development of a more autonomous women's movement.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the Chinese women's movement on a level by level basis. However, in reality, the confluence and connections between all three provide a more accurate depiction of such a dynamic phenomenon as a SM. Maria Jaschok et al. have captured this confluence nicely in their description of Chinese women's vital role in negotiating social and political transformations in Chinese society:

...unique fluidity that has come to characterize women's activism [read: movement] in relation to central structures of power: that is, situated both inside and outside the centre, yet sometimes preferring to negotiate in the interstices, the spaces in-between; working outward from the inside, but also influencing the
centre from the outside; starting from positions of weakness and marginality and transforming these into mobility and strength. In the process these activists have been creating a borderland of social and intellectual movement which is leaving neither the centre nor the periphery unaffected and unchallenged (Jaschok et al., 2002: 4).
Chapter Five: Conclusion

I began this paper with Li and Zhang’s observation that a women’s movement indeed exists in China despite opinions to the contrary. Its form and content, activities and challenges are distinct from movements of the West, and understandably so, considering the different environments in which these respective movements must manoeuvre. As I have shown in this paper, the road to women’s true liberation in China has been characterized by a long history of sharing its pathway with the government in power. This close and sometimes tense relationship between women and the state had kept at bay an autonomous women’s movement, but had, perhaps unwittingly, set the foundations and provided the tools necessary for the eventuality of such a development to occur. This eventuality came to a pass in the Reform era.

In the years after the CCP leadership, the Chinese women’s movement underwent a multitude of changes that have given impetus to a more autonomous and separate movement. I have laid out some of these changes in the preceding chapter by analyzing them on a macro-, micro-, and meso-level using the social movement approach. Such an approach allows for a more dynamic assessment of the movement, its environment and its members, and the interactions between them through time.

With the retreat of the state in the Reform era, cracks began to appear in the system, opening up spaces of opportunity for women to claim as their own. In these cracks, somewhat shielded from the watchful eyes of the state, women began to question their ‘supposed’ liberation on their own terms, becoming conscious of their particular place in society. Moreover, they began to form links with one another, establishing ties through shared histories and interests, and thus building a women-centred community,
albeit a still evolving one, within Chinese society. This community has, since the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, extended its networks even further, into the international community of women around the world. These developments have contributed to a women’s movement that is more self-directed, self-reflective, and ultimately, a potent force for societal change in China.

This last point is loaded one. What I mean by this is that it opens up numerous lines of inquiry and avenues for research into the multifarious changes that are occurring in China today. The women’s movement in China, and the changes it is still undergoing, presents an interesting and compelling puzzle for the researcher, mainly in three regards.

First, it imparts a case where the distinctly Chinese experience is observable: the active engagement (and importance) of the state in the affairs of the society, and thus the effectiveness of cooperation, in some form or another, over conflict; the propensity of groups of people with shared interests to form, and to take part in the construction of a strong China; and, the not overtly political stance these groups have commonly taken to remain relatively “free” from state repression. This allows room for at least some rudimentary generalizing. Essentially, the case of the women’s movement in China offers a rich and variegated model by which it is possible to extrapolate its findings to understanding other more latent social movements that are working to change Chinese society.

Secondly, the Chinese women’s movement adds a new dimension to the most appropriate approach to the study of social change and the agents of that change – the social movement approach. Looking at the Chinese women’s movement through this lens brings to the surface the brimming layer of organizing, mobilizing and myriad of
activities just below the surface of what had been believed to be a fairly complacent and almost invisible movement. But also reciprocally, it presents a case for the SM field that warrants the call for "building bridges" between the different theoretical and empirical approaches vying for centre stage in the field. As this paper has shown, there were various factors, at different levels, that have contributed to the development of a more autonomous women's movement in China. Moreover, the women's movement in China brings to the SM approach an exemplar case where less overt forms of dissent are also deemed precipitous to the transformation of society. In this, it differs from the movement wrought by students that had manifested itself during the events of 1989, and that have garnered most of the attention from the researchers in the SM field. As Tilman Evers notes, it is the "everyday 'doing it differently'" of new social movements, taking place at the level below existing power structures, which is slowly changing these structures at the roots. These activities will only become manifest in the long run, but they could "...prove to be more incontestable and irreversible than many abrupt changes within the power cupola, because it is rooted in the everyday practice and in the corresponding basic orientations in which all social structures have their foundations" (Evers, 1985: 50-51).

This last point augments the third one: the women's movement in China provides a case that can inform many of the debates that have proceeded from witnessing the flurry of changes in China in the last couple of decades. The debates around the prospects for civil society and democracy have been especially salient. Although a more in-depth exploration in this regard is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be remiss not to point out that women, and in particular the women's movement, in China are especially in a unique position to enlighten these debates and discussions. If civil society, or
something coming close this in China, is thought of as "...a formation that exists by virtue of state-society interaction, not as something between, separate from, or autonomous from either", as Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic have aptly noted (Brook and Frolic, 1997: 12), then the women's movement has, and continues to, contribute to its realization.

In the introduction of this paper, one of Nanette Funk's two models for women's movements was used to describe the Chinese women's movement in its initial stages. Beginning in the late 1970s, it has taken a route toward the other model: "For Chinese women in the reform era, the transformation of the particular also greatly affects the totality. The current wave of the women's movement, with women's points of view and voices much stronger than ever before in modern Chinese history, casts its own influence on people's values and behaviors and on the reorganization of China" (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 44). Renegotiating its relationship with the state in innovative ways, the women's movement has "...created a space for independent thinking and communicating, for political initiatives and activity – a "public sphere" (the term is just beginning to make sense for the Chinese)" (Lin Chun, 1997: 15-16). This public sphere opened up by the activities wrought by the women's movement may not be a "civil society" in the Western sense of the concept, but it reveals characteristics that are somewhat similar to one. The most pertinent one for this paper is the feature of autonomy, reflected in the ways that the Chinese women's movement has carved an active and self-reflective role for itself in the reincarnation of a beleaguered post-Cultural Revolution China into a revitalized and more open China. More research into how the new Chinese women's movement can continue
to take part in the prospects for a Chinese style civil society, and ultimately "democracy", would be most rewarding.

All of these concluding remarks share in common the notion of change. As alluded to in chapter two, throughout Chinese history, women have been, at different times, used by the state as the principal marker of change, for modernity, development, progressiveness and societal transformation. Moreover, the Chinese women's movement itself has gone through significant changes since the late 1970s, eliciting the need to find an appropriate manner by which these changes could be observed. The SM approach is especially instructive in this endeavour since the essence of this approach lies in its contemplation of change, political and otherwise. By observing the dynamic nature of the Chinese women's movement using this analytical tool, it is possible to see how the effects of these changes in the women's movement can engender broad societal change.

As Robin Teske and Mary Ann Tétérault have remarked:

[A]ction is the ability to start out, to begin something anew. Action extends beyond beginnings, however. The initiation of action is like tossing a stone into a pond. The impact makes ripples on the surface, but the most lasting changes occur in places we can't see, below the surface, where the life of the pond reorganizes itself around the intruding stone and the injury as well as the assistance is inflicted on its way to the bottom. Like the stone, action is inherently neither evil or benign. Regardless of what is intended, action simply is and, in the process of its realization, makes change not only possible, but necessary (Tétérault and Teske, 2000: 15).
FOOTNOTES

1Betty Friedan makes this statement in an article she wrote appearing in Newsweek Magazine, September 4, 1995

2While it is important to recognize that there exists differences in terms of the issues and obstacles faced by the multitude of positions Chinese women occupy – i.e. urban versus rural, young versus old, rich versus poor – for the purposes of this paper, I will discuss the Chinese women’s movement as a single entity (making references to a particular position when necessary). Elisabeth Croll makes the observation that, “…although no single voice can be said to be the “authentic” or “representative” voice of female experience in any one period or location, there is an interesting congruence in the gendered moments recalled by these female narrators although their accounts may be separated by time and space” (Croll, 1995: 4).

3For example, the Association for the Collective Advancement of Women and the Association for the Promotion of Women’s Education (Park, in Tétrault, 1995: 140).

4The KMT’s codes were not strictly enforced due to the New Life Movement in 1934 that advocated a revival of Confucian values. The CCP’s law and legislation raised the ire of peasant men, whose support was crucial to revolutionary success, and as a result, low priority was given to the realization of their promises (Park, 1995: 140, 141, 143).

5This particular gain encountered a setback when “the distribution of land to individuals was subsequently changed into a system of collectives” (Hall, 1997: 11).

6As Bauer et al. have pointed out, employment and occupational opportunities are affected by education. The result of their studies show that “…[a] junior high education significantly increases the probability of being employed, a senior high degree has an even larger positive effect, and a university education has the largest effect. The participation of those with primary education is not significantly higher than those with no education” (Bauer et al., 192: 352).

7The education of rural women encountered a major setback during the famine of 1959-1961. Hence, the period between the end of the famine and the resumption of growth in the percentage of female education in the late 1960’s was characterized by a slow rebuilding of pre-famine levels (Lavely et al., 1990: 70, 71).

8This encouragement is in keeping with Marxist theories of the private/public dichotomy. Essentially, like other state socialist countries, the Chinese state believed that “…the roots of women’s oppression lie in the denial of property and, through that, access to the public sphere as independent actors” and as such, questions of this dichotomy is important since “…[t]he division between the two is regarded as signifying the alienation of individuals in society. The obliteration of the private/public dichotomy is on of the goals of communism” (Rai, 1999: 181).

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9. The Politburo was made up of the core Standing Committee (where women have yet to penetrate), a larger group of full members (consisting of Jiang Qing, Ye Qun, and Deng Yingchao, the wives of the three leaders mentioned), and another group of alternate members (consisting of Wu Guixian and Chen Muhau) (Rosen, 1995: 317-318).

10. As Ellen Judd has pointed out, any organizing outside of the official framework of the party/state was politically suspect, "...most obviously because it might not be socialist in character, but also because it might challenge the Party's interpretation of feminism and its place in the socialist project" (Judd, 2002: 162). As such, the ACWF served as the "official" Chinese women's movement in the politically charged climate of the Revolutionary period.

11. Parallel organizations to the ACWF were also established for the youth and the workers of society, the Communist Youth League and the All-China Federation of Trade Union, respectively.

12. In the initial years of the Cultural Revolution, many women bought into this belief that they have finally achieved true equality with men. As Croll has astutely noted, this had been abetted by the concurrence of the new rhetoric with the recent changes to their roles. Essentially, there was physical proof, such as new opportunities to join the work force and the political arena, that indeed women were equal to men; "[p]rofessional, peasant and working women could constantly compare and contrast their lives before and after the revolution, and in the first decade, many rightly perceived that the conditions in which they performed their productive and reproductive activities were much altered and improved by the new revolutionary government" (Croll, 1995: 78).

13. The Cultural Revolution and women's part in it is much more complex than what I have laid out in this section. While I have pointed out a few of the positive aspects of this period in regards to the advancement of women's interests, these need to be tempered with fact that what was occurring in the broader political and cultural context in China was certainly not all positive. In fact, the official view on the Cultural Revolution (originally put forth by the Party in 1981 in its lengthy 'resolution on history') acknowledged that this period was "...responsible for the most severe setback and heaviest losses suffered by the Party and the people since the founding of the People's Republic" (Hutchings, 2000: 93). Despite the noble and benevolent rhetoric espoused by the state during this period, this revolution was broadly considered as a power play by Mao, unhappy with the measures taken to recover from the Great Leap Forward, that resulted in massive social upheavals and extreme violence.

14. Deng introduced an agenda that focused on developing four sectors of the economy, known as the 'Four Modernisations': agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology. This entailed a replacement, to some extent, of the planned economy with a market-driven one, the growth of the private sector, and the withdrawal of the state from economic monopoly. The results have varied between such negative effects as the curtailing of the "iron rice bowl" (a situation whereby the state took care of
the employment, pension and medical treatment of its citizens), and positive effects as the opening up of the ideological sphere and room for relatively more choice and mobility (Rai, 1999: 186-187; Croll, 1983: 20-22; Ping Zhuang, 1999: 4-5; Zhang and Xu, 1995: 32).

15Naihua Zhang and Wu Xu make the argument that Chinese women have been active agents of change, and not just passive recipients of state policy, throughout modern Chinese history (in their roles as workers and members of the ACWF). They claim that there is "...a dialectical relationship between the state and women, and women are not always opposed to or completely separate from the state." Furthermore, in a footnote, they call for more empirical studies into the period between 1949-1957, during which they believe was one of the high points of the women's movement in post-Revolutionary China (Zhang and Xu, 1995: 43, 55).

16As Steven M. Buechler astutely points out, the term “new social movement theory” is a misnomer in that "...it implies widespread agreement among a range of theorists on a number of core premises.” Instead, “[i]t would be more accurate to speak of “new social movement theories,” with the implication that there are many variations on a very general approach to something called new social movements” (Buechler, 1995: 442, emphasis in the original). This is an useful distinction in that it provides for a more flexible approach to the study of such a dynamic topic as SM. The emphasis on variations in the general approach embraces not only past theorizing, but also leaves room for a more synthetic approach.

17This summary is by no means a comprehensive overview of the state of the field of the Social Movements paradigm since its inception. Some excellent attempts can be found in McAdam et al., 1988; Shah, 1990; Tarrow, 1994; McAdam et al., 1996; Singh, 2001; Shah, 2002; among others.

18As noted by David S. Meyer: “Sociologists and political scientists, regardless of their articulated concerns, write from the preoccupations of their time. Analysts of social movements considering the topic in the 1950s wrote with fascism in general – and the Nazis in particular – in mind” (Meyer, 2000: 37).


The main progenitor of this concept is Doug McAdam. In his seminal work, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), he synthesized various research done in the field that focused on the workings of the political process in his study of the development of the civil rights movement in the U.S.


The prominent NSM theorists are Manuel Castells, Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and Jurgen Habermas. They have developed elements of the NSM approach from their observations of movements in their respective countries of Spain, France, Italy, and Germany, and from their own intellectual traditions. A summary of their differing perspectives indicative of the wide-ranging orientations of this approach can be found in Buechler (1995, specifically 443-447).

The varying phenomena that have presented puzzles to SM researchers include: “Peace movements, student movements, the anti-nuclear energy protests, minority nationalism, gay rights, women’s rights, animal rights, alternative medicine, fundamentalist religious movements, and New Age and ecology movements...” (Johnston et al., 1994: 3).

For research in this regard, see the excellent anthology by Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds.), *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Also, a collection from a related approach, the social constructionist approach, see Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992).


Scholars who have advocated for this multi-level approach include: McAdam et al., 1988; Alexander et al., 1987; Meyer et al., 2002.

Some SM research conducted with the case of China include: Zhou, 1993; Crane, 1994; Zuo and Benford, 1995; Guthrie, 1995; Zhao, 2000; a very interesting exception to the study of SM in China that does not specifically treat the 1989 protest
movement is Patricia M. Thornton’s “Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy” (2002). In her article, she discusses the more subtle forms of contentious practices in contemporary China, namely the strategic uses of subversive doorway hangings and the body cultivation techniques of the sectarian group, falun gong.

Sidney Tarrow, in his discussion of the possible reasons for the accelerated collapse of state socialism in east central Europe after 1989, also makes a similar observation: “In authoritarian settings, while repression crushes resistance under most conditions, centralization of power offers dissidents an odd sort of advantage – a unified field and a centralized target to attack once the system is weakened...[w]here power is centralized and conditions are homogenized, once opportunities are opened, as they were when Gorbachev began his reforms, framing and organizing a social movement are facilitated. The weapon of the weak in such systems...is that they have “a great deal in common”” (Tarrow, 1997: 81-82); Similarly, McAdam et al. list “ecological concentration” as an important macro organizational condition for collective action. They define this as being “…the degree of geographic concentration in the residential or occupational patterns of a group’s everyday lives...[which] has the important effect of increasing the density of interaction between group members, thereby facilitating recruitment.” Discussing this concept in the context of the urbanization, they emphasize the structural potential for collective action facilitated by such “…dense concentrations of relatively autonomous homogenous people” (McAdam et al., 1988: 703).

In fact, the feeling of alienation was a general malaise that plagued the Chinese population in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. According to Wang Ruoshui’s “alienation” theory, “…the 30 years of the CCP’s proletariat dictatorship alienated both the Chinese people and the Party itself, it distorted the human nature of the people, and it corrupted the Party.” Argued from this angle, the policy on women during those turbulent years had distorted women’s “essential” nature, masculinizing them. Thus, the turn towards “femininity” suggested a negation of Maoist politics and a recovery of human nature (Wang Zheng, 1997: 136).

Because it is beyond the scope of my paper, I have not included the generational factor in this list to be analyzed. However, I will briefly mention here that more in-depth research in this area of the Chinese women’s movement using a SM approach would be most interesting. Nancy Whittier, in her article “Political Generations, Micro-Cohorts, and the Transformation of Social Movements”, proposes a generational approach in analyzing change and continuity in a social movement (Whittier, 1997). Similarly, Bert Klandermans, in his chapter “Transient Identities?: Membership Patterns in the Dutch Peace Movement,” suggests that collective identities are transient phenomena. He focuses on the “...process of the changing composition of a body of activists and its consequences in terms of collective identity” (Klandermans, 1994: 169). Both of these somewhat similar approaches could be used to understand the generational shifts in the Chinese women’s movement, especially in the following cohorts: the pre-Revolutionary cohort, the Revolutionary cohort, and the Reform cohort. Elisabeth Croll, in her book Changing Identities of Chinese Women, looks at these three generations as they live out
the rhetoric of their respective eras, but she does so from a more narrative angle and not so much from a systematic one, as could be done using the SM approach (Croll, 1995).


33A similar change occurred in women's (mainly scholars) reclaiming of control over language, especially in terms of the freedom to name themselves. For a more in-depth analysis of this change, see Tani E. Barlow's “Politics and Protocols of Funü: (Un)Making National Woman”, where she discusses female subject positions in discourse. Essentially, she argues that the shifts between the terms funü, nüxing, and nüren in history, all of which can be translated as "women", indicate attempts at fashioning (competing) identities. Funü signifies the Maoist collectively defined national woman; nüxing was a counteridentity that stressed the difference between women and men; nüren is a more scholarly attempt at producing a subject from a self-reflexive position, a position that is in constant self-surveillance. The nüren subject "...forms an irreducible "identity" for anchoring advocacy politics" (Barlow, 1995: 356-357). Thus, while research on the woman question in the early 1980s concerned itself with concrete matters, such as employment, the latter part of the decade saw an increased focus on research into women themselves (Qing Ren, quoted in Barlow, 1995: 357); See also Lin Chun (1997, especially 16-19) for an enlightening reinterpretation of the term feminism by Chinese women, reading its differences from the Western usage of the term.

34This particular development in the Chinese women's movement sets it apart from that of women's movements in the West. For the latter, while it is also challenging the dominant culture codes in its own respective environment, it does so in the opposite direction. Thus, it argues "...against standards of feminine appearance requiring women to wear makeup and restrictive clothing" (Meyer, 2000: 50), adopting a position quite similar, but not as extreme, to the "sameness" that the Chinese women's movement have sought so eagerly to extricate itself from. This was also illustrated in the designation of "Ms." to replace "Mrs." and Miss." Also, the 'anything a man can do a woman can do also' slogan used by the state in China during the Cultural Revolution resembles the contested issue of military women's participation in combat roles in the United States (which would have been inconceivably two decades earlier) (Meyer, 2000: 50). This was not even debatable in China, where women have been a regular fixture in the various revolutionary projects throughout modern China.
Bibliography


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