

Finding Women in the State

A SOCIALIST FEMINIST REVOLUTION
IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC
OF CHINA, 1949-1964

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Introduction

IN 1936 AN ESSAY ENTITLED "The Female-Centered Film and the Male-Centered Society" appeared in *Women's Life*, a left-oriented feminist magazine published in Shanghai. The author cautioned readers not to take the popularity of female movie stars as an indicator of women's liberation, and then proceeded to present a critical analysis of unequal power relations in a male-dominated capitalist society in which the film industry was reducing female actors to sex objects catering to male desires.¹ The author of this radical feminist political position was herself a rising movie star, the twenty-eight-year-old Chen Bo'er. In 1946, after Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, she was sent by Zhou Enlai, the vice chair of the military committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), to take over the Manchuria Film Studio in northeast China. There, Chen became a founder of the socialist film industry of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and in that capacity is a protagonist in this book. Another protagonist is Shen Zijiu, the editor-in-chief of *Women's Life* who had invited Chen to write her essay, and a renowned social activist ten years Chen's senior who had founded and run the magazine with the support of her circle of left-oriented friends. Shen later became the editor-in-chief of *Women of China*, the only women's magazine circulating nationally during the early years of the PRC. Both women were elected to the Executive Committee of the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF, later ACWF) upon its founding in April 1949; this nationwide umbrella organization brought together leading feminists of the Republican era (1912-49) who had been members of the CCP or sympathized with the Communist Revolution. This book centers on many feminists like Chen and Shen who joined the Chinese Communist Party in the course of the Communist Revolution (1921-49) and

held powerful positions in the socialist state after the founding of the PRC in 1949.

The concentration of revolutionary women and men from diverse backgrounds in a political party formed amidst the cross-currents of feminism, anarchism, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism in the early twentieth century and shaped by decades of military combat, political strife, and violent suppression by their enemies, including Chinese local warlords, imperialist colonizers, Japanese fascists, and the Nationalist government, led to messy interpersonal entanglements and left behind an extremely complex historical legacy. Revolutionary women and men with passionate convictions, if diverse visions, of a socialist modern China shaped the complicated dynamics and multifaceted struggles in the CCP's highly volatile and historically contingent experiment of establishing a socialist state. This book investigates the internal workings of the CCP in the contentious processes of socialist state formation and cultural transformation from a gender perspective and illuminates a persistent "gender line" in the struggles within high politics.

The stories in this book question the assumption of the total dominance of a socialist state patriarchy. To some extent, this study also questions conceptualizations of masculinist state power in any political system that rule out possibilities of women's subversive action in state processes. The issue here is not only to recognize women's agency but also to reconceptualize state power. Can a feminist theory of state critical of all dimensions of state power also account for sites and effects of feminist negotiation and intervention in dispersed state processes? Different from Wendy Brown's preoccupation with "finding the man in the state," *finding women* in the socialist state is the focus of this book.²

KEY WORD: FEMINISM

Throughout this book, I repeatedly use the words "feminist," "socialist feminists," "state feminists," and "cultural front" when naming my protagonists and their activities. I have chosen these words because they resonate with present-day usage and the relevant literature examining similar views and practices in the histories of other countries. But as with any work that relies on translating from documents and interviews in a language other than English, my wording can be viewed as arbitrary; some explanation may therefore be in order.

“Feminist” here refers to the view that women and men are equals, although the meaning and form of “equality” is inevitably the object of intense debate. In its broadest sense, feminism was one of the many ideologies embraced by educated Chinese in their pursuit of modernity and rejection of an ancient dynastic system. Sometime around 1900, the Chinese term *nüquan* began to appear in Chinese translations of foreign feminist texts, mostly Japanese that used the neologism to refer to “women’s rights or power.”³ *Nüquan* was quickly adopted by those who questioned the gendered social arrangements prescribed and elaborated by ancient Chinese philosophers and male literati with the specific term *nannü*, men and women, denoting China’s ancient gender system.⁴ Against the Confucian ideal of *nannü youbie* [gender differentiation] and *nannü shoushou buqin* [gender segregation], Chinese feminists expressed a different imagining of a better future: a more humane society that centered on social justice and equality, a modern society that allowed individuals to break free from the constraints of Confucian patriarchal social norms embedded in kinship relations as well as from the control of an imperial polity, and / or a stronger nation that turned China from being the prey of imperialist powers into a sovereign state. Regardless of the differences in their political positions, reformers, revolutionaries, professionals, and educated women and men from elite social backgrounds who advocated various versions of feminism agreed on the necessity of changing gender practices in transforming their ancient civilization, which had fallen into deep crisis in a time of imperialist and colonialist expansion. The confluence of diverse and often contradictory ideas and practices rapidly came together to turn the neologism *nüquan* into a key word in early twentieth-century China. Related terms such as *nannü pingdeng* [equality between men and women], a Chinese rendition of the English phrase “sexual equality” that had been circulating globally since the late nineteenth century,⁵ and *nüquan zhuyi* [the ism of women’s rights or power] that emerged in the first decade of the Republic of China following the revolution toppling the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) were also increasingly popular.

With the birth of the New Culture Movement promoting its circulation to a wider audience, *nüquan zhuyi* as a Chinese rendition of “feminism,” in particular, gained increasing currency for its advantage as a continuation of the by-then common word *nüquan* and for its explicit association of “-ism” with “women’s rights or power.” Marked by Chen Duxiu’s publication of the *New Youth* magazine in 1915, the New Culture Movement rapidly became a rallying point for cultural radicals aiming to transform dominant Confucian

morality and cultural practices in order to modernize China. Gender hierarchy, gender differentiation, gender segregation, double sexual standards that demanded chastity of women while legitimizing polygamy, and cultural practices ritualized in the service of maintaining a deeply entrenched hierarchical society that was fundamentally based on the dominance of men over women, were highlighted as the quintessential symbol of the backwardness of Confucian culture defined as “feudalist” (*fengjian zhuyi*). In turn, feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*) was enthusiastically embraced as a powerful weapon to combat this “feudalism.”

The small circle of cultural radicals, which included the future CCP founders Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, rapidly expanded its social and intellectual influence after May 4, 1919, when college and secondary school students spearheaded a nationwide patriotic movement. Incensed by the treaty signed by world powers at the Versailles Conference that transferred all of Germany’s rights in Shandong Province to Japan after World War I, the May Fourth Movement, with its vehemently anti-imperialist female and male students as major constituents, became a powerful vehicle that carried the New Culture’s advocacy of anti-feudalism, including the promotion of feminism, into mainstream urban society. Women’s equal educational and employment opportunities, and freedom to socialize with men that would end centuries of gender segregation, were seen as the foundation for women’s liberation, *funü jiefang* (another feminist term rapidly gaining ascendance in the May Fourth feminist movement). Pursuing equality in all spheres of life and achieving an independent personhood became the hallmarks of May Fourth women’s feminist subjectivities. Many May Fourth feminists—by definition, educated women and men—later played important roles in China’s political, social, and cultural transformations.⁶ From the two cohorts, older New Culturalists and younger May Fourth Movement student participants, emerged a small group of men and women, disillusioned with the Western liberal but imperialist powers, who formed the Communist Party in 1921, modeled after the newly founded Soviet Union, and openly endorsed “equality between men and women” in its platform.⁷

Even though many high-profile May Fourth feminists joined the CCP, the term *nüquan zhuyi*, “feminism,” began to lose favor within the Party when CCP feminists came into contact with Western socialists and communists and adopted their view that “feminism” was “bourgeois”—a discursive practice that had originated out of the rivalries between radical suffragists and socialist women in the early twentieth century.⁸ Nonetheless, CCP feminists

kept alive the May Fourth feminist agendas of women's liberation, simply replacing the discredited word *nüquan* with *funü quanli* [women's rights], and kept up the pressure on the Party to promote *funü quanli*, and, with yet another new term, "women-work" (*funü gongzuo*), mobilized women for the revolution.⁹

The CCP women's shunning of the term "feminism" (*nüquan zhuyi*) while actually promoting a feminist agenda in the realm of women-work and in their advocacy for women's rights and equality between men and women may confuse readers of this book, especially since I continue to refer to them, in English, as "feminists." Moreover, feminist organizations unaffiliated with the CCP (a small and underground political party in its inception) continued to use the term feminism, *nüquan zhuyi*, which was considered legitimate in the mainstream media of the Nationalist Party (NP)-dominated Republican period. Still, feminists in the CCP rarely openly used the word "feminist" to identify themselves, although they were shaped by May Fourth feminism, identified with global socialist feminism, and were conversant with widely circulating socialist texts such as August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* and Frederick Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In the CCP's terminology these texts represent a Marxist theory of "proletarian women's liberation" (*Makesi zhuyi wuchan jieji funü jiefang lilun*). Adding "proletarian" declared their concern for class oppression and also indicated that the CCP's major constituency in this early stage was the urban working class. Organizing factory women workers became the major work of urban CCP feminists who were assigned to "women-work" (*funü gongzuo*) or "working on the women's movement" (*zuo fuyun gongzuo*) in the twenties and thirties.

KEY TERM: SOCIALIST FEMINIST

My usage of the term "socialist feminist" in this book, therefore, does not reflect its actual circulation in the CCP, but is necessary, I contend, to identify significant conceptual distinctions among Chinese feminists. By "socialist feminists" I refer to feminists identified with theories of women's liberation developed by socialists globally since the nineteenth century, specifically to those feminists who joined the CCP. What distinguished the CCP socialist feminists from other Chinese feminists in the early twentieth century? Feminists in and outside the CCP both viewed themselves as heirs of May

Fourth feminism; both highlighted a gender-inflected anti-feudalist agenda; and both could possess a strong nationalist anti-imperialist sentiment and a passionate desire for an independent modern China. But feminists in the CCP held that women's "thorough" emancipation could only be achieved in a socialist country that would abolish private property and eliminate all social hierarchies. Feminism, nationalism, and socialism were blended coherently in their vision of an independent socialist nation in which women would enjoy full equality and human dignity.

A second prominent feature that distinguished feminists who joined the Communist Revolution from those who did not was the experience of living in a rural area during the years of revolutionary struggle. The breakup of the first alliance between the CCP and NP in 1927 resulted in the NP's ascendance and dominance over the CCP by violent suppression. In its outlawed status, the CCP leadership moved from the urban to the peripheral rural mountain areas to establish military bases. Joining the CCP thus enabled many educated urban women to experience the reality of rural life on an intimate level. The May Fourth feminist agenda of anti-feudalism that centered on personal freedom and independence had mostly reflected the demands of educated urban people whose pursuit of social and spatial mobility crossing gender boundaries was feasible in a modernizing urban society. For rural women, however, who lived not only in the "feudalist" bondage of patrilineal kinship, patrilocal marriage, and patriarchal family, but also, in most cases, in stark poverty, it was necessary to incorporate a different reality into the feminist agenda. In organizing and mobilizing various kinds of women in diverse geographic and social locations, CCP feminists learned firsthand that women were not a homogeneous group and that solutions to women's oppression, especially the interlocking oppressions of poverty and gendered bondage among lower-class women who constituted the majority of Chinese women, required attention to multiple factors underlying their oppression. Fighting shoulder to shoulder with rural women leaders who were often illiterate, educated urban feminists also witnessed how rural women were empowered by participating in the resistance war efforts. These personal experiences powerfully consolidated their identification with the CCP's goal of overthrowing the Three Big Mountains—imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism—as a comprehensive solution to Chinese women's oppression. In short, addressing gender inequality was a persistent concern that defined socialist feminists in the CCP, but their solutions pointed toward a radical removal of multiple systems of oppression.

The term "state feminists" in this book specifically refers to feminists in the CCP who took on various official posts after the CCP gained control of the state in 1949. Here I am adopting the transnationally circulating term "state feminists" that social scientists first deployed decades ago to refer to feminists employed as bureaucrats in positions of power or women politicians who promoted gender equality policies in Scandinavia, and is now conceptualized to enable scholarly examinations of the institutionalization of feminism in state agencies in a variety of political and economic systems.¹⁰ The term has also been adopted in scholarly discussions of the Chinese socialist state's gender policies but with a significant twist.¹¹ When applied to China it often portrays a paradoxical image of a state patriarch championing women's liberation, although with vacillation and inconsistency. Parallel to this conceptual chasm also exists a methodological difference between studies on women and the Chinese socialist state and studies on feminism in capitalist democratic states. In the latter case, documenting feminists' engagement with state power and identifying individual feminist actors in the process of shaping pro-women policies or institutions often constitute the main body of a study. Works on "femocrats" in Australia and the Netherlands are good examples of in-depth ethnographic studies of a transformative political process.¹² But studies on Chinese socialist state's gender policies are generally content with an abstract concept of the "party-state" without investigating the concrete policy-making process.¹³ It is never clear how pro-women laws and policies came to be initiated and passed by a patriarchal centralized power structure.

The conceptual chasm and methodological difference in dealing with "state feminism" are symptomatic of a lingering Cold War paradigm of a "totalitarian Communist party-state" in the field of Chinese studies.¹⁴ By ignoring fissures, contradictions, gaps, and conflicts inherently embedded in the formation of the socialist state, and by assuming the impossibility of expressions of feminist agency in the male-dominated power structure, a masculinist fixation on power struggles among top male leaders in high politics has effectively worked to erase feminist contentions in the socialist state. At the same time, feminist criticism of a centralized socialist patriarchal state has also become a blindfold that prevents us from seeing subversive women in the state and from exploring theoretical implications of gender transformations and feminist possibilities generated in the process of building a

socialist state. As a result, the gendered internal workings of the “party-state” remain uninvestigated; inside feminist agitators are unknown; and conventional assumptions persist.¹⁵

“Socialist state feminists” are the lead characters of the history I narrate here. Although feminist officials did not call themselves “socialist state feminists,” I have chosen to define my subjects in this way in order to illuminate the dynamics that shaped their work and explore its historical significance and highlight a gender line in the Communist Revolution and the PRC that mainstream narratives generally overlook. First, positioning CCP officials as *feminists* points to the tenacity with which they held to the May Fourth feminist vision of equality between women and men. Second, defining them as *socialist feminists*, I stress their goal of women’s “thorough” liberation and their commitment to the “masses” of women. Third, emphasizing their positions in the *state* brings into focus the important feminist endeavors that contributed to political, economic, social, and cultural transformations in the PRC that effectively enabled the social advancement of millions of Chinese women, and whose erasure from history seriously hinders an adequate understanding of this unique period. Finally, in tracing these socialist state feminists’ interactions with male officials and CCP leaders, I illuminate the historical processes in which, as depicted in much scholarship on socialist China, the socialist state appeared as a paradoxically “woman-friendly” patriarchal party-state that sporadically promoted gender equality. By investigating socialist state feminists’ activities, contentions, and struggles in the formation of the socialist state, I expose diverse and even contradictory visions and actions underneath the conventional image of a monolithic party-state that was presumably gendered male, stable, and depersonalized (if not outright dehumanized). An adequate understanding of Chinese socialism and its politics, I insist, has to include the stories of these socialist state feminists who fought at multiple fronts—in their *formal* capacities as Communist Party members and state officials—toward an egalitarian vision of a socialist modern China premised on equality between women and men.

THE PAST AS PROLOGUE: WOMEN IN THE CHINESE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION

The scope of feminists’ involvement in the formation of the socialist state may be represented with a brief review of women’s participation in the long

Communist Revolution. Hundreds of thousands of women from diverse social backgrounds became members of the CCP, the first cohort having joined in the 1920s. Most early Communist women were urban-based educated feminists of the May Fourth generation, and some were factory workers active in the CCP-led workers' movement. Many in this cohort died either during the Nationalist Party's persecution of Communists after the breakup of the first United Front between the CCP and the NP (1924–27) or in the subsequent military battles. The survivors of this cohort served in various official posts at the national level in the early PRC, including the two top leaders of the CCP-led women's movement who founded the ACDWF: Cai Chang, a May Fourth activist who had joined the CCP in 1923 when she was in France; and Deng Yingchao, a renowned young feminist leader in Tianjin in the May Fourth feminist movement before she joined the CCP in 1925. Other prominent leaders included Zhang Yun, vice chair of the ACDWF, and Yang Zhihua, director of the Women Workers Department of the All-China Trade Union.¹⁶ For the surviving first cohort of CCP women, the men they married in their youth who also survived ferocious battles either on the military fronts or in political fields rose to the top of the new PRC's power structure. The young man whom Deng Yingchao married in 1925, Zhou Enlai, would become the PRC's first premier, while the young man whom Cai Chang married in 1923 in Paris, Li Fuchun, would become the vice premier.

The second cohort was mainly composed of rural women who joined the Communist Revolution when the CCP established its rural military base areas after the breakup of the first United Front. CCP membership swelled from over forty thousand in 1928 to over three hundred thousand in 1934. Many rural women were involved in guerrilla warfare and the Soviet-style local government in the CCP base areas in southern and central China. After the CCP's military defeat by the NP forces in 1934, however, only ten percent of the Communist troops survived the almost two-year-long retreat and relocation, which Mao Zedong later named "the Long March." Among the Communist women who survived the ordeal and reached the CCP's new base areas in the northwest in late 1935, several rural women guerrilla leaders from the second cohort rose to leadership at the national level, including Kang Keqing, who became the vice chair of the ACWF in 1957 and the chair from 1978 to 1988.¹⁷

The third cohort joined the CCP in the War of Resistance against Japan's invasion, especially after July 1937 when Japanese troops advanced beyond the borders of Manchukuo, their puppet state, seized in 1931. This military

advance, a marker of the start of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), ignited a full-scale military resistance, with the NP and CCP forming their second United Front to save China. Patriotic zeal for national salvation as well as dislocation caused by the war drove hundreds of thousands of urban students and young professionals to the CCP bases areas established in peripheral rural areas around the desolate rural town in the northwest, Yan'an, that was now the CCP headquarters. Party membership expanded dramatically from about forty thousand in 1937 to over eight hundred thousand in 1940. From this cohort some urban celebrities, including Chen Bo'er and Shen Ziji, later took on leading official posts in various branches of the central government of the early PRC. Other women students in this cohort also became important in a second tier of dedicated leaders of the ACWF; a few of them, such as Luo Qiong and Dong Bian, appear in this book. In most cases educated women in the third cohort became officials at the provincial or municipal levels, and rural women with little education staffed the county governments or lower-level posts. Because women who were appointed to the leading positions at national and provincial levels in the early PRC were mainly those with a secondary or college education when they joined the CCP, they are the central focus in this study of socialist state feminists. The group of state feminists certainly includes women officials with less education working at diverse local levels.

The fourth cohort joined the CCP during the civil war between the CCP and the NP in the late 1940s, after Japan's surrender. This cohort was more diverse, including urban young students, factory workers, professionals, and rural women from both the old CCP base areas and newly occupied regions. Many in this cohort would staff the new socialist state's local governments, as well as Women's Federations at the urban district or street and rural county or township level. By the time of the CCP's victory in 1949 its membership had expanded to 4.49 million, of whom 11.9 percent were women.¹⁸ Integrating these 530,000 CCP women into our understanding of socialist China is a crucial step toward engendering the Chinese revolution, an agenda proposed by the late historian Christina K. Gilmartin in her work on radical women of the CCP in the 1920s, which has remained largely unfulfilled.¹⁹

Perhaps more important than the number of Communist women are the shared characteristics of the different cohorts. Outlawed except during the brief periods when the CCP and the NP formed temporary alliances, CCP members either worked underground in urban settings with their real identity as a Communist revolutionary disguised, or resided in rural military camps

that frequently engaged in battles with the Nationalist army, local warlords, or invading Japanese troops. The drive to risk their lives in a perilous revolution was most prominently explained in CCP women's memoirs and interviews by their experiences of gender oppression from childhood to adulthood. Some literally ran away from an impending arranged marriage or from an abusive husband or in-laws to the Communist camp that in a sense served as a shelter for women who had no other refuge from the blows rained down on them, all permissible in the Chinese gender system.²⁰ In other words, while not every Communist woman was necessarily a conscious feminist, situated in a Chinese gender system, each would feel attracted to and empowered by the CCP's slogan of equality between men and women. The strong appeal of the CCP to women was attested to by Chiang Kai-shek's perplexed lament after his Nationalist Party was driven from the mainland to Taiwan, "Why did women all go to the Communist Party?"²¹ Moreover, given that ninety percent of Chinese women were still illiterate in 1949, educated women (the focus of this study) were predominantly from families with some degree of social privilege. Their choice to risk their lives by joining an embattled political force, either to pursue an idealistic dream or to escape from predicaments in their personal life as a woman, or both, indicates the presence of a clear political consciousness and commitment, as well as a strong will and inclination toward action.

How did socialist state feminists act out *their* dreams and visions in their daily practices of socialist feminist transformation of China? In what ways did enacting a socialist feminist project generate significant changes as well as new antagonisms in a socialist country? Such questions open up new vistas to a relatively recent past that has almost been sealed by a reductive and one-dimensional depiction of a totalitarian polity. Most definitely, the existence of these Communist women revolutionaries requires historians to adopt a historical perspective that does not mechanically sever the identity of the CCP as a state power holder from its former identity as a grassroots organizer and revolutionary outlaw. Embodied in these historical actors, the two diametrically opposed roles of the CCP were played out in the lives of the surviving CCP members, who (for better or for worse) endeavored to blend the two roles rather than allow them to be separated, especially since grassroots mobilizing and organizing held the key to the CCP's victory and "the mass line" was theorized as a fundamental principle of the Party. Accordingly, relying on a dichotomous sociological model of "top-down" versus "bottom-up" would be inadequate when approaching the Chinese socialist state feminism embodied in the generation of Communist revolutionaries.

THE CULTURAL FRONT

Two realms of feminist endeavors are the focus of this book: the All-China Women's Federation and the film industry. Together they constitute what I refer to throughout the book as a "cultural front." Although "culture," which we normally associate with literature and the arts, may seem to be a peculiar designation for a state agency that organized women into governance structures, and "front," with its implication of militancy and struggle, may appear a peculiar designation for an entertainment film industry, in both cases the mission of providing the masses of women with representative models for a new socialist subjectivity is understood as essential to an ongoing anti-feudal revolution. Even organizationally, the two realms were not entirely distinct; for example, the founder of the socialist film industry Chen Bo'er, who introduces this book, was also on the executive committee of the ACDWF. This defies our conventional disciplinary divisions that would place an examination of the ACWF into the discipline of government and politics and Chen Bo'er into film studies. In this historical narrative tracing socialist state feminists' footprints, their agenda of cultural transformation brings together the ACWF and the film industry in their shared role in creating a cultural front that functioned to consolidate and expand a socialist feminist revolution of culture to a vast and largely illiterate population in a pre-television age via its massive institutional coverage.

The euphoria of socialist state feminists is evident in their staging of some of the earliest public events in the PRC, even before its official founding. The first was their March 1949 National Women's Congress—the very first national conference organized by any of the social groups convened in anticipation of a transfer of political power to plan for action in a socialist China. It was at this conference that it was resolved to set up a national women's organization, the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (its name was changed to All-China Women's Federation in 1957, hence ACWF), an umbrella organization that would horizontally unite all pro-CCP women's organizations and an official institution that would vertically reach all women down to the rural villages and urban neighborhoods nationwide (excluding students who would be organized in the Youth Association and workers who would be organized by the Trade Union).

Then, on December 10, 1949, only two months after the founding of the PRC, a significant *international* conference of the new socialist China was convened in Beijing. The All-Asian Women's Congress, attended by 197



FIGURE 1. Three top women leaders—Cai Chang, Deng Yingchao, and Song Qinglin—attending the All-Asian Women's Congress in December 1949. Courtesy of Hung Liu.

representatives from 23 countries, was organized by the ACDWF in its new role as a member of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) (fig. 1). Hosting an international conference on women when only about ten socialist countries had established diplomatic relationships with the PRC indicated the CCP leadership's full support for this initiative. The event not only demonstrated state feminists' conscious efforts to merge the women's movement in the PRC with socialist women's movements globally; it also revealed the crucial role the ACDWF played in the new socialist state's efforts to establish international connections. The chair of the ACDWF, Cai Chang, served as vice president of the WIDF from 1948 to 1958.²²

Additionally, it was the ACWF (still known as the ACDWF) that was charged with promulgating the 1950 Marriage Law. CCP feminists had been working on this since late September 1948, even before the founding of the

ACWF, when the Party Central assigned the Central Committee of Women-Work a task: to draft a Marriage Law for a new socialist China. Chairing a group of six CCP feminists of the first three cohorts, Deng Yingchao provided strong leadership in drafting a feminist law, the first law passed in the PRC.²³ A central debate among the members of the drafting committee concerned the freedom to divorce. Some CCP women officials supported restrictions on divorce in order to deter male CCP officials from replacing their old wives with young urban-educated women once they moved from the rural bases to the major cities and assumed privileged positions in the new state. But Deng Yingchao insisted on removing these restrictions on the ground that the law should prioritize the interest of the vast majority of women, that is, rural women. Poor rural women who were sold to men or endured an abusive marital life needed a divorce law that could assist their escape from such predicaments.

Coordinating support from multiple branches of different levels of government, including film and other fields of cultural production, the ACDWF turned the promulgation and enforcement of the Marriage Law into a powerful mass campaign promoting women's equal rights and personal freedom. The May Fourth language of "anti-feudalism" as the expression of women's equal rights and independent personhood was widely circulated among the vast population in this period, and the Chinese term "feudalism" (*fengjian zhuyi*) quickly became a gender-inflected key word encompassing everything we today call sexism, masculinism, patriarchy, male chauvinism, and / or misogyny. Even illiterate women in rural areas could deploy the term effortlessly.²⁴ "Equality between men and women" and "women's liberation," popularized via state-owned media and cultural production, became household slogans intimately connecting gender equality with the authority of the new socialist state. The feminist law promulgated with socialist state power, although encountering ferocious resistance in its implementation, significantly transformed not only the marriage institution but also gendered cultural practices and discourses.

The subject of Part II of this book, socialist film production infused with feminism was also a militant in the feminist cultural front. Its significance cannot be overstated given that, before the advent of television, film was the most accessible and influential medium in socialist China, where 80 percent of the population was illiterate. The CCP had paid tremendous attention to the film industry even before they gained state power. The founding of the PRC enabled the Party to turn the now-nationalized film industry into a key

location for cultural production in the process of socialist construction and cultural transformation. As such the film industry became a center of intense ideological and political struggles as well as artistic strife. From this highly unstable and fiercely contested field emerged a vast range of films centering on representations of revolutionary heroines in both war and peace that constituted a prominent feature of socialist culture.

Curiously, while some post-socialist film scholars have clearly noticed this conspicuous feature of Chinese socialist films, their examinations do not lead to an excavation of feminist endeavors behind the scenes. Relying on visual analysis of the films, they have examined how the socialist representational mode, prominently featuring revolutionary heroines in leading roles, is accomplished through a confluence of scenario, lens, angle, lighting, composition, background music, acting, editing, and so on; and how the cinematic language and narrative structures in visual representations of gender performativity were distinctively different from gender representation in classic Hollywood movies. Rather than seeing this as a puzzle calling for historical research, such distinctive gender representation in socialist film has instead served as film scholars' evidence that the representation of revolutionary heroines demonstrates the patriarchal socialist state's "masculinization" of women by erasing their "innate femininity."²⁵

Few film studies scholars who have looked at socialist films have concerned themselves with the questions that this book explores: What went on behind the scenes in the production process that produced films centering on revolutionary heroines with gender representation distinctively different from conventional Hollywood modes of gender representation? Who contended for aesthetic and political control in visual representation, by what means, and for what purposes? My historical research, in a sense, questions the methodological and conceptual adequacies in the conventional field of film studies when applied to socialist cinema. An adequate understanding of socialist films cannot be separated from an investigation of the specific political context and the actual filmmakers and production crews. The production of socialist films, an openly acknowledged political act in an art form, was intimately entangled in the politics of the time, in which diverse and complicated forces were involved in intense contentions. While the final products obviously became part of socialist political culture, the fierce struggles behind the scenes were never transparent to viewers or scholars. I insist that only when we illuminate this opaque process can we understand the significance of the final products in their historical context, complicating our

comprehension of socialist China beyond the prevailing assumption of a one-dimensional authoritarian state. Indeed, projecting researchers' own values and aesthetic standards shaped in a specific location and political moment onto a visual text produced in a different time and place without a historical approach—a prevalent practice in post-socialist film critiques in China as well as in film studies outside China—is among the reasons that have led to the erasure of Chinese socialist state feminists' historical endeavors of cultural transformation.²⁶

How can feminist scholars maintain a critical stance that opposes masculinist power without erasing feminist revolutionaries' historical endeavors? Can we conceptualize the construction of a socialist state without reducing the state and the Party to an ahistorical, monolithic entity that conceals complex and fluid historical processes and contestations? In what ways may we avoid demonizing revolutionary ideals, including feminist revolutionaries' visions and pursuits of gender and class equality, even as we condemn the colossal blunders and actual crimes that were committed in the name of the revolution? I think contextualized historical research may help us tease out significant historical actors and actions from extremely messy and entangled processes of a Chinese socialist revolution.

FINDING WOMEN IN THE STATE

Socialist state feminists have existed in a contradictory political environment. Ideologically, the Party's platform has endorsed a feminist pursuit of "equality between men and women," and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China grants legitimacy for feminist expressions and actions as it claims to uphold "equality between men and women." Institutionally, however, the various administrative levels of the CCP's leadership have always been predominantly occupied by men, many of whose subjectivities seem to have been shaped by a pervasive patriarchal culture rather than fundamentally transformed by feminist and socialist principles of eliminating all hierarchies.²⁷ In practice, the presumptions and power dynamics of male supremacy could overrule the ideological and legal legitimacy of feminist actions. A masculinist in a position of authority could easily tell a woman official who proposed an action on behalf of women's interests that he also believed in the importance of this issue, but more important and larger issues deserved the government's resources and energy and thus justified disabling feminist protest.

The ACWF, in particular, was organized as a Party-led mass organization rather than an executive branch of the government, although everyone in the Women's Federation system was also on the government payroll. As this book demonstrates, the distribution of power between this gender-based mass organization and the government was a contested matter in the beginning of the new socialist state. The subsequent institutional marginalization of the WF system in the socialist state structure has conditioned the routine experiences of women officials in the WF that women-work was of lesser value, except for those moments when some item on the Party's agenda required that women be mobilized. The WF embodied a dilemma evident from the earliest days of the CCP: the institutionalized women-work in the CCP, a prominent progressive stance superior to those political parties or forces that totally exclude or ignore women, was turned into a marginalized enclave of feminists within the political system of the CCP and, later, the socialist state. State feminists had to fight for political and material resources as well as recognition of women's interests and rights from an internally structured disadvantaged position.

The institutional subordination of the ACWF in the socialist state structure gave rise to a particular institutional behavior that shared some resemblance to that of any subordinate social group in the power relations of domination. State feminists in the WF system routinely operated in *a politics of concealment* in their endeavors to promote feminist agendas. Since singularly and openly raising a demand on behalf of women would have a slim chance of receiving the support of male authorities, WF officials learned to insert feminist items into the Party's agenda in order to gain legitimacy and resources for actions that had a clear gender dimension. Articulating their strong support of the Party's "central tasks," state feminists often embedded a "hidden script" that intended to advance women's diverse interests. In other words, camouflaging a feminist agenda with dominant Party language was a major principle in *the politics of concealment*. This book provides many examples of such state feminist discursive maneuvers in shifting political contexts.

In the early PRC the central feminist maneuver hinged on a major item in the CCP's revolutionary goal, anti-feudalism. After the Communist Revolution drove out imperialist and capitalist powers and eliminated "feudal power" based in rural land ownership with its land reform, state feminists persistently waged battles on "feudal remnants," turning "anti-feudalism" into a gender-specific word full of feminist implications and declaring it an unfinished task of the Communist Revolution. Thus, the state feminist

politics of concealment expressed both their marginalization in the power structure and subversive possibilities in the socialist state. Their discursive maneuvers launched under cover of the dominant official language simultaneously blurred feminist traces and inscribed socialist mainstream ideology with deep feminist implications.

The second principle in *the politics of concealment* was self-effacement. The first cohort of socialist state feminists had long experience of operating in a male-dominated Party that often created a perilous political environment for feminists. Historically, the label of “narrow bourgeois feminism” was used as a political club to beat down those outspoken CCP feminists who insisted on the priority of women’s interests or raised a critical voice against male chauvinism in the CCP.²⁸ In this historical context, it was not only necessary to camouflage their feminist agenda with legitimate, seemingly un-gendered Party slogans, but also crucially important to attribute their own accomplishments in the realm of women-work to the “wise leadership of the Party.” This self-effacing performance gave extra weight to women-work by appealing to the authority of the Party and, more importantly, publicly acknowledged their role as a dutiful subordinate to the Party Central, or to the various administrative levels of the Party committees that were the immediate supervisors of the Women’s Federations. In sum, a women’s organization that aimed to transform gender hierarchy nevertheless staged a gendered performance in accordance with prevailing gender norms that extolled the womanly virtues of modesty, hard work, self-effacement, self-sacrifice, and a lack of desire for power and fame. Acting in accordance with this gender script could most effectively ease the possible irritation or even resentment of male authorities. By glossing over their struggles behind the scenes, this self-effacing rhetoric made it difficult for outsiders to glean state feminists’ struggles from published official documents that deliberately projected a façade of Party unity or an image of a coherent party-state. It ensured that these dynamic women leaders were, and remained, unknown to the public. Receding into the shadows, socialist state feminists contributed to the myth of a monolithic patriarchal party-state that sporadically showed benevolence toward women.

However, the socialist state feminists’ anonymity was not entirely due to the politics of concealment. It was also the result of *the politics of erasure* in two different temporalities. In the early PRC unexpectedly tumultuous themes of the socialist revolution often overwhelmed the feminist notes. In many political storms after the founding of the PRC, state feminists were

sometimes the targets of deliberate suppression or the inadvertent casualties of power politics. Even when they were not affected personally, their feminist agenda would often be brushed aside by imperatives from the Party Central that left no room for feminist maneuver. In 1964 the intensifying Maoist class struggles enabled suppression of articulations of women's gender-specific interests, and an exclusive focus on the theme of class struggle replaced the theme of a gender-inflected anti-feudalism in cultural production. Socialist state feminists' conscious and persistent endeavors of transforming a "feudalist" culture and society were seriously thwarted, if not buried altogether, by the rising sound and fury of Maoist class struggle that became the prelude of the Cultural Revolution. The ACWF, paralyzed in 1966 like other official organs in the heat of the Cultural Revolution, did not resume its function until 1978.

The second major erasure of state feminists arose in the production of historical knowledge of socialism since the late 1970s, when the CCP began to depart from the socialist course after Mao's death in 1976. In Chinese intellectuals' concerted critique of the CCP's crimes under Mao's dictatorship, Mao became synonymous with socialism. This anti-socialist discourse is both grossly reductive and openly masculinist. In post-socialist elites' efforts to dismantle not only the CCP's authoritarian rule but also socialist economic and distribution systems, and socialist egalitarian values and practices, the mainstream socialist gender ideology and institutional mechanisms that promoted equality between women and men were characterized as the Maoist state's imposition of gender sameness, a crime of the CCP that distorted women's natural femininity and masculinized them. Restoring gender differentiation was promoted in the urban elites' two conflicting proposals: embracing a Western capitalist modernity symbolized by sexualized and commoditized women in advertisements; or reviving a Confucian tradition by retrieving so-called "Oriental women's traditional virtues." Rearranging gender practices became a prominent theme in elite proposals to undo the socialist revolution. The vehemence with which these ideas were advocated was strikingly similar to their forebears' passionate agitation for change in gender practices at the turn of the twentieth century, though pointing toward a reverse direction in their imagining of a gendered future. As many scholars have observed, this initiative constituted an open and powerful backlash against the gender policies of the socialist period.

In retirement or approaching retirement, many in the first generation of state feminists engaged in hyper-energetic publishing activities since the late

1970s, producing a large quantity of personal memoirs and collective histories of the women's movement in various regions all over China. Memoir and history writing became a key site for the first generation of state feminists to resist erasure and to claim their contributions to the Communist Revolution and to socialist women's advancement in the early PRC. However, produced at a time when a neoliberal embrace of capitalist consumerist modernity was on the rise with the Party's endorsement, their memories celebrating a feminist revolution in a bygone and denigrated socialist past gained little currency.

ENCOUNTERING SOCIALIST STATE FEMINISTS

No prior knowledge of socialist state feminists led me to this project. I encountered them unexpectedly. Like most scholars in Chinese women's history, in the early 1990s my mission was to resist the erasure of women's agency in the master narrative of the CCP that portrayed women before 1949 merely as victims of the old society. In 1996, after completing a dissertation on May Fourth feminists, I began working on a social history of the socialist transformation of urban society, starting with fieldwork in the Shanghai neighborhood where I was born and grew up. When I interviewed women who had been neighborhood activists during the early 1950s, I immediately noticed a couple of phrases unfamiliar to me. One was *fudaihui*, the women's congress; the other was *jiemeimen*, sisters. Women used these phrases in their reminiscences of how officials of the Shanghai Women's Federation came to the neighborhood to organize them and other housewives and their feelings of empowerment as they became involved. Sensing feminist activities signified by these key terms, I conducted research at the Shanghai Municipal Archives to verify my oral history materials. The copious files of the Shanghai Women's Federation and the Department of Civil Affairs demonstrate a massive mobilization of Shanghai housewives to engage them in the socialist reorganization and transformation of urban society. Reading the passionate and sometimes biting comments of officials of the Women's Federation advocating for women's interests, I realized that my previous understanding of CCP-led women's liberation was devoid of knowledge about concrete historical processes.

Shifting my research focus to those historical actors who promoted women's rights and interests in socialist China, I began to interview retired officials

of the Shanghai Women's Federation (SWF) and then moved on to retired officials of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and secretaries of its deceased top officials, Deng Yingchao and Luo Qiong (in total, twenty-nine retired WF officials). Talking face-to-face with these senior women and listening to each one's life story changed my perception of the official women's organization, which had been distorted by post-socialist critiques of a socialist women's liberation that was supposedly imposed on Chinese women by the party-state. Vague assumptions of a faceless patriarchal party-state were gradually replaced by the vivid voices and viewpoints of women who remained articulate, forceful, and dynamic even in their old age. As a historian who has always been interested in finding people who made a difference in history but whose stories were unknown to the public, I quickly realized that the work and ideas of socialist state feminists, who were once the driving force in engendering the social and cultural transformation of a patriarchal society, were being erased amidst China's departure from socialism.

My cohort of educated Chinese women was unaware of the endeavors of the Women's Federations in part because during the socialist period we were not their constituents. The CCP mobilized diverse populations in the project of socialist construction by organizing them in specific social groupings. Students were included in the Communist Young Pioneers (7–14 years old) and the Communist Youth League (14–28 years old); urban workers and professionals were organized by the Trade Union; and the Women's Federations focused primarily on urban housewives and rural peasants, who comprised the vast majority of women in the early PRC. Young educated urban women's lack of interest in the WF reflected our non-identification with the WF's constituency. Being socialized in a gender-neutral educational system and social organizations and shaped by a dominant gender ideology of "equality between men and women" and Engels's theory of women's liberation based on women's participation in social production, my cohort of educated urban women generally regarded being a housewife as a relic of the old feudal society. Ironically, the powerful effects of socialist state feminism placed the WF in low esteem in the eyes of "liberated" educated urban women because of its association with "backward" housewives who were confined to domesticity. Investigating the history of Chinese state feminism, for me, has involved a reflective process of reviewing and critiquing my own prejudices and misperceptions.²⁹

Parallel to my research in China, my feminist activism facilitated my comprehension of the strategies of feminists operating within the official system.

In 1993 a group of Chinese women doctoral students in the United States started collaborating with scholars in China who were interested in research on women. We worked together to run feminist workshops and conferences and to publish feminist texts, including translations of feminist scholarship written in English, in order to promote feminist discourse and gender studies in China. Chinese participants included both academics involved in feminist activism and officials from the Women's Federations at different administrative levels and in diverse geographic locations. My continuing activities in China have given me access to many groups of women, beyond that of a researcher, as their partner in shared activist projects, or as a specialist whose expertise could be utilized in their programs. As a participant in ongoing feminist actions, I have had many opportunities to observe how feminists in and outside the official system maneuvered to achieve their goals; I have come to see the logic and rationales in their strategies and to notice how feminists in the official system could respond to the same situation very differently from their counterparts in similar positions. Individual feminists' distinct pursuits and personalities can make a huge difference in a bureaucratic institution. These points may sound commonsensical. But in the English-speaking world, where the assumption persists that officials in a Communist party-state are robotically programmed to carry out the central command, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the human side of political interactions.

Although the feminist academics and officials I have associated with through my own political and intellectual work are very different from the state feminists of the 1950s and 1960s whom I studied, their tactics often reminded me of what I was discovering in the archives, memoirs, and interviews with those in the early PRC. The continuity in the political system despite the dramatic social, economic, and cultural transformations since the late 1970s means that *the politics of concealment* has remained viable. Whether it was transmitted to the new generation of officials of the Women's Federations or has been reinvented by contemporary feminists without any knowledge of their foremothers' wisdom and frustrations, similar strategies and tactics illuminate the presence of feminist consciousness and similar feminist predicaments, as well as persistent structural constraints of an institutionalized political culture. I have identified two principles of *the politics of concealment* in the operation of the post-socialist state feminists of the WF system: engaging in discursive battles over key words to claim legitimacy and authority for promoting women's rights and interests; and publicly representing the WF's accomplishments in a self-effacing manner.

Not all special features of the first cohort of state feminists, however, have been re-created in different historical contexts. Though never in the center of the political power of the CCP, the first generation of ACWF leaders, with their own Party seniority, and with their husbands in the top echelon of the Party, simultaneously enjoyed tremendous institutional and informal power and suffered from deep entanglement in masculinist power struggles. Indeed, unexpected and seemingly inexplicable turns of political events often resulted from unpredictable dynamics in complicated personal relations formed in the long Communist Revolution. The leading state feminists and their feminist agendas could become inadvertent casualties in power politics in the early PRC. Therefore, this story of Chinese socialist state feminism emphasizes that the political is often personal, in addition to underlining the feminist insight that the personal is political.

Although my research has benefited from the social networks I built through my activism in China, restrictions on access to the ACWF's archives thwarted my ambition to systematically document its internal workings and delineate the full scope of its activities. I have been unable to follow the clues I found into new lines of inquiry. For instance, from the ACWF's published materials, it is clear to me that, by utilizing its membership in the International Democratic Women's Federation, the ACDWF played a major role in China's diplomacy as well as the international socialist women's movement in the early 1950s, when China was denied access to many international events beyond the socialist camp. That story could convincingly disprove another enduring myth, that in the Mao era China operated in total isolation from the rest of the world. But, without access to those precious archives, I have been unable to explore the transnational dimension of Chinese socialist feminism in the early PRC, although this large global context was crucial to the state feminists and the CCP in their efforts to build a socialist China.

Looking back, my frustration that I was denied use of the ACWF files now seems like a healthy corrective that prevented me from romanticizing an institution that was deeply embedded in the bureaucratic system of the Chinese state. As an inseparable part of the Communist Party in the project of forming a socialist state, the ACWF was always entangled, embedded, or implicated in a tragically ironic historical process in which a revolutionary Party aiming to establish an equalitarian society ended up creating a huge hierarchical bureaucracy and becoming a new privileged ruling class. State feminists' innovations in creating socialist democratic practices that enabled

them to serve women's interests did not provide them with an alibi in an increasingly centralized and bureaucratized CCP. In fact, the quagmire of bureaucratization combined with internal contentions in the CCP was the political reality in which these youthful, daring, and idealistic feminists were situated. Transforming a patriarchal society while resisting or complying with being transformed or disciplined by a male-dominated Party constitutes a motif in the trajectory of their feminist struggles.

CONSTRUCTING A GENEALOGY OF CHINESE FEMINISM

Scholarship on women, gender, and feminism in China has flourished in the past several decades, though with an obvious deficiency regarding the socialist period. Without access to all of the relevant archives and with the loss of the first cohort of the CCP feminists since I started my research, this history of socialist state feminism is necessarily incomplete, only representing an initial effort toward a history of the PRC from a gender perspective. Eventually, more research will emerge out of increasing access to the official archives and, perhaps more crucially, with the coming of age of a younger generation of feminist scholars in and outside China who are discontented with the hegemonic historical narrative exclusively focusing on male power holders in a historical era when China witnessed massive social, economic, cultural, and political advancement of women in the largest numbers.

This history of a socialist feminist revolution in the early PRC is organized into two parts. Part I, "The Women's Federation and the CCP," focuses on the WF system's efforts in its institutional building and feminist cultural transformation in the process of socialist state formation. The four chapters in this part highlight feminist contentions inside the CCP, operating in *the politics of concealment*, and demonstrate intense gender struggles in and outside the Party in socialist state feminists' endeavors to transform a patriarchal society. While these chapters show constant feminist battles on all fronts and at all levels, two moments of severe feminist setbacks are the focus of particular attention, 1957 and 1964 respectively, when the internal workings and power dynamics in the CCP were laid bare. The ACWF leaders' conscious feminist transformative agendas, I argue, had to fold in 1964 when the intensifying Maoist class struggles enabled rapid development of a pernicious political environment. A Maoist concept of "class" finally suppressed state

feminists' critical articulations of gender hierarchy, gender norms, and gendered power relations.

Part II, "From Feminist Revolution of Culture to the Cultural Revolution," investigates socialist state feminists' innovations in film production as an important site for the feminist revolution of Chinese culture. Chapter 5 uncovers a long-neglected feminist founder of the socialist film industry, Chen Bo'er, whose pioneering role in creating a paradigm of revolutionary heroines in socialist films moved lower-class women to the center stage in the cultural representation of women's liberation as well as socialism. Chapter 6 focuses on a male feminist leader of the film industry, Xia Yan, whose artistic creativity continued a New Culture heritage of transforming a patriarchal culture in the socialist period. In chapter 7, the narrative turns to the dense entanglement of cultural production and power politics that was a prelude to the Cultural Revolution. A critical examination of Jiang Qing's rise in the cultural realm demonstrates that her key role in framing a "two-line struggle" in the film industry led to the elimination of an anti-feudalist agenda in socialist films and in the larger cultural realm as well.

My examination of feminism in the early PRC's social, political, and cultural realms suggests a new periodization for recent Chinese history. The moment when the ACWF's pursuit of a feminist agenda was disabled, the moment when Xia Yan was removed from the leadership of the film industry on charges that he followed a "revisionist line," and the moment when Jiang Qing's endeavor to revolutionize theater received official recognition were simultaneous and occurred within the same political context. If we shift our focus from power struggles between the top CCP leaders, Mao and Liu, to the cultural realm, we can see the Cultural Revolution actually began in 1964. Moreover, in its initial stage the Cultural Revolution *was* largely about complex contentions in the cultural realm, resulting in eliminating the May Fourth New Culture heritage of "anti-feudalism" in cultural production, although tensions between different artistic and political visions of a new socialist culture had long been mired in contentious personal relationships formed through the long course of the Communist Revolution.

Continuing my investigation of the politics of erasing socialist state feminist endeavors, chapter 8 extends my critical examination of discursive contentions into the post-socialist era. Condemnations of the dominance of the CCP since the 1980s have functioned to delegitimize all socialist transformative programs and policies, including gender equality. The political maneuvers of the post-socialist masculinist elite have succeeded in demolishing

many of the mechanisms of the socialist period that addressed gender and class inequality, in part by obliterating the memory of the historical actors who strove to achieve a socialist feminist vision. This book stages a feminist historian's resistance to the erasure and distortion of socialist feminist struggles for human dignity as well as presents a historical analysis of the contentious forces and contingencies that contributed to the demise of a revolution for social justice and equality.

The Conclusion brings the narrative to the present state of feminist struggles in and outside the official system in China. In a drastically changed country where "comrades" have metamorphosed into "consumers" and, except for the dominant power of the Party, much of a socialist revolution has been undone, where can we identify the legacies of socialist state feminism? What political valence could such a heritage generate in an era of capitalist globalization? And what lessons from socialist state feminists' endeavors can be meaningful and useful to a young generation of feminists? Ultimately this book expresses my aspiration to bridge a significant gap in feminist knowledge in order to inform young feminists of their foremothers' beautiful dreams, strong commitments, tenacious struggles, bitter frustrations, formidable constraints, serious limitations, and astonishing accomplishments. Reviewing and reflecting on a saga that has as yet been only partially recovered will, I hope, inspire our continuous efforts to carry on the dream of a world of justice, equality, and human dignity.