
Introduction

When China embarked on its rural economic reform, change for women was not part of the program. The reform was conceptually a strategy of gender-blind political economy designed to generate economic growth in the countryside and the nation. But the implications of the reform as it unfolded were much more far-reaching. Every facet of rural social life was affected, and this meant that gender relations were recreated and the lives of women actually or potentially transformed.

As men left the countryside, or at least found work outside, women assumed increasing roles in agriculture. In contrast to their traditional role marginal to agriculture—as expressed in the classic phrase, “men till and women weave” (*nangeng nūzhi*)—women were doing roughly two-thirds of the nation’s agricultural labor by the 1990s. The small rural enterprises whose productivity was driving the Chinese economic success relied heavily upon the work of young rural women, especially in the key textile and light consumer goods sectors. Household-based enterprises mushroomed throughout the countryside, and these were commonly based upon the partnership and division of labor of a conjugal couple. For many married women, this offered an opportunity for the use of skills and abilities that had previously had no avenue for expression, while other women lacking skill, capital, or opportunity experienced more difficult circumstances. Young women entering marriage in the countryside found that their economic potential and that of their young husbands gave them an unprecedented independence, and placed them in a stronger position in relation to their mothers-in-law. Other young women left the countryside temporarily or permanently in search of a better life elsewhere. The entire fabric of rural gender relations had become open to obvious and to more subtle processes of change.

Rural women responded to this wider range of possibilities in di-

verse ways, and it has become more difficult than in the relatively homogeneous past of the collective era to generalize about their conditions of life. As economic differentiation has proceeded, this has affected women—not only in connection with their localities and their male relatives, but also on the basis of their own activities. Nevertheless, while local communities and households have been transformed, they remain androcentric and patriarchal. Significant differences in gender relations and a gender division of labor continue to give rural women substantial shared interests.

By the end of the first decade of reform, in the late 1980s, the implications of shifting gender relations for women in particular, and for the recommoditizing rural society in general, had become increasingly evident. In the final years of the 1980s, in addition to the changes women and men were making in their own lives, an organized response from the women's movement was gradually formulated and put into practice.

This book had its origins in the efforts of many Chinese women to educate me about their vision for improving the lives of women in rural China in the context of reform. This vision was not exactly what I had expected to find on the part of grassroots women leaders responsible for "woman-work" (*funü gongzuo*). Their starting point is the proposition that the decisive problem for women is that their "quality" (*suzhi*) is too low. Although quality may be and often is used in a very general sense, the main point here is that women have disadvantages in literacy, education, and skills that would enable them to compete successfully and thrive in the marketplace. On the basis of this identification of women's quality as the decisive factor, a set of programs and policies have been developed and implemented to raise women's quality (especially in basic and practical education) and to lead women to compete more successfully in China's "socialist market economy." A defining paradox here is that it is the official women's movement—the Women's Federations under the leadership of the Communist Party of China—that is spearheading this move toward the market.

How an arm of the state—the official women's movement—leads the move toward the market can be examined in general terms as one aspect of the distinctive fusion of state and market characteristic of contemporary China. My concern in this study is somewhat more specific and concrete. I will attempt an "ethnography of the particular" (Abu-Lughod 1991), in which I will explore this vision as situated in

specific experiences of the reform and in women's various efforts to strategize in the reform context.

Among the varied issues that one might discuss in relation to women's organizing in contemporary China, I will limit myself to the complex of changes I was able to observe and to discuss with the women involved during a series of field trips from 1988 to 1995. The framework of this study is determined by what was present in directly encountered locations of Shandong province during those years. There is a broader significance in that the same policies and practices have been evident nationally in the 1990s in policy documents, studies by Chinese scholars, and in publications by and for Chinese women, especially those involved in woman-work. The contribution of this study will be the grounding of an encounter with this set of policies and practices in the ethnography of a contemporary community.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZING IN CHINA

It is not new that women are organizing in China in the context of larger processes of social change.¹ Women and women's issues figured significantly in most of the major initiatives and movements of the twentieth century. The earliest Communist Party experiments in governing, in the southern soviets in the early 1930s, included an activist agenda on women's rights, especially in marriage. The subsequent Yan'an period (1937-47) saw some retrenchment in this area as the Party consolidated its support among the rural men upon whom it relied in the Anti-Japanese War and in the renewed civil war that followed. Nevertheless, the same period saw the emergence of a major role for women in rural production and in local governance, taking the place of absent men and finding some new openings in the policies of the border regions. The first law of the new People's Republic of China, the Marriage Law (Central People's Government 1975), proclaimed in 1950 and popularized in the early 1950s, directly addressed women's specific oppression in the patriarchal family. At roughly the same time, women were granted at least nominal economic equality through being allocated land in the land reforms of 1947-52. This was followed by increased participation of women in public labor in the collectives, which was partially remu-

¹ There is a large and excellent literature on women organizing in China. Among the major works consulted here are Croll (1978, 1981, 1983), Davin (1976), Diamond (1975), Gilmartin et al. (1994), Honig and Hershatter (1988), Jacka (1997), Johnson (1983), Stacey (1983), and Wolf (1985).

nerated through the workpoint system, even if a whole household's remuneration might be given to the (usually male) household head. The ill-fated Great Leap Forward that began in 1958 included experiments in collectivizing domestic labor by instituting public dining halls and child care. While these changes were underway in the countryside, the rebuilding of urban institutions included the creation of employment for women, with equal pay and a gender-sensitive program of benefits. The upheavals of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) did not initially include particular initiatives on the part of women, although its later years were marked by the increased entry of women into traditionally male fields of work, an increase in the representation of women in leadership, and the encouragement of uxori-local marriage.

After a brief interregnum, the period of reform that followed from 1979 was not a favorable one for women. In the 1980s, many women in leadership positions found themselves marginalized, transferred, or retired, while the early reform policies being promoted did not give attention to the needs of women at the grass roots. The 1980s also saw a resurgence of a women's movement in China both within and beyond the established framework of the official Women's Federations.

All of these changes, reshaping the conditions of life by and for women in China, have been closely connected with the state, and specifically with the Communist Party, both before and after it formed a national government. Women had organized for change outside this framework as well, especially early in the twentieth century, but it was those who linked women's liberation with the socialist movement who were historically more influential in China. The resulting approach was one that kept the women's movement intrinsically connected with and subordinate to gender-inclusive movements for national liberation and socialist revolution. For their part, the men (and they were almost exclusively men) who led the Communist Party recognized the commitment of the inclusive socialist vision to women's liberation at the same time as they continued to hold and implement patriarchal beliefs and practices. The result has been an uneasy fusion in which some discernible gains have been made through a state-supported women's movement, but with evident compromises.

These gains have not been a simple or direct matter of implementing policy, although state policy in China since 1949 has generally been more supportive of women's rights and interests than the society at large, and this has been especially the case for rural women living in

bounded androcentric communities. In considering the prospects for change for women in rural China, it is essential to place the possibilities in the context of these communities and their social structure. The continuing norm in rural social life has been that men remain in their communities of birth while women born there marry out, and women from elsewhere marry in. Despite small numbers of uxori-local marriages and a recent increase in the acceptability of intravillage marriage, patrilocality continues to structure rural communities. The significance is not only that men remain in the same communities while women experience a rupture, after which they build adult lives at some remove from their natal families. Patrilocality also means that men live in communities in which the outer domain or public life is structured around multigenerational groups of related men. In the various locations in Shandong with which I am familiar, descent within the village can be traced back roughly twenty generations, and villages are often single-lineage communities. Even in the village at the center of this study, Huaili, which is a multisurname village, there is a core lineage of the same depth, and a similar androcentric (but multisurname) core to the village's outer domain. This pattern of forming communities, together with cultural sanctions against women's participation in the outer domain, leave both formal and informal community ties realized by or through men. This situation obtained prior to 1949 on a more directly patrilineal descent-based model, following collectivization as the same communities became vested with political and economic authority, and after decollectivization in the form of administrative villages. The exact boundaries, size, and number of corporate units have varied, but the deep androcentric character has remained through each transformation. Such communities have been markedly resistant to change that would give women rights in marriage, divorce, or child custody—all of which go to the heart of the community's membership—and also resistant to women's fully equal participation in the economic and political life of the communities.

Women, for their part, have most commonly pursued strategies based on family and household. They have nurtured strong ties with children, grandchildren, and, wherever possible (in a situation where most marriages are still semi-arranged), with their husbands. While young married women are discouraged from forming ties with women outside their own household, except with those married to their husbands' closest agnates, they can legitimately assume important roles in

the inner domains of their own households. The desire of women to manage their own households independently is one of the major forces promoting household division and the increase in the number of nuclear families. Women may manage or co-manage household resources, make major contributions to household income through raising domestic animals or other household-based activities and, especially in the reform era, run small household-based endeavors on their own or jointly with their husbands. Although not every woman has the education, skill or capital—or the favorable household relations—to do so, many women do find this a more attainable (and perhaps more desirable) goal than entering the outer domain characterized by androcentric domination.

Creating change in the interests of women within such a context has been a formidable undertaking. Much Western writing on the subject to date has addressed the question of the role of the state, and this study is partly a continuation of this scholarship. But this is not to argue that the state has been the prime mover of change in the countryside and that the difficulty has simply been one of local implementation.

My own view of this matter was decisively affected by interviewing the senior generation of women in three Shandong communities about the impact of the 1950 Marriage Law (Judd 1998). My understanding prior to these interviews was that this law, together with the national campaign to implement it, was a threshold event in which the new People's Republic made a concerted if only partially effective effort to intervene in the familial dimensions of patriarchy, especially by making it possible for women to leave unwanted marriages. I spoke at some length with all the women who had held leadership roles in these three villages in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, a time when women had often filled such roles in the place of absent men, and I spoke with many other women of the same generation. I was struck by their absence of mention of the Marriage Law; even when explicitly asked about it, they did not consider it very significant. Equally striking were accounts of how some young women had resolved their own marriage problems in that era, by leaving unwanted marriages and subsequently remarrying. I was not being told about policy and its imperfect implementation; I was being told how some women had actively changed their own lives. It appeared to me, from the cases described, that young women close to the newly emergent political forces might have been best positioned to make this change, and that the new policies and state structures had

some indirect, enabling role. The women who spoke with me emphasized the women's own actions, and added the observation that these were women who did not yet have children, or they would not have been able to take the steps they did.

It has seemed to me that there is a major point to be learned from this oral herstory. In a peculiar and unconscious manner, given the explicit sympathies of most Western feminist observers with Chinese women and their movements for change, we may have inadvertently orientalized Chinese women by allowing them to appear as passive figures responding to equally distorted images of exaggerated state power. The actual workings of women's agency in modern and contemporary rural China utilize resources made available by state policies and programs and by organized arms of the state, such as the Women's Federations, but their agency is grounded in the immediate structures of rural communities, and primarily dependent on the women themselves.

A RURAL COMMUNITY

The departure point for this study is the administrative village of Huaili in the primarily agricultural region of Dezhou Municipality, Shandong province. I visited this village on five occasions from 1988 to 1995, and much of this book is based in the lives of the women of this community. Although the study also addresses issues elsewhere—in the township and county in which Huaili is located, in several cities in Shandong, and nationally—the significance of the issues resides firmly in Huaili and in innumerable villages like Huaili.

I arrived in Huaili after an extended search for a community where it would be possible to explore the process of decollectivization. I had earlier been sent to villages that had concentrated on rural industry and, while this had proved useful in understanding emergent forces in the countryside (see Judd 1994), I still sought a location where I would be able to explore the new household-based agricultural economy. The prospective sites in Ling County appeared rather exceptional, but a chance invitation to a wedding in Huaili introduced me to that community, and I was allowed to make it a continuing fieldwork location.

Huaili had formerly been a relatively successful production brigade in the collective era. The village had done well with vegetable cultivation, in addition to grain and cotton, but lacked the advantages of either close location to an urban center or a diversified non-agricultural base at the time it decollectivized in 1984. Shortly thereafter it suffered a major

setback with the appropriation of a considerable amount of Huaili's land for a World Bank-supported water control project. This misfortune of location meant that Huaili lost more land than neighboring villages, and for a year the situation was sufficiently dire that no woman married into Huaili. However, improvement in the village economy (and marriage situation) occurred quickly with Huaili's move to maximize some compensating advantages, also related to its location (see map, page xii). Huaili borders on a minor paved highway that brings some traffic close enough to the village to provide commercial opportunities for motor repair and minor commerce, although traffic is not heavy. In addition, the township offices are located not far on the other side of the road, attracting local travelers. The township itself is a walled compound of offices and residences for township staff, but it is small and not a market center itself. A periodic market is located along the wide street that separates Huaili from the neighboring village of Dongjie. It is Dongjie that is the market town, but Huaili also benefits from its presence. Huaili's strategy for development was one of encouraging households to open small shops and other enterprises along the roadside or near the periodic market site, or to engage in any other form of small enterprise that might benefit from these commercial opportunities. An effort at developing some village-based industry (primarily weaving) was also made in the late 1980s, but failed to survive the shakeout in 1990, as was the fate of most of the limited rural industry in the county. Huaili's chosen route in the reform era was a mix of intensive cultivation of the remaining land with promotion of household-based enterprises. The majority of Huaili households attempted and had some success with at least one enterprise. These were uniformly small and rarely involved the employment of anyone outside the household, but generated substantial income for their households. Land remained valued and a basic resource for food, fodder, and tax payments, but a household enterprise was essential for well-being in land-poor Huaili.

In 1988 Huaili had 997 people in 220 households, and the size of the community increased gradually in the following years. There were only occasional, temporary additions to the village, when one of the more successful enterprises sometimes hired an employee from outside. There were always some people absent from the village working elsewhere on a temporary or long-term basis, and most of these were men, although Huaili had not experienced the significant out-migration of men characteristic of some other areas in the 1980s. A few women left

permanently prior to marriage, and a few young couples successful in business also left the village. Huaili was not a community that had strong economic contacts outside the village, and there was no established connection with external employment. This situation was beginning to change in the mid-1990s as Huaili developed greater ties and opportunities in the expanding economic region centered on Tianjin Municipality, but for the most part Huaili was reliant on its own labor and resources.

Huaili did not share in the new affluence of villages close to major cities or located in the thriving coastal areas. Although some households had built new homes in the 1980s and 1990s, these were single-story structures built along traditional lines, not modern multistory structures. By the mid-1990s a few households had begun to have radiators and telephones, the latter primarily for commercial purposes. The pace of economic development was uneven, with the early 1990s being difficult for all of Ling County, but there was a discernible trajectory of moderate improvement for the village as a whole. This was built upon continuing intensive cultivation of the modest land base (less than one *mu* per person) and active involvement in a shifting mix of small enterprise. Huaili can be viewed as somewhat representative of the middle economic stratum of communities in rural China, although one village cannot capture the full range of diversity, and Huaili was more commercial than most surrounding villages.²

Huaili was, at certain times, slightly out of the ordinary in having a higher level of activity in woman-work (*funü gongzuo*, as the work of the official women's movement is known) than was usual. All villages in China have a nominal structure for such activity, but it is not always very active. Huaili was located in a township where a long-serving vice-head of the county Women's Federation had once worked, and Huaili itself was reasonably accessible from the county seat by road (a half-hour trip). At the time I first arrived in the village, a younger vice-head had briefly made Huaili into an example of what could be accomplished by promoting women's activity in the "courtyard economy" (*tingyuan jingji*) through her regular visits and through concerted effort together with the village women's committee. In subsequent years, Huaili went through a less active period when it had no women's head within the village; it revived its activity later under a new women's head and the

² For further background on gender and the political economy of Huaili in the 1980s, see Judd (1994).

“two studies, two competitions” initiative; and then it lapsed into a period of little activity apart from monitoring compliance with the birth planning policy. Huaili demonstrated within itself both the possibilities of various initiatives when actively pursued and the fragility of the work and organization.

THE STUDY

The study described here took form during the process of fieldwork, in response to and in discussion with women in Huaili and in the women’s movement both there and elsewhere in Shandong. My initial purpose had been broadly to explore the implications of decollectivization and the reemergence of a household-based economy for life in rural China. This necessarily included both women and men and required an understanding of gender relations and the changes that they were undergoing. There was never any question about whether I would work and talk with the men—they were the leaders in each community and active in the outer domain, including interactions with foreigners. From the beginning, I made a point of ensuring that I also worked and spoke with women. I sought out women involved in woman-work or who were active in the outer domain in any other way (such as teachers and former teachers, successful entrepreneurs, medics, and midwives), and I ensured that the diversity of women’s household and working situations was represented in my household samples. I also tried to recruit women (as well as men) as research collaborators in each village, and was usually able to do so. I did, of course, have to be officially accompanied in each village and, since this often involved sharing a room, my hosts often found it most convenient to turn to the Women’s Federation for a companion to share both living arrangements and daily fieldwork. These women were not only indispensable with the planned schedule of household and key informant interviews, but they also allowed me an insight into their own world of woman-work at township, county, and provincial levels.

A significant element of this study is that it includes both systematic data on women derived from household samples and an in-depth longitudinal examination of the women’s movement as it unfolded in and around Huaili. The data regarding women in Huaili has allowed me to look systematically at issues such as women’s literacy, education, and employment, and to explore the relation of the women’s move-

ment's initiatives to changes in the local political economy and in women's activities.

The longitudinal study of the women's movement began in 1988 with visits to households in which women had been conspicuously successful in the mid-1980s, and with inquiries about the context for this provided by the "courtyard economy" initiative. This was essentially an effort to increase incomes by maximizing the use of two underutilized resources—women's labor and the space within courtyards. This built upon women's traditional association with the inner domain of courtyards and their long-standing participation in activities such as raising domestic animals, but sought to promote this more widely and on a very much more intensive level in an effort to increase household income significantly. There were some additional implications of this initiative, including strengthening organized ties between women and promoting training in new skills. Women at the grass roots of Women's Federation staff and women within Huaili struggled to find promising economic avenues for women in their community and to organize ways for more women to benefit from these, as they were newly called upon to generate local economic development programs for women.

Local efforts such as this provided the ground from which the Women's Federations proposed their national initiative under the rubric of the "two studies, two competitions" activities (*shuangxue shuangbi huodong*) from 1989. This was referred to as a set of "activities" (*huodong*), in order to distinguish it from earlier mobilizational movements (*yundong*), as part of a general move by the state to retreat from mobilization. Nevertheless, the "two studies," as I will abbreviate it here, did have some mobilizational elements in that it was organized by the official Women's Federations on behalf of the state. It differed from earlier movements in being more voluntary in nature. The Women's Federations sought and where possible reported very high participation rates, but the new strategy was to induce women to participate by offering the prospect of increased income rather than relying (solely) upon administrative or mobilizational recruitment.

The phrase "two studies, two competitions" is a conventionally compressed way of referring to a program literally consisting of four elements: adult basic education (*xue wenhua*); practical technical training (*xue jishu*) intended to generate income very quickly; competition among local women in achieving economic success and gaining rec-

ognition (*bi chengji*), and through that economic success, competition in making social contributions (*bi gongxian*). The core of the program, especially as it began, was the effort to increase rural women's income through providing short-term training oriented toward the market economy. The remainder of the program revolved around that element.

In 1989 Huaili showed considerable evidence of the courtyard economy from which the "two studies" grew. This was the year I began to hear the distinctive discourse associated with the new activities, the argument that the decisive obstacle was the low quality of women. In this year, also, I first formulated the idea to look not only at the official women's movement, but also at elements of the women's movement emerging beyond official limits.

In 1990, in addition to following developments in Huaili, I began exploring at the fringes of the official women's movement in three Shandong cities—Jinan, Qingdao, and Jining—by meeting in discussion groups and individually with a selection of members of professional groups and study groups of several kinds and associations for the advancement of women. Here, too, issues of quality and discourse regarding it emerged as prominent concerns. Quality was not only an issue for rural women, but also one for women in privileged levels of government and the professions.

In 1992, when I returned to Huaili again, I found it at a peak of activity in the "two studies." This was partly a matter of the initiative by this time being vigorously implemented, and partly a matter of Huaili enjoying the activity of an unusually effective "women's head" (*funü zhuren*). The women's heads (village women's leaders) in Huaili during these years were, as one might expect, selected from among the more capable and well-connected women in the village, and these women were also the ones most likely to leave for attractive opportunities elsewhere. By 1992, this was the third occupant of the position I had met, and she, too, would soon leave. While still there, she effectively organized women to participate in market-oriented activities and to join in the official competitions of the "two studies." By this time, I was primarily focused upon understanding that initiative in practice, and what it meant for the grassroots women's movement. I continued to visit households systematically, updating material on households visited in the past and adding to the number of households in the study; and I continued to trace developments in the lives of women activists and models of market success.

In addition, I spent a considerable amount of time perusing local records and documents of the women's movement at each level from village through township to county. I had read some of these before, but record keeping for the "two studies" had resulted in an increase in records at village and township levels, and these were extensively made available. The county Women's Federation also granted me access to a considerable quantity of files and reports covering their work in general, and especially material related to the "two studies." I supplemented these with published material in the internal publications of the national and provincial Women's Federations, *Zhongguo fuyun* (*The Chinese Women's Movement*) and *Funü gongzuo* (*Woman-work*), both of which were initially provided to me by members of the Women's Federation and to which I later subscribed. During these years, I also reviewed a range of more readily accessible Chinese publications.

On each of the previous visits I had spent some time with women from higher levels of the Women's Federations—province, prefecture, and county—but beginning with this visit I began to work more closely with women at the county level, in order to contextualize Huaili and to have a better sense of the support available from this crucial local level of the state to women working at the grass roots. In addition to reviewing documents, I spoke extensively with several women in the county Women's Federation, in addition to working with those who sometimes accompanied me in the field.

In 1995 I went again to Ling County and Huaili, primarily to pursue the "two studies" but also to explore broader aspects of the women's movement. By this time, the five years initially envisioned for the "two studies" had concluded (1989–94), and a revised second phase had been launched. The new phase had moved from literacy to higher levels of technical training and from small-scale local projects to integration into local economic development programs. The local plan here was for large-scale production of chickens for export to Southeast Asia, and women were being trained through women's classes in the Rural Correspondence College (*Zhongguo nongcun zhifu jishu hanshou daxue* or *Nonghandu*) to participate in this endeavor. Huaili was not, however, a key point in this project, and the focus of its woman-work had shifted toward implementation of the state's birth planning policy. Again in 1995, I visited households, interviewed participants in the women's movement at various levels, and reviewed documents.

The result of this work has been, I believe, a relatively detailed pic-

ture of the local work of the women's movement, and one that is ethnographically situated. It remains an outsider's view and one that is necessarily limited by that perspective. From the point of view of feminist methodology, it is essential to be fully a participant in the feminist practices in question to be able to know about them and to be able to represent them adequately to others. Such a method was never possible in this study. I have attempted to break through the differences that separate my own life from those of women in China, but the differences remain. I have lived in China, as a student from 1974 to 1977, and I have returned on a roughly yearly basis from 1986 to 1997, in most cases either to conduct academic field research or to participate in gender analysis and women-in-development work. As a Canadian feminist I also participated in 1995 in Beijing in both the official United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum. These various ways of being in China all allowed me some interaction with Chinese women and some knowledge of their lives, but the conditions of my own life were always different—in culture, in middle-class privilege, and in the work of being an anthropologist.

That this work could be done at all is due to the Chinese women who helped me understand their lives and work—from the outside. Those with whom I had more contact knew that I had a life elsewhere that included feminist action, but I was necessarily outside, by definition as a foreigner, and as a foreigner I could not directly participate in the women's movement in China. I could not do so because I was transient in China, but also because it would have been a form of foreign meddling. China is adamant about keeping foreigners outside (even when they are inside), and this extends also to the women's movement. Long-time residents in China and those engaged in the growing number of internationally supported development projects for women within China are able to enter more than others into these processes, but the difference remains real. Learning to live the status of outsider is part of learning to live in China as someone from elsewhere.

Being outside, there is much that I cannot know about how the Chinese women's movement works from the inside. Consequently, there is much that remains for Chinese women to tell the rest of the world about their own movements at the grass roots in the countryside. One reason I undertook to write this book, despite these obstacles, is that there is little detailed firsthand material available outside China about this work, especially at the village level. There is an additional advan-

tage in that this material can be connected with earlier ethnographic work on the same community (Judd 1994), with complementary material added here. Imperfect and provisional as it must be, this account can nevertheless aim to add to international understanding of the grassroots women's movement in China.

Being outside the Chinese women's movement has not meant that it has remained outside me, or that my thoughts have not entered this account. There is no easy separation possible between "here" and "there." I am not attempting and do not claim any form of unrealizable objectivity. However, I do take an ultimately modernist standpoint (see Wolf 1992) and have aimed for an account that approaches the "reality" in and through which these women live their lives. I have also sought a critical perspective on myself as the one perceiving and examining this constructed reality, although this book remains firmly focused on the women of Shandong. There is certainly an implicit assumption here that change in the interests of women (in China, Canada, and everywhere else) is a social good, and that organized action toward this goal can be effective. I also depart from a vision of such change that values it only if it includes all women, especially those who are confronted with multiple barriers and are most vulnerable. I will generally avoid the term "feminism," since its usual understanding in China is that it is a Western construct that privileges middle-class women and market-based concepts of equality. There are important reasons for debating what feminism or a more broadly conceived women's movement might or should be, and I have previously attempted to explore this question (see Judd 1995). For present purposes, I will depart from the particularities of the women's movement in Huaili and elsewhere in Shandong. My preoccupation in the pages that follow is not with whether the women's movement is a good thing, but with how it is conceptualized and acted upon, and with the details of local and particular strategies for change.

The research reported here was conducted under the highly public circumstances characteristic of research in China. It was all done openly and through official channels. All involved knew that they were part of a research project conducted by a foreign academic and that the results would be published. Moreover, everyone was aware of the official people accompanying me during the household visits and interviews. The fact of being part of a foreign research project may well have been less constraining than the knowledge that the material presented

was also part of the local record of the fieldwork. Under these conditions it is not possible to offer anonymity or confidentiality, nor would it be expected. Nevertheless, I have slightly obscured the location of the community and the identities of the people; no real names are used, except where citing publications; and I have presented no more about individuals than is entirely public. I did not seek to evade the constraints put upon me, or to gain privileged access to private or public material.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The women's movement in China has a very different shape from that familiar to readers in the West. Since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, it has been dominated by the institution of an official women's movement, known as the Women's Federations. These had first been established in the border regions administered by the Communist Party prior to 1949, became national first as the All-China Democratic Women's Federation and, since 1957, as the All-China Women's Federation. This organizational structure, with a lapse during the Cultural Revolution, has continued with only limited changes to the present.

The Women's Federations are a "mass organization" in classical Marxist-Leninist terms, a transmission belt through which the Communist Party is able to reach a particular constituency of the people, in this case women. It is paralleled by similar organizations for youth and for industrial workers. The mass organizations are attached to the Party rather than the government and, although they are in some respects (for example, financially) in a weaker position than government departments, they are a component of the state as understood here, that is, as the ruling structure including Party, government, armed forces, and all institutions connected with those elements.³

Individuals do not join the Women's Federations, but all women are at least nominally considered to fall within its constituency. In practice, women workers are reached through the mass organization for workers (the trade unions) and, until recently, women in government

³The Women's Federations have not been entirely happy with their status on the margins of state power. Some staff have argued that it would be better for the Women's Federations to enjoy the advantages of being a government department. More recently the predominant approach has been to seek to define the Women's Federations as "non-governmental organizations" (NGOs) for the purpose of receiving international aid and forming ties with international NGOs.

offices were not targeted. The Women's Federations have very largely addressed questions of reaching rural women, and the majority of their personnel are engaged in that work.

There are several administrative tiers of the Women's Federations, paralleling the national administrative structure: national, provincial, prefectural/municipal, county, and town/township. Although there is a framework for leadership between these levels, the Women's Federation at each level is under the authority of the Party Committee at its own level. There is nothing exceptional about this administrative arrangement in China, but it is worth noting because it means that each Women's Federation is tightly linked with the state at its own level, and that the Women's Federation structure is not autonomous.

The mandate of the Women's Federations is to mobilize women as a whole to pursue the policies of the Party, and also to represent and pursue the interests of women. Priority has historically been given to mobilization for the Party's programs that, as socialist ones, can be construed as including the liberation of women as a goal, so working for the Party and for women are therefore fundamentally compatible. In practice, a considerable amount of the work of the Women's Federations has revolved around working toward general societal goals, such as economic development, rather than working on women's specific issues. Since the Women's Federations have very limited personnel and funds, their incorporation into the general work of the state results in a significant reduction in the resources available for work in the interests of women. Nevertheless, the existence of this structure provides a publicly funded national framework for women, and one that is historically well established.

The work of the Women's Federations is conducted by professional staff, who are assigned to work in the Women's Federations through the usual mechanisms of staff assignment in the civil service. That is, women do not become Women's Federation staff through a commitment to or activism on women's issues, but are assigned to this work, and can be transferred in or out of the Women's Federations. The staff commonly do have a commitment to woman-work, although there is a constant need for orienting the flow of new staff, who may not have given much consideration to this work prior to their job assignments. There is a large absolute number of Women's Federation staff, simply because a Women's Federation is part of the state structure at every level. This can be deceptive, however, since by the mid-1990s (following

a general reduction in the civil service) a county might well have only six Women's Federation staff and each township only one or two. Since Women's Federation staff commonly have other work to do as well, especially at the township level, the human resources are scarce. Although the framework is very thin, it reaches through the entire administrative structure, formally terminating at the town/township. Beyond that point, connections are made with village women's heads (*funü zhuren*), who are outside the Women's Federations but linked with them.

For the most part there has been little in the way of an independent women's movement, since the ground for legitimately organizing in the interest of women was occupied by the official women's movement. Indeed, the women's movement in China is largely seen as the profession of those who do woman-work, that is, women in or connected with the Women's Federations. Women could pursue their individual or household-oriented strategies, which might include courting appointment as women's head, but rural women have rarely organized as women apart from the official channels.

Since the 1980s a more independent women's movement has emerged in the cities—in women's studies circles in universities, in newly formed non-governmental organizations, and in development work. Where these groups have moved to develop a presence in the countryside, they have generally done so in connection with the ready-made framework of the official movement. This has not been a difficult link to make, since the Women's Federations themselves have been experiencing a revitalization and have been eager to extend their scope beyond traditional channels by finding new allies and new modes of organizing.

In part this book is concerned with the strategies of the Women's Federations, but it is actually more concerned with what is happening at the margins of the official women's movement, where that movement intersects with the lives of women charting their courses through a society in transition.