

Chinese Women After Beijing

The Impact of the Conference

by Wang Jiexiang

L'auteure donne une vue d'ensemble des préparatifs des femmes de la Chine qui ont vraiment commencé en 1993

sues. In China, at least before "opening up" to western markets, what was most important, whether you were a man or a woman, was your political stance. If you were politically "right"

as the country opened up there were not enough jobs for everyone. Thus, the discussion of whether women should go back to their homes and be dependent on their husbands hit us.

Furthermore, the re-structuring of the economy meant that a lot of workers were laid off. The percentage of women workers that were laid off was much higher than the percentage of male workers that were affected. And that is what led us to the second thing. Women were paid maybe 60 per cent of their original wage and then they were told to stay home.

The third thing which hit us was that our female students graduating from university found it difficult to get jobs. Whereas before jobs were allocated to everybody, all of a sudden employers who wanted to hire university graduates preferred boys. At the some schools over 50 per cent of the students are girls and it is very difficult to find jobs for these girls. And, these girls are very good students, sometimes much better than the boys who get jobs easily.



Mother and child, Beijing 1995.

Photo: Angela Miles

pour la Conférence de Beijing. La Conférence a rendu les préoccupations des femmes de Chine plus visibles et, conséquemment, les ONG des femmes se sont multipliés.

In China, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women has had a great impact on the Chinese women's movement. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), quite a new idea in China before preparations for the Conference started, have since flourished as people become more aware of the issues confronting women. Currently, in China, we have grown from only six women's studies centers to 497 such centres.

Although a lot of women are aware of the issues, in China it is a little bit different than in many other parts of the world. I grew up not realizing what the "sexual" issues were but I was very much aware of political is-

you got a job, if you were politically "wrong," you didn't have anything. So, if a woman was criticized for wearing a beautiful dress, it was not because she was a woman wearing a dress, but because she was a woman with bourgeois ideology. That beautiful dress was a symbol of the bourgeois, capitalist life style. It was not a gender issue or sexual issue but an issue of political stance, or whatever reflects your political belief.

Women have become aware of gender issues since China opened up. Three things hit us around the mid-eighties. The first was the discussion of whether women should go back to the kitchens, what we call "little homes." Since 1949 the Chinese Constitution has guaranteed that men and women are equal in China. The government has in fact done a lot to get women out of their homes and into the workforce. However, as soon

Preparing for the UN Conference

We realized that a lot of old issues resurfaced because of this "economic restructuring" and that's why we began forming women's studies groups. Women's studies groups and women's NGOs really flourished after the preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Preparing for the Conference allowed us to communicate a lot with the outside world and many of the taboo issues such as violence against women, women's human rights, sexual harassment, and the environment are now researched and talked about. We particularly talk about women and development, because in China, the official ideology is that if a village or an area is developed economically, of course

everyone benefits, including women. It's just that simple. But now we, as women, can say, "Wait a moment, it's not that simple." Development does not necessarily mean progress for women. It is now possible to talk about these issues because they have been talked about in newspapers and journals. It is beginning to get into peoples' heads.

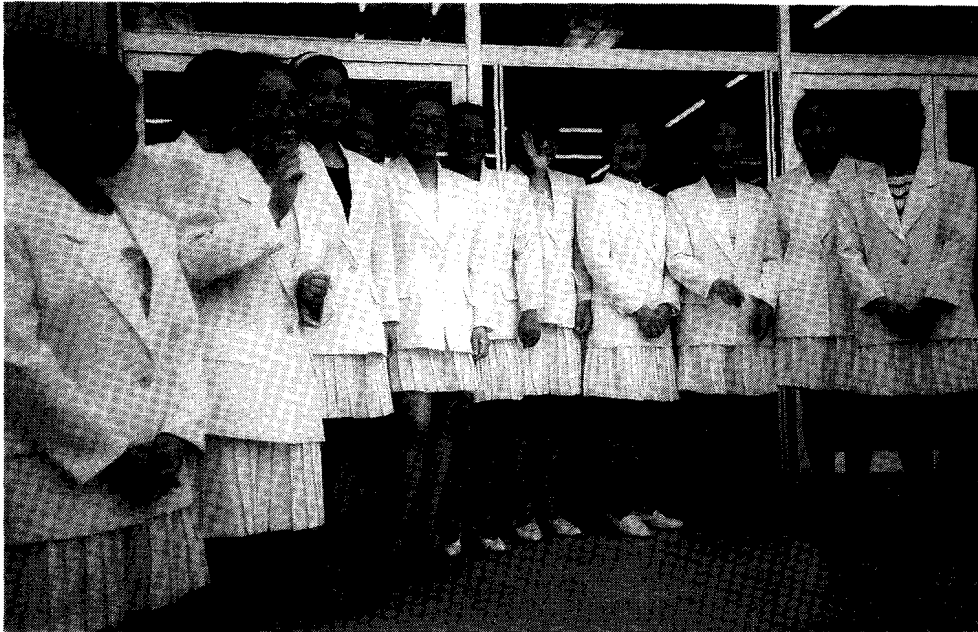
Also, because of the international

for something, you might get into trouble. When it is the law and you do something, you are enforcing the law. I think that Chinese women are making use of all these commitments, laws, and programs to advance women's causes in China. The Conference has made it possible for us to look at the major issues facing Chinese women today and examine what we should do.

things. It is not enough to simply have the percentages. Percentage-wise women might hold up to 20 per cent of the seats in the Peoples' Congress—which is like your Parliament—but at the top levels we still need decision-making power. It not enough to simply put a woman in the Congress. It is also important to raise the awareness of the women that are there.

After the Beijing Conference a vice-minister, a woman, said to me, "Now I realize what it means to be a woman. I have never thought of myself as a female minister." I replied, "Well, a female minister is just like a male minister." But she now realizes there are issues that a female administrator can specifically affect. Thus, raising women's awareness is very important and something that we need to promote in China. Right now it is still basically the more educated women or women living in urban areas who are most aware of the issues. In the large rural areas this kind of consciousness raising is very important for our work with women.

The second thing we are looking at is what we call the feminization of agriculture in China. The "opening-up" policy allowed the entry of foreign capital and the private sector in business. Many people who used to work in rural areas moved to the cities. Who moved, who where the most mobile? Men, first of all. They just up and went. And then younger women in their late teens to early twenties who were not married, women without children, or family responsibilities. Who got left behind in the rural areas doing farm work: raising pigs, cows, chickens, vegetables and then looking after the family? The young and elderly married women. Eighty per cent of Chinese women live in rural areas and some 70 to 80 per cent of the rural work is now done by women. These women have triple burdens. They are living in poverty because the men left. They are doing the farm work and everything else. If the women are too loaded down by their triple burden, there is only one decision they can make that



Students at the Chinese Women's College, Beijing 1995.

Photo: Marion Lynn

exchanges developed in the last four or five years, Chinese women have been able to liaise with networks of the outside world. We share the same kind of interests with women outside of China and we are now able to look globally and in comparison look at our own country to see what women in China need. Because of the UN Conference, women's issues in China have become more visible.

The government has actually established a program for the advancement of women into the year 2000. However, if we women don't do anything about it ourselves it will remain on paper. But because we had the UN Conference and our government made commitments there, it is possible for Chinese women's NGOs and Chinese women to push for implementation. And I think that is very, very useful because otherwise if you didn't have these laws and you pushed

Major issues after the Conference

The first part, of course, is to make use of all existing laws. The second is to identify issues. In China, we think that there are not enough women in power and decision-making positions at all levels of the Chinese government. The government says that in every county or province there should be women as governors or as county heads but usually, most of the women get secondary positions—vice-mayor, vice-governor, or whatever. We might meet the quotas but we don't really have decision-making power. One woman, a deputy magistrate, told me that in some counties there is one county magistrate, and eight deputy magistrates, however, when it comes to voting there is only one female vote. The women are pushed to look after family planning, education, culture, health issues, and other related

is up to them and that is to pull their daughters from the schools. Therefore, we also have a very high drop-out rate for girls in rural areas. Mothers will try their utmost to keep their sons in school but when they can't cope with the workload, they pull their daughters out. This issue is very grave and the government and a lot of NGOs are working on solutions.

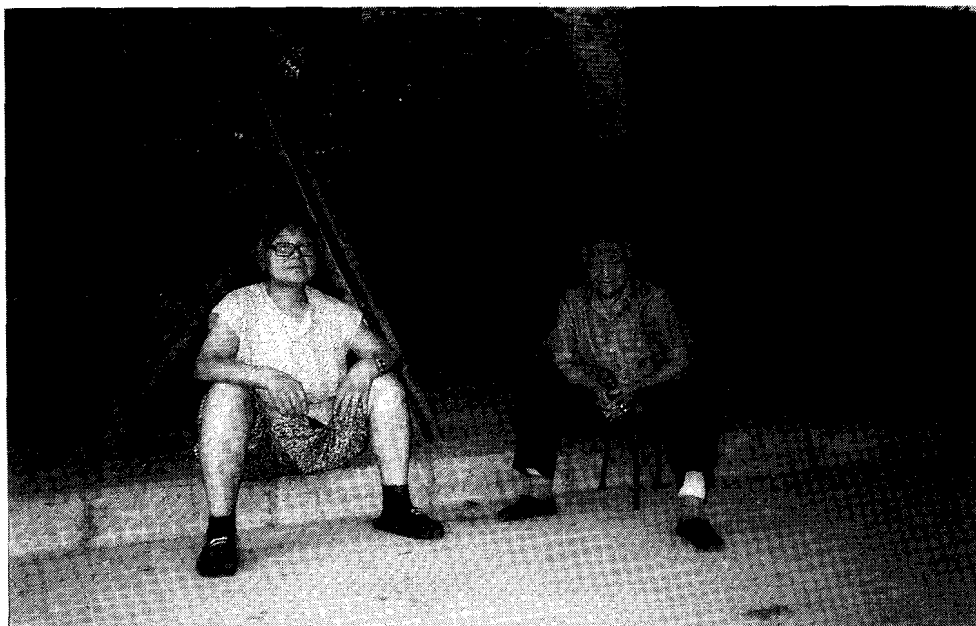
One strategy geared to bringing

can't. For instance, you may want to help them get practical skills so that they don't have to work with hoes in the fields. Science and technology would help them, but then that means they need a bit of education. Thus, the need for literacy plus practical skills training. This is a major issue for a lot of the women's NGOs. There is a program in place called the Hand in Hand Movement in which female

tries not very far from their homes, so that they are still able to look after their families. But ten million have moved into the larger cities and that, of course, raises a lot of problems. Ten million young girls work in far away big cities like Beijing and Shanghai and their jobs are not guaranteed. They heard it was easy to get a job, that there are lots of new factories and job ventures, but that doesn't mean that everyone who moves to the city can get a job. This makes these young girls vulnerable to "traffickers," people who trick girls and say "Hey I have got a job someplace, follow me." They are then sold in remote areas or forced into sex jobs in massage parlours. Trafficking of women is a criminal act, strictly forbidden, and the police are very harsh on the traffickers, yet it still happens. Who is going to protect these women's rights?

Even when they find jobs in opened-up areas, many new factories are just sweatshops. About two years ago a big fire broke out in a toy factory, and the workers couldn't get out because the windows were barred with iron and of the four doors into the factory, only one was unlocked. The girls couldn't get out. Many died. Because of these things, women working in the labour union, in the women's federation, and in other NGOs, are investigating such cases and making suggestions to the government that labour unions be established in all factories, job ventures, or foreign capital financed operations. Of course, the issue is still enforcement because sometimes local Chinese authorities, in order to attract foreign capital, will turn a blind eye. Who can look after the interests of these women when the locals are more interested in their own economic gain? Women's NGOs are now coming in, doing investigation work and making suggestions to the government and women's federations to protect the interests of these women.

In urban areas, workers are now being laid off because of the restructuring of our state-owned industries. Sixty per cent of the people being laid off are women. The reason for this is



Chinese women, Beijing 1995.

Photo: Marion Lynn

girls back into schools is the Spring Back project. The problem is mothers who say, "I don't have to spend any money on my daughter when she goes to school. She has everything, books, bought for her. But the trouble is I need the money she brings in if she doesn't go to school. If she doesn't go to school, she works. She can bring in money or she can help with my work." It is not enough just to see that the girl is looked after financially, that her school expenses are covered, because the illiteracy rate is already pretty high. There are 1.8 billion illiterate people in China and I would say 95 to 98 per cent of them are from rural areas. Furthermore, of the 1.8 billion, two-thirds, or 1.2 billion, are women.

It is very important to bring education to the women. If women are illiterate, there a lot of things you may want to do to help them but

university students work with women in villages. Students from medical colleges assist the village doctors or midwives, helping with the health checkups and providing some training. Others work with village teachers. Students from agricultural colleges help teach farm women new techniques for growing things or for raising chickens and running chicken farms, how to prevent disease, etc. These things are very, very helpful and is has largely been possible for NGOs to engage in such activities because of the UN Conference.

So, a lot of people left the villages to go to cities—of course more men than women—but lots of women, young women left. One study claims that 50 million women have left rural areas since the opening up. Forty million of these migrant women workers work in cities nearby what we call "township enterprises," small indus-

that they are considered a little bit old, over 35, and their educational level is not high enough compared to men. They might only have junior high school whereas men have a better education. The women don't have any special skills, anybody can do the job, and so they get laid off. They also get laid off in favour of the influx of people from rural areas which provide cheap labour. Some new busi-



Chinese woman Huairou 1995. Photo: Marion Lynn

nesses don't want to hire people from Beijing, but they will hire people coming from rural areas because they can pay them less.

For all these reasons, helping rural women has become quite an issue with the government and also with women's NGOs. Job re-training to build up their confidence is one option. Recently, however, there is a regulation, a kind of bonus incentive, that any unit that hires a laid-off worker—women over 35, men over 40, and their contract lasts for

two years—then the unit receives 3,000 yen a year as compensation. That is to ensure that employers who hire these people don't suffer economically. So there are ways of trying to cope with the issue but it is still one that a lot of the women's NGOs are working on that.

Violence against women was also not really looked into until five years ago. Now, a lot of the researchers are women and women's organizations. We used to think that this was not a very serious issue in China but that is not the case. A lot of women are victims of domestic violence and they just don't want to tell people about it. Now that we have a mediation system of sorts—if you are abused at home you can go to your work unit or your husband's work unit. Your husband's work unit would then talk to him and say this is no good. In China it is very important not to lose face in your work environment, and the stigma of being a wife beater might control him a little bit. The family and the women's federation would also help to mediate. Women's lawyers are also now stepping in.

Talking about the laws we have, good laws protecting women's interests, have helped. But the thing is that the majority of women, especially in rural areas, do not know about these laws and therefore they cannot use them to protect themselves. Sometimes this is also true in urban areas. For example in Beijing, a girl was hired by a Japanese company and she became pregnant. Her employer wanted to kick her out. She felt terrible and was ready to accept it until someone in the Women's Studies Group told her, "No! No way you should take this lying down." She got a copy of the law and gave it to the pregnant woman and told her to place it on her boss's desk then wait to see what would happen. Well, sure enough, he never mentioned kicking her out again. But of course, after her pregnancy benefits and maternity leave, she decided not to stay because she was sure her boss would "give her a pair of small shoes to wear to pinch her feet." She felt she wouldn't be

comfortable there. So she fought, she got her rights, she was not kicked out, but left after her maternity leave was over. So, if a city girl in Beijing does not know how to use the law to protect herself, what about women in remote areas? Legal education is important to women. Most of the women's journals and the newspapers are now helping women become aware of the laws that protect their rights. Asking publishers of rural women's newspapers and journals to do the same would help.

I know a few lawyers, professors, and lecturers, in the Law Department of Beijing University, who have formed a group that provides free legal advice to women on women's issues such as divorce. Women don't even know to protect themselves in terms of divorce. When their husband says I want a divorce, and he has already transferred all of their money into other accounts and the wife can't lay her hands on it, she doesn't know how to protect herself. The issue of women's right to property is still very new in China, but women lawyers are helping. The Beijing Conference provided an opportunity to help us further those women's causes which are currently not very advanced. I think in this sense, it has helped a lot.

Many of the women's NGOs still want to concentrate on projects in rural areas as well as programs which provide training to women workers laid off in cities. But I don't think things will change overnight. I want to end with a little anecdote about Australia. I was at Kangaroo Island recently and we were looking at the sea lions in Seal Bay. The guide was telling us what was the major killer of the seal population was actually the bull—the male seals. I asked "how come?" And he replied, "because the bull sniffs around and if he decides it is not his cub, he rolls over and kills it." I don't know how true it is. I don't know about seals. I said, "Wow, can't the mother protect them?" and he replied, "oh, no, no, you know the females, can't do anything." I said, "That's not right." This guide was leading a group of teenagers, boys

and girls. He said "yeah, that is the way nature works. It's no good. You cannot change the power structure between males and females." I said, "Do you mean human beings, too?" "Yeah," he said. "Oh Jesus Christ," I tell myself. I don't think the UN Conference is going to effect his ideological thinking, whatever decisions we as women make.

I think the one thing that can change him though is the effort of Australian women—and maybe through his wife—to change traditional thinking, traditional culture. If we can make all Australian women aware of the issues, then maybe we can help change some of the ideological and traditional ways of thinking of men. In China it is the same. It is all about changing peoples' traditional ideas about men and women, about gender roles. You see it all the time on television, in commercials, when you see a happy woman, happy just because she was able to find the best brand of washing powder. So I think we have got to change all of the stereotypes of women. Otherwise, no matter what happens at the international level it won't effect our lives. I believe in thinking globally but acting locally. That is where real changes begin.

Excerpted from a talk given at the Sixth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, held in Adelaide, Australia, from April 21–26, 1996.

Wang Jiexiang is a Professor of English Literature in the English Department at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. She has been a member of the Women's Studies Forum since 1988 at that University and from 1986 to 1988, she was a Henry Luce Scholar in the Department of English and Women's Studies Program at Cornell University, New York. She was very involved in the PrepCom meetings for Copenhagen and Vienna as well as with the preparations for the Beijing Conference.

This paper was received courtesy of Angela Miles.

An Interview with Wang Jiexiang

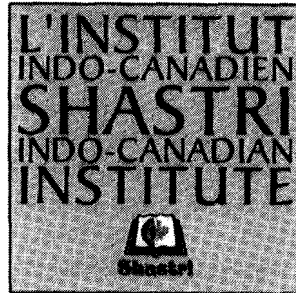
Could you tell me about your role in preparation for the World Women's Congress? I have been involved since the first PrepCom in Vienna. I and others went to a lot of conferences, mainly NGO Forums and also the Asian and Pacific Regional Forum to familiarize ourselves with the issues and common kinds of concerns of the women of the world, especially the developing countries since China is a developing country. We wanted to be able to communicate to the outside world in their language, because if we were speaking different languages the understandings would be different. Later on I helped compile training materials about the major concerns of international women's NGOs for the volunteer interpreters who worked in Huairou helping visitors at the Forum. So at least these young people would know something about what women are concerned about and then we could really dialogue with them. I also organized a workshop at the Forum about Women and Education in China.

What do you mean when you say that you and others worked to ensure that the Chinese women would be speaking the same language as other women at the NGO Forum? As Chinese women we were very worried that the UN Conference, and especially the NGO Forum, would become something of an academic Forum. This is the usual Chinese understanding of this kind of thing. Everybody comes with a paper ready and reads the paper and that's it. But the first time I participated at Vienna at the NGO PrepCom I realized that this was totally different. If we prepared for the NGO Forum along those lines it would be a total catastrophe. So we informed the Women's Federation who was responsible for the preparations what NGO Forums were like. Later on many members of the Women's Federation were able to go to a lot of NGO Forums. At first they paid more attention to the government meeting. We thought that the government meeting was less complicated than the NGO Forum because it is the NGO Forum that is totally new to the Chinese concept. So, basically, in those two and a half years we were trying to really bring this concept of the NGO Forum home to the Chinese official people and I think we helped.

So you were cultural links, cross cultural interpreters, and educators both ways? A lot of us who were active in women's issues and who had a chance to learn about the international women's concerns and issues at some of the NGO Forums worked very hard to help a lot of the Chinese NGOs who prepared specific workshops, many of them, at first, like an academic seminar. Each Province in China had their own provincial delegation. Some people were critical of the fact that many of the delegates for the NGO Forum came from among Women's Federation officials and so on, but we said it doesn't matter because they came to the Conference and were exposed to all the issues. The Chinese women said it had opened their eyes and broadened their vision. Wherever I went and talked about the issues that concerned women internationally Chinese women found "it's the same thing here." Not many women can go abroad and communicate with the outside world, so what we have been doing is make it possible for the Chinese woman to understand more of the outside world and for more of the outside world to understand the Chinese woman.

Excerpted from an interview of Wang Jiexiang conducted by Angela Miles at the Sixth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, held in Adelaide, Australia from April 21–26, 1996.

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