Rethinking Women's Substantive Representation: the Challenge of the All-China Women's Federation

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Abstract
The role of the Chinese party-state has always been quite controversial regarding the development of the female half of the Chinese population. Dominant perspectives on gender and politics commonly view the state as an abstract, immutably patriarchal and non-democratic body which devalues the agency and interests of the Chinese women. However, a growing number of research findings have shown that the social status of the Chinese women has been substantively promoted in general. The aim of this study is (1) to explore whether the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), an institutionalized organization led by the Chinese Communist Party, substantively represent women’s interests; (2) to discuss the criteria of evaluating the representativeness of a public organization which is not elected by the people as well as not entirely autonomous, such as the ACWF; and (3) to offer a new perspective on gender and politics which has either overlooked or misinterpreted women’s representation articulated and conducted by the Chinese party-state. This study adopts a case-based qualitative approach to reveal how the substantive representation of women is conducted by the ACWF. Following the debate of responsiveness, we introduce a concept of serving, which consist of the ACWF’s actions of observing, responding, and mobilizing the interests and needs of the Chinese women during policy process.

Keywords
substantive representation, China, All-China women’s federation, serving
Introduction

The All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) distinguishes itself not only from a branch of government but also from a civil society organization. It is unique because it is an independent mass organization outside of government, but meanwhile led by the Chinese Party. As a result, its legitimacy and effectiveness to represent women has been questioned. For one thing, its relation to the party-state has been seen intrinsically harmful to women’s interests as women’s interests inevitably subordinate to state interests. For another, dominant perspectives regard the Chinese Party-state as undemocratic, it thus has no commitment to women’s liberation.

Therefore, in this piece of work, we attempt to explore the representation of the ACWF by answering a couple of questions: (1) Is the ACWF a representative agency of women? (2) What is represented? (3) What are the systematic characteristics of this sort of representation? (4) How does representation conduct? (5) What are the normative criteria of the good representation in this case?

The methods of this study involve political ethnography (Mügge & Celis, 2016) and interviews. Instead of using normative theories to examine a Chinese case, we at first immerse ourselves in empirical evidences. Then let them lead us to both questions and findings. And the interviews in this study are conducted with officials of ACWF at the national, county, township and village level. The main theme of the interviews is the role of ACWF in dealing with domestic violence issues.

The following sections first illustrate why should we consider the ACWF as a crucial representative of Chinese women regardless of its controversial relationship with the Party. Next, using the term of state feminism, we explain two characteristics of the ACWF, namely: institutionalization and bureaucratization. Then, we re-examine how women’s interests are constructed and represented. At last, we introduce a service concept of representation which consists of the ACWF’s actions of observing, responding, and mobilizing the interests and needs of women. Thereafter, this article links the characteristics of the ACWF and its effectiveness of representation (serving).
What counts as representation?

Disputes placing ACWF’s legitimacy of representing women into question can be seen from three main respects: (a) the debates over the ACWF’s dependence of Party-state. The propositions behind this debate is ultimately the interests of women and of the state diverge, and the former subordinate to the latter. The dispute over whether the ACWF is a ‘real NGO’ during the accompanying NGO Forum of Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 is an example (Wang, 1996, 1997; Hsiung & Wong, 1998; Zhang, 2001; Wang & Zhang, 2010). Hsiung and Wong write:

...Western feminist/activist groups have employed a rather rigid ideological framework on which the concept of NGO is based and a set of Euro-American-centric criteria to evaluate what organisations can be classified as NGOs. Their approach implies that the only way women can promote and safeguard their interests in through NGOs that assume an oppositional position vis-à-vis the state. (Hsiung and Wong 1998: 485)

(b) Dominant scholarship on gender and politics views China, in which the ACWF operates, as non-democratic body. Therefore, the ACWF has no commitment to women’s interests because the officials are not elected but appointed. Zhou argues:

...women who hold positions of leadership do not necessarily represent the interests of Chinese women, because they are not elected by the people, but appointed by the party/state." (Zhou, 2013)

The premise of this claim assumes the one who elected by the people represents people interests without considering other alternatives. (c) With the fading canon of Marxism/Socialist feminism adopted by the ACWF (Howell, 1996), commonplace discourse suggests that a new model/language should be employed to address women’s issue.

Here, we argue that the above-mentioned views are less persuasive and the
ACWF could be seen as a representative of women’s interest for four main reasons. First, from the perspective of Chinese intellectual tradition, the lack of competitive election does not necessarily lead to the lack of legitimacy. Democratic institutions view a representative is elected by people to act in the interest of the people. Consequently, electoral mechanisms guarantee representatives response to the people (Rehfeld, 2005; Urbinati & Warren, 2008) Different form democratic traditions, Jing argues that a representative is legitimated by its ability to recognize and protect of people’s interests in Chinese Politics (Jing, 2007). Edelman, the largest independent public relations firm around world, released 2017 "Edelman Trust Barometer" report. Respondents were asked to evaluate their trust of governments, businesses, media and NGOs. The result showed that Chinese respondents have the highest degree of trust in the government, up to 76%; and about the overall trust in the four areas, China ranked third. In this political context, being appointed by the Party does not necessarily harm to the ACWF’s ability to represent women’s interests. The significance of “Party-led” model should be re-conceptualized and re-assess.

Second, from the perspective of state-society relations, feminist theorist Wang argues “the relationship between the Women’s Federation system and the Party was far from a one-dimensional story of subordination and dominance” (Wang, 2005: 538). Take it further, Wang writes: “…the women’s federation was no doubt an organ of the Party and Women’s Federation officials were firmly identified with the Party’s goal of socialist revolution. However, their identification with the Party did not exclude the possibility of expressing their own gendered visions of a socialist state” (Wang, 2005: 538). Different from the view that NGOs plays a crucial role the scholarship of civil society, state has been considered as the most significant resources in Chinese politics (Harding, 1984; Perry, 1994). Perry argues that China would be classified as having a strong state and weak society which is the worst combination under a dichotomy paradigm. However, an influential society ironically derives not from its organization but from its homogeneity vis- à-vis the state in the structure of state socialism (Perry, 1994: 705). As a party-led organization, the ACWF has been “producing and maintaining boundaries between the government and the “mass organizations” in the
CCP’s power structure” (Wang 2005: 545). Though the ACWF has never had the administrative power as possessed by many government branches, it also has to dedicate time to Parry’s center work, it undeniably makes women’s issue appears to politics and has a voice to affect the policymaking process.

Finally, the significance of the ACWF intimately links to Chinese Socialist Revolution traditions. This point has been practically overlooked by most normative political theories on Chinese politics. Historically, the CCP foregrounded the women questions in the central place of China’s attainment of socialist modernization (Wesoky, 2015). Therefore, since the very beginning, CCP has had ideological commitment to women’s status and gender equality. During history, the ACWF serves as an “transmission belt” between Party and women to emancipate women through mobilizing women involve in socialist construction. From this perspective, the ACWF, a historically subsided organization, appears as an institutionalized legacy to deliver gender equality (Zhang, 1996).

Based on the discussions above, this study considers the ACWF as the representative of women. All the reasons we argued, however, do not necessarily produce a good representation. In the following section, my study will unpack the process of representation conducted by the ACWF and theorize the criteria related to its effectiveness.

**State, Women’s Federation, and women’s interests**

a. **The mechanism of Chinese “top down” state feminism**

The term *state feminism* refers how state responses claims of women’s movements in rich work *Comparative State Feminism* (McBride and Mazur, 1995). It also means feminist work of state promoting gender equality policy in *State Feminism and Political Representation* (Lovenduski, 2005). Borrowing this term, we define it as valuing state’s intervention to prompt women’s statue and gender equality. Appointed as a representative of women’s interests by the Party-state, the ACWF embodies a sort of state feminism. We shall first explore the mechanism of the ACWF (the Chinese state feminism).
Different from the “bottom-up” democratic movement, Chinese women’s liberation movement has been considered as a state project since People’s Republic China was founded by Chinese Communist Party in 1949. In this context, it shows two remarkable characteristics. First comes institutionalization. The system of the ACWF is a hierarchical institutionalized one paralleling with the government system, from village, township, district (county), city, province to the national level. By 1994 it laid claim to 68, 355 branches, 30 at provincial level, 370 at city level, 2,810 at county level and 65,145 at township level and between 80,000-90,000 cadres throughout China (Li, 1992). Bureaucratization is another feature. Even though the ACWF was labeled as NGO during the preparation for the Fourth UN Conference on Women, its offices were set up inside all levels of government. Branches of the ACWF at each level compulsively report their work to the Party and government at the same level.

b. What counts as women’s interests?
The ACWF self-recognized they are the representative of women’s interests. Here comes a question: what counts as women’s interests? Based on the materials of interviews, two main senses of women’s interests can be classified. The first one is women’s preexisting interests which are more legislation related. Taking domestic violence issue as an example. Preexisting interests includes safety, litigious divorce. Women’s long-term interests come next which refer to the well-being of women, family harmony, society harmony. Chan argues that Chinese Confucian traditions view rule’s ability to protect and promote people’s well-being and the willing acceptance of rule by the people as the purpose and justifications of political authority not the natural political rights of individual (Chan, 2014). In the similar way, Chinese Communist Party asserts that the only justification of its leadership is the Party’s ability to protect people’s interests and the willing of endorsement by people. Thus, the long-term interests of women, the half population of people, are not of subordination to but a part of party-state’s interests. Additionally, from the ACWF’s perspective, protection of women’s long-term interests will be of benefit to fulfill preexisting interests. Considering these reasons, the ACWF’s advocating for President
Xi’s words “constructing a harmonious socialist society” does not reflect the ACWF is a submissive organ. Quite on the contrary, the ACWF consider this as good resource to fulfill the well-being of women. They believe the value of harmonious family can not only indirectly benefit to decrease domestic violence but also merit women’s life.

**Bridging theory and practice: a service concept of representation**

According to the two types of women’s interests we have developed, we shall ask how representation is expressed and conducted. When we talk to the officials of the ACWF, on the one hand, they self-proclaimed that they are the representatives of women’s interests. On the other, they stressed that their work is serving for women. We thus offer an alternative concept of political representation, namely: the service concept of representation. Here, we shall briefly clarify the significance of “service” in Chinese political ethics. The concept of service is not refined from empirical work done by scholars. And it is also not a normative term. It is clearly expressed by the Chinese Communist Party. In 1944, Chinese chairman Mao put forward and interpreted serving for people at the funeral of a soldier for the first time (Selected Works of Mao Zedong, 1953). Serving for people was then written in the party’s constitution. From identity perspective, the ACWF consider itself as a representative of the female half of the Chinese population. Meanwhile, the ACWF employs serving for women to address women’s work. Pitkin writes a representative is ‘acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them (Pitkin, 1967: 209) Here we argue, the ACWF fulfills its role, a representative of women’s interests, through serving for women. Therefore, the question needed to answer is how serving for women is expressed and conducted?

Here we refine three concepts which consist of the ACWF’s actions of observing, responding, and mobilizing the interests of women to unpack the process of serving. (a) Observing is particularly underlined by officials in communities and villages. It stresses immersion in women. Zhang argues the ACWF functions rely on “hundreds of thousands of grassroots activities in a comprehensive network reaching the great
majority of Chinese women”, not on the making of policy (Zhang, 1996). Interviewees of officials in villages are proud of they familiar with every family. One official said that once she observes a woman is beaten by her husband, she takes initiative to talk with that woman and her husband. (b) Responding women’s preexisting interests come two parts. The first part is legislation related. The National Women’s Federation played a significant role of bring this issue on the official legislative agenda, triggering the legislation process by integration of the gender perspective into more inclusive interests. In 2013, Zhen Yan, the member of People's Political Consultative Conference and the vice president of National Women’s Federation, proposed a proposal on domestic violence with a draft of Law against domestic violence in the National Congress Conference and People's Political Consultative Conference (these two conferences always held together). The draft was composed bases on investigation the ACWF and Bureau of Statistics conducts. According to the interview with a national ACWF official, against domestic violence law has been officially taken into the next five years plan of legislation in 2013. It has, however, only been classified as the Class II Items. This means whether it will be formed and released is unknown. In this condition, the national ACWF strategically triggers the policy-making process by integrating women’s interests regarding against domestic violence into state interests. This strategy places the emphasis of urgent legislation less on how women benefit from it but more on state’s failure to commit its promise. To specific, during the Fourth UN conference on women in 1995, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have been released and signed by all the member states. Thus, the ACWF urged the legislation with a strong accent on a moral state that should bear the responsibility it promised to solve domestic violence against women. As a result, in 2015, Standing committee of National People’s Congress adjusted the legislature plan made in 2013. The law against domestic violence was took form Class II Items to Class I Items and arranged to be released at the end of the year. This was recorded as the only adjustment which happens after the five-year plan was already issued since 1993. Second, responding women’s complaints is placed in the center of
the work of the ACWF. A room for complaints (信访接待处) was established in the department of women’s rights and interests in every office of the ACWF. “Have a trouble, complaint it to Women’s Federation” (有事找妇联) which was a slogan in the socialist period still works today. Zhang Shengli, an official in the department of women’s rights and interests of Baoji Women’s Federation, Shanxi province told us there was around 170 women came to ask for help last year. Most of problems are domestic disputes. Among them, some women have been beaten by their husbands. Normally, the officials will listen women’s stories and help them to figure out a solution. If she wants divorce, the ACWF will help this woman to collect proofs so that to protect this woman’s interests during prosecution divorce. If she does not want divorce, the ACWF will have a conversation with her husband to mediate their relation. (c) Mobilizing refers to women’s long-term interests. It involves two main objectives. The first one is leading women to pursue better personality. Back to 1949, Cai Chang, the first president of the ACWF and the leader of women’s liberation movement, publicly expressed that one of aims of liberation is to educate women to get rid of vulgar (Cai, 1949). Next comes mobilizing the whole society to value harmonious family/harmonious society. For doing this, the ACWF sets up role models every year. Since 2014, the National Women’s Federation address an action named “The most beautiful family”. This action spreads to all levels of the ACWF. Except for this, the local ACWF advocates “good wives”, “good husbands” to mobilize every individual to pursue harmony. Here comes a puzzle, does the pursuit of harmony will undermine the willing of asking for help of victim which women are the main group. Throughout investigation, pursuing harmony here is with an strong stress on “zero-tolerance of violence” and is more related to leading individual self-educated to be a civilized person.

**Conclusion**

As stated above, women’s representation is not articulated by an electoral body which guarantees representatives act in a manner of responsive to women’s interests. In China, it is expressed and conducted by a mechanism of “top down” state feminism
led by the Chinese Communist Party. In this system, the ACWF plays a significant role which serves as the only official representative of women’s interests outside of administration and legislation. In 1980s, it set up branches paralleling with the government system, from village, township, district (county), city, province to the national level. Moreover, most offices are settled inside the accompanying branch of government. Therefore, even though it is not a branch of government and has no administrative power, it shows two distinctive characteristics, namely: institutionalization and bureaucratization.

In this article, we claim that two types of interests are considered as women’s interests in the case of decreasing domestic violence. First comes preexisting interests which includes safety, litigious divorce. Long term interests are the next. This type of interests refers to well-being of women which are constructed with correspondence of state project of “constructing a harmonious socialist society”. Then we develop a service concept of representation. Empirically, ACWF fulfills the role of representing women’s interests through serving for women. To specific, we refine three concepts which include ACWF’s actions of observing, responding, and mobilizing the interests of women. First, observing stresses the important of immersion in women. Second, responding refers directly to fix women’s problems and to represent those cannot be fixed to the state. Thus, one the one hand, the ACWF has been promoting the legislature to pass a national law against domestic violence. On the other, they substantively help women complaint domestic issue for the ACWF. Third, the ACWF sets up role models to mobilizes individual to pursue harmonious family as they believe this value can not only indirectly benefits to decreasing domestic violence but also merits women’s life.

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