This book examines cultural complexities of gender by focusing on gender politics in Asia with case studies from China, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. It is a comprehensive volume that examines multiple aspects of gender politics (in terms of dress, healing, religious ordination, NGO activism, etc.) and brings interdisciplinary approaches of inquiry based on in-depth empirical data.

In so doing, this book demonstrates the great diversity in gender politics and women's strategies to negotiate and change gender relations individually or collectively.

Women Manoeuvring within Dominant Gender Orders

Edited by
Wil Burghoorn, Kazuki Iwanaga, Cecilia Milwertz, and Qi Wang

Cover photographs by Rob Koudstaal

[Review quotes]

‘An excellent introduction to the subject, written in a lively and interesting manner, complementing the editors’ insightful handling of the theme.’ (Aminata Dada, University of Delhi)

‘I heartily recommend the book to everybody researching gender questions in Asia and complement the editors for their insightful handling of the theme. ‘ (Anindita Datta, University of Delhi)

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GENDER POLITICS IN ASIA
Gendering Asia addresses the ways in which power and constructions of gender, sex, sexuality and the body intersect with one another and pervade contemporary Asian societies. The series invites discussion of how people shape their identities as females or males and, at the same time, become shaped by the very societies in which they live. The series is concerned with the region as a whole in order to capture the wide range of understandings and practices that are found in East, Southeast and South Asian societies with respect to gendered roles and relations in various social, political, religious, and economic contexts. Gendering Asia is, then, a multidisciplinary series that explores theoretical, empirical, and methodological issues in the social sciences.

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Gender Politics in Asia

Women Manoeuvring within Dominant Gender Orders

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Preface

Among the various regions of the world, Asia is especially interesting for students of democracy. There are several reasons, not least that many Asian countries have committed themselves to implementing a form of democratic government in the past few years. Implementation, however, is not simple; this is a vast region characterized by extremely diverse populations and huge gender disparities, a situation that creates enormous challenges for the establishment of balanced political representation. As a result, many countries have adopted affirmative action measures to increase the representation of women and ethnic groups in their parliaments. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that recent decades have witnessed the rise into political prominence of many different women in Asia. Corazon Aquino, Benazir Bhutto and Aung Sang Su Yi are just a few examples of women who have struggled to come to power, not always successfully.

The ability of a small elite of highly educated, upper-class Asian women to obtain the highest political positions in their country is unmatched elsewhere in the world. Lower down in the political ‘food chain’, however, the ability of women to exert power in their local communities appears to be far more limited. This situation has prompted more and more scholars to explore the ways in which power and the constructions of gender, sex, sexuality and the body intersect with one another and pervade contemporary Asian societies. One has resulted in a series of international conferences on women and politics in Asia. *Gendering Asia*, the series in which this volume appears, is another manifestation of this increased scholarly interest.

*Gender Politics in Asia* has its origins in and builds on this activity. The volume was first conceived as a result of the first International Conference on Women and Politics in Asia, held in 2003 at Halmstad University in Sweden. The conference examined not only formal channels of participation but also informal channels. Among other matters, then, it concerned itself with women’s exercise of power through these channels, the role of women’s organisations in getting gender issues on the political agenda in different contexts, and the impact of cultural and religious systems on gender and
Gender Politics in Asia

politics. The conference drew together subject specialists – scholars and activists included – representing a range of professional and national perspectives on the subject matter. We were truly impressed with the breadth, variety and scholarly value of the papers presented. Unfortunately, it was only possible to select a fraction of the papers presented for inclusion in this volume. The resulting material has been worked and reworked over the years. It is our sincere hope that this collection will contribute to the ongoing research on politics of gender in Asia.

Certainly we could not have achieved this final result without significant support from many people. First, the volume builds on the dedication and hard work of the conference organizing committee and tremendous support for the conference received from various people at Halmstad University. Nor could it have been made without the help of academic colleagues based in Europe as well as in Asia, not least (but not only) their scholarship and their expertise. Our thanks, too, go to the authors of individual chapters who so painstakingly endeavoured to work according to a demanding schedule while taking into account the diverse comments from us, the editors.

In addition, the project received generous support from various institutions and individuals. The conference itself would not have been possible without generous financial support from the Swedish Research Council, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Swedish Institute, NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies at Lund University and Halmstad University. Finally, our appreciation also goes to NIAS Press for overseeing the publication of this book.
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**Gender Politics in Asia**

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**Mina Roces** is a PhD graduate from the University of Michigan, and teaches in the School of History, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. She is the author of *Women, Power and Kinship Politics: Female Power in Post-War Philippines* (1998), and *Kinship Politics in Post-War Philippines: x*
Contributors


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List of Abbreviations

ACWF  All-China Women's Federation  
APEC  Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation  
AWARE  Association of Women for Action and Research (Singapore)  
CEDAW  Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women  
CMA  the China Mayors’ Association  
GABRIELA  General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action (Philippines)  
GMA  Gloria Macapagal Arroyo  
GO  Government Organization  
IMF  International Monetary Fund  
NFWC  National Federation of Women’s Clubs (Phillippines)  
NGO  Non-governmental organization  
PAP  Peoples’ Action Party (Singapore)  
PRC  People’s Republic of China  
RVN  Religious of the Virgin Mary (Philippines)  
SCW  Singapore Council of Women  
SCWO  Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations  
SONA  State of the Nation Address (Philippines)  
TFD  Task Force Detainees (Philippines)  
TW-MAE-W  Third World Movement Against the Exploitation of Women  
WMA  Women Mayors’ Association  
WMS  Women Mayors’ Society  

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Introduction

QI WANG, CECILIA MILWERTZ, WIL BURGHOORN and KAZUKI IWANAGA

There is no doubt that the inclusion of gender as a category of analysis in the study of societies and cultures in Asia is important. Indeed, some would argue that it is essential. In the preface to Brownell and Wasserstrom’s edited volume, *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities*, Thomas Laqueur claims nothing less than the ‘mighty resonance of gender in Chinese culture’ (Laqueur 2002: xi). He notes that the book ‘argues that no political or economic or social history is possible without a cultural history: a history of the meanings of things, actions, events, movements, gestures, clothes, and accomplishments, among much else. And it argues, moreover, that there can be no cultural history without a history of gender’ (ibid.: xiii). In this case, the discussion relates to China, but in a similar vein, the argument can be applied to other societies, both in Asia and elsewhere.

This book examines cultural complexities of gender by focusing on gender politics in Asia. The term ‘gender politics’ has been used in many ways and domains of life, often without being specifically defined. Here, we follow R.W. Connell’s definition: ‘In the most general sense, gender politics is about the steering of the gender order in history. It represents the struggle to have the endless re-creation of gender relations through practice turn out a particular way’ (Connell 2002: 144). He uses the term ‘gender order’ to define the dominant patterns of gender arrangements and norms in a given society.

The collection of case studies in the present book deals with women who are diversely situated in various countries in Asia: urban housewives in Japan, prosperous, modern women in Singapore, women mayors and
NGO activists in China, Buddhist nuns in Thailand and Hindu healers in Malaysia, as well as suffragists, Catholic nuns, highland women, a First Lady and two female presidents in the Philippines. The authors differ in their focus, methodology and perspective. This heterogeneity provides the basis for illustrating ongoing negotiations of gender politics in many ways and at different levels of society. The cases examined in this volume invite the recognition and acceptance of differences in the realm of meanings and practices in which inequality and hierarchy find expression. The essays show how gender pervades the differentials of power and how gender politics are played out by those who maintain current gender orders – by those who perhaps even strengthen or reinvent them, and by those who want to change them by creating new meanings and practices. In all cases of defining the gender order – be it maintenance of the existing order, change, re-invention or strengthening or challenges to existing meanings and practices – we see gender politics being enacted.

By drawing on diverse disciplinary backgrounds, intellectual frameworks and empirical material, we address the following central concerns:

- How do women in various gendered contexts in Asia position themselves in the production and reproduction of gender relations?
- How do they manoeuvre, implicitly or explicitly, to support or to resist and change these relations?

As stated above, the inclusion of gender as a category of analysis in the study of societies and cultures in Asia is important if not essential. Studies of gender and Asian modernity have pinpointed the centrality of gender in the transformation and modernization of Asia. According to these studies, gender is a fluid, contingent process characterized by contestation, ambivalence and change (Ong and Peletz 1995: 1). The reworking of gender notions has occurred within ‘the large ideological and material contexts of a dynamic, modernizing Asia and has been a very public process in which state, economy and religion have all played extensive parts’ (Sen and Stivens 1998: 4). This volume shows how these various domains interconnect, interact and intertwine with each other, forming dynamic and multi-layered sets of power processes.

Maila Stivens once asked what we mean when we set out to talk about the gendered processes constructing the contemporary order in Asia. What are the implications of working our way through the changing, shifting and highly contested meanings of gender, not least in their political contexts, to think about the gendering of modern Asia? (Stivens 1998) She has argued
that we must understand the modernizing and globalizing of Asia as systematically gendered processes. Stivens emphasizes that the question is not simply one of effects or impacts of change on gender relations, but how, analytically, we can understand larger structural transformations as thoroughly gendered processes. In other words, a focus on gender implies more than studying both men and women as immediately identifiable groups by virtue of their sex alone. Studying gender implies focusing on the meanings attributed to many different aspects of femininities and masculinities in various contexts in order to understand why these relationships are constructed as they are, how they work and how they change. The concept of gender is used both to describe relationships between men and women and as a category of analysis to theoretically explain continuities and discontinuities, equalities and inequalities, as well as similar or different social experiences.

Multiple and Contested Meanings of Gender in Asia

Gender discourses in Asia have increasingly become sites of contestation involving a multiplicity of conceptions regarding male and female. Anna Meigs (1990) has convincingly argued that multiple gender discourses occur and coexist in every society. She has illustrated this with examples from the Hua, agriculturalists in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Her data reveals that there are different gender ideologies in defined situational contexts. In a similar way, Susan Brenner (1995) has shown with data from an urban area in Central Java, that gender ideologies are contextually specific. She discusses the variable ways in which masculinities and femininities are constructed, contested and reworked. In comparing the official and dominant view with those which find expression in the marketplace among female vendors and their customers, she finds not only different but also conflicting and contradicting gender discourses in society.

In this book, multiplicity and contestation can be illustrated by a discussion of motherhood. Several chapters show how the perception of the domestic arena as the proper place for women is emphasized by different actors on different sites of gender politics – state policy, elected political representatives, popular opinion and mothers themselves. Phyllis Chew (Chapter 7) discusses how Singaporean women’s lack of political engagement is generally understood as being due to their lack of sufficient time, as they are fully occupied by their paid employment and their responsibilities as wives and mothers. The unquestioned implication is that women’s obligations to maintaining a family are more time-consuming than those
expected of men who also have families. In a similar vein, in Japan a system of allocating higher pensions to housewives (women not in employment) than to women in employment underlines the norm that the appropriate behaviour for women is to care for their homes, husbands and children rather than to work outside the home (Eto, Chapter 2). At the same time motherhood can function as an incentive for political mobilization and be the driving force behind women’s political engagement. Their identities as mothers and the language of ‘mothering’ have mobilized Japanese housewives, drawing them into a community-based movement in large numbers. An interesting observation in Mikiko Eto’s chapter is that the community-based women’s movement in Japan grew quickly because it confirmed the dominant gender order. By contrast, the Japanese feminist movement, aiming to enhance women’s rights and emancipation, has not been able to exert much influence beyond a small feminist circle in Japan. In Japanese society, Eto explains, women can win respect by bearing the social status of mothers. In utilizing the power of ‘motherhood’, the community-based women’s movement in Japan succeeded in transforming women’s private concerns into public concerns.

Notions of motherhood can also be used strategically to downplay radical elements of collective organizing for change, as in the case of Chinese women mayors and Filipina suffragists. In China, a notion of femininity is now celebrated as the signifier of modern womanhood. Women mayors, who have transgressed the domestic sphere and moved into the public sphere of politics, can appeal for social acceptance and support by carefully manipulating their image as loving mothers and wives (Wang, Chapter 6). Similarly, the first women politicians in the Philippines wore traditional dress in order to present themselves as non-militant, non-aggressive women who glorified the home and motherhood. The suffragists did not confront existing constructions of the feminine, even though they lobbied for radical change. Because traditional definitions of the feminine were not openly or publicly challenged, female power was still associated with the woman as beauty queen and the woman as moral guardian (Roces, Chapter 1).

**Individual and Collective Engagement with Gender Politics**

The case studies in this book show that forms of maintaining, challenging and changing gender relations can be enacted either on an individual basis or collectively. The chapter by Alexandra Kent examines the activities of two Malaysian healers – one woman and one man, both devotees of the
**Introduction**

Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba – within the broader Malaysian socio-political context. The Sathya Sai Baba movement in Malaysia aims to reform, revitalize and ultimately dominate Hinduism in Malaysia. The movement is controlled by middle-class Indian men in the hope that they – a minority whose ethnic solidarity and political strength is jeopardized by class, caste, and linguistic and religious divisions – might gain genuine leverage in the orchestration of Malaysia’s future. They present their organization as committed to nation building and modernization, promoting both cultural and religious pluralism as well as patriarchal and bourgeois values as principles of social order. The creation of the order, as Kent argues, is not simply an intellectual issue of ideology or rhetoric. Rather, it is deeply concerned with the body and emotions. This particular practice of healing, with its intense focus on rectifying ‘disorder’, constitutes a potent area in which the ordering power of political process is filtered through social bodies and then digested, reproduced or even rejected by individual minds and bodies. By examining the micro-political process of healing as practised by two individuals, Kent reveals how the manipulation of healing power within this Hindu revitalization movement in Malaysia can be managed in ways that on the one hand extends and on the other challenges the hegemony of politically endorsed patriarchal ideals.

In her chapter on gender and religious legitimacy in Thailand, Monica Lindberg Falk provides a case study of Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, the first woman ever to obtain the status of an ordained bhikkhuni (female monk) in Thailand. Lindberg Falk shows how this woman’s struggle to become a bhikkhuni through ordination has challenged the traditional and gendered religious order in Thailand. Nuns (mai chii) and female monks are excluded from the sources of institutionalized religious power and prestige in Thailand. To achieve ordination, women have to become either nuns or female monks. However, both categories are outside the Thai Buddhist Sangha (community), which is solely a male congregation. Female ordination involves not only individual courage but also education, financial resources and the support of lay people. Thus, the success of this single woman reflects numerous overall changes in women’s social status that are taking place in Thai society. Moreover, this woman’s current project of establishing a bhikkhuni order in Thailand may potentially influence more women and lead to further transformations of the Thai gender order. The current movement to introduce full ordination for Buddhist women, Lindberg Falk argues, is the most obvious way to reconstruct religious traditions and tackle inequality in Thai Buddhism.
In the chapters on the Philippines, Japan and China, we see women collectively organizing. The community-based women’s movement in Japan, examined by Mikiko Eto, was initiated and developed by urban housewife–mothers in Japan in response to their concern over serious problems such as food and environmental pollution that threatened the lives and futures of their children. This organizing ‘by women’ was criticised by the established women’s movement for its lack of attention to issues of female gender subordination and discrimination as well as its lack of attention to the political fields of international relations and defence normatively viewed as male domains. The established women’s movement argued that, by focusing on issues such as healthy food for their families and care for the elderly (issues that could legitimately be addressed within the scope of gender-appropriate behaviour for women), the community-based women’s movement was accepting the exclusion of women from formal politics and was not challenging male-dominated politics. However, Eto argues, by organizing and acting politically, housewife–mothers were indirectly challenging gender norms insofar as their very organizing practices implied going beyond their prescribed roles of political disengagement. Gradually, their political engagement escalated. The housewife-mothers became involved in organizing ‘for women’ that is, in addressing issues directly related to challenging the male-dominated and unequal gender order.

The chapter by Qi Wang on the Women Mayors’ Association in China provides a case study of how female mayors organize themselves to deal with the problems they face as women, not in contrast to, but in line with the dominant gender ideology in their society. Replacing the Maoist notion of gender sameness, the idea of naturalized gender differences has prevailed in the post-Mao era. This change has opened up new possibilities for the negotiation of gender and gender identity. By proclaiming their gender specificity and the need to accommodate such specificity, Chinese women mayors were able to set up an organization of their own and thus carve out a space for themselves. The Women Mayors’ Association (WMA) works to address women mayors’ concerns, promote their visibility, and improve their welfare and conditions. Instead of openly criticizing male domination in politics or addressing the problem of growing gender inequalities in society, the WMA has adopted a safe and non-confrontational language, phrasing its activities in terms of gender differences and women’s need to improve their lot. In so doing, the organization has succeeded in winning male social acceptance and the support of the China Mayors’ Association, the national organization of municipal leaders.
Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, when the Women Mayors’ Association and many other women’s professional organizations were established in close relationship to Party–state institutions, another relatively independent form of women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also emerged in the People’s Republic of China. Activists in many of these NGOs have been influenced and inspired by increased international and transnational interaction. Cecilia Milwertz and Bu Wei examine how activists in non-governmental organizing have first created and subsequently disseminated knowledge to challenge the dominant gender order. Their main focus is on how knowledge and identity formation processes among activists in Beijing take place in the course of activists’ encounters with alternative discourses and practices introduced from abroad and on how such new knowledge subsequently serves as the basis for social movement activism. The chapter is concerned with how processes of challenging dominant gender understandings in society, redefining interpretations of gender equality issues and naming the unnamed are the starting point for, and, in a broader societal context, the intended outcome of, activism to create social change.

The chapters on the first- and second-wave feminists in the Philippines, the community-based women’s movement in Japan and NGO activists in China show how participants in women’s movements have become increasingly radical in challenging male-dominated gender orders in the process of organizing. What happens when people realize that the gender order they have taken for granted and accepted is in fact oppressive to them? The Japanese case and the non-governmental organizing in the People’s Republic of China illuminate collective organizing as processes where increased consciousness or awareness of oppressive gender orders lead to action to alter existing forms of male domination. In contrast, Phyllis Chew’s chapter on the participation of Singaporean women in formal politics and on women’s movement activism shows a different development, with a change from ‘vociferous and active’ participation in the pre-independence period to the current ‘depoliticized and apathetic’ attitudes. The general perception now is that Singapore has no gender inequalities. Chew, writing from the position of her involvement in the non-governmental women’s organization, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), in Singapore, is deeply disturbed by this change, and she seeks to understand how and why this has happened, as well as what consequences low levels of political participation on the part of women have for AWARE. Chew refers to the general scholarly agreement that citizens in Singapore today are politically apathetic – a significant reason being self-censorship due to
tight political control and fear of reprisals. Chew has further explored why women specifically are passive in politics. The factors that play a role in this change include, among other things, state paternalism, gender ideology, cultural norms, and particularly a materialism nourished by market forces and economic success. Women have gained opportunities for education and employment as part of the Singapore modernization project. In this political project, one of the normative roles for women is that of building the nation as wife/mother and worker. Moreover, Chew points out that the modern educated and employed Singaporean woman has no desire to return to the not-so-distant past, when employment opportunities were not afforded to women.

What, then, is characteristic about gender politics in Asia? Are there certain patterns specific to Asia? What does the study of gender politics add to our knowledge of Asia? Here, the case study from the Philippines helps to throw some light on these questions. Mina Roces analyses (among other things) the Catholic nuns and women’s organizations that formed the second wave of the women’s movement in the Philippines. Both the nuns and secular activists started their political engagement in the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship; and only later did they become involved in the women’s movement. Militant nuns were very visible in the protest politics of the martial-law era. The nuns could exercise ‘moral power’ because they were religious persons. Some of the choices made by the nuns in the Philippines illustrate how context-specific gender politics can be. In the 1960s and 1970s, women in cloistered orders all over the world were asked by the Vatican to exchange religious dress with secular dress. Here, Roces compares the situation of Filipina nuns with nuns in Massachusetts. For the nuns in the United States, exchanging the habit with secular dress was a positive experience allowing them better to interact with their communities. In contrast, the Filipina nuns flaunted the habit and wimple, using their costume during demonstrations and rallies as a political weapon in their struggle against a repressive regime. At that particular historical point in time, it was important for them to claim a collective identity, symbolized by their dress, with Catholic nuns all around the world. Violence against one Filipina nun would represent violence against the entire community of nuns and, ultimately, against the Catholic Church. Roces thus demonstrates how different forms of strategic use of dress have been manoeuvred in response to gendered meanings in particular cultural contexts of time and place.

As with this example of Filipina nuns, the chapters in this book offer stories of women who strategically use, confront or accommodate dominant gender
orders. These examples are specific in time and place to certain countries in Asia and to certain people within Asian societies at certain times. They do not form patterns of gender politics that are specific to Asia. Mina Roces thus shows how the history of the Philippine second-wave women’s movement is specific to the political history of that particular country.

Chew’s chapter, on the contrast between a historical period when women were strongly involved in formal politics and the current low level of engagement in Singapore, plays a particularly important role in this selection of case studies of gender politics because of the way it reminds us that gender politics take place not only in terms of individual or collective action that challenges dominant and subordinating gender orders. Gender politics is also the ongoing maintenance of any given gender order. If any ‘pattern’ of gender politics in Asia can be said to be drawn by the chapters in this volume, then it is one of diversity and of historical, economic, social, political and cultural positionalities. The women described in this volume are situated in different and changing contexts. They take different approaches to organizing their lives, their relations to men and other women and the larger political order and their actions are constituted by the different contexts in which they operate. Some women challenge gender-discriminatory practices and patriarchal cultures in their society, either vociferously or quietly. Some aim (implicitly or explicitly) to win social acceptance and to manoeuvre within the orbit of the dominant gender ideology. They utilize the potential embedded in their normatively prescribed gender roles. They engage in gender politics at different levels, with different political and moral implications, across different domains, and with different objectives.

The common denominator of the effects and impacts of various actions and events on men and women respectively – and of the gendered characteristics of the events narrated in the chapters of this volume – is their multiplicity. This is not to say that the existence of certain similarities across or within the region of Asia is impossible, or that stories cannot be made to generate more generalized insights about the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. It would in fact be possible to focus on a narrower topic than the broad theme of gender politics, and from this perspective to identify patterns specific to (parts of) the region. Indeed, we have pointed to several such similarities between chapters. However, from the perspective of gender politics as a whole, it is quite clear that diversity and difference related to specific people in particular contexts characterize the continuous enactment of gender politics in Asia.
Gender Politics in Asia

References


CHAPTER ONE

Women, Citizenship and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines

MINA ROCES

The iconography of the People Power 1 Revolution is replete with photographs of militant nuns dressed in full habits facing armed soldiers who were ordered to clear them from the site (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue EDSA). These powerful photographs sent the semiotic message that unarmed women with religious legitimacy could triumph over macho military men with sophisticated weaponry. The militant nun as activist had in fact already been visible in the nation's collective memory before 1986. In 1981, the film ‘Sister Stella L’ had its main protagonist (a nun, Sister Stella L) recite the activist line at the end of the film: Kung hindi tayo kikilos, sino pa, kung hindi ngayon, kailan pa! [If we do not act, who will, if not now, then when!] Written by Jose Lacaba, this slogan was one of the catchphrases of the activists of the 1970s. The fact that Lacaba purposely gave these lines to the character, who was a militant nun, was a testimony to the visibility of the militant nun as representative of the opposition to the Marcos dictatorship. But the nun’s habit itself was a weapon. At a time when post Vatican II instructions were to ‘go lay,’ encouraging nuns to discard the habit so that they could blend more with the community, nuns deliberately wore their habits to demonstrations because they were aware of their symbolic capital in a predominantly Roman Catholic country. Since the Marcos dictatorship disenfranchised all but those close to the Marcos–Romualdez kinship group/alliance group, nuns used dress to renegotiate citizen’s rights in a dictatorship and, by February 1986, as a revolutionary or battle ‘uniform.’
Although women have been construed as the bearers and wearers of national ‘tradition’ and therefore ideally are expected to be attired in ‘national’ or ‘traditional’ dress, they have also been able to subvert gendered codes in order to negotiate political citizenship. This chapter explores women’s strategic use of dress in political self-representation – from the suffragists of the 1920s to the militant nuns of the 1970s and 1980s to the women’s organizations and women politicians of more recent times. The gendering of political power in the Philippines sees men exercising official power as politicians and women exercising unofficial power through kinship and marriage ties to male politicians (Roces 1998). While some women accepted the status quo and focused on maximizing the parameters of unofficial power, other women campaigned for the right to exercise official power and the extension of full rights of citizenship to the female sex. In some of their political campaigns, women manipulated the semiotics of dress to claim political space. Although not all the women discussed in this chapter were feminists, they had overt political agendas: the extension of citizenship rights (suffragists, nuns, Cordillera women); maximization of unofficial power (Marcos); or the claiming and legitimization of top official positions (Marcos, Arroyo).

This chapter studies women’s political use of costume over several periods of the twentieth century and several types of regimes: colonial, democratic and authoritarian. Different types of political regimes meant that women had to grapple with a series of dilemmas and challenges, since women’s ‘positioning’ in the nation-state varied in each case. I am interested in exploring the vestimentary use of five women/groups of women: 1) the suffragists in the American colonial period, 2) the militant nuns, 3) the Cordillera women, 4) First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos and 5) President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

One clear, consistent theme emerges: dress reflected the shift in the specific political agendas of the women’s movement, as women consciously campaigned for an increase in political space and official power in particular. Dress was an important strategy deployed by women who have tried to break out of the traditional gendering of power by making a bid for official power. In particular, these women have been able to capitalize on the contrast between Western dress and Filipino national dress or other forms of traditional women’s dress/undress to pursue radical agendas.

Though this chapter explores three groups of women and two individual women, with five different agendas, the problem of what to wear reflected the contrasts between women’s dress and men’s dress – the ‘other’ from which
women constructed their identities. Often this contrast was heightened by the tension between Western dress and Filipino dress, the two representing opposing identities. In the American colonial period, men with political power wore the *Americana* (American jacket and suit or Western suit) and women wore Filipino national dress (the *terno* and the *pañuelo*). The Western jacket was the signature of a powerful colonizer, and Filipino men, by wearing the *Americana*, were linking themselves with the colonizers, while Filipino women, in *terno* and *pañuelo*, wore the attire of the colonized subject. In vestimentary code, men were identified as heirs of the colonizing powers — the future wielders of power in the emerging nation, while women were associated with the colonized nation’s meek and emasculated past. In contemporary times (since the 1950s, but more so since the 1970s), the reverse is true. Men wear the *Barong Tagalog* and women wear Western dress. Since Philippine independence, Filipino men wear the *Barong Tagalog* as a symbol of their proud, nationalist identity (Roces 2005).

A contrast between dress and undress was used by the women in the Cordillera. The nuns, on the other hand, used the contrast between traditional dress and modern dress — or religious dress versus civilian dress to advertise their moral power and to exude political legitimacy. The contrast or tension between men’s and women’s dress, between religious and civilian dress, between dress and undress becomes the visual marker denoting different citizenship positions — it is the visual contrast that women used as a semiotic for political change.

Interest in the politics of dress and citizenship is relatively new in world history. Wendy Parkins’ edited volume entitled *Fashioning the Body Politic* is a pioneering anthology which specifically addresses the links between dress and citizenship in world history (Parkins 2002a). Although in recent years there have been a growing number of studies on the politics of dress, scholarship on Western suffrage movements has not yet explored the links between the semiotics of dress and suffrage campaigns. (Lisa Tickner’s work on the spectacle of women does also discuss dress with relation to the costumes used by the suffragists in their pageants, in particular. See Tickner 1988.) The notable exception is Wendy Parkins’ work on British suffragettes. Parkins has explored how British suffragettes used colorful hats and dress to avoid arrest (Parkins 2002b: 97–124). Fashionable dress was part and parcel of the identity and performance of the suffragette, who took pains to dissociate herself from those anti-suffragists who chose to represent her as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘manly’, and at the same time made a deliberate attack on the middle-class belief that the female subject was ‘decorative but apoliti-
Fashion, according to Parkins was a form of agency because it ‘enabled and abetted their protest’ (ibid.). When suffragists were arrested for a window-smashing raid in 1912, the 49 detainees refused to give their names, thus compelling the constable to offer a detailed description of the offenders through their attire. Once in the police station, the 49 women exchanged clothes and hats, effectively preventing the constable from identifying them properly. In the end, the women escaped punishment (ibid.).

In the Southeast Asian context, studies on dress and gender have focused on gender and national dress and women have been designated as ‘bearers’ and ‘wearers’ of national tradition. The consequence of this cultural construction of the feminine was that, in sartorial code, men were associated with modernity and political power, while women, still marginalized from official power, were linked to the past (Taylor 1997: 91–126, Sekimoto 1997). The links between dress, gender and citizenship have yet to be explored in Southeast Asian history.

This chapter is a first step towards an exploration of the imbrication of women, dress and citizenship over a century. Politicians of all ilks and of both sexes have manipulated dress precisely because it is a very visible public marker declaring one’s allegiance, identity or political preferences. Yet, the study of the politics of dress has not yet been given much attention in the production of knowledge on politics in the Philippines, perhaps because dress was hardly seen to be part of hard core ‘politics.’ Since the Philippines has not had sumptuary laws, there was less interest in the study of the political use of dress. Instead, dress studies focused on the history of Philippine costume (Moreno 1995, de la Torre 1986, Enriquez, Lalic and Corpuz 1999, Bernal and Encanto 1992, Mingo 1949, Cruz 1982, Roces 1978), the ethnography of dress (Pastor-Roces 2000) or a history of clothing materials (Montinola 1991). But although women have been marginalized from official power, arguably during the entire twentieth century, they have consciously and consistently deployed the semiotics of dress as one of their strategies for negotiating political space. This chapter attempts to unpack women’s clothing in an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the history of women’s movements over a century.

The Suffragists

In the American colonial regime (1902–1946), while Filipino men campaigned for the independence of the Philippines from colonial rule and demanded the right to negotiate its future, women’s roles in that emerging nation were still contested. Filipino men could vote and run for office (as
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part of America’s policy of democratic tutelage for future self-government), but Filipino women could do neither. The American colonial power was keen to grant women suffrage in keeping with their democratic project, but it was Filipino men who were against the enfranchisement of women. Although both Filipino men and women were colonial subjects, the men had more citizenship rights because they could vote and run for office; the women were excluded. The suffragists faced two equally important dilemmas: Filipino women’s assumptions and desires that they be an important part of nation-building, and Filipino men’s reluctance to share that space. For men, supporting the nationalist project meant advocating immediate independence from America and working towards that goal. For women, supporting the nationalist project meant lobbying for a government that would disenfranchise them as women. Suffragists hoped to win the vote by convincing Filipino men through rational arguments and lobbying. In presenting their demands for citizenship rights, the suffragists literally ‘dressed up’ their radical agendas (which included reforming the Spanish Civil Code, a move more radical than votes for women) in traditional national dress. This strategy proved very effective.

When nations came to be imagined in Asia (Anderson 1991), the invention of national dress was part of the essential accoutrements of ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1988). This process of inventing national dress had gendered implications. In the Philippines, it was the women who were designated to be the bearers and wearers of ‘tradition,’ adorned in national costume. But paradoxically, symbolizing the nation in the vestimentary code did not necessarily imply that women were accorded equal citizenship rights with men in the emerging nation-state. This disenfranchisement was reflected in the very fact that they wore national dress at a time when the country was still carrying the stigma of colonial status.

But the project of nation-state formation also involved would-be nation-states claiming legitimacy by representing themselves as ‘modern.’ This ‘modernity,’ which included a Western-educated elite, could be visibly measured through the adoption of Western consumption and sumptuary practices. The tension between the need to cast aside ‘primal’ loyalties (Geertz 1963) in favour of ‘national traditions’ and the colonizer’s expectations that there be evidence of ‘modernity’ (read Westernization), was portrayed in vestimentary code. Here, men wore the markers of ‘modernity’ (Western attire), while women in ‘national dress’ embodied ‘national tradition.’ Thus, men in Western attire and women in ‘national dress’ – both sexes and both types of clothing – were important to the emerging nation’s
self-presentation as both nationalist and ‘modern’ (and therefore equal to the Western colonizers). Dress reflected the axis of power in both the local and global milieus, particularly in the colonial era. Since the Western nations (read colonizers) were the power wielders during colonial times, Western-style dress (especially the Western suit and, in the Philippines, the American jacket or Americana) became the symbol for the empowered, modern male. In Thailand, dress and clothing practices became central to the Thai monarchy’s agenda of projecting itself as distinctly ‘modern’ and therefore ‘equal’ to the West (Peleggi 2002: 45). King Chulalongkorn consciously presented ‘the Royal Self’ (a metaphor for the Siamese people), attired in Western dress and adopting the self-representation of the reigning monarchs of Europe at the time in paintings, photography and on coins (ibid.). During the American occupation of the Philippines (1902–1946), the Filipino male politician also refashioned himself sartorially in the American image, not only in order to appear ‘modern’ but also to show that he was an apt pupil in America’s democratic project. Filipino men were allowed to run for local and national office as part of America’s policy of democratic tutelage. By donning the Americana, Filipino male nationalist politicians presented themselves as being on a par with the American colonizers. The wearing of Americana could be read as the yardstick of the Filipino rejecting the status of colonized subject by adopting the dress of the colonizers.

The modern Filipino man became synonymous with the Sajonista (pro-American): English-speaking, university educated, professional and a politician. This modern Filipino was attired in Americana. Wives of politicians, on the other hand, always wore the terno and the pañuelo when accompanying their husbands to official functions and duties. In the American colonial period, men in Western suits certainly represented political power and modernity. Women in the terno and pañuelo, however, represented the disenfranchised, disempowered non-citizen. Filipino male politicians, by wearing the Americana, disassociated themselves from the colonized and claimed to be among the powerful. Women, on the other hand, wore the attire of the colonized subject (Figure 1.1).

The fact that suffragists and wives of politicians wore the terno and the pañuelo did not necessarily mean, however, that these women wholly accepted and internalized male representations of them. Suffragists (most of whom were involved in one way or another in women’s education) argued that the nineteenth-century Filipino dress was impractical for daily wear – for example as uniforms for high school or university students or as attire for the workplace. Encarnacion Alzona outlined the reasons why the Filipino dress should be discarded by women students:
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Going to school, rain or shine, has demonstrated the impracticability of the Filipino dress for daily wear and an active life, for its blouse, or what is called camisa, made of either piña or sinamay and heavily starched, cannot withstand exposure on rainy days. It becomes sticky and thus presents an ungodly sight, giving the wearer an uneasy feeling. The large, puffed sleeves of this blouse make it unfit and dangerous to wear inside laboratories with their gas jets or alcohol burners and rows of glass tubes. It was in fact the women students of the University of the Philippines who initiated in 1917 the wearing of the European dress for school purposes. Since then its use has spread to other schools, and now even women who have long left the schoolroom affect this dress. The popularization of outdoor sports, such as tennis and golf, has also compelled the Filipino women to affect a suitable costume. The gauzy, long-trained Filipino dress has now become, for a large number, a party dress for afternoon and evening wear. (Alzona 1934: 137–138)

Figure 1.1: President Manuel L. Quezon (second from left), and wife Mrs Aurora Quezon (third from right), welcome Vice-President Sergio Osmeña and Mrs. Osmeña at Malacañang Palace (1930s). From Nick Joaquin, Palacio de Malacañang, 200 Years of a Ruling House, (Manila: Society for the Preservation of Philippine Culture Inc., 2002), p. 193.
‘Modernization’ required the abandonment of traditional dress when performing ‘modern’ tasks. In her book, *My Ideal Filipino Girl*, Dr. Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon advocated the white uniform for school girls but recommended the Filipino costume for formal wear ‘because it is our own; it is more suitable to us than the European evening dress which one cannot wear without exposing arms, neck and sometimes the back’ (Mendoza-Guazon 1931: 31–32).

And yet, while advocating Western dress for the new modern woman, suffragists deliberately wore the *terno* and *pañuelo* to all official occasions – and often to the workplace. In fact, the *terno* became so closely identified with the suffragists that a Filipino scholar writing about them gave them the epithet ‘*pañuelo* activists’, because they all wore the distinctive *terno* and *pañuelo* (*pichu*) (Tirona 1996). A number of suffragists were also beauty queens (carnival queens of the Manila carnival held every year), and wore couturier-designed *ternos* and *pañuelos* at their coronation ceremonies. Postcard-type photographs of them in their national dress were printed and distributed as part of the souvenir paraphernalia of the Manila Carnival.

*The Woman’s Home Journal* (mouthpiece of the National Federation of Women’s Clubs, NFWC, which led the suffrage campaign) advocated the *terno* and *pañuelo* in the fashion pages (Western-style dress does not appear until 1936) and praised the ‘few’ Filipino women who wore the *Mestiza* dress (another term for *terno* and *pañuelo*) to work (*Woman’s Home Journal*, vol 8, no. 1, 1938: 10 and 51). One article named three NFWC women and Encarnacion Alzona as examples of ‘modern’ women who wore the *terno* to work. One of the NFWC women mentioned was Mrs Sofia de Veyra, a prominent clubwoman and president of the NFWC, who in 1931 won the Philippines Free Press reader’s contest for ‘The Woman in the Philippines I Would Most Like to Be and Why’ (ibid., and *Philippines Free Press*, April 1, 1931: 6). *The Woman’s Home Journal* reports that she always wore the *terno* in public. Other prominent NFWC women suffragists who always wore the *terno* for public occasions were: Trinidad Fernandez Legarda (unpublished History of the National Federation of Women’s Clubs: 11), Pilar Hidalgo Lim, Josefa Llanes Escoda, (Hernandez 1998: 22), Josefa Jara Martinez, Concepción Felix Calderon, and educator/suffragist Francisca Tirona Benitez. According to a short biography of Josefa Llanes Escoda while the young Josefa was in the United States ‘she made it a point to always wear the Filipino dress (Gwekoh 1952); a feature on her published in the Philippines Free Press in 1998 noted: ‘She always wore her attractive Filipino dress with butterfly sleeves wherever she went’ (Hernandez 1998: 22). The identifica-
tion of these women with the *terno* and *pañuelo* was such that caricatures of them depicted them in this attire (Figure 1.2).

The suffragists were the ‘modern,’ Americanized women of the time: English-speaking, university educated, professional women and clubwomen (the National Federation of Women’s Clubs). They were among the first women university graduates (women being allowed into universities only in 1908). These women demanded profound changes, including the reform of the Spanish Civil Code, a move more radical than giving women the vote. The campaign for the vote was revolutionary at a time when most Filipino men, including the majority of the delegates of the Constitutional Convention of 1934, were against it. I argue that the use of national dress was one feminist strategy for ‘repackaging’ the ‘modern’ Filipino woman in ‘traditional’ women’s narrative, playing to the men’s nostalgia for a romanticized ‘Filipino woman.’ Popular culture echoed this nostalgia for the ‘Filipina,’ who was shy, timid, beautiful and obedient. One of National Artist Fernando Amorsolo’s favourite subjects for his paintings in the 1920s and

*Figure 1.2: Suffragist Dr Encarnacion Alzona in a cartoon by Gat, for The Manila Chronicle* (no date), from the Encarnacion Alzona Papers, Ateneo Library of Women Writers (ALIWW), Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University.
1930s (and even beyond) was rural scenes featuring this *dalagang* (Tagalog: ‘maiden’) Filipina dressed in a traditional *balintawak* or *kimona* (variations of the national attire but less formal than the *terno*), shy, smiling, timid, posed against the backdrop of a never-changing romantic, rural landscape.

*Figure 1.3:* Amorsolo painting. From the collection of Alfredo and Irene Roces.
By the 1920s this ‘Filipina woman’ was disappearing (Roces 1975: 90 and 180, Roces 1978: 2612–2619). Amorsolo’s biographer, Alfredo Roces, argued that Amorsolo’s paintings, which were in the genre of the tourist’s vision of the Philippines, represented the Filipino’s nostalgia for a rural countryside which remained untouched and romantic (Roces 1978: 2612–2619). Amorsolo’s paintings essentialized, in visual art, the image of the Filipino woman that most Filipino men wanted to preserve. As the country experienced vast changes, some longed sentimentally for the imagined ‘unchanging’ countryside peopled by beautiful women in national dress, winnowing rice or carrying water jars. In the midst of change, women were still imagined as ‘traditional’ (Figure 1.3).

The very first women politicians also wore the *terno* and *pañuelo* in public. The performance of modern tasks while attired in traditional dress made a statement that women were still ‘traditional’, ‘nationalistic’ and ‘Filipino’. Women also wore this attire because they believed they were being nationalistic (personal communication, Dr Benito Legarda Jr, 2002; personal communication, Ms Eulalia Lim, 2002). Their choice to present themselves publicly as non-militant, non-aggressive women who still glorified motherhood and the ‘home’ and as beautiful women closely identified with civic work made their new demands for political power and equality in civil law seem less threatening. Lobbying for women’s equality seemed less ‘modern’ if the lobbyist was dressed in a *terno* and a *pañuelo*. In actual fact, the Filipino woman had come a long way. Filipino women began to enter universities in 1908. By 1919 they were founding their own women’s universities. Women also became professionals before they won the vote in 1937. Women were already doctors, lawyers, deans of faculties at universities, and businesswomen. Suffrage enabled them to enter the last frontier – politics.

But the suffragists’ decision to wear national dress had consequences for the history of women and the feminist movement. It conformed to the traditional cultural construction of woman as bearer and wearer of tradition, of woman as ‘beauty queen’, moral guardian, wife and mother. Although the suffragists themselves in real life were modern women who had gone beyond the domestic sphere, they did not openly challenge these traditional cultural constructions of the feminine. Suffragists’ use of dress mirrored their other strategies. While their women’s periodicals proclaimed that the home was women’s designated space, a close read of the articles they published revealed the subtle argument that while the home was where women reigned, women needed to venture outside the home to become
good wives and mothers (Roces 2004). In public, they did not confront existing constructions of the feminine, even though they lobbied for radical changes in women’s roles. This public face was, of course, best expressed in dress. But because traditional definitions of the feminine were not openly or publicly challenged, female power was still associated with the woman as beauty queen and the woman as moral guardian (Roces 1998). Women were still defined as ‘wife and mother’ (Eviota 1994: 53–81). Filipino ‘first-wave’ feminism had succeeded in giving women political power but not in radically altering nineteenth-century definitions of the feminine. It would be the militant nuns of the 1970s (ironically, also women as moral guardians) and the women’s organizations that in the midst of a political dictatorship would challenge these cultural constructions of the feminine. This time, nuns chose to use militancy in facing a macho military authoritarian regime. Perhaps because they were nuns, ambivalent women unattached to men (though ironically, still moral guardians), they were less afraid to confront the enduring gender narrative (Roces 1998: ch. 4).

**The Militant Nuns: In and Out of the Habit**

The pattern of dressing radical agendas in the guise of traditional dress proved to be a successful one, both for the suffragists and the next generation of feminists – the militant nuns. Second-wave feminism appeared in the Philippines in the late 1970s, and Catholic nuns and women’s organizations became the pioneers for this next phase of the women’s movement. But both the nuns and the women’s organizations started as activists against the Marcos dictatorship before they became bona fide feminists. Even so, not all the militant nuns or women’s organizations that emerged in opposition to the Marcos regime metamorphosed into second-wave feminists.

The militant nuns were very visible in the protest politics of the martial law era up to the 1986 revolution. The nuns were remarkable for their consistent and brave support for the victims of martial law; they supported all victims regardless of ideological position or religious and political beliefs, so long as they were victims of social injustice or violations of human rights. Nuns risked their lives and protected men and women – those who were victims of martial law, especially political detainees, labourers on strike (strikes were illegal during martial law) and members of minority ethnic groups threatened with loss of their ancestral lands. The president of the Task Force Detainees (TFD), the organization that documented and agitated for the release of political prisoners, was a nun (Sister Mariani Dimaranan). Another nun, Sister Sol Perpiñan, was founder, editor and writer of *IBON*.
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*Facts and Figures*, a newsletter that produced documentation on Philippine society, economy and politics, including the underground. First published in 1978, *IBON Facts and Figures* became the only accurate available published reportage on current events and issues in the Philippines. Scholars, journalists and academics, particularly from overseas, relied on *IBON* for their data on Philippine society and economy.

The nuns could exercise ‘moral power’ precisely because they were nuns – religious persons. A woman religious also conformed to the nineteenth-century cultural construction of the woman as moral guardian. The most visible symbol of the woman as moral guardian is the nun’s habit and wimple.

The reforms of the post-Vatican era included radical alterations to religious dress in the 1960s and 1970s. The majority of women in the non-cloistered orders were asked to exchange religious habits for secular fashions (Michelman 1999: 135). The habit was meant to obliterate individual identities because it prioritized the collective identity and commitment to the Roman Catholic Church (ibid.). In Susan Michelman’s study of a group of non-cloistered nuns who relinquished the habit in western Massachusetts, USA, the habit was viewed negatively because it communicated a social identity that inhibited their ability to express personal identities that would allow them to function more fully in secular environments. The habit clearly symbolized their total commitment to their order, but it was described by them as a form of social control in that it affected their ability to interact and communicate freely as individuals. As described by women in this study, the habit made them feel less than fully human (Michelman 1999: 135–136).

Exchanging the habit for secular dress was a positive experience for these women because it allowed them to interact ‘normally’ with other people, becoming thus more effective in providing service to the community (ibid.: 140–141). Furthermore: ‘they symbolically reclaimed their bodies as they discarded the habit’ (ibid.:141).

Filipino nuns were also asked to discard their habits so that they would blend more easily with the community and so that they would not be given special privileges such as seats on filled buses, for example (interview, Sister Gertrude Borres 2002). In the Philippines, the nuns’ habit gave the wearer special privileges because religious persons were highly respected. According to the nuns being interviewed, the habit rendered them some sort of ‘symbolic capital’ (interview, Sister Mary John Mananzan 2003). The Catholic Church in the Philippines has always been powerful precisely because it could provide legitimacy to political regimes. Until today, no
politician has dared to propose a divorce bill in the Senate or Congress because they fear the criticism of the Catholic Church.

The initiative to dispense with the habit and wimple raised interesting dilemmas for Filipino nuns at this particular time – a time when they were political activists against a repressive regime. In fact, the military was aware of the church’s resistance and its empathy with the victims of martial law. In the early years of martial law, the military raided convents and seminaries suspected of printing and publishing ‘subversive’ material and harbouring dissenters against the Marcos dictatorship. St. Joseph’s College, Our Lady of Angels Seminary, the Convent of the Oblate Sisters of Notre Dame, the Redemptorist monasteries in Davao and Tacloban and the Good Shepherd Sisters in Mantina, Davao, were also raided (Liberation, November 12, 1973: 12). On the orders of Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile, St. Joseph’s College was also raided because the military suspected that it was a centre for the distribution of underground newspapers (ibid.). Some nuns were arrested and detained (Sister Mariani Dimaranan was arrested and detained in Camp Crame for 15 days and Bicutan for 32 days). Ang Bayan (the ideological paper of the Communist Party of the Philippines, CPP) reported at least one case of a nun (pseudonym – Sister Jo) who escaped being burned to death by government militia sent to interrogate her (Ang Bayan, 28 February, 1978: 11).

Determined to continue their political activism and aware that they had some advantages over Marcos – their ‘moral power’ and credibility as defenders of social justice – the nuns chose to wear their habits as a ‘costume’ during demonstrations and rallies. Sister Gertrude Borres of the Religious of the Assumption reflected on how the habits made their protests more effective:

So that was the thing, in the 70s, members of the church we also went through a stage ... the church renewal after Vatican II and so one of the things was ‘Go Lay’ – meaning to say that the church was such a strong power so you should already try to be less visible in your thing, but mix with the people. Just dress the way they do so that when you take a bus, people will not offer you a chair, you know that kind of thing. But the thing was, at the same time that this was happening, on the other hand, when there were mass demonstrations, everyone was there in their full gear, seminarians in their sutanas [laughter], sisters in their habits [laughter], because then you had to be visible, you had to dress as religious. (interview, Sister Gertrude Borres 2002)

The nun's habit and wimple advertised the moral power, the legitimacy, of the wearer. Soldiers could be intimidated by a nun, just as a nun could
be frightened by a soldier in full battle gear. This did not mean that nuns escaped prosecution, but there was the general belief that the military would hesitate to harm a nun, because she symbolized religious legitimacy. Indeed, the habit proved to be a very useful attire for political activism. According to Sister Mariani, a priest once told her when she was president of the TFD: ‘Kung hindi ka madre na may belo, wala na ang TFD’ [If you were not a nun with a veil, the TFD would no longer be around] (interview, Sister Mariani Dimaranan 1995). Nuns confessed to smuggling documentation on the plight of political prisoners out under their habits when visiting the prisoners (ibid.). When a demonstration or strike took place, the nuns would link arms at the forefront, facing the military, in the hope that the military would hesitate to arrest or harm nuns. (There were cases, however, in which nuns were also arrested and imprisoned – and sometimes beaten. See Roces 1998: 123–137.) In demonstrations, when the police confronted the agitators, Sister Mary John Mananzan would liaison with policemen who, despite their initial intention to disperse the protesters, conceded to the nuns’ request for a space in the street, even giving them a few minutes to speak their piece (interview, Sister Mary John Mananzan 1995). In the events that culminated in the ‘snap election’ held in 1986, which led to the People Power 1 Revolution, the nun’s habit and the rosary were indispensable to the revolution. Nuns protected ballot boxes to ensure that they were not substituted for ‘fake’ ones by the military. Sister Josefina Magat of the Religious of the Assumption was one of the nuns who protected the ballot boxes in San Simon Pampanga. She recalled that in the precinct, two nuns were assigned to stay with the public school teachers and guard the ballot boxes. All at once, the military arrived and they heard one or two rounds being fired. The teachers suddenly ran to the nuns, asking for protection. When the first soldier entered the room, he recognized Sister Josefina as the nun who had reported a robbery some weeks earlier. Immediately, he apologized to her for the shots, using respectful Tagalog (Sorry, po, Sorry po) (interview, Sister Josefina Magat 2002). Then, although the soldiers intended to take the ballot boxes to the precinct, they allowed Sister Josefina Magat and her junior sister to hold the box and take it personally (escorted by them, of course) to the municipio (municipal level) (ibid.).

Because the habit and wimple were the only weapons the nuns possessed, military attempts to ‘disarm’ their rivals involved removing the veil or ‘undressing’ them. In one of the post-1983 anti-Marcos demonstrations, when the military broke up rallies with tear gas and water cannons, Sister Chit Valeria of the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVN) had the experience of
having her veil torn off her head by a heavy water cannon. When the burst from the water cannon removed both the crowd and her veil, she overheard one soldier cry out to her, as she bravely retrieved her soiled, soaked veil from the ground: ‘Napahiya ka ano?’ (You were embarrassed/shamed, right?). With a stubborn tilt of her chin, Sister Chit responded with dignity: ‘Hindi sagad!’ (Not nearly enough) (interview, Sister Chit Valeria 2003).

Different religious orders had different policies regarding the habit and wimple. Some, like the Good Shepherd nuns, gave the women religious the option whether or not to use the habit and wimple. The Maryknoll Sisters have not worn the habit and veil since the changes recommended by Vatican II. Maryknoll Sister Helen Graham, who was a prominent anti-Marcos activist, did not choose to return to the habit during martial law, even though she was aware of the habit’s symbolic capital (interview, Sister Helen Graham 2003). Nuns were acutely aware of the power of religious dress in the Philippines, and some religious orders and individual nuns have been flexible about the use of the habit and wimple. Sister Soledad Perpiñan, founder of the Third World Movement against the Exploitation of Women (TW-MAE-W) worked with prostitutes, organizing alternative employment for them. In this particular vocation, wearing the habit to the various bars where the prostitutes worked would only have elicited hostility from bar owners, who feared that the presence of a nun at a bar would ‘scare customers’. Thus, Sister Sol does not wear the habit when she visits the bars. But when she represents the TW-MAE-W in the Philippines and overseas, she wears the habit; sometimes with the veil, sometimes without (interview, Sister Soledad Perpiñan, 2003). Sister Mary John Mananzan, president of GABRIELA (the umbrella militant women’s organization) and a feminist nun who founded the first Women’s Studies Center in the Philippines, wears the habit when she is in the Philippines, but not when she is overseas. She confessed in an interview that it was more practical to travel in ‘civilian’ clothes because it was not possible to lie down in the departure lounge of an airport while wearing the habit and wimple. On the other hand, she was forthright in admitting that the habit was ‘symbolic capital’ in the Philippines, where religious persons are respected (interview, Sister Mary John Mananzan 2003). If she appeared on television criticizing the government, she wore her habit and wimple.

While the American nuns in Susan Michelman’s study found that the habit deprived them of their personal identities, thereby making it difficult for them to fulfill their secular duties, Filipino nuns during the martial law regime rediscovered the power of their collective identities as religious
people who wielded moral and legitimizing power. True, some of their credibility was due to their record of helping victims of social justice in their local areas. Moral legitimacy did not automatically accompany the wearing of religious dress. But at this historical juncture, it was important for the nuns to claim a collective identity with Catholic nuns all around the world. Hence, violence or persecution of one nun would represent violence against the entire community of nuns, or even against the Catholic Church. In this case, it was more strategic to subsume one’s personal identity. Even after the restoration of democratic institutions in 1986, Filipino nuns remain strategic about the habit, using it when they need to present the collective identity of the Catholic Church and discarding it when it becomes more effective in their vocation to assume personal identities as leaders in the women’s movement.

The nuns, however, were not only political activists; they were also among the first leaders (along with the women’s organizations) of second-wave feminism in the Philippines. As feminists, the nuns (unlike the suffragists) were instrumental in challenging the traditional cultural constructions of the feminine as beauty queen, wife and mother, introducing instead the woman as ‘militant activist’. Sister Mary John Mananzan, a pioneer in the new feminist movement of the 1970s, revealed in an interview that her critics accused her of being ‘mataray’ (militant). But according to her, the very nature of activist protest against injustice required militancy, because one cannot demonstrate in the streets by confronting soldiers with sweet smiles or sweet talk (interview with Sister Mary John Mananzan, 1994 and 1995). Challenging the traditional construction of woman required a new militancy learned during the period of political activism. This militancy was particularly effective when ‘packaged’ in a nun’s habit that evoked traditional definitions of the feminine as moral guardian. But the nun’s habit had more symbolic capital and moral power than the suffragist’s terno and pañuelo. Moral legitimacy combined with militancy enabled the nuns to challenge both dictatorship and patriarchy (both within the Philippine society and within the church).

After martial law, the women activists metamorphosed into feminists. GABRIELA (founded by Sister Mary John Mananzan) has, since the 1980s, been the umbrella organization for around 200 women’s organizations from all levels of society. It describes itself as a ‘militant’ women’s group and continues to fight for women’s issues in the national democratic feminist framework. In July 2003, it launched its own women’s party fielding candidates for the 2004 election. Many feminist nuns are active in GABRIELA and
other women’s organizations (many of them feminist) and NGOs. Feminist nuns are also involved in feminist education (women’s studies courses and women’s studies centres and research). While during the martial law years the militant nuns fought for the restoration of human rights for all men and women who were victims, after the restoration of democratic institutions in 1986, they focused on empowering women through education, feminist activism, lobbying for the rights of women victims of violence (prostitution, domestic violence, sexual harassment) and fighting against the contractualization of female labour.

**Cordillera Women Undress**

Traditional dress for the women of the Cordillera or the Philippine Highlands, consisted of a single piece of woven cloth worn like a sarong, wrapped around the waist and held together by a long narrow piece of woven cloth that functioned as a belt, leaving the breast bare. The rest of the body was accessorized with beads and feathers but the feet remained bare as well. Some women also wore short, waist-length, sleeveless blouses (made of the same colorful woven cloth as the sarongs). ‘Undress’, a traditional form of protest used by the Cordillera women, involved the removal of the sarongs. Although in the late twentieth century many women wore short blouses as part of their everyday attire, official accounts of women’s dress/undress during the martial law protests described the women as bare-breasted when discarding their sarongs (Cariño and Villanueva 1995).

Ethnic minority groups were particularly victimized by the martial law regime. The censored press made it difficult to inform the country of human rights abuses, and the authoritarian regime meant that the minorities could not resort to democratic representation in the legislature. President Marcos wanted to build a series of hydroelectric dams (Chico I, Chico II, Chico III and Chico IV) in the Chico River in the Cordillera highlands of the northern Philippines. The dams would deprive the mountain province groups, especially the Kalinga and the Bontok, of their ancestral lands. At first, villagers tore down the camps of the exploration teams and, with the help of Catholic priests, sent petitions to President Marcos (Hilhorst 2003). When the engineers and the military returned and rebuilt their camps, the Kalingas continued their protest by tearing down the camps and enduring relentless arrests and detentions. The protest galvanized the peoples of the Cordillera into making multilateral agreements with each other (traditionally, they had only made bilateral agreements), initiating the formation of the Kalinga–Bontok Peace Pact Holders. But the protests at this point (in
The conflict escalated when the military was called in to quell dissent, and activists were arrested, detained, tortured and ‘salvaged’ (killed). At this point, the New People’s Army, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines, formed a close alliance with the activists. When the protest became particularly heated, the women bared themselves, undressing in unison and marching militantly forward to push back the barriers erected by the developers. This was a traditional form of Kalinga protest used only as a last resort and only in extremely serious situations to drive away intruders. According to oral testimonies, the last time this had been used was back when the Spanish conquistadores arrived in Benguet in the sixteenth century, attracted by the gold mines of Benguet (interview, Vernie Yocogan-Diano, 2003). The Spanish colonizers in the Philippines were never really able to conquer the Cordillera.

The women’s use of undress as a protest strategy had the particular aim of shaming the engineers (and the military sent to protect them) into abandoning the Chico Dam project. The act of undressing was accompanied by civil disobedience, such as the dismantling and tearing down of the camps. The strategy itself proved to be successful. In the end, although Macliing Dulag was assassinated by the military in 1980, then Prime Minister Cesar Virata admitted that the dam would not be built because the people were against it (Igorota, vol. 8, no. 4: 17). Of course, it was not the undressing alone that explained the Cordillera victory, since it was accompanied by other forms of activism, such as petitions and lobbying as well as armed struggle involving the New People’s Army – the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines – and the student activists from the Cordillera who were detained with the Kalinga and Bontok activists in Tarlac (Hilhorst 2003: 38–40), plus barricades and civil disobedience, which included destroying the structures. But the effect of undress was similar to the symbolic capital of the nun’s habit. Just as the military may hesitate to harm or arrest a nun on the spot, the military did not arrest the naked women protesters (interview with Vernie Yocogan-Diano 2003). The military was perfectly able to arrest the women some time after the protest. But undressing had the dramatic effect, momentarily, of metaphorically disarming the army and the engineers. In this sense, the Cordillera women had succeeded in shaming their aggressors to the point of driving them...
away. Of course, this strategic form of protest would lose its impact if used too often. Since the Chico Dam protest, it has been used in the Maiinit village in the Bontoc Mountain Province against the Benguet Corporation (the biggest gold-mining company there), where women undressed to stop the surveyors (interview with Vernie Yocogan-Diano 2003; Resurreccion-Sayo 2004: 222–223).

The Cordillera ‘victory’ had an impact way beyond the specific protest against the Chico Dam because it has since inspired the women’s movement. The story of the Kalinga women’s undressing to shame the military is reproduced in a children’s book published by GABRIELA whose text was based on the oral testimonies of the Kalinga protesters themselves (Cariño and Villanueva 1995). Although this book to some extent mythologizes the women’s undress, interpreting it as the climax of the protest, it presents women protesters as heroes triumphing over male adversaries (ibid.). This is compatible with the new construction of ‘the Filipino woman’ as militant activist, a revolutionary feature in the history of feminism in the Philippines.

**Imelda Romualdez Marcos and the Terno**

When Ferdinand Marcos became president for the first time in 1965, it was his wife First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos who graced the cover of Life Magazine, wearing a terno. The former Rose of Tacloban and Miss Manila was a raven-haired beauty who, according to couturier J. Moreno, ‘carried the terno very well’ (interview with Jose Moreno 2002). The terno was her signature attire from the time of her campaign for the presidency (‘she wore ternos even for appearances on small, rickety, makeshift stages of rough wooden planks covered with nipa leaves’ [Navarro-Pedrosa 1969: 216]) until the last Philippine national television coverage of Marcos’s 1986 inauguration, taken just before the First Family boarded the helicopter that took them to their exile in the US. Even after the Marcos dictatorship was toppled in 1986 and the first family forced into exile in Hawaii, the cartoons lampooning them always showed the former first lady wearing a terno. By 1986, the terno became synonymous with Imelda Marcos in the same way a shoe fetish was associated with her name (referring to her vast collection of shoes).

Although in 1972 he launched an authoritarian regime with himself as president for life, President Marcos was keen to represent his actions and his leadership as legitimate not only within the geographical confines of the country but in the eyes of the world. Elections were held (though results
were ‘rigged’) and there was a legislative assembly. This preoccupation with legitimacy on the international stage was reflected in the first couple’s self-representation in fashion and appearances. They appropriated Filipino myths and legends, particularly the myth of Malakas and Maganda (literally ‘strong’ and ‘beautiful’, the first man and woman who emerged when a bamboo was split open). Commissioned portraits of President Marcos, for example, depicted him as the legendary Malakas emerging from the splitting of two bamboos, with Mrs Marcos as Maganda. Historian Vicente Rafael pointed out that the appropriation of the legend of Malakas and Maganda was ‘a departure from previous presidential self-representations’ (Rafael 2000: 124) because the couple imagined themselves as the ‘mother and father’ of the country (ibid.: 122). This self-representation, I surmise, was part of their legitimizing narrative, in which they wished to reinvent themselves as pro-Filipino, nationalist subjects. It was therefore necessary to trace their genealogy magically to the origins of Filipinos and to the mythical characters of the Philippine folklore. Mrs Marcos, for example, asked to be painted as an encantada, one of the enchanted fairies of the forest. Since these images were mythical, they were pure, heroic and everlasting.

These self-representations were also for international consumption. The Marcoses aspired for global prestige, since financing for the regime came from World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans as well as from ‘rent’ for the American bases in the Philippines. Marcos’s popularization of the Pierre Cardin tapered Barong Tagalog style sent the message that the Filipino dress style was also internationally stylish and could stand alongside the clothes touted by haute couture. When foreign dignitaries made official visits, gifts of the Barong Tagalog and terno were presented to them. While this practice did not originate with the Marcos regime, it was popularized at the time. Mrs Marcos threw herself into projects such as the Bagong Anyo, a series of fashion shows that showcased Filipino attire, especially the terno, reinvented by the prominent couturiers of the time. For example, Mrs Marcos entertained the IMF delegates in 1974 with a grand fashion show which showcased couturier-designed ternos and Barong Tagalogs and a folk dance extravaganza with the Bayanihan Philippine Dance Company. Just as the Barong Tagalog can appeal to the international fashion set, for example as an inspiration for Pierre Cardin’s designs, the terno was also sent overseas in fashion shows. The Philippine contribution to the Expo ’76 in Okinawa, Japan, was folk dancing performed by the Bayanihan Philippine Dance Company and a fashion show parading couturier Christian Espiritu’s designs for the terno and the Barong Tagalog.
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Mrs Marcos wore the *terno* because she wanted to present herself as a nationalist Filipino who was proud of her heritage. The need to tap into the traditional cultural construction of the feminine as ‘bearer of tradition,’ or ‘bearer of nation,’ was essential to her agenda of legitimizing her husband’s authoritarian regime as well as legitimizing her own access to power via her husband. It also presented an example of a woman’s attempt to use dress to maximize her power in a political space where men dominated the symbols of power. She was later able to access official power herself when she was appointed – by her husband of course – Governor of Metro-Manila and Minister of Human Settlements. Though not a feminist, she had succeeded in extending her unofficial power to its maximum potential and in gaining official power herself. But although she achieved this in the traditional way, through links with male politicians, she had inspired the later generation of women to explore the depths of unofficial power so that even politician’s mistresses later on were widely known to be the power behind the scenes (Roces 1998). Though power behind the scenes has been problematic for feminists, who focused on extending official political power to women on their own merits (as opposed to through the kinship group or their links with male politicians), Mrs Marcos has revealed the potential of unofficial power for women in the Philippine context, where power is held by the kinship group.

When Imelda Marcos was compelled to face trial in New York City after the fall of Marcos regime, she appeared in court, despite the New York weather, in a *terno*. This was a deliberate choice, made because she wanted to send the message that the United States was persecuting her country: ‘When I got indicted, I did not shout at the Americans for the injustice heaped upon me. I made a statement by wearing a *terno*, to say I am a Filipino. I could not wear the flag, so I used the *terno* to make my statement’ (*Philippine Graphic*, 15 October 1990: 7).

In her interpretation, the *terno* was the flag, and by wearing it she embodied the Philippine nation victimized by the powerful West. But this self-representation was not endorsed by local audiences, and after 1986, it was repudiated by international audiences as well. If clothing is a form of ‘text,’ then there can be several meanings attributed to it, these meanings often being different from the wearer’s agenda. Politicians may imbue a particular attire with particular meanings, but the public viewing the particular ensemble of clothing and accoutrements interprets the ‘text’ from its own ideological positions. For example, Emma Tarlo showed how Mahatma Gandhi wore the loincloth made of white *khadi* (coarse, homespun cloth).
to send the message that India’s poverty would be solved by spinning cloth by hand and thus obtaining freedom from British rule (Tarlo 1996: chapter 2). But for the Indian people the loincloth sent another message: that he was a holy man, a saint, an ascetic (Tarlo 1996: 78). Despite Imelda’s attempts to identify herself with the ‘national imaginary’ by wearing the terno, audiences associated the terno with her personality, giving her names such as ‘the iron butterfly’ in reference to the terno’s butterfly sleeves and her toughness. By the 1980s, the terno was metonymy for Imelda Marcos rather than a metaphor for the nation. When Mrs Marcos wanted to celebrate her

Figure 1.4: Painting of Mrs Marcos by Claudio Bravo, from Vicente L. Rafael, White Love and Other Events in Filipino History (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 144.
84th birthday in July 2003, couturier Jose ‘Pitoy’ Moreno suggested that Mrs Marcos have a terno theme requiring all guests to wear a terno (interview with J. Moreno, 2003). Up until 2003, seventeen years after Marcos fell from power, the terno was still very much a metonymy for Imelda (Figure 1.4).

**President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo or GMA**

Western dress became the choice for revolutionary clothing in the events that led to the ‘People Power revolution of 1986’. The ubiquitous yellow t-shirt became the visible symbol of the anti-Marcos opposition. Mrs Marcos’ close association with the terno more or less meant that Marcos’ successor President Corazon Aquino, the first female president of the country, would not want to wear something so closely symbolic of the previous regime. In fact, since the fall of Marcos, female politicians have been reluctant to wear the terno, although President Gloria Macapagal has worn it on rare occasions such as the State of the Nation address (SONA), at which politicians are expected to appear in traditional Filipino attire.

With the ousting of President Joseph Estrada by People Power II in January 2001, the Philippines got its second female president. When Macapagal-Arroyo ran for senator in 1995, her campaign posters displayed an enticing photograph of her, bare shoulders exposed in a cover girl pose (emphasizing beauty and all its links with virtuous female power). In the 1998 vice-presidential campaign, on the other hand, the posters presented her dressed in a rustic farmer’s attire, complete with straw hat, clutching a bunch of newly-harvested rice stalks. When she became president, she revealed bewilderingly contradictory personas of toughness, firm rule, no-nonsense business-like (or professional technocratic) behaviour, interlaced on other occasions by softer, gentler and more conciliatory postures, thus leading one observant journalist to regard all these reinventions as ‘packaging Gloria’ (*Business World*, 21 June 2001).

At the start of her administration, Macapagal-Arroyo put on a tough, uncompromising stance: Estrada was arrested and jailed; the rebels of EDSA III, including their leaders, who were powerful, pro-Estrada senators, were warned: ‘I will crush you.’ (EDSA III – pronounced EDSA Tres – was a very large protest rally that was sparked by the arrest in April 2001 of newly-deposed President Joseph Estrada. The rally was held for several days on a major highway in Metro Manila, the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue or EDSA. This eventually turned into a march to Mendiola Street in Manila, which is near the Malacanang presidential palace). Officially declaring the nation in a state of rebellion, Macapagal-Arroyo initiated moves to prosecute those she regarded as ‘plotters’.
While her predecessors gave themselves voter-friendly public tags (President Ramos was fondly known as ‘Eddie’ and President Estrada was affectionately called ‘Erap’ for Pare or Buddy), President Macapagal-Arroyo chose to be known as ‘GMA’, reflecting her ‘businesslike’, efficient image in contrast to Estrada’s inefficiency and incompetence in government. She negotiated with the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) and stood up to the sexist fundamentalist Muslim separatist group, the Abu Sayyaf, which had kidnapped hostages, beheading some of them. She succeeded in winning the support of the military. She readily made capital of her credentials as an economist, politically aware that in the midst of the economic crisis, a technocrat seemed to be what the country needed most of all. In keeping with this no-nonsense image, Gloria announced that her husband, Mike Arroyo, would perform the charity work expected of all previous First Ladies. Thus, she challenged the gendering of politics – for the first time a husband is required to be involved in the civic duties that traditionally had been expected of the wife of a politician; a duty which most husbands of female politicians shunned, including Mike Arroyo himself when Macapagal-Arroyo was senator (Far Eastern Economic Review, June 14, 2001: 20).

Despite this, however, Arroyo has not hesitated to shift from a rigid, strong position to a conciliatory, gentle, soft stance. She paid personal visits to Estrada twice in his prison, hinting that ‘she wouldn’t block his demand to be detained under house arrest in his Manila mansion’ (Far Eastern Economic Review, June 7, 2001: 22). Although during the state of rebellion she had quickly ordered the arrest of alleged ‘plotters’ Gregorio Honasan and Juan Ponce Enrile, once Honasan and Panfilo Lacson won Senate seats, she announced that she was prepared to be ‘flexible’ on the charge of rebellion (ibid.).

Gloria’s new ‘package’ also came with a new nickname. When the poor stormed Malacañang during EDSA III, the state of rebellion, the middle class finally woke up to the plight of the poor and applied pressure on Arroyo to show sympathy for the poor. Being the president of the poor meant reinventing herself – instead of ‘GMA’ she was now ‘Ate Glo’ (big sister Glo).

When President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took her oath of office in 2001, she wore a Western suit (Figure 1.5). It was not simply a matter of rejecting the terno so closely associated with Mrs Marcos. There were other types of national dress – the kimona, for example. The choice of a suit is crucial because she wanted to present herself as ‘GMA’, the efficient professional woman with a doctorate in economics. President Arroyo chose Western dress over Filipino dress because she wanted to represent all that was considered
efficient and professional – in contrast to the ineptitude and inefficiency of her predecessor, President Joseph Estrada. A no-nonsense image was more compatible with Western dress. Women have to wear Western dress because they still have to fight to be taken seriously as valid contenders in the power game. While men could already bask in their political power, women, marginalized from official power (in 2004, the average proportion of women in key elected posts was 17 per cent, a slight increase after almost a decade from 12 per cent in 1995, see Factsheet NCRFW), still had to show that they were qualified, efficient, educated, modern and professional. In this case, Western dress delivered that message of professionalism much more effectively than national dress. It also revealed a rejection of the construction of woman as ‘bearer of tradition’.

Figure 1.5: President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo takes her oath of office as president in January 2001. From Nick Joaquin, Palacio de Malacañang, 200 Years of a Ruling House, (Manila: Society for the Preservation of Philippine Culture Inc., 2002), p. 344.
However, since women’s dress is also a response to men’s dress – the ‘other’ from which it defined itself, it is interesting that since the 1970s men have become the ‘bearers of tradition’. The Barong Tagalog is ubiquitous in the Philippines and most Filipinos own several types of Barong Tagalogs. On the other hand, the terno has been relegated to the position of a costume for special occasions requiring traditional dress. The fact that the Philippines is now an independent country with a self-conscious identity means that men can now proudly wear a Barong Tagalog and feel themselves to be on a par with the modern nations of the world. In fact, when President George W. Bush visited the Philippines in October 2003, he was expected to wear a Barong Tagalog at the formal dinner (Philippine Daily Inquirer, October 17, 2003). Former US President Bill Clinton wore a Barong Tagalog when he attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Subic in 1996 (ibid.). It is indeed an APEC tradition that the leaders attending the summit wear the national costume of the host country. National dress in Asia is now to be proudly worn at these important meetings where Presidents of powerful Western countries don the national dress. This is an interesting reversal of the colonial period, when colonized Asian peoples wore Western dress in order to appear equal to their colonizers.

Because the history of post-independence Philippines is fraught with corruption and kinship politics, politicians are keen to represent themselves as Filipino heroes who will save the country from deterioration and chaos. The wearing of national dress is an attempt to make that claim. Hence, that men rather than women are the bearers and wearers of ‘nation’ further marginalizes women from becoming national icons. Precisely because dress can express a multitude of codes, the battle over ‘national dress’ or Filipino dress becomes more than a struggle to alter appearances.

**Conclusion**

In the twentieth century, men and women’s positioning as citizens of the nation-state was very much reflected in dress and undress. In the colonial era, men in Western suits represented political power and modernity, while women in national dress were the disenfranchised, unable to vote or exercise official political power as politicians. But since the 1970s, it is men who wear the national dress and as bearers of tradition dominate the political scene, comprising almost 90 per cent of the group of politicians. Women politicians feel obliged to wear Western dress in order to be seen as professional and efficient.

Dress and undress formed part of women’s strategies in improving their political positions. The Cordillera women used undress to gain the right to
express their democratic rights in the midst of an authoritarian dictatorship and militant nuns used moral power and the habit and wimple to negotiate for human rights during martial law. But the contrast between Filipino and Western dress, dress and undress, modern and traditional reveals men and women contesting their citizenship positions in various types of regimes from colonial to democratic to authoritarian. Opposition to a regime meant expressing opposing identities, best expressed visually in distinct forms of dress or undress. Women’s agendas for claiming citizenship rights were visibly expressed in dress that contrasted their rivals’ (men’s) dress. The perception that woman as ‘bearer and wearer of national tradition’ locates woman firmly in the past and denies her agency requires painstaking dismantling. Women were proactive in using dress to express their protest and to pursue radical agendas. Women did not merely accept their positions as partial citizens in the colonial, authoritarian and even democratic regimes. For many of these women, the use of national dress, Western dress, dress and undress, were part of a strategy for negotiating citizenship whether or not they were part of the feminist/women’s movement.

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Notes

1 EDSA III is a nickname for People Power 3. EDSA 1 was the 1986 people power revolution that overthrew President Ferdinand Marcos. People Power 2, or EDSA II, was the revolution that ousted president Joseph Estrada in 2001 and People Power 3, or EDSA III, refers to the attempt of Estrada supporters to oust President Gloria Macapagal. This attempt was unsuccessful.

2 These men were allegedly behind the coup against GMA. Gregorio Honasan was senator of the Philippines elected in 1995 and reelected in 2001. He ended his term in 2004. Juan Ponce Enrile, senator of the Philippines, was a leader in the 1986 People Power Movement that drove President Ferdinand Marcos from power. Panfilo Lacson is a retired Director-General of the Philippine National Police and currently a member of the Philippine Senate.

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CHAPTER TWO

Community-Based Movements of Japanese Women: How Mothers Infiltrate the Political Sphere from Below

MIKIKO ETO

The language of 'mother' has drawn Japanese women into social movements in large numbers. Referring to Nancy Naples's work on the community activism of American women whose bases ‘often lie in women’s position in the gender division of labour’, Connell (2002: 140) argues that ‘gender politics may occur, and generate some of this energy, without a gender-or-sexuality-based movement’. Indeed, the case studies in Naples’s book, which are about issues as diverse as schooling, toxic waste, poverty, domestic violence, racism and immigration, show how politically powerless women develop social networks which are useful for their political resources and how they create political activities in local communities through their gendered roles (Naples 1998). Connell and Naples suggest that there is another type of women’s movement, different from typical feminist activism. Indeed, the incentive of many Japanese women to get involved in collective activities is their awareness of the serious problems which threaten their children’s lives and futures. A strong sense of motherhood sometimes enables these women to engage in militant campaigns, and the key to their success in campaigns lies in the appeal of the maternal role they play. Activists of such groups do not see themselves as ‘feminists’, and they are sometimes even guided by male leadership. Their motive for collective activities is neither to challenge male domination nor to enhance women’s status in society.
The non-feminist women’s organizations in Japan are often formed in communities; their members live together in the same community, they are often aware of problems which motivate them to act through everyday life in their community, and the resources for their solutions come out of their community activities. Sometimes, they develop larger organizations extended to several regions and their campaigns exercise influence on the wider society. Although these are ‘ordinary women’, not professionals or socially influential figures, and their names are unknown outside their community, they take the initiative in response to problems encountered in their everyday lives and they share equal responsibility for campaigns. They pay attention to such everyday issues as food safety, river purification, recycling, anti-nuclear power stations, and care for disabled elderly people. They are similar to the American community activists of Naples’s book in their subjects and political style. But unlike their American counterparts, who are working-class or ethnic minorities, they are non-employed married women from middle-class households, and the impetus for their collective activities is not socio-economic discrimination caused by class and race, but concerns derived from their gendered roles as mothers.

Tarrow defines social movements as the ‘sequence of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames’ (1998: 2). Following his definition, I identify the ‘movement’ of non-feminist women in Japan as a series of collective activities in which individuals are voluntarily engaged and which aim to change the status quo based on their beliefs in opposition to the authorities. The non-feminist women’s organizations in Japan challenge the established power holders in existing institutions and the policies in society and politics, putting forward their alternatives. Their collective activities, therefore, can be regarded as social movement activities. At the same time, however, the basis for their activities is their community. Thus, I define such collective activities as ‘community-based movements’. In this chapter, I shall focus on the scope and limits of a movement of this kind. My purpose is to examine the impact of its political activities at the grassroots level, which is a key characteristic of this movement that makes it widely known in society. First of all, I shall examine the background behind the growth of the community-based movement of non-feminist women in Japan. Next, in citing a case study of a leading group in such a movement, I attempt to illustrate why female community-based activists became involved in politics, how they developed political campaigns and to what extent they succeeded in making local politics more oriented towards improving their everyday lives. The case
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study is based on interviews conducted by the author with the core members of the Life Club Cooperative Society both in Tokyo and in Kanagawa between July 1996 and August 1999. I have also drawn on the bulletins and newsletters produced by the two groups.

Before proceeding further, it is helpful here to compare briefly the feminist movement and the community-based women’s movement in Japan. Two waves of feminist movements have emerged in Japan. The first wave can be referred to as the suffrage movement in the early 1930s (see Mackie 1997: 132–1432; Kodama 1981: 186–190). The women’s liberation movement emerged with the first meeting of the women’s liberation group in October 1970 (Ueno 2002: 154). The feminist movement has struggled for women’s genuine emancipation in society as well as for the enhancement of women’s rights (see Kodosuru-kai Kirokushu Henshu-iinkai, 1999). But its scale of mobilization and social impact have been less than those not only of its Western counterparts (e.g. Chafetz and Dworkin 1986: 163–169) but also the non-feminist women’s groups in Japan. In fact, the Japanese feminist movement has not attracted many women, its organizations are usually composed of a small number of members (see Burkley 1997: 343–357), and its activities have hardly had any influence outside feminist circles (Ehara 1990: 8–8; Hagiwara 1997: 312). By contrast, the non-feminist women’s movement based in the community has flourished in Japanese society and its organizations often mobilize large numbers of Japanese women. In recent years, their activities have become a significant factor in Japanese society and politics (Tanaka 1998: 112; EPA 1997: 6).

Why have Japanese women been attracted by a reformist movement largely oblivious to gender issues rather than by the feminist movement? The analyses of Chafetz and Dworkin (1986), in which they investigate the reasons for coincidental upheaval of feminist movements worldwide, are instructive here. They regard industrialization, urbanization and women’s attainment of higher education as important factors facilitating women’s participation in social movements. They also highlight the correlation between the increase in the number of married, full-time working women and the increase in the mass mobilization of women by the feminist movement, because these women obviously become aware of inequality both in the workplace and at home through comparison with their male colleagues and husbands. Chafetz and Dworkin’s account of what spurs feminist mobilization could help us to partly explain the reason for the unpopularity of feminism among Japanese women. On the one hand, since the mid-1960s, Japanese society has become rapidly urbanized, with a rise in the number
of middle-class households, and a notable increase in women’s educational attainment. On the other hand, in the 1970s when the women’s liberation movement appeared in Japan, women’s labour market participation in Japan (especially those with full-time jobs) lagged far behind that of women in Western countries. Thus, Japanese women were scarcely conscious of the unfairness of the gender division of labour (Mikanagi 1999: 69). At the same time, however, we should also note a cultural tradition surrounding Japanese women, namely the ideology of motherhood, which has profoundly influenced Japanese women’s consciousness and attitudes.

As contemporary feminists often reject ‘motherhood and maternalism as incompatible with female emancipation’ (Koven and Michel 1993: 3), it is not surprising in Japan that the ‘non-feminist’ activists became a target for feminists’ attack because of their maternal attitudes: Japanese feminists asserted that their political approach did not lead to the liberation of women from oppression and that it might confine the women’s political world to ‘small politics’, thus limited only to everyday life. Such feminist criticism stimulated the non-feminist women’s awareness of gender issues. More importantly, the result of their activities is to contribute not only to improving women’s circumstances but also to changing male-dominated politics. In the final section of this chapter, I shall discuss the dispute and dialogue between feminists and community-based activists over women’s political activities. I shall conclude by suggesting that the community-based political activities have revived stagnating Japanese politics and strengthened Japanese democracy from below.

**Mobilizing Women at the Grassroots Level**

The origin of the non-feminist movement at the grassroots level is a pre-war patriotic group known as the Patriotic Women’s Association (*aikoku fujinkai*). This was set up by a middle-class woman, Ioko Okumura, in 1901 so that women could contribute to Imperial Japan’s various war efforts in their capacity as the wives and mothers of soldiers (Garon 1993: 15). The group rapidly grew to become the largest women’s organization in pre-war Japan (Mackie 1997: 57). The militaristic regime not only encouraged many women to answer the patriotic appeal, but the group also touched on a common concern of women about the fate of their husbands or sons on the battlefield.

The grassroots women’s groups, responding to immediate contemporary social problems, began with fellow members in neighbourhood communities, and they often started their activities with a small number of members. In time, however, some of them grew into large-scale organizations, devel-
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opining into inter-regional or nationwide organizations. In October 1945, for example, immediately after the end of the Second World War, 15 housewives in a small village in the Kansai region who were dissatisfied with the shortage of rice held a demonstration to demand an increase in the rice supply. They succeeded in meeting with an official from the General Headquarters of the Allied Occupation Force (GHQ), which was responsible for food rationing in their village. In response to their direct action, the authority improved the rice rationing system. Out of the struggle over the rice supply, a regional consumer movement called the Kansai Housewives Union (kansai shufu rengo kai) came into being (Nomura 1979: 15–19). When a Japanese fishing boat was exposed to radiation from the thermonuclear test on Bikini atoll in 1954, a group of housewives in Suginami, a town that is now a ward in the centre of Tokyo, promptly started collecting signatures against atomic and hydrogen bombs (Matsushita 1970: 153). Their campaign came out of the desire of mothers that their children should never have to experience anything similar to the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The movement soon spread throughout the country, and developed into the nationwide nuclear disarmament movement. From the 1960s to the early 1970s, the Japanese government launched a heavy-handed program of development in several rural regions, which included the construction of an international airport in Narita outside Tokyo and a base of the Self-Defense Forces in Kitafuji near Mount Fuji. In such regions, protest movements by residents sprang up, and many women got involved in the movement, if only in support of their husbands. Yet, female residents gradually developed their own skills in combating the established authority, and they organized female-only groups (AMPO 1996: 27).

In the mid-1960s, food containing artificial additives was beginning to be the norm. A group of mothers who had been anxious about food safety in Tokyo set up a cooperative society called the Life Club Cooperative Society in Tokyo (henceforth, Tokyo Club), which aimed to purchase non/low-additive food at reasonable prices in cooperation with neighbours. The Tokyo Club introduced an original purchasing system that trades directly with the producers of organic vegetables and low/non-chemically processed foods. This kind of organization became widespread in other regions. The Life Club Cooperative Society (henceforth, the Life Club) organizations are already established in 15 of 47 prefectures, numbering approximately 250,000 members in total. The group sends more than 100 members as its own representatives to local assemblies. I shall return to the political activities of these assemblies later. Although the women's consumer groups
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had existed before the Tokyo Club was established, the Life Club movement is distinct from any other consumer movement in the much greater degree of importance that its members attach to social reform and political involvement (Sato 1994: 109).

In the late 1980s, anti-nuclear power movements appeared throughout Japan. Many campaign groups against nuclear power stations were set up by mothers’ circles who had originally engaged in reading, childcare, charity and community activities. According to Hasegawa (1991: 47–48), women have led the recent Japanese anti-nuclear power movement. The number of female anti-nuclear power groups has been rising since 1987, particularly in urban areas, and these women were inspired by the nuclear power disaster at Chernobyl in 1984. The anti-nuclear power movement not only mobilized many mothers, but it also managed to collect four million signatures for its petition to dismantle the nuclear power stations (ibid.: 54). As with other female community-based movements, mothers’ anxiety about the fatal effect of nuclear power on their children provoked them into direct action (Sakurai 1990: 138).

The non-feminist women involved in social movements are typically non-employed, middle-aged married women; they are mostly from middle-class households, have a high level of education and a serious interest in social problems. They see the concerns that arise from their everyday lives as political issues, and join up with fellow women to campaign for changes in their spare time. Although women themselves are still regarded as ‘second-class’ citizens in Japanese society, the status of ‘mother’ is valued for its self-sacrifice and altruism, and as a result, it legitimizes women’s involvement in social movements (Hasegawa 1991: 52). The role of ‘mother’ not only motivates women to undertake collective activities, but the concept of motherhood is also essential to the female community-based activists’ thinking. The non-feminist movement at the grassroots level is the largest component of the Japanese women’s movement in terms of both their mass mobilization and the effectiveness of their activities.

Why ‘Ordinary’ Women Became Politicized

The Life Club movement, above all, is a typical example of women’s collective activities at the grassroots. Each Life Club organization acts independently, yet they share the same ambitions and they often discuss things together. Initially, they were engaged exclusively in the cooperative purchasing enterprise. However, after the purchasing activities had got well under way, their interest in social problems increased. They then began to campaign for a
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variety of causes, such as the protection of rivers against pollution by foul water, reduction of rubbish and the care of the disabled elderly. They also presented demands to local authorities for local referenda on city planning. Moreover, nine Life Club organizations send their own representatives to local assemblies.

The most outstanding political successes have been achieved by the Tokyo Club (55,000 members as of 2000) and the Life Club Co-operative Society in Kanagawa (henceforth, Kanagawa Club, 43,300 members as of 2000). While the Tokyo Club had six prefectural assembly members and 57 municipal assembly members, the Kanagawa Club had three prefectural assembly members and 33 municipal assembly members as of March 2004. The two groups also engaged in a series of remarkable campaigns on social issues. The former concentrated its campaigns on environmental conservation, and in so doing set a pioneering environmental movement in motion. The latter, long before the general public had become aware of this issue, pressed for improvements in the quality of welfare services for the elderly and set up its own enterprise to provide high quality welfare services. In these respects, the two groups are the flagships of the Life Club movement and serve as a model for the movement. Focusing on these two groups, I shall analyse why non-working married women from middle-class households became politicized.

The Life Club organizations operate on two levels, the large municipality level and the smaller neighbourhood level. The members base their activities primarily in the neighbourhood branch, which consists of up to twenty women who live in the same area. Each neighbourhood branch regularly holds a meeting to discuss the problems that arise from its everyday activities and the particular subjects in which its members are interested. The municipal branches consult all the neighbourhood branches before putting forward proposals for the Life Club’s courses of action. The proposals of each municipal branch are then passed on to the group’s headquarters to be included in the draft of the annual action plan. The annual action plan is finally decided upon with the consent of the members attending the annual general meeting.

It was a policy of the Life Club that all the members should be involved in the planning of the activities and in how the plans are carried out. However, as the organization became larger, their activities also became increasingly specialized, and it became more and more difficult for all the members to be equally involved in every initiative. Individual members came to be more committed to specialized activities such as welfare service enterprises, recyc-
ling and political campaigning. As a result, several project groups, distinct from the neighbourhood and municipal branches, were established to deal with these specific issues. All members belong to two branch organizations, but only some members are involved in the project groups.

What catalysed the formation of the Japanese women’s liberation groups in the anti-establishment social movement of the 1960s, the so-called New Left, was a sense of rage among female activists at the patriarchal behaviour of their male comrades, who, despite their advocacy of freedom and emancipation, treated their female comrades like their wives and mothers (Kanai 1990: 56). The Life Club movement, by contrast, won the sympathy and support of some of the male activists who had been in the vanguard of those left-wing social movements of the mid-1950s that had risen in opposition to Japanese remilitarization. These left-wing activists abandoned their efforts in the mid-1960s, because the more ideological social movements had lost their impetus by this time, as Japan enjoyed a high level of economic growth and people attended less to big political issues. The mothers of Setagaya Ward, who wanted to set up a cooperative purchasing enterprise, came into contact with left-wing activists who were seeking a new field of activity (Ito 1995: 226–228). The male activists were skilful organizers and helped to create the first cooperative society – the Tokyo Club – which was founded in 1968. The mothers in Kanagawa Prefecture, near Tokyo, soon followed Tokyo’s example, and in 1971 the Kanagawa Club was set up – also with the assistance of male, left-wing activists.

Although it was the women who had initiated the movement, real power over the organizations fell into the hands of the male left-wing activists (Sato 1995: 166). These women lacked any experience in organizing and had no way of maintaining a cooperative without drawing on the expertise that the male activists had built up over years of campaigning in the left-wing movements. For several years after the establishment of the organizations, the Life Club movement was effectively run by a handful of male activists who worked for it full-time and received a salary from the organizations. However, the female members gradually became more experienced and began to acquire a greater level of expertise about how to run the projects and organize campaigns, whereas the left-wing male activists, who were aging, began to withdraw from direct involvement in the movement, handing over the authority to the women. The women’s commitment to local politics and subsequent feminist criticism of their political activities, moreover, might also have encouraged them towards their independence. Approximately 20 years after the movement’s foundation, the women came to take responsi-
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bility for all the activities of their organizations (Ito 1995: 233–243). They regained real power over their movement.

The circumstances under which the Life Club began to get their representatives elected to local assemblies can be explained in a similar way. What first spurred the Life Club to fight a local election campaign was a proposition that the first chairperson of the Tokyo Club, Kunio Iwane, a male activist, put forward in the March 1977 issue of the Club’s newsletter (Tokyo Seikatsu-sha Netto Waku 1998: 5). At that time, ten members of the Diet (Japanese parliament), who were discontented with the domination in Japanese politics by a small number of ‘professional’ politicians who ignored the demands and expectations of the public, founded two new parties under the slogan of taking politics back to the people and away from the ‘professional’ politicians. Iwane sympathized with the new parties’ manifestos and therefore proposed that the Life Club should send its own representatives to local assemblies. He saw this as a way of strengthening the foundations of democratic politics, something he believed was not solely the task of the established political elite, but in which he believed ordinary citizens should take an active part (Watanabe 1995: 179).

Iwane’s proposal soon came to be widely discussed by members of both neighbourhood and municipal branches of the Tokyo Club. The members who had been involved in the campaign for social reform ten years before were expected by Iwane to be ready for active participation in politics. He urged them to do so, but few members sympathized with his arguments (Watanabe 1995: 179–180). Nevertheless, in April 1977, a general meeting did approve his proposal, and the leader of Nerima Branch, Masae Tsuchiya, stood for election to the Tokyo metropolitan assembly in July. Due to a lack of enthusiasm for her campaign among members and the weaknesses of the campaign strategies, the Tokyo Club’s first candidate failed to be elected. Since many members did not understand why they needed to send their own representatives to assemblies, still believing that politics was not their business, it was not surprising that she was defeated. However, when the members realized that they needed to participate in local politics and that their livelihood would not improve unless they themselves stood up for their demands, they began to make more committed efforts in elections, and soon became successful.

What made them politically conscious? Iwane’s proposal might have been an important stimulus: in the Nerima Branch, three months after Tsuchiya’s defeat, some members, who had been directly involved in her campaign and had been shocked by her defeat, set up a project group to
investigate how ordinary citizens could win more access to politics (Tokyo Seikatsusha Netto Waku 1998: 26). However, the primary cause was the realization that their social reform activities were severely limited by their lack of contact with policymakers. An example of how damaging this absence of communication could be can be seen by looking at proposals for safer and more environmentally friendly forms of public policies. When the Machida Branch in Tokyo urged the Machida municipal assembly to ban artificial food additives from school lunches and submitted a petition with 17,207 signatures, the assembly made no serious efforts to discuss it. Similarly, when the Hoya Branch in Tokyo submitted a petition with 5,500 signatures to the Hoya municipal assembly for the introduction of a system of waste disposal where different types of rubbish would be separated for recycling, the assembly rejected the petition after stalling it for a year and half (Watanabe 1995: 183). In order to purify rivers, seven branches of the Kanagawa Club each presented a proposal for a reduction in the use of synthetic detergents to the relevant municipal assemblies. Despite managing to collect an impressive total of 220,000 signatures, the Kanagawa Club’s proposal was rejected by all seven assemblies. Those members of the Kanagawa Club who listened to the assembly debates were disappointed that most of the assembly members did not appear to understand their proposal at all (Kanagawa Netto Waku Undo 1998: 8).

Their awareness was raised by their sense of outrage that ‘the assembly members, whose job it was to represent citizens, had completely ignored the demands of so many citizens’ (Tokyo Seikatsusha Netto Waku 1998: 28). They strongly believed that the assemblies needed to have representatives who would work, not for the interests of small lobbies in successive bids for re-election, but to serve the needs of the wider majority (Kanagawa 1998: 8). They concluded that they themselves would be suitable representatives of these citizens because their daily activities in the Life Club made them familiar with the average citizen’s everyday life; thus, they could express wider public demands in the assemblies. The first victory of the Life Club came in 1979, when Reiko Katano was elected to the Nerima Ward assembly in Tokyo. Her success encouraged other Life Club members to become more involved in local elections, and these members, following Nerima’s example, organized project groups in each branch. In 1983, Etsuko Terada of the Kanagawa Club was elected to the Kawasaki municipal assembly. Since then, the Life Club has increased its seats in local assemblies.

Most of the members committed to the election campaigns were either not employed, having left work because of marriage or motherhood,
while some of them were employed in part-time jobs on very low wages. They were supported financially by their husbands, whose incomes were higher than average (Kunihiro 1993: 233). They had often regretted giving up their full-time jobs, thus they sought out activities to restore their self-respect (Watanabe 1995: 197). The political field provided them with a sphere in which they could acquire an individual status distinct from their accustomed role as wives and mothers. The satisfaction that they gained from these activities was the reward for their unpaid labour. Indeed, they found the experience of the election campaigns enjoyable, because ‘it resembled the social circles of their college years and it was much more interesting than housework’ (Kunihiro 1993: 232). When they got involved in the election campaigns, they determined to cope with both housework and political activities. They promised that they should never neglect their roles as mothers and wives, even though they were busy with their political activities. Their husbands accepted their outside activities insofar as the women fulfilled their housework duties. Some of the women who were heavily committed to political activities faced conflicts with their husbands. Yet, these women finally won their husbands’ agreement to their activities, because they gradually understood that their wives were engaged in something meaningful (Sato et al. 1995: 71–155).

The Scope of Grassroots Politics

A municipally-based group called the ‘Network’ played a leading role in the Life Club’s local election campaigns. The Network was, in a sense, a women’s task force that not only intended to organize the election campaigns, but whose members also aspired to becoming local politicians themselves. Thirty-four Network groups in the Tokyo Club, with a total membership of 2,500, had been set up as of 2004. The Kanagawa Club had 38 Network groups, with a total membership of 3,400 as of 2004. While each Network group carried out its election activities independently at the municipal level, the headquarters coordinated the political goals of all the Network groups together so as to keep them consistent with the Life Club’s objectives. The Network groups organized a competition from among their membership for their own candidates for municipal assemblies. Women intending to stand as candidates had to put together a policy presentation, and those who gave the most convincing presentation would be selected to run as candidates. The candidates could make specific commitments to their constituencies, as long as their pledges fitted the general electoral strategy elaborated by the headquarters in consultation with the Life Club members. Candidates
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for the prefectural assembly were selected from among people recommended by all the Network groups, following the same kind of competition as was used to select municipal assembly candidates. Once their candidates started campaigning for the election, the Life Club organization provided them with material help and assistants, and the organization lent them its all-out support.

The Network movement aims to revive local politics, which have become divorced from the expectations of many citizens, by invigorating popular political commitment. Japanese local government has long been financially dependent on the central government. Most local governments rely on central government budgeting for some 70 per cent of their financial resources. For this reason, it has always been important for local politicians to build friendly relations with the central political elite in the ruling party, so that central government financial distribution could work in favour of their region. The local assembly members support the Diet members of the ruling party in their campaigns to be elected by local constituencies, while the Diet members reward the local politicians for their support by allotting generous financial support for the municipal budget. During the period of high economic growth, these financial resources were spent on improvements to the local infrastructure, and this brought benefits to the local economy. However, most of the really necessary work had already been done. Local people began to see the development of better social services as more useful to them than further construction projects. People in the city were especially keen to find solutions to the problems they faced in their daily lives with regard to childcare, care of the disabled, education and the environment. Despite the new public mood, local assemblies continued to attach importance to building projects of marginal value, and assembly members continued to serve as clients of the Diet members (Eto 2001a: 28–31).

Why were local people unable to reform such dysfunctional assemblies and make them respond to their own needs? The main obstacle was often the difficulty in finding people who could go into politics but who were not part of the established political networks, even at the level of the municipal elections. Even in municipal election campaigns, it is necessary to obtain a huge amount of money and possess powerful allies. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the candidates will necessarily be elected, and if they fail, they may lose their livelihoods, because they have to give up their jobs in order to run for election in the first place. Ordinary people could neither raise enough money to go through an election successfully nor afford to take these kinds of risks. These factors have contributed to a persistent
dominance in the local assemblies of politicians oriented towards vested interests.

It was the members of the Network groups who were able to break out of this vicious circle. They had the advantage of the organizational assistance and support of the Life Club. Middle-class married women whose livelihoods were sustained by their husbands’ income would rarely lose their livelihoods, even if they failed to get elected. More importantly, since the non-employed married women spent all their time in their communities, they had a particular awareness of the needs of those areas. Shinohara argues that these women are the only people who can be described as ‘real citizens’ qualified to serve in local politics (1971: 128–142). He and his male colleagues among Japanese political scientists had attacked the practice of ‘interest politics’ offering special benefits to pressure groups as a perennial feature of Japanese politics, and they expected that the Network women might represent an opportunity to change this political syndrome (Watanabe 1995: 183).

The Network members have expressed the defining principle of their political style as ‘amateurism’, meaning the opposite of the established style of politics. The Network representatives’ term of office is limited to three terms (four years per term), so that their political style can remain distinct from that of the conventional local politicians. They attach great importance to the connection between their everyday lives and politics. Their policy on political pledges is based on assumptions which they have come to hold in the course of their various activities in the Life Club. These activities gave them the opportunity to develop ways to solve their everyday problems through regular discussion. Thus, their representatives tabled motions in local assemblies on such issues as food safety, river purification, recycling of waste and improvements in social services (ibid.: 203). A prominent aspect of all their proposals was the intention that the Life Club’s everyday activities could ensure their feasibility: the project groups had previous experience of these subjects, which allowed the Life Club’s assembly members to make up policy proposals.

One of these project groups, for example, is a welfare enterprise group in the Kanagawa Club that has provided a wide range of welfare services for the elderly since 1985, including home-care, day-care, meals-on-wheels and a nursing home. Some Kanagawa Club members who had become especially conscious of the poor quality of publicly provided care for the elderly decided to produce the kind of welfare services that they hoped they themselves would obtain when they became old. They set up a welfare enterprise for the elderly and created a framework for their welfare services which
was based on their previous efforts to introduce a limited involvement of market forces in welfare services in order to produce a higher quality of service at lower costs. In this way, they were able to expand their welfare enterprise. The idea that social welfare services could be managed through market incentives became widespread in social policy debates in the 1980s. However, the Kanagawa Club was the first organization that succeeded in putting this idea into practice. Their welfare enterprise was adopted as a model of welfare service provision by the Kanagawa prefectural government (Eto 2001b: 244). Likewise, the new recycling system which many municipal governments in Tokyo introduced was originally developed by the project group that had campaigned for rubbish reduction (Tokyo Seikatsusha Netto Waku 1998: 10–11). The local assembly members based their proposal on what they had achieved in their everyday activities.

When the Life Club representatives proposed a new measure in local assemblies, their colleagues in the project groups supported them by lobbying. In the local decision-making process, a draft of any new policy program is made by administrative officials. The members of the project groups persuaded the administrative officials to adopt their alternatives in their public service programs. Since the local officials came to value the alternative ideas of the project groups and often invited members to cooperate in implementing public service programs, the members enjoyed many opportunities to demonstrate the validity of their ideas (Eto 2001b: 243–244). Prior to discussion in the assemblies, the draft programs are deliberated by advisory councils. An advisory council consists of the representatives of three groups: the interest groups that would be affected by new policies; the experts in a particular field of policy; and citizens in general. Its aim is to balance the different interests of these groups. It is the advisory council that is mostly responsible for determining the policy framework. Accordingly, in order to exert influence on decision-making in local politics, it was important for the Life Club members to participate in the advisory councils as well as in assemblies. The core members of the project groups were often nominated to serve on councils. Once the measure came to be discussed by the assembly, many members of the Life Club would attend the discussion as spectators. The presence of the Life Club members in the audience encouraged their colleagues in the assembly, while it also put indirect pressure on the ‘professional’ assembly members, who often were unenthusiastic about programs designed to improve people’s livelihood. In sum, the Life Club exerts a dual influence on local politics both inside and outside of the assemblies.
Boundary between Community-Based Movements and Feminism

The Life Club movement has been markedly successful in local politics, both in terms of the number of representatives it has gained in the assemblies and in the practical influence acquired on policymaking in local governments. Its members’ core beliefs came from their sense of themselves as wives and mothers. Their gender roles were what had shaped their political interests and were the foundation for the way in which they attempted to solve their political problems. This brought their movement the support of the rest of the society. Their ‘maternal’ characteristics, on the other hand, led to criticism from some feminists. There was an inevitable feminist antipathy to female community-based activists because feminists feared that the gender role upon which the community-based movement was established negated the primary object of feminism. The hostility of the feminists was first expressed after the remarkable success of the Networks’ candidates in the local elections of 1987 (Amano 1997: 277). Subsequently, the increasing political influence of the Network groups forced feminists to pay more attention to them.

Feminists who did a nation-wide survey of the activities of female local politicians condemned the representatives of the Life Club groups for the limited nature of their agenda. The observers argued that while the Life Club’s assembly members were keen on environmental issues, they were unconcerned about working women who were buffeted by sexual harassment and sexism in the workplace (Sasakura 1990: 250). Kanai (1992: 63–64) distinguishes between politics which can be changed ‘by women’ and politics which can be changed ‘for women.’ Whereas the former means that women can reform the political life which men have damaged, the latter means political reform in favour of women’s emancipation. She argues that ‘politics for women’ inevitably requires a feminist perspective and that since the Life Club’s political approaches lack any feminist concern, they cannot represent a genuine ‘politics for women’.

Yet the idea that the Life Club women unquestioningly accepted their gender roles was not necessarily accurate. The Life Club movement, as I mentioned, had been led by a few men who assumed that the gender division of labour was a natural fact of life. Sato (1995: 165) sees the male leadership as something which internalized the traditional model of the Japanese family in which men had authority over women, and he suggests that gender issues had been deliberately overlooked by the core male members because they were afraid of losing their predominant position in the movement. In
other words, the men tried to preserve the justification for their dominant role in the organization by preventing the women from being roused to any gender consciousness.

However, the criticism of feminists undoubtedly stimulated changes in the consciousness of the Life Club’s women. The expansion of the Life Club’s activities also provided them with opportunities to meet employed women and to become better informed about the serious problems that women faced in the workplace (ibid.: 164). The Life Club women gradually began to realize that ‘they had been working in a space which was very far from the pain of women who were victims of discrimination in the workplace and in society’ (ibid.: 165). They started to speak out for causes supporting working mothers and for improvement of women’s conditions in society. They argued that if they did not do so, the raison d’être of their movement would be lost (ibid.: 163). Their gender consciousness has undergone changes. For example, according to a 1991 survey of all the members of the Tokyo Network groups, only 4.3 per cent of the members agreed with the statement that men should go out to work and women should stay at home. This figure is much lower than the corresponding figure for Japanese women in general of 31.9 per cent, as recorded in a survey taken by the Prime Minister’s Office, conducted in the same year (Watanabe 1995: 204). A similar survey conducted by Kunihiro (1993: 2) in 1992 of members of a Network group in Kanagawa revealed that no member agreed with the statement that women should take all the responsibility for housework and child-rearing. These figures show that the Life Club women are no longer confined to the traditional notion of gender roles.

Further, we should not overlook the fact that they succeeded in taking control over the movement that had initially been run by male activists. Their experience in taking responsibility for the management of group enterprises and in running campaigns confronted them with the realities of a society in which women had to endure many forms of degradation and marginalization. Above all, the group’s assembly members often felt frustrated by the ‘male rationality’ which dominated the assemblies. In local assemblies, their male colleagues not only undervalued their opinions just because they were women, but they sometimes also exposed these women to the humiliation of sexual harassment (Tokyo Seikatsusha Netto Waku 1998: 28).

The women of the Life Club now began a ‘dialogue with feminists,’ in order to ‘reconsider their everyday activities in terms of feminism’ (Amano 1997: 284–286). Some members of the Tokyo Club set up a new project group to examine the social insurance system of pensions, which gives
more advantages to non-employed married women than to full-time employed women in 1999 (Tokyo Seikatsu Netto Waku 1999). Non-employed women who are married to full-time employees are eligible for the basic public pension without having to pay any premium to their pension plan themselves, because all employees contribute to it on their behalf. Naturally, employed women, who have to pay for both their own pension schemes and those of non-working married women, feel discontented with this system. Non-employed married women, by contrast, have every reason to be satisfied with the system, and it would be in their interest to leave it as it is. Nonetheless, the project group put forward the suggestion that the preferential treatment of non-employed married women should be abolished. They argued that preferential treatment was a reflection of the fact that society regarded them as dependents of their husbands, and that all women should contribute to a pension scheme. Although their proposal may receive further criticism for its optimism (since their pension premium would come out of their husbands’ salaries because they were not earning money themselves), it represents their sympathy for the feminists. Moreover, since the 1999 local elections, the Network candidates have campaigned under the slogan that ‘the government is responsible for child-care and care for the elderly’. They made a pledge to their constituencies that they would improve the public programs for child-care facilities and for the care of the disabled elderly (Tokyo Seikatsu Netto Waku 1999–2002).

While it is certain that the Life Club women became politically successful by focusing on everyday issues which male politicians had overlooked, it is still the case that this approach has confined them to so-called ‘small politics’ until now. Although their political style is well-oriented towards issues of everyday life, they do not touch on ‘big issues’ such as the wider economy, international relations and defence issues. These are still dominated by male politicians. This is because their political participation has been limited to local politics – and this may deepen the gender divisions in politics. A wider political agenda and involvement in national politics will be the next challenges for them to undertake. Their solidarity with feminists should support their new challenges.

**Conclusion**

In the Japanese women’s movement, it is the non-feminist, community-based movement rather than the feminist movement which mobilizes many women. The claims and causes of the non-feminist movement are supported not only by women but also by men, so that the non-feminist
activists are able to play a direct role in politics. The gendered role of the mother is essential for the non-feminist movement: the activists’ concerns as mothers mobilize them to get involved in political activities and their political agendas stem from their maternal experience. It is unlikely that they would succeed without basing their collective activities on the ingrained traditional value of motherhood in Japanese society, where women can win social respect based on their status as mothers. Their aim is to reflect their everyday experience in politics. In order to mediate between women’s private world and the political world, the movement can provide them with three opportunities: (1) the transformation of private concerns into public issues, (2) the gathering and sharing of information that is useful for problem-solving, and (3) communication with the political world.

The activists, as we have seen, often get involved in the movement out of personal motives, such as anxiety, frustration and anger. Through reciprocal exchange between the participants, the movement channels these women’s private motivations into more general public issues. Indeed, each woman’s concern starts as a personal one, but gets debated and then developed into a common problem for all the members through general discussion. The problem is then no longer private but takes on a public character once it becomes a formal issue of the group. When the women seek to find solutions to the problems, they accumulate information and knowledge. They make good use of the expertise which has been acquired through their daily activities, and their solutions are practical and feasible. However, unless their solutions are put into practice as government policy programs, the situation does not ultimately improve. The women need to exercise practical influence on politics. The movement gives them a space in which to develop political knowledge and skills, and it also provides those members who intend to become politicians with all-out support for their election campaigns. It is the women’s movement which transforms ‘private’ women into ‘political’ subjects.

The level of political participation these women had attained was criticized for its gender-blind approach by some feminists. This criticism gave these non-feminist activists an opportunity to review their activities in terms of gender, and they added woman-friendly issues in support of working women to their political agenda. The grassroots women began to share their outlook with the feminists. The beginning dialogue between these two branches of the women’s movement will hopefully have positive implications for all of Japanese society, because a broader solidarity among a diversity of women’s groups is necessary in the promotion of gender-sensitive politics.
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More importantly, the women’s political involvement at the grassroots level contributes to the democratization of Japanese political institutions, particularly the election system. Participation in election campaigns in Japan requires huge sums of money and powerful supporters. Only people who manage to raise such material resources can run in the elections, and these people are usually found among those who enjoy strong connections with the political community: for example, appointed successors to established politicians and core members of political parties. Politics in Japan, therefore, has been far removed from the general public, as it is confined to a small, specialized circle. The fewer Japanese that are interested in elections, the less meaning representative democracy has. In the midst of this political deadlock, the Life Club activists demonstrated that even ordinary women could not only run for election, but could also actually be elected. They successfully broke through the rigid obstacles to entering the election campaigns. The women’s challenge to local politics, in this respect, has the effect of gradually restoring public reliance on representative democracy. It is true that their political involvement remains limited to local politics and that their political perspective is biased in favour of mothers’ concerns. Nevertheless, their fresh style of politics has to some degree succeeded in changing routine Japanese politics. Thus, the community-based women’s activists can be regarded as agents of active democracy in Japan.

Author’s Note
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Notes
1 Women’s labour force participation in Japan as a proportion of the overall female population aged 15 years and older rose approximately 5 points from 45.7 per cent in 1975 to 50.1 in 1990, and remained steady at 49.6 per cent in 1999 (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office in Japan 2001).

2 According to Garon (1993: 15), its members numbered 807,000 in 1911.

3 The local government system in Japan consists of a two-tiered structure comprising prefectures and municipalities. The prefecture is an intermediary entity between the central government and the municipalities.
At present, there are 47 prefectures and 3,230 municipalities. Local governments function with an assembly as the legislature, and with a governor of the prefecture or a mayor of the municipality in charge of the executive. The assembly members as well as the governor/mayor are elected by adult residents once every four years.

4 Since the 1920s, many cooperative societies engaged in activities such as health care, delivery of groceries and delivery of educational material have been established in Japan. These cooperative societies consist of both men and women, and are often influenced by left-wing political parties or trade unions. In this respect, the Life Club can also be distinguished from all other cooperative societies.

5 In the Life Club, for example, the group includes a small number of working women, but they are less active in the movement than non-working women.

6 There are few Japanese female politicians, in particular female Diet (i.e., Japanese Parliament) members, who assert that they are representatives for women. Most of them tend to identify themselves with gender neutrality, asserting that they work for both men and women. They are reluctant to take up gender-related issues, and when they need to touch on such issues, they often deal with the issues in terms of motherhood.

7 Bouissou regards the Life Club movement as one of the new civic movements which has revitalized the routine nature of Japanese politics (2000).

8 LeBlanc has done detailed research on the political involvement of the Tokyo Club women, based on ethnographic fieldwork. She examines the possibilities and problems of their political world by means of her key concept of ‘housewifery’ (1999). The data sources come from the Tokyo Club’s website, http://www.seikatsusha.net and the Kanagawa Club’s website, http://www.kgnet.gr.jp.

9 Kanai suggests that the stimulus for the Japanese women’s liberation movement was the same as that which motivated American and British radical feminism (e.g., Friedan 1983: 49; Whelehan 1995: 67), namely, the anger felt by women involved in the New Left against male domination within the movement.

10 The Ward is a basic administrative district of the capital of Japan and corresponds to a municipality.
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**11** This data is based on the Tokyo Club's website http://www.seikatsusha.net.

**12** This data is based on the Kanagawa Club's website http://www.kgnet.gr.jp.

**13** In Japan, particularly in urbanized regions, working people often spend long hours from early morning to late evening at the workplace, and commuting also takes more than two hours. Thus, they have little time to take part in social activities in their community, to which they are rarely attached. In this respect, Shinohara (1971) distinguishes mere 'residents' like these people from 'real citizens' who spend most of their time in their community and who are active in their community lives.

**14** Interview by the author on 21 January 2002 with Atsuko Ikeda, who is the core member of the Tokyo Club and has served 12 years on the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly.

**15** However, they do exert some influence on national politics. The Kanagawa Club, for example, had been involved in a national debate on social welfare reform for the elderly in the mid-1990s, and it succeeded in influencing the creation of a new social welfare system, introduced in December 1997 (see Eto 2001b).

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CHAPTER THREE

Healing Bodies of Thought:
The State of Gender in the Sathya Sai Baba Movement in Malaysia

ALEXANDRA KENT

This chapter focuses upon individuals and their interpersonal relations and micro-negotiations of power as these are played out in the healing of ‘disorder’, in its widest sense. Thus, it examines how the ‘personal’ is made political and vice versa. Politics is constituted every bit as much in the arenas once considered ‘private’, such as homes and workplaces, as it is in those arenas classically defined as ‘public’, such as stock exchanges and parliamentary chambers (Sen and Stivens 1998). To explore the mechanisms of gendered micro-politics, this chapter takes an anthropological look at a contextualized case in order to illuminate the ways in which power is affirmed and contested between individuals in social practice. This case, like that discussed by Lindberg Falk in the following chapter, concerns the way in which the minutiae of religious activities may concretize the politics of gender. These processes arise in response to and feed into broader political discourse and need therefore to be understood against this backdrop.

Modernity erupted in Malaysia under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir (1981–2003), whose Vision 2020 paved the country’s path towards capitalism, urbanization and industrialization. This rush towards modernity, however, was also suffused with anxieties about shifting gender roles and loss of morality. In his Hari Raya Aidilfitri (the celebration of the end of the fasting month, Ramadan) address (New Sunday Times 9/2/97), Dr Mahathir coined the term ‘social ills’ to refer to ‘... juvenile delinquency, loaf-
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ing, bohsia [loose morals], child abandonment and child abuse to the extent of causing death, prostitution, drug abuse, corruption, all kinds of fraud, divorce and single mothers, runaways from homes, school absenteeism and others. He called for Malaysians to match material progress with morality, and this stimulated lively debate that focused on the breakdown of family values as the culprit. Throughout 1997, the newspapers were peppered with discussions of social ills and several religious and other organizations began designing schemes for the policing, preservation and rehabilitation of morality. The Johor Baru state government had pre-empted the debate in 1996 by establishing a ‘... Family Development Foundation to promote stronger family ties and combat social problems’ (The Sun 12/11/96). Shortly after the Prime Minister’s speech, a gathering of leaders from the Malay political body (UMNO), youth leaders and academics agreed that the remedy for social ills was to be found in enhancement of religion and parenting skills (New Straits Times 28/2/97).

Gender politics tends to discourage women’s participation in formal politics (Mustafa 1999). However, with the country’s rapid socioeconomic change, women have nevertheless acted politically, adapting their identities by either reinforcing the dominant gender paradigms that have emerged hand in hand with modernization or by modifying or resisting them (Devasahayam 2005).

This chapter evolves from fieldwork carried out in Kuala Lumpur between 1996 and 1999 on the Malaysian following of the contemporary Indian guru, Sri Sathya Sai Baba. The results of this study have been published in a number of articles and a monograph (Kent 1999; 2000; 2004; 2005a; 2005b). Although my inquiry was not focused specifically upon gender, gender-related issues nevertheless emerged prominently in several spheres during the course of the study. This chapter picks out the sphere of healing as a crucible in which the processes outlined above may be explored. Healing, with its intense focus upon rectifying disorder is a potent area in which to examine how the ordering power of political processes is filtered through social bodies and then digested, reproduced or even rejected by individual minds and bodies (cf. Schepet-Hughes 1987).

I shall be presenting the activities of two Malaysian healers, one woman and one man, both of whom are devotees of Sathya Sai Baba. I shall look at these healers’ backgrounds and practices and the intriguing conflict that I observed between their practices. By then placing this within the broader Malaysian socio-political context of the late 1990s, I shall examine how the manipulation of healing power within this Hindu revitalization movement was managed by
these actors in ways that, in the one instance, extended and, in the other, challenged the hegemony of politically endorsed, patriarchal ideals.

I shall begin by providing an introductory background to the group from which Sathya Sai Baba’s following primarily derives in Malaysia, giving a brief history of Malaysian Hinduism before describing the establishment of this movement. I shall then look more specifically at the two healers and discuss how each of them was trying to articulate opposing stances in relation to the state ideology of the late 1990s.

**Malaysian Indians**

Definitions of ethnic identity in Malaysia are unambiguous and formalized. All Malaysians must carry an identity card stating their race. The Malays (known as *bumiputras*, ‘sons of the soil’) are politically dominant and are guaranteed certain privileges concerning land entitlements and special access to quotas in education, business and the civil service. Malay ethnic identity is defined according to three principles: habitual use of the Malay language, adherence to Malay custom and profession of the Muslim faith. Proselytizing by non-Muslims among Malays is forbidden by law. Chinese and Indian identity, however, are not defined according to religion and these groups include Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Muslims.

Malaysian Indians represent only some 8 per cent of Malaysia’s total population, while the Chinese answer for some 28 per cent and Malays approximately 60 per cent. Malays enjoy political dominance, although Indians and Malays have long been perceived as economically subordinated to the Chinese (Nagata 1974). Around 80 per cent of contemporary Malaysian Indians are of South Indian Tamil origin, mostly descendents of low caste plantation labourers who were recruited during the British colonial administration. The remaining 20 per cent comprises a medley of castes, language and occupational groups from various areas of India and the Malaysian definition of ‘Indian’ includes Jaffna Tamils and Sinhalese. These non-labourers migrated voluntarily to Malaysia to exploit opportunities for money lending or to seek posts within the growing colonial bureaucracy. Their descendents constitute an Indian elite in Malaysia today. Prominent amongst them are Jaffna Tamils and Malayalees, groups once favoured by colonial leaders as plantation administrators and lower-ranking civil servants. Since independence, the favours once ensured by the British have been eroded and this small group now wields little influence (Roff 1994: 112), although the privileges they once enjoyed mean that they continue to be viewed with some suspicion by other Indians.
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Class, caste, linguistic and religious divisions within the Indian community imperil ethnic solidarity and jeopardize the political strength of an already numerically weak group (Andaya and Andaya 1982). Those middle-class Indians who nourish social and political aspirations win little audience for their claims to help in shaping Malaysian society. During the 1990s, the ethnically based Indian political party, the Malaysian Indian Congress, was shedding its former elitist style of leadership (Lee 1989), which was dominated by the middle classes. Instead, it began currying support from the more numerous Indian labourers. This left middle-class Indians with no firm political base, and their hopes of gaining genuine leverage in the orchestration of Malaysia’s future meant following alternative and innovative routes. As we shall see, the Sathya Sai Baba organization and the controlling of womanhood was one avenue.

The Sathya Sai Baba Movement in Malaysia

The Sathya Sai Baba movement is global in scope and is represented in some 140 countries. Several studies of the movement have been published. Klass (1996) has analysed the following in Trinidad, Swallow (1976; 1983), White (1972) and Babb (1983) have discussed the movement in India and Bowen (1988) studied the movement in Britain. The Malaysian following has been examined by Lee (1982) and Ackerman and Lee (1990) as well as by myself (Kent 2005b). All of these studies have explored various political aspects of the movement, but none has focused specifically upon gender.

Sathya Sai Baba was born in 1926 in a small village called Puttaparthi, in today’s Andhra Pradesh. According to his biographers, he performed paranormal feats even in childhood (Kasturi 1973–75; Murphet 1975). At the age of fourteen, he suffered a seizure, possibly caused by a scorpion bite. For several months after this his behaviour was extraordinary, culminating in his declaration ‘I am Sai Baba.’ The boy thus claimed himself to be a reincarnation of the Maharashtran saint, Shirdi Sai Baba, who had died in 1918, eight years before the boy’s birth.

The new Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba (Sai Baba of Truth) continued to perform miracles and materializations and began attracting a global following. His most renowned feat is the miraculous production of sacred ash known as vibhuti, which he does by making a circular movement with his right hand. His teachings are quite unoriginal and, like those of other modern Indian gurus, offer a simplified reiteration of Sanskritic thought, emphasizing tolerance and spiritual equivalence and delivering all this in a format suited to those enculturated with Western rationalism (Babb 1983).
His miracles, however, demonstrate his divine status to followers and play a far more important role than his teachings in attracting devotees.

Although Sathya Sai Baba was accumulating a following in India even as a young man, his popularity overseas only began to grow in earnest and become formalized during the 1960s–1970s (Ackerman and Lee 1990; Bowen 1988; Maxwell et al. 1995; Klass 1996). In Malaysia, a following burgeoned in the 1970s and an embryonic leadership quickened predominantly among Jaffna Tamils and Malayalees. In 1984, under the inspiration of a small group of Indians, the organization became a registered society: The Sathya Sai Central Council of Malaysia. As of 1995, there were thirty-five registered Sai worship centres in Malaysia and thirteen devotional groups, each falling under the auspices of a local centre. All of these were chaired by men, and of the total one hundred and forty-four office holders, only six were women. At the time of my fieldwork the Malaysian Sri Sathya Sai Baba Council comprised, with one exception, middle-class, non-Brahmin, urban Indian men, mostly Jaffna Tamils and Malayalees. This leadership effectively controlled the ideology by which the Sai following was publicly advertised.

Membership is difficult to ascertain, since relatively few devotees register formally as members of the organization. Congregations fluctuate and the majority of worshippers attend Sai Baba centres only for devotional singing and not for charity events or other programmes. The picture is further complicated by the fact that there are Indians and Chinese – and allegedly even Malays – who recognize Sai Baba as divine yet, for a variety of reasons, do not associate with the organization and its activities. The struggle in which the organization’s leadership is engaged is therefore, in part, a struggle to attain a position for itself as both generator and controller of a politically correct profile of unity for this fluid movement.

The Sai Baba organization is, in many respects, typical of Malaysian Hindu revitalization movements in its attempts to refine and update Hinduism (see Lee and Rajoo 1987). Like the Sai Baba organization, other Hindu revitalization drives have almost always been controlled by middle-class Indian men, whose shared ambition is to raise the status of Malaysian Hinduism by increasing its consonance with Sanskritic tradition and abolishing ‘degrading’ folk practices such as blood sacrifice, spirit possession and firewalking (Rajoo 1975: 268–269). A concern that middle-class Hindu drives for religious hygiene share with other religious groups is the politicization of gender (see Stivens 1998).

The Sai Baba organization targets not only the Indian community or sections of it, but is ‘... an “extroverted cult” with expansionist aims’ (Lee
It is advertised, not as a Hindu reformist drive, but as a wellspring of global spiritual revitalization that claims all humanity as its recruiting ground. The fact that this wellspring is of distinctly Hindu character makes such a claim particularly tricky in Malaysia, where Islam is becoming an increasingly politicized and exclusive marker of the Malay ethnic boundary.

**Shared Ideals**

The Malaysian organization is not blind to the problems that this contradiction engenders, given their country’s politico-religious sensitivities. In pursuit of the approval of the ruling Malay elite, the organization’s members have therefore tended to publicly quiet the Hindu/Indian association, instead stressing their universalistic ideals and a transcendent camaraderie with the Malays. They have done this by presenting the organization as committed to nation-building and modernization, as a provider of charity, as a sponsor of universal human values and a promoter of cultural/religious pluralism. This has dovetailed nicely with the government’s policy of building an economically mighty Malaysia, in which the participation of charities and cultural organizations is encouraged.

An integral element of this streamlining of Sai Baba visions and Malay politics is the promotion of patriarchal bourgeois values as principles of social order; the agenda for women’s participation in modernization as set by the Malay leaders corresponds closely with the Sai Baba organizations’ gender rhetoric. In his discussion of gender discourse among Malays, Peletz (1997: 239–240) notes the conflicting demands upon women in Malaysian state rhetoric. On the one hand, women are urged to participate in capitalist development, and must accept this incitement as the ‘… handing over of rights from a superior to a subordinate’ (Ariffin 1992: 173), but at the same time women are the focus of a moralizing discourse about their domestic roles in maintaining family values and Asian morality. The Asian route to modernity is thus decreed to be produced in the heart of the Asian family, and responsibility for this productive labour falls to women (Sen and Stivens 1998: 3).

The Sai Baba organization advertises itself as the handmaiden of government in the effort to reconcile modernization with the promotion of Asian family values:

The country is moving to join the league of newly developed nations but unfortunately such growth has not been matched by similar development of value systems ... The government is doing its part in pushing the concept of family values, religion, wholesome activities
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etc. ... However government efforts cannot succeed unless the people respond ... In answer to this call and desiring to play a positive role in Nation Building, the Sathya Sai Central Council of Malaysia has over the years initiated and successfully concluded several human values programmes and service projects for national welfare. The objective of these programmes was to instil values and awareness among the Malaysians ... . (SSSCCM 1994: 3)

This appeals both to the Asian Values rhetoric (see Jacobsen and Bruun 2000) and the Malaysian modernity project, Vision 2020, ‘...which called for an active contribution of women from the middle and upper-income echelons into wage employment, while stressing that they continue to retain their roles as mothers in the home ... [where they should provide a] harmonious family environment’ (Devasahayam 2005: 16). The Sai Baba organization elaborates:

Of course, the modest woman will not crave for honour or praise. Her attention will always be on the limits which she should not transgress. Honour and praise come to her unasked and unnoticed. (SSSCCM n.d.: 57)

It is in the domestic arena that a woman is to effect the Sai and government leaders’ family values mission:

Woman must accord first place to the service of her husband; that is True Worship, for her. Her prayer and worship and puja [prayer rituals] can wait. Without serving the husband she cannot attain Bliss in worship or meditation.

[As bearer of tradition she] ... can become the force to create a great wave of Revivalism and ‘give back’ to the generations of the future, the precious heirlooms of the past. (ibid.: 28)

This kind of delivery of Sai Baba thus extends government ideals concerning family and social order.

The Power to Heal

Creating order is not simply an intellectual issue of ideology or rhetoric but it is also deeply concerned with the body and the emotions. The creation of order is therefore also a matter of praxis, of which the art of healing is perhaps exemplary. Through healing, individual, disordered bodies may either be reordered and incorporated into a social body and ultimately into the body politic (Schepfer-Hughes 1987), or their autonomy from these
structures may be reasserted; the healer may declare the power of the community over the patient or, conversely, legitimize the subversive individual and their resistance to oppression. A successful healer must convincing enact certain shared ideas and make them resonate with the experience of his subjects (Laderman and Roseman 1996: 4). In this way, the subject undergoes ‘ritualization’ and becomes empowered within emerging micro-relations of power (Bell 1992: 220–222).

Healing is one of the most potent symbols associated with Sai Baba – many devotees distribute vibhuti ash to the needy to assuage distress. Formalized healing practices are actually rare among the following in Kuala Lumpur, though the appearance of vibhuti or the honey-like substance amrit at homes is reasonably common. People who receive it on their altars usually offer it freely to those who seek them for help.

The Malaysian Sai Baba organization members whom I worked with employed healing in such a way as to enforce the ideals they share with national leaders, whose patronage they sought (see Kent 1999). The healing they endorsed worked through the body and emotions to incorporate, regulate and subordinate those healed within a patriarchal and politically acceptable order. At the same time, they rejected forms of healing that did not submit to this scheme.

The healers whom I shall discuss articulate two quite different interpretations of Sai healing power. These respective articulations must be seen in relation to the social circumstances in which they arise. The first healer, whom I call Uncle Murthi, was well entrenched in the Malaysian Sai Baba organization, and his healing reproduced the organization’s moral programme. By contrast, the second, whom I call Auntie Elizabeth, worked independently of any social body and she threatened the emergent rigidity of the organization. She refused incorporation into the political body and insisted on the individualism of Sai. In essence, her healing was subverting the political ambitions of the organization.

Uncle Murthi

Uncle Murthi, a retired office worker in his late sixties, was married and had adult children, all of whom were Sai Baba devotees. His wife was almost always at his side, assisting in his rituals. She also participated in several of the regular activities of the main worship centre of the Sai Baba organization, in Kuala Lumpur. Since this centre was the administrative and charismatic hub of the Sai Baba organization and because her husband was a renowned healer, she too was widely known within the Sai Baba com-
munity. When I met the family in 1996, they lived in a detached house with garden. Annexed to the house was a small shrine room, where vibhuti ash appeared on the many images.

Uncle was Malaysian-born, but of South Indian Tamil ancestry. His forefathers had migrated to Malaysia in the mid-nineteenth century and his father had worked on the railways in Kuala Lumpur. When he was a child, his family had taken him to the temple, where he had worshipped Lord Ganesha and Lord Muruga, but the family had also worshipped the saint Shirdi Sai Baba.

Uncle’s calling as a healer became clear to him when he was 25 years old. A middle-aged relative contracted bronchial pneumonia and her condition rapidly deteriorated. The hospital eventually discharged her so that she could die in her own home. When Uncle and his mother heard about this, they hurried to the scene. When they arrived, they gathered with their other relatives and began chanting mantras over the dying woman. After about half an hour, quite without warning, Uncle suddenly fell into trance. Observers told him later that he had performed a ceremony using sacred ash. When this was completed, the woman sat bolt upright, recovered and continued to live in good health for a further thirty years. Uncle explained his role in her recovery as incidental rather than instrumental. It was not her karma to die just then, so he was simply the agent of her destiny. No intervention, Uncle contended, can prevent moral necessity.

After this incident, Uncle began concentrating on his spiritual development. He adopted a disciplined but non-renunciatory lifestyle and began meditating. He soon became a sought-after healer. He found that he could fall into trance quite easily, becoming ‘taken over’ by Lord Muruga (the god of war), Lord Ganesha (the god who removes obstacles and brings luck) or Amman, the goddess who offers tenderness and protection but who can also bring disease (Babb 1975: 128–131). Sometimes he would simply pray and apply sacred ash to his client and sometimes he would go into trance.

Sathya Sai Baba first came into Uncle’s life almost exactly a decade after the first trance incident, on 23 November 1965 (Sai Baba’s birthday). A friend dropped by and simply gave him a picture of Sai Baba. A further ten years then passed before ash began appearing on his shrine. Uncle came home one day from the office and went to pray as usual. On his Sai Baba picture he noticed that there were tiny spots of vibhuti ash. He asked his wife to clean it off but she never got around to it and later in the evening he noticed that they had grown. By the time he was ready to go to bed, they were the size of the mouth of a coffee cup and he became concerned. He telephoned a friend who was a devotee of Sai Baba and active in the developing Sai
Baba organization, and the man came round immediately. Together with this friend, the family held midnight prayers and by the following morning vibhuti was flowing freely all down the picture and onto the floor.

After the ash began appearing on his shrine, Uncle continued to carry out healing as before, but used ash taken directly from the shrine, in other words Sai Baba’s own materialized ash. Over the years, Uncle received messages and insights while meditating and these came to guide not only his healing practice but also the advice that he offered the leaders of the Sai Baba organization. At the time of my fieldwork he had never held any formal office in the organization but was acting as something of a divine advisor for local Sai Baba centres. The appearance of ash on his shrine not only awarded him divine legitimacy, but it also gave his life story a symbolic depth, suggesting links to Lord Siva’s powers of destruction and creation, but more directly authenticating his link to Sai Baba.

Healing ‘disorder’

In the late 1990s, Uncle was holding weekly prayer sessions at his shrine room and devotees from local Sai Baba centres would attend and assist. There would be anything between fifteen and fifty people in attendance, a handful of them regulars. Uncle and his wife would sit on chairs at the front while everyone else sat cross-legged on the floor, women on the left and men on the right. Most weeks, there were two or three families or individuals in attendance seeking Uncle’s assistance with healing. The prayer sessions followed the regular pattern of Sai services, centring on devotional songs (bhajans) and took about one hour. These were followed by the healing performances, which varied in length but could carry on into the early hours of the morning, particularly when Uncle went into trance.

Uncle and his wife would decorate the shrine before prayers, sometimes helped by some other devotee women. The shrine was filled with images of Hindu deities – the Goddess Amman, Lord Muruga, Lord Ganesha, Lord Siva and more. On the bottom shelf of the shrine stood a small statue of Shirdi Sai Baba. To the right of the shrine, from the audience’s viewpoint, hung a life-size full-length standing portrait photograph of Sathya Sai Baba, with the familiar enigmatic smile. On the floor were oil lamps, flowers and incense sticks flanked by standard Hindu prayer offerings of tiffin tins and stainless steel trays of food brought by devotees. The images on the shrine proper, particularly those lower down, were veritably drenched in ash.

After bhajans, Uncle would talk his congregation through a minute or so of meditation and then deliver a spiritual message, often in the form of
allegory followed by explication in terms of Sai Baba's teachings – the act of preaching demonstrating his right to represent the moral community. After prayers, if there was a client waiting, he would begin his healing. The rituals varied in length and detail but showed some constancy in their variability. They all included the manipulation of an array of Hindu ritual paraphernalia, but sometimes they also included elements common to other Asian traditions, thereby making it possible even for non-Hindus to identify with his treatment. His treatments ranged from straightforward advice to elaborate ritual performances, sometimes involving trance. Sometimes he would order his wife to prepare herbal tinctures or pastes for problems such as skin conditions. Afflictions spanned the entire spectrum of cosmic-social-psychological-physical conditions, covering anything from spirit attacks to family disharmony, eczema and even cancer.

Uncle told me that the rituals were simply to provide a crutch for the less spiritually evolved. They catered to ‘different perceptions, backgrounds, customs, etc. Rituals discipline and fine-tune energy. They prepare you for a higher level, for plugging into the cosmic energy ... It’s like opening the front gate and letting me in, in order for us to converse.’ Uncle’s healing was premised upon the idea that the world complies with the dictates of dharma, which, in this context, meant eternal cosmic order as defined by the organization. His healing reasserted the imperative of maintaining this order. Uncle’s rituals were purificatory but not in the Brahminic sense of bringing about a state of ritual purity. Instead, they employed a hotchpotch of Hindu symbols to bring about ‘internal’ purity: to purify the mind. Uncle said he felt that religious practice had become increasingly mechanical and meaningless for people and that the Sai mission was therefore to regenerate awareness of its inner significance; his ritual laxity ultimately transmitted a relatively inflexible set of values and ideals (cf. Bharati 1976).

Being healed

Stories related to me by those who had experienced Uncle’s healing reveal its relationship to moral rectification and the re-instantiation of ideals. The theme of well-being as co-extensive with obedience to gendered and non-egalitarian order was prominent. Clients’ stories frequently involved family disharmony, often in which one member had broken some moral imperative; husbands drinking alcohol, youths taking drugs or refusing to study, women behaving with inappropriate assertiveness or disrespect towards their husbands or in-laws. Uncle was renowned for perceiving these problems when families themselves and others had failed; he would then
confront people indirectly, pricking their conscience without humiliating them, reminding them of their duty to uphold righteousness and propriety. A young woman whom he had cured of eczema described his sensitivity and compassion:

Uncle has got something, you can either call it extra-sensory perception, I don’t know what you call it but, you know – he can see beyond what we can see – into the past and into the future ... One or two times when Uncle has gone into trance he has told me one or two things ‘Maybe you’re worried about this,’ and then I think no, I didn’t come here with any worries. I just came, you know, just to pray ... and then when you look deep, deep back you think ... and you realize that might have been my deepest fear from young.

All the stories of marital disharmony told to me both by Uncle and by clients focused on controlling the behaviour of women – and these women were sometimes brought to him against their will. He told me of a young plantation worker girl who had been married by arrangement to a relative. She was brought unwillingly to Uncle because she had begun behaving like a vampire, biting her husband and even her baby and beating her mother-in-law with a stick. Several Malay healers (bomohs) had failed to help. Using vibhuti and trance, Uncle finally subdued her, and when the performance was complete she performed full prostration for Uncle, her husband and her mother-in-law.

Another story concerned a middle-aged woman whose marriage Uncle saved. Born and raised a Jain in India, she migrated to Malaysia to marry her husband, whose family were all Sai Baba devotees. Because of their different religious orientations (she described Sai as a branch of Hinduism, which she contrasted with Jainism) she found herself in deep conflict with her husband and his family. Uncle had explained to her that all religions are the same, and he had advised, ‘You cannot be fighting for the sake of religion. Everybody must compromise. You cannot leave your religion which you are following for twenty-six years, I agree. But the family that you are going to, they are following the same religion for many, many years. They cannot change for you.’

At his prayers he had once called the pair forward and asked the wife to separate a block of burning camphor into two pieces. She was unable to, and he explained that marriage is like the camphor – a single, inseparable light. He told her that although she did not want to hear it, she would be with her husband for life, and now, she told me, she understood that this was right and good. So, she explained, she began to follow what she called
Hinduism, alongside her Jain practices, raising her child not as a Jain but as a Sai Baba devotee. She told me how she had improved as a person and become more compromising:

Last time my anger and all that was very bad, but now I can get over – I get angry but I can come out of it ... I think ‘I must give up my ego, never mind.’ I was not thinking like this earlier. But he makes the person softer and gentler ... I used to think ‘why a person can do like this to me?’ the question was like that ... but now I think, ‘never mind, God will show them the path ... the day will come that they will understand me’.

When the deities speak
Although Uncle’s healing was characterized by symbolic flexibility and heterogeneity, it recreated the relatively rigid structure of the institution representing his moral community. This was evident in the trance episodes which, over the years, had become increasingly associated with the delivery of teachings rather than healing per se.

When in trance, Uncle received divine messages that he communicated directly to his audience. Devotees told me that the trance episodes had become less frequent with Uncle’s advancing age, although in the late 1990s they were still occurring at important events, particularly when divine advice was needed for carrying out some ritual or festival preparation at the local Sai Baba centre. Several devotees pointed out that he would tend to go into trance when the, ‘level of devotion in the audience and the vibrations from the singing reached a sufficient pitch.’ This usually corresponded with the presence of office bearers from the Central Council. The leader of the movement would often only clinch an important political decision for the Sai Council after consulting the deities through Uncle.

The only time I saw Uncle’s trance was just prior to the Deepavali festival 1998. He became possessed first by Lord Ganesha, and shortly after by Amman. Amman asked the audience what the inner significance of Deepavali was and then guided the respondents towards a particular interpretation: the enactment of family unity, respect for elders and removal of negative feelings, and the inclusion into this of new family members (female in-laws and children). She described the roles of husband and wife as breadwinner and homemaker. The dharma of the wife was to provide good food for her husband and children, to uphold the light (jothi) of the house and ensure the family harmony essential to the children’s educational progress and health. She should prostrate herself at her husband’s feet and
he should reciprocate by feeding her a sweet, and then the children should prostrate themselves at their parents' feet and receive sweets from them.

Collins (1997: 106–126) notes that trance follows cultural scripts – the disruption of order that it would seem to predicate is ultimately subject to the social imperative of conformity. To an extent, the aesthetic modes available for the engendering, communication and reception of experience (Kapferer 1983: 245) are standardized. However, societies generally contain several such standardized modes. While trance may be performed in the mode of one particular community's sense of order, it may simultaneously be subversive of other orders.

Uncle's trances were neither exuberant nor spectacular. There was no suggestion of disorder in their style. His behaviour was gentle and smooth, his movements graceful and delicate; he portrayed a divinity epitomized by artistry, cultivation and control. Further, the deity within him was highly concerned with the audience, addressing and responding to it. This starkly opposes the inward directedness of the trances and self-mortification that take place at the Malaysian Hindu festival of Taipūcam (Lee 1989; Willford 2002; Kent 2005a), which suggest rejection of and perhaps even rebellion against state-approved, sanitized religious forms. Uncle's trances and his practice spoke not of ecstasy and liberation but of social commitment and discipline. They guided his audience into the moral and political framework that was verbally articulated by the Sai Baba organization and publicized in its texts.

Uncle's close personal association with the Sai Baba organization leaders suggested mutual support and sanctioning. While the de facto leader of the organization held a prestigious position in a government department and therefore had contacts and influence in the national arena, Uncle was confined to the local. Nevertheless, the organization leader was the one who performed padenamaskar prostration at Uncle's feet, not the other way around. This echoes the subordination of worldly power (artha) to divine ordering (dharma) described in the relationship between Hindu priest and King (Dumont 1970: 65). Uncle offered divine sanction to Council members and their temporal authority, while his own powers were reciprocally ratified through connection with the organization. This sealed his magical powers within the controlling structure of the body politic of the organization.

**Out of Bounds: Auntie Elizabeth**

In this section I shall give a brief presentation of a woman healer and Sai Baba devotee with whom I spent time in Kuala Lumpur. Her status and
practice contrasted in important ways with those of Uncle Murthi. Auntie Elizabeth’s persona as well as her practice starkly contradicted the ideals of the Sai Baba organization, challenging its Hindu-based ecumenism and bringing the limits of its tolerance into sharp focus. Her practice fell well within the range of Sai Baba’s philosophy, yet she was rejected by the Malaysian organization leadership as a heretic.

When I met Auntie, she was living in a small house in a working-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur. She was a childless widow in her sixties, born in Malaysia of South Indian Tamil parentage and, although raised a Catholic with little exposure to Hindu deities, she told me that she was brought up to respect other people’s gods. She first encountered Sai Baba in 1976, when her sister brought her a book containing numerous stories of his miracles. Some time later, she claimed, she saw Sai Baba appear in front of her image of St. Anthony. He was chewing betel leaf, which he breathed over her. In 1984, she travelled to Puttaparthi and received ash from Sai Baba. Her husband had recently suffered a stroke and when she returned to Malaysia she applied some of this ash to him, whereupon he recovered. He died ten years later. Shortly before his death she herself experienced Sai Baba’s healing – when he, ‘reached into my heart and removed a clot’. Following her husband’s death, Auntie began witnessing Sai Baba in her house. When Sai Baba made his mysterious appearances, he told her he and Jesus were the same. She began to receive visions of Hindu deities, which she understands to have been delivered by Sai Baba. She even saw several times how the images of Sai Baba and Jesus melted into one before her. Sai Baba told her in these visions that she should erect a shrine and that she should work as his healing instrument.

Service without sermon

In the early days, she mainly treated Chinese who were victims of charms. Those she whom healed would usually make a small financial donation or donate a godform for her altar, which, when I saw it, boasted an impressive display. When I met her in 1997, she was practising healing every weekday evening and, like Uncle, conducting weekly bhajans in her home, where the cramped front room served as a shrine. Her congregation would spill over into the vestibule and out onto the front porch. A variety of Indians and Chinese would attend for healing and most of the people at her weekly prayer meetings had experienced her healing powers themselves or indirectly through a family member. Her bhajans followed the general pattern, modelled upon Hindu prayer ritual. They were introduced with the chant-
ing of ‘om’ and *mantras* together with the offering of flowers at the feet of Baba’s chair followed by about one hour of devotional singing. The prayers were closed with a simple offering of camphor flame before the altar and to all the images in the house, many of which were Christian, and finally to the congregation. There were no oratories or preaching, and Auntie made no moralizing dictum about charity nor did she deliver Sai Baba’s teachings. In conclusion, she simply distributed ash and placed some on the heads of selected individuals, waving her hand subsequently towards the picture of Sai Baba on her altar or towards an open window. With this movement, she explained to me, she could remove blockages and spirits from within the person – then casting them graphically out into space or towards Divinity. The ash she used did not materialize on her shrine. She bought it in packets, although she told me that Sai Baba would then grace it miraculously with a pungent fragrance.

Auntie explained that she was a kind of screen for Baba, and that people with a sixth sense, or an open third eye, could see his face in hers. During my interview with her she demonstrated her direct communication with Sai Baba by repeatedly stalling, listening attentively to an inner voice, and then turning to me to deliver its message, prefaced by ‘Baba says …’. When I asked her why Baba had chosen to come to her house, she told me that he had explained, ‘No one can fathom my reality. I came to a Christian house.’ And she stressed, ‘I have no powers. I am only his instrument.’ However, although she emphasized her Christian identity and Sai Baba’s explicit approval of this, her connection to him was also validated by the fact that she claimed knowledge of a past birth, in which she was the daughter of a famous Hindu sage.

There was a clear, though not absolute, division between Auntie’s and Uncle’s clienteles. Some of those who attended Auntie’s prayers or consulted her for healing also attended Sai Baba centres administered by the organization, where they might participate in charity events and other activities. Generally, though, Uncle’s regular audience was almost exclusively Indian and Hindu and many of its members had close social links to key figures in the organization, while Auntie’s following was more diverse. Her weekly prayers could draw as many people as Uncle’s – usually between twenty and forty – but her influence was confined largely to her home. She had no access to wider audiences at the Sai Baba centres and she received no patronage from other influential figures. From what I could establish, her retinue comprised a core of middle-class Indian followers, including several Catholics. Beyond this she attracted many Chinese to her thauma-
turgical skills, though the Chinese did not seem to participate regularly in her weekly prayers. She was content to help a broad range of individuals but made no obvious attempt to try to coordinate her clientele into a moral community or institutionalized format.

Unlike Uncle, who de-emphasized the importance of physical cure and stressed the delimiting moral conditions of *karma*, when I spoke with Auntie she recalled having cured two thousand six hundred ‘cases’, of which twenty-six were cancer, two were brain tumours and six were heart cases. It was Sai Baba, she said, who kept count for her. She recounted how, during the healing sessions, she could see spirits, clots, lumps and black substances exiting the body of her client, although usually no one else was able to see them. She believed that it was because she was dealing with spirits and charms, many of which have been caused by Malay *bomohs*, that members of the Sai Baba organization had accused her of practising black magic. She was angry about their rejection and mentioned how she had even healed some of those who deprecated her most vehemently.

The individual spirit

The area in which she most blatantly contradicted the organization’s ideology was that of womanhood, both as person and through practice. One of her clients told me the story of how she had been repeatedly sexually abused by her husband. After years of suffering she had found help through Auntie, who came to her home and marked out a division through the house with *vibhuti*, leaving an area into which the wife was assured her husband would not trespass. Apparently, the line had worked and the husband subsequently stopped his aggressive advances towards his wife and she felt safe in her protected area. This kind of practice brings to light issues of women’s oppression and abuse which were granted no place in the official ideology extended by Uncle, where female virtue was closely connected to self-sacrifice and submissiveness. Auntie’s line of ash itself explicitly refused the principles of subordination through encompassment that was driving Uncle’s practice, and it prioritized individual emotional and physical autonomy over community.

Auntie’s inattention to – and even challenge of – the gendered order represented in Uncle’s healing was further complemented by her filtering of Sai Baba and healing power through a Christian scheme. On one occasion, I entered her house as she was finishing treatment of a mother and her two children. I noticed that she piled *vibhuti* onto the head of the mother, put a small pinch on the daughter’s head and nothing on the son. Later I
asked her why, and she explained that the mother had been troubled by feelings of uneasiness related to the presence of spirits. The mother was Hindu, but her husband – and consequently, the children – were Catholics. Auntie explained that as Catholics they were ‘clean’ and therefore did not require as much or sometimes even any protection from the spirits. This was a blatant rebuttal of Hindu supremacy and the right of particular actors to define the terms and forms of purity.

Auntie’s Christianity, intriguingly positioned within a Hindu framework, was central to her understanding of her powers and of divine protection in general. She told me that Jesus Christ was the only *avatar* to carry out miraculous healing, by which she accounted for the fact that Sai Baba chose to carry out healing through a Christian household. However, although Auntie broadly equated purity with Christian identity, she still did not elaborate a didactic moral framework and seemed little concerned with the purity of conscience that was so celebrated within the organization ideology.

The absence of explicit references to moral rectitude is also notable in the stories told by her clients. These phrase healing very much in terms of worldly rather than moral or spiritual transformation. One middle-aged man explained how she had repeatedly helped him with ‘clots around the heart’, sometimes indeed accomplishing this over the telephone, communicating with Sai Baba directly and channelling his energy towards the sick body. The afflicted man described the feeling of warmth around his heart that immediately resulted, bringing about the dissolution of the clot. The two of them in fact demonstrated a session for me, after verifying between them that a small clot was still bothering him. Auntie Elizabeth again heard Sai Baba’s voice and nodded in accord as she stood by her altar, held her hand in the air pointing towards her seated client. In a few minutes the session was completed and her client claimed relief.

**Limiting Community**

Both of the healers discussed here had clearly helped large numbers of people. Both were utilizing essentially mystical sources of power, and both claimed direct connection to Sai Baba. Yet while Uncle was acclaimed by the Sai Baba organization, Auntie was spurned. This was so despite the fact that many of those loyal to the organization privately confessed to considerable scepticism about Uncle’s performances. Authentication of claimants to Sai power was awarded by the organization according to the extent to which they, as persons and as performers, could be seen to exemplify and
expand their community and its ideology. In the practices of these two healers there was, in the one case, absorption of the individual into the social body and priming for enlistment in the Sai Baba political body, while in the other case there was not.

Uncle, through his lifestyle, his teachings and his rituals, instilled the importance of Indian tradition and values as means of recovering a lost age of order and harmony: he was a pillar of tradition and an instantiation of norms. He personified beneficent patriarchal authority, middle-class male control over religious authority and moral purity through this worldly asceticism. His divine empowerment was ratified because of his adherence to the organization’s dharma which was correct, and corrective – a yardstick against which tolerated religious diversity could be measured. His healing imparted remedial order as it incorporated disordered individuals into a regulatory social body. Auntie’s healing, on the other hand, made no requirements of her clients to commit themselves to a community with a defining ideology or distribution of authority, and it made no connection between obedience and relief.

While Uncle enacted some of the salient features of the Sai Baba organization’s mission, Auntie’s neglect and even defiance of these, and her consequent rejection, help elucidate the dynamic underlying the organization’s distinction between patriarchally organized community and non-community. Those members who were most loyal to the organization explicitly rejected Auntie Elizabeth’s claims to healing powers. Auntie’s efforts were directed towards the gratification of individual needs rather than the consolidation of community, and this individualism was apparently provocative to the organization. Auntie and one of her followers both told me that she had even received several poison-pen letters accusing her of practising black magic and using Sai Baba’s name in vain. During my field research I was warned not to let people at the official centre know that I had been attending bhajans at Auntie’s house. When I cautiously mentioned to one of the Council members that I knew of her, he told me that she was not genuine and that she was simply claiming these powers for egotistical reasons. Equally, Auntie said that the official centres were devoid of healing powers.

Several of Auntie’s stalwarts supported her own contention that the organization’s condemnation had mainly to do with the fact that she was a woman. Some pointed out that there was no place for female autonomy or authority within the organization. Clearly Auntie singularly failed to embody the ideals of womanhood cherished by the organization. Uncle
was the exemplary family man, who saw women as contributors to societal redemption through their role as ritual assistants, mothers and wives. By contrast, Auntie was a widow, a social condition that is in Hindu tradition highly inauspicious and betokens the loss of male control. She was also childless and so she could not represent the ideal of motherhood either. Further, she was clearly capable of taking the part of abused and oppressed women whose cases were obfuscated in the organization’s recipe for social harmony through patriarchal authority and female submission and nurturing. By suggesting female rights to define and remedy disorder, a woman healer may threaten such harmony. Auntie was not the only example of a woman failing to gain audience with the Sai Baba organization in the region. In Singapore, I was told, a Buddhist female healer met with a similar cold shoulder and was ousted from the Sai community.

Furthermore, as a Catholic, Auntie could not represent a natural transmitter of the Sai Baba organization’s formulation of *dharma*, rendered as an eternal, Hindu order into which all other religious forms of order ultimately collapse. Nor did she deliver her Catholicism as a subsumed aspect of a Hindu dharmic framework. Rather, Jesus and Sai Baba were merged on mutual terms. Sai Baba’s philosophy ostensibly recognizes all religions as expressing the same universal values. However, Hindu members tend to privilege Hinduism with the status of ‘mother of all religions’ and as encompassing and subordinating all others, socially excluding the impure from the domain of the pure. Auntie’s refusal to submit to the hegemony of the organization suggests a kind of intra-ethnic counter-culture resistance.

Members of the organization, some of whom had had experience of Auntie’s healing, referred disparagingly to the fact that she, unlike Uncle, accepted donations in exchange for her services. One member of the Central Council even related a story of how the Council had been asked by some disquieted devotees to investigate Auntie’s financial dealings with her clients, though their queries had given no tangible results. Donation and healing alike, devotees argued, should express selflessness and should therefore go to the needy without expectation of return. Since Hindu religious gift giving traditionally subordinates transaction to disinterested giving (Parry 1985), the criticism of interestedness was an effective way of discrediting Auntie’s healing and her spiritual authenticity. Moreover, failure to emphasize charity excluded Auntie’s practices from a discourse that enjoys broad currency in Malaysia, and which provides a potent avenue for accumulation of symbolic capital. Auntie’s determined autonomy must therefore be seen in part as an implicit refusal to politicize Sai Baba power.
Healing is a micropolitical process. The negotiation that takes place between healer and client concerns the power to create order and this power emerges within a context of broader cultural developments and their political deployment. Here I have highlighted the way in which gender ordering in the late 1990s was handled in similar ways by both the Malay dominated government and the culturally besieged elite Indian leaders of the Sai Baba organization. In both cases, the role of women was defined as that of putting into effect the patriarchal visions of their male leaders, particularly in their capacity as nurturers in the home. Both moral schemes promoted women’s self-discipline, modesty and submissiveness as ways of ensuring family and, by extension, national order.

Uncle Murthi’s healing fitted neatly into this as he guided his disturbed clients into the calming waters of such order. His healing literally incorporated individual bodies into a social body highly attuned to the political exigencies of contemporary Malaysia. By imposing the organization’s social and moral order on disordered individuals he could offer them a kind of limited emotional and physical empowerment within a restructured world. But his form of salvation prioritized the group and its quasi-political interests over the individual and his (or more particularly, her) subversive potential. Healing provides just one example among many that I have not been able to discuss here of how the Sai Baba organization was streamlining its vision of social order to that of the government, thereby perhaps echoing ancient Brahmanic duties as ritual assistants of state.

Auntie Elizabeth, on the other hand, challenged all of this. For her, the religious tolerance of Sai Baba’s teachings was a tolerance predicated upon egalitarian and syncretistic principles; Christ and Sai Baba were interchangeable, and the supremacy of Christian purity and power was possible. As a healer, she submitted to no one and demanded no submission from her clients. On the contrary, she circumscribed them with protective lines and removed oppressive forces from them, demonstratively casting the evil spirit forces out of her clients without a care for political gymnastics and rhetoric. She affirmed the individual. Her attention to aspects of daily reality that were ignored in the political posturing of the organization refused the effacement of the individual implied by encompassment in a collectivity. While state and Sai Baba organization discourses were perpetuating a male monopoly over definitions of womanhood and sexuality, Auntie’s insistence upon her own and others’ autonomy subtly, yet non-violently,
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was subverting the forces working upon individual bodies to coerce them into submitting to imposed order.

My analysis is not meant to suggest that the elite Indian group controlling the Sai Baba organization was simply acting as the alter-ego of state. Both of these healers told me stories of dangerous forces identified in the Malay bomohs – both have to deal with the Malaysian reality of a powerful ethnic ‘other’. Uncle’s quiet demonstration of his moral superiority and his ability to bring about willing submission in the ‘other’ suggest tacit claims to Indian moral superiority that were quieted in the organization’s public self-presentation, betraying the awkward ambivalence of this small, formerly privileged community. As I have argued more fully elsewhere (Kent 2005b), the Sai Baba organization’s vision of Malaysia’s spiritual destiny is one in which the ethnic and religious exclusivity of the Malays will melt away, and Malays too will come to understand their religion as participant in a cosmos most fully described by the symbols and tenets of Hinduism. Yet this incorporative, subordinating ambition cannot be expressed overtly. Instead, the organization has to propose itself as the partner of government in the unfolding of Malaysia’s moral and economic destiny.

Part of this proposition consists of the manipulation of womanhood, both in discourse and in the micro-politics of practice. Womanhood thus becomes contained within a male definition of modernity and morality that is focused upon family values. The proper role of women thereby becomes that of actualizing a patriarchal cultural scheme in the domestic sphere. Although the pattern we see in the ethnography above may seem context specific, I propose that it in fact simply represents a single crystallization of a pattern extending well beyond Kuala Lumpur, beyond Malaysia and, indeed, beyond Asia. Over large parts of the world, the structures of hegemony have for centuries been primarily controlled and designed by men. Women have occasionally entered these patriarchal realms and sought patronage and rewards within them. It could be argued that in so doing, they further rather than challenge existing patriarchy. Marginalized cultural innovators like Auntie Elizabeth, whose practice might challenge contemporary hegemony, often remain operative only at the quiet fringes of society, in spaces where their subversive power is peripheral to the centres of power.

Note

1 The exception to this is the English-educated Chinese national president, who sees himself largely as an appointed figurehead of ethnic diversity
and who feels that his power in directing the organization’s profile is curtailed by his Indian entourage.

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Healing Bodies of Thought: The State of Gender in the Sathya Sai Baba Movement


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*New Straits Times* 28/2/97
Over the centuries, the Thai Buddhist Sangha has strongly guarded its boundaries against the entry of females. An oft-cited example of that is the case of the two sisters, Sara and Chongdee, who received Buddhist novice ordination on 28 April 1928. They were daughters of Pra Panom Saranarin, a critic of Thai society, who protested the unfairness of banning women from the formal religious domain of Buddhism. Sara and Chondee refused to give up their robes and were arrested. Sara was jailed for eight days and Chongdee for four. After their release, they continued to wear robes and travelled to different provinces. Sara continued as ordained for eight years: for two years as a mae chii, for four years as a samaneri, and for two years as a bhikkhuni (Chatsumarn 1991: 45–48). This inspired the Thai sangha’s supreme council to pass an order forbidding any monk to give women novices full ordination as Buddhist monks. The rule was implemented in 1928, and there has been no sign that the Thai sangha is likely to annul it.

Today, Thai women who want to become ordained have at least two possibilities: either to become a nun, mae chii, or to become a female monk, bhikkhuni. The bhikkhuni was introduced during the Buddha’s time and the mae chii category is a Thai term used for Buddhist nuns. Both categories still lie outside of the Thai Buddhist sangha, which in Thailand is solely a male congregation, thus demonstrating that Buddhist nuns in Thailand have to create space outside the formal religious structure. Both bhikkhunis and mae chiis struggle for recognition of their ordained status. Bhikkhunis aspire to be part of the sangha – this is in contrast to the mae chiis, who
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want to stay outside the sangha and be recognized as religious persons within their vocation as mae chiis.

In this essay, I explore the case of one pioneering Thai female monk, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, with the aim of illustrating the denial of legal recognition for monastic women and the structural subordination of Thai women in the prestigious religious field. Using the example of women's struggle to attain religious legitimacy, I shall demonstrate the importance of women's agency and global networking.

Before introducing Dhammananda Bhikkhuni and investigating her challenges in her role as a bhikkhuni, I shall begin with a brief introduction to women's position in Thai society. I shall continue by exploring the gendered boundary between the lay and the spiritual realms, women's ordination and the background of the revival of the bhikkhuni order. Then I shall examine the significance of women's agency and global networking in the ongoing process of establishing a bhikkhuni order in Thailand and analyse the reactions met by attempts to reform the gendered religious order in Thailand. Establishing a bhikkhuni order in Thailand would bring about profound structural changes in the Thai gender order, giving women access to a prestigious domain that, in Thailand, is entirely male. That would not only change the gendered power structure in the religious domain but also have great implications for the social structure and probably affect formal politics – likewise a male arena.

I have followed the female ascetics in Thailand over the last decade. In 1997 and 1998 I conducted seventeen months of fieldwork in Thailand, mostly spent at samnak chiis, ‘Buddhist nunneries.’ Since then I have conducted shorter periods of fieldwork in Thailand each year and followed the development of the bhikkhuni issue continuously. I have also followed the mae chiis’ struggle to gain better circumstances for themselves. Methods used during the fieldwork periods have mainly been participant observation, informal conversations and interviews. Over the years, I have interviewed about one hundred and fifty mae chiis. The first time I met Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who later became Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, was in 1994. Since then, I have personally met and talked with her several times.

Women in Thai Society

In comparison to women in South and East Asian societies, women in Thailand are considered to have greater gender equality, at least in certain areas (cf. Eto, Milwertz and Bu Wei, Qi Wang, and Ghim-Lian Chew, this volume). Thai women’s public visibility and their high participation in the
economic sector and in the labour force are noted as signs thereof. Thai society is described as heterogeneous, with regional and class variations, and it has been characterized as having a system of gender complementarity (see, for example, Hanks 1963, Potter 1977, Eberhardt 1988). Buddhism has by some authors been identified as the main source of the moral degradation of women, leading to social and economic disadvantages for them (see, for example, Thitsa 1980, Hantrakul 1988). Nicola Tannenbaum (1999) noted that Buddhist texts are often overrepresented in researchers’ attempts to explain the subordination of Thai women. Also, Penny Van Esterik questions the use of ancient Buddhist text as an equivalent to contemporary practice or belief (Van Esterik 2000: 68–70). The Buddhist ideology is important in the process of shaping genders, and there are manifold Buddhist texts which convey diverse stories and connotations of women. Rita Gross has examined the Buddhist textual sources, and she states that Buddhist attitudes towards women are not especially misogynistic. However, androcentrism has been almost constant throughout Buddhist history (Gross 1999: 81–84). According to her, Buddhist feminists are more engaged in Buddhist core teachings and do not emphasize history as do Christian feminists (ibid.). Perhaps that is truer for Buddhist feminists in the Mahayana tradition, where female monks’ ordination persists, than for Theravada Buddhist feminists, who use history to argue for regaining their right to receive ordination.

Thai women’s exclusion from membership in the religious community, the sangha, and their absence from the prestigious arenas of political leadership and formal office have created a structural subordination of women; thus their contributions to these spheres are generally informal. Increasing activity in the religious realm by knowledgeable female Thai religious specialists will have an effect on the structural subordination of women. However, the categories of bhikkhunis and mae chiis have chosen different ways to deal with women’s subordinated position in the Thai religious field and they employ different strategies to achieve formal authority as religious persons. The bhikkhunis stress their right to be part of the sangha. They advocate a bhikkhuni order and embrace the widespread notion that this order, which was instigated during the Buddha’s time and later spread to Sri Lanka, where the spiritual lineage broke, has survived through the Mahayana bhiksunis in China and could therefore continue in the Theravada tradition. This perspective contrasts to that of most mae chiis, who have adopted the general Thai opinion that the line of bhikkhunis was broken and, with reference to the Buddhist canonical text, cannot be restored. The
mae chiis want to remain outside the sangha’s control, but they are striving for legal recognition as religious persons in their capacity as mae chiis.

**Dhammananada Bhikkhuni – a Pioneering Thai Female Monk**

Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was a well-known female Buddhist scholar when she sought ordination as a female monk in Sri Lanka in 2001, adopting the religious name of Dhammananda. The female Buddhist monks, bhikkhunis, are new in the Thai religious realm and Chatsumarn was the first Thai woman to receive ordination as a female novice monk in the Theravada tradition. Her ordination created a sensation, making front-page news in the Thai press, and the Thai sangha has not recognized her ordination or her status as a Theravada female monk.

By becoming a bhikkhuni, Dhammananda has challenged the Thai Buddhist sangha. The sangha is against the ordination of female monks and this hostile environment makes it difficult to survive as a bhikkhuni. This means that not only courage but also education and financial resources are essential for upholding female monkhood in Thailand. To become a pioneering bhikkhuni in Thailand without 1) proper bhikkhuni training, 2) a bhikkhuni community and 3) respect and support from the laity as well as from the monks’ community would be difficult for most Thai women. Dhammananda is unique in that she has knowledge, a secure economic situation and some support from lay people. She was previously a professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, where she taught Buddhist philosophy for two decades, and she also taught at one of the monks’ universities, Mahachulalongkorn University. Most Thai women lack a higher education in Buddhism, and there are very few women who teach Buddhism to monks. The monks’ universities are male institutions for advanced Buddhist studies and they are, with few exceptions, open only to men.

Originally, Chatsumarn had planned to seek ordination after her retirement, but she changed her mind when she fell ill. When she recovered, she decided not to postpone her ordination any longer. Therefore, she sought early retirement from the University and she also resigned from television, where she had been working for many years. One of the first things that she did before the ordination was to file for a divorce. She said: ‘My husband had known before we were married that I would follow the Buddha’s way one day. Now that my children have grown up and settled down well, my job is done. I have no concern left’ (Atiya 2001). In April 2000 she went to Taiwan and received the lay bodhisattva precepts as a way to formulate her
mind. On the first full-moon night of the first month in 2001, she received the Buddhist eight precepts, which include celibacy, not beautifying herself and not eating after noon. The day before the next full moon, the day before the Buddhist holy Makhapuja Day, which occurred on the sixth of February, she had her head shaved and received novice ordination.

Dhammananda’s novice ordination follows a spiritual heritage from one generation to the next. Her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh was the first bhikṣunī in Thailand who had received ordination from both the male and the female sanghas. Voramai Kabilsingh was first an eight-precept nun for fifteen years, and then in 1971 she received bhikṣunī ordination in Taiwan in the Dharmagupta lineage. Chatsumarn’s grandmother, Mae chii Somcheen, Voramai Kabilsingh’s mother, was also an ordained woman.
Mae chii Somcheen originally came from Vientiane in Laos. She became a widow with five daughters to take care of when she was only thirty-six. When her daughters were grown up she received mae chii ordination and became the chief nun at Ganikaphala Temple in central Bangkok.

The most difficult question for Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was in which tradition she should ask for ordination. She said: ‘Ordination was not just for myself; I wanted to be accepted in this country where female ordination has not been accepted for 700 years’ (Yasodhara 2001b). She considered the Chinese tradition, in which her mother had been ordained. However, she said that she had learned from her mother’s example that despite being ordained for several decades and having many supporters, her mother did not have any followers. Chatsumarn considered the possibility of ordination within the Tibetan lineage, with which she has a close connection. However, they have only novice ordination with maroon robes, and if she were to receive full ordination after two years, she would have to change her robes and enter into another tradition, which might look strange to the lay people. She closely followed the development of ordination in Sri Lanka, but at first did not accept the practice of the the Sri Lankan bhikkhunis, who began ordaining others when they themselves had only been ordained for three years instead of the twelve required by the scriptures. Then she read an interview given by local Sri Lankan monks who were organizing the ordination, and they said that the Buddha gave permission to alter minor rules ‘If the sangha so desires’. The Sri Lankan Sangha granted permission to the dasa sila matas (ten-precept nuns), who had 40 years of experience as religious women but only three years as bhikkhunis, to ordain others. This explanation satisfied her, and she decided to seek ordination in Sri Lanka (Atiya 2001).

On 28 February 2003 Dhammananda Samaneri received full bhikkhuni ordination in Sri Lanka together with three other samaneri – one American and two Burmese women. The novice ordination of Chatsumarn, which was performed in 2001, was recognized by bhikkhus and senior male monks from Siyam Nikaya, a lineage from Ayutthaya in Thailand. Siyam Nikaya is the lineage that actually reinstated the Bhikkhu sangha (Buddhist monks’ order) in Sri Lanka after it had been wiped out by a Hindu king. Twelve senior bhikkhus, male monks belonging to the Siyam Nikaya, and ten senior bhikkhunis, female monks, conducted her higher ordination in 2003. In 2005 Dhammananda Bhikkhuni received bhikkhuni ordination in order to be affiliated with the Siyam sect of the Dambulla chapter (Yasodhara 2006: 20). Despite this, the Thai sangha persists in not recognizing her ordination and her status as a Theravada bhikkhuni.
A Gendered Boundary Separates the Monastic and Lay Realms

An ideal Buddhist society consists of female and male monks (bhikkhuni and bhikkhu) and female and male lay-people (upasika and upasok) with a distinct boundary between the monastic and lay realms. Monastic life was originally open to both men and women. However, it has never been possible to receive bhikkhuni ordination from the Thai sangha, since the order of female monks never spread there. Despite the absence of a bhikkhuni order, Thai women, like women in other Theravada countries, create categories that distinguish them from lay people. They shave their heads and eyebrows and become nuns after having received five, eight or ten Buddhist precepts. Nuns are known by different names according to the country in which they practice. For example, in Burma they are named thila shin, in Sri Lanka the ten precepts nuns are named dasa sila mata, in Thailand mae chii and in Cambodia don chii.

Buddhist lay people are expected to follow five precepts: to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. On special occasions, lay people can follow the set of eight precepts, which require a more ascetic regime. They include the first five precepts, but in this case the third precept requires abstinence from any sexual activity whatsoever. The additional three precepts are to abstain from eating after noon, to avoid beautification or entertainment and to avoid sleeping on thick mattresses. The novice monks observe ten precepts, of which eight are the same as mentioned above, but the seventh precept, about not using beautification or entertainment, is divided into two precepts in the last group. The tenth precept is to abstain from using gold or silver (money). However, the monks often violate that precept, since at times they have to handle money.

The particular sets of Buddhist precepts correspond to the different categories of Buddhist male and female, lay and ordained persons. The crucial boundary goes between the lokiya, worldly and mundane, and lokuttara, transcendental and spiritual. The set of eight precepts belongs to the lokiya while the set of ten precepts belongs to the lokuttara. Over the centuries this boundary has become highly gendered.

The lokuttara person is dependent on the members of the lokiya (lay realm) for material support. Religious practices that signify that a person belongs to the religious realm (lokuttara) have traditionally only been carried out by monks in Thailand. Therefore, mae chiis, for example, have not walked on alms rounds in the mornings, not commonly studied Buddhist
philosophy and have not officiated at ceremonies, since these are indicators of renunciants who belong to the non-lay realm.

Mae chiis usually receive eight precepts, and it is uncommon for Thai women to receive the ten precepts that novice monks observe. Through the ten Buddhist precepts, the mae chiis can informally enter the ordained, male domain. The monks who give women ten precepts usually do that secretly, so as not to upset the sangha. However, there are nuns in Thailand who are openly given the ten precepts. One example is that of the ordained women at the Santi Asoke temple. However, neither the Santi Asoke monks nor the nuns are recognized by the Thai sangha (see Heikkilä-Horn 2000).

A novice monk and a mae chi thus have considerably fewer precepts than male monks (bhikkhu) and female monks (bhikkhuni). Bhikkhus observe 227 precepts and bhikkhunis observe 311 precepts. The eight precepts that most mae chiis observe are the same as those which lay people may observe on special holy days. However, both novice monks and mae chiis must also follow the seventy-five rules that are included in the monks’ training rules and govern every aspect of daily activities and behaviour. These rules are an additional support and guide to help the ordained to regulate their lives. The mae chiis have additional rules, stipulated either by the Thai Nuns’ Institute or by the temple at which they reside.

Women Who Seek Ordination

Women in many Buddhist countries face a range of difficulties when they seek ordination. The denial of women’s right to enter into the formal religious domain has created an ambiguous position for Thai nuns, placing them somewhere between the lay and the religious realms. They are not part of the prestigious sangha, nor do they belong to the lay world, since they have given up their lay identity for monastic life. This gives nuns a marginalized position in society.

In recent decades, the mae chiis have begun to take advantage of the indeterminate space between the two statuses. Using their own competence and networking skills, they have begun to enhance their position and create better circumstances for themselves by creating their own religious spaces outside the formal religious structure. They have accentuated their religious vocation by refining their practice, upgrading their educational level and drawing a more distinct boundary between themselves and the lay people. In the process, groups of nuns have moved away from the monks’ temples. The recent decades’ growth of self-governed nunneries and the reports of Thai women’s increasing interest in Buddhist monastic life are
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notable changes in women’s behaviour in the spiritual field. This connotes a modification of the restricted male religious domain (Lindberg Falk 2007).

Thai nuns are inspired by, and often refer to, the legacy of the female monks, bhikkunis, in early Buddhism. However, the majority of the mae chiis whom I have interviewed in the last eight years did not aspire to become female monks. One reason they gave was the subordinated position that the female monks would have in relation to the male monks – they saw this as a disadvantage. They contrasted the female monks’ secondary standing in the sangha with their own autonomous position outside the male monks’ influence – a position they considered more favourable. Here, the mae chiis are referring to the eight special rules (gurudhamma) that subordinate female monks to male monks. These are:

- A female monk must always bow down before a male monk, no matter how long she has been a monk.
- A female monk is not to spend the rainy season in a district where there is no male monk.
- In order to perform the Uposatha ceremony, the female monks must wait for the male monks to come and deliver the teaching.
- After the rains retreat, the female monks are to hold Pavarana (to inquire whether the female monks have committed any fault) before both the male monks and the female monks.
- A female monk who has been guilty of a serious offence must undergo the manatta discipline before both sanghas.
- When a novice has trained for two years in the six precepts, she should seek ordination from both sanghas.
- A female monk is not to revile or abuse a monk under any circumstances.
- Admonition by female monks of male monks is forbidden, while admonition of female monks by male monks is not forbidden.

However, there is recent research indicating that the gurudhamma did not originate from the Buddha but are from a more recent time. If that is proved true, there would be no reason for subordination with reference to gender (Kusama 2000).

Rita Gross has identified three general attitudes towards women in Buddhism. The first teaches that female rebirth is the result of negative karma. The second view asserts that a Buddha must be male therefore making male rebirth necessary for women. The third view is that gender is irrelevant for
salvation in the sense that gender is one of the traits of the ego, which needs to be transcended (Gross 1993: 115–117). In Thailand, all three attitudes are present. The popular notion of karma holds that a female birth is lower than a male birth. Living a celibate, monastic life is considered the best way to achieve religious merit and reach the ultimate Buddhist goal. However, in Thailand women are denied the right that they once had in Buddhism to enter into the formal religious domain. The third view, which says that gender is irrelevant for reaching enlightenment, is expressed by the mae chiis. They are certain of the equal capacity of women and men to reach the final goal, nibbana.

A Thai woman who expresses the wish to become a bhikkhuni is commonly accused of egotism and a greed for status. These undesirable conditions are considered a sign of spiritual weakness. Both lay people and mae chiis seem to be uncertain of the reasons for and the value of the bhikkhuni movement. The resistance to female monks in Thailand and the people’s lack of interest in the bhikkhuni issue, at least before Dhammananda’s ordination, can be partly explained by the fact that it has never been possible to receive bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand, since the order of female monks has never spread there.

Dhammananda has worked for a long time for the establishment of the bhikkhuni order in Thailand and she is well known among the mae chiis. As noted earlier, most mae chiis are not especially interested in bhikkhuni ordination. Instead, they strive for recognition of their own vocation as ordained persons. Moreover, it is common for people to view bhikkhunis as a possible threat to the sangha. Some lay women whom I have spoken to expressed concerns about the sangha being degraded and losing its capacity to provide a field of merit for lay people if women entered it. The mae chiis who strive to advance their position are careful to point out that they do not aspire to be part of the sangha. Although the sangha strongly guards its realm against female entry, it is not uncommon for individual monks to be in favour of bhikkhuni ordination – and some of these monks have also given public support to it.

Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order

Women have been involved in Buddhism from the very beginning of the religion. Horner reports that soon after the Buddha’s first sermon in the Deer-Park at Isipatana, both men and women became lay-disciples and the Buddha spoke of the same matters in the same terms to both women and men (Horner 1990: 98). The Buddha established the bhikkhuni sangha
in the fourth century B.C.E., five years after the establishment of the male order, the bhikkhu sangha. The order spread from India to Sri Lanka and developed into the Mahayana tradition, spreading to China and further to Vietnam, Korea and Japan. According to Barnes, the bhikkhuni sangha probably was brought to Burma in the eleventh century, and it is known from stone inscriptions that it was still active there until the thirteenth century (Barnes 1996: 271). The bhikkhuni order disappeared from India sometime after the ninth century. In Sri Lanka, the order flourished for more than 1,300 years and disappeared together with the bhikkhu order after the Chola invasion from South India in the eleventh century. The monks’ order was later restored with help from Thai and Burmese monks (Goonatilake 1997: 31).

The standard argument against reviving bhikkhuni ordination is that bhikkhuni, according to the Buddhist discipline, have to be ordained by both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni orders, and that is not possible since the Theravada bhikkhuni order disappeared when the order dispersed in Sri Lanka. However, there are objections to the notion that the bhikkhuni lineage has been broken. Those who argue that the lineage still exists assert that the bhiksunis order that remains in the Mahayana tradition in East Asian countries actually originated from Theravada Buddhism. In the 5th century, bhikkhuni from Sri Lanka travelled to China to establish the bhikkhuni order there. Consequently, they argue that Mahayana bhiksunis can help to ordain and revive the bhikkhuni order in the Theravada tradition. It was therefore natural for Sri Lankan nuns who wanted to revive the Theravada bhikkhuni order to ask the Mahayana bhiksunis to assist them in the dual ordination.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Sri Lankan women started the dasa sila mata movement with nuns dressed in ochre robes and observing ten Buddhist precepts, the same that novice male monks receive. As noted earlier, Sri Lanka had a female monks’ order until the eleventh century and female renunciants had since then been absent until the early twentieth century (Bartholomeusz 1994: 91 ff.). Women’s agency to create a place for themselves in religion was decisive to the project of revival of female monastics. The dasa sila mata established monastic communities and opened schools for young girls. Teaching was a new vocation that the ancient bhikkunis were not known to have practised. Like ascetic women in the other Theravada countries, the dasa sila matas struggle for educational opportunities and ways to meet their financial needs (Tsomo 1988: 140–144). In 1998, Sri Lanka was the first Theravada country to recognize
the bhikkuni order and today it is possible for women to receive higher bhikkhuni ordinations from the required chapters of both male and female monks. Bhikkhuni ordination was once possible in Burma, which is the only country in Southeast Asia that has had a bhikkhu sangha (Cantwell and Kawanami 2002: 54). However, the order vanished in thirteenth-century Burma, and today the Burmese nuns receive eight or ten precepts. Like the mae chiis in Thailand, the position of the thila shins is ambiguous. They have renounced the lay world and live in temples, yet their ordination is not recognized by the sangha and they are therefore, in certain circumstances, referred to as lay women (see Kawanami 2000).

**International Networking**

When I met Chatsumarn for the first time in 1994, she said that she believed it possible to re-establish the Bhikkhuni order, but she thought it would be in the remote future. In 1988, five Sinhalese women had received bhikkhuni ordination in Los Angeles, but their ordination was not recognized by the sanghas in the Asian countries. Since then, the ordination of several female monks has taken place in India and in Sri Lanka and in 2001 Chatsumarn decided to seek novice ordination in Sri Lanka, thus becoming the first Thai Theravada samaneri bhikkhuni. In February 2003 she had completed the two preparatory years as a novice and was entitled to seek full bhikkhuni ordination. Currently there are two Thai bhikkhunis with higher ordination. In Thailand in April 2006, according to the Yasodhara newsletter, there were seven novice female monks, samaneri bhikkhunis (Yasodhara 2006: 20–21). I have information on thirteen mae chiis at a nunnery in the Chiang Mai area who received samaneri ordination in Sri Lanka in February 2006. In Thailand there are also a handful of bhiksuni who have received ordination from Mahayana male and female monks abroad.

Globalization and international networking are imperative forces in the processes of change on institutional as well as individual levels (see also Milwertz and Bu's chapter in this volume). The international networking of individual actors has been of vital importance for restoring the bhikkhuni order. In 1987 the first international conference on Buddhist nuns was held in Bodh Gaya, India. Although there have been some councils after the death of the Buddha, this was the first recorded conference on Buddhist women (Tsedroen 1988: 44–52). The main aims of the conference were to promote mutual understanding and to encourage Buddhist women in their Buddhist practice. The conference addressed problems faced by Buddhist nuns and lay women, and at the end of the conference the participants decided to form
an international Buddhist women’s association. They named the association Sakyadhita, which means ‘Daughters of the Buddha.’ The American female monk, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, together with Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and two German female monks, Jampa Tsedroen and Ayya Khema, organized the conference. They became the initial leading team of the association. Sakyadhita’s major objectives include improving education, communication, facilities and ordination opportunities for Buddhist nuns. The main focus of Sakyadhita is fourfold: (1) to create a network of communications among the Buddhist women of the world, (2) to educate women as teachers of Buddhism, (3) to conduct research on women in Buddhism, and (4) to work for the establishment of the Bhiksuni Sangha (order of fully ordained nuns) where it does not currently exist’ (Tsomo 1999: 2).

At the first conference, the inaugural address was given by the Dalai Lama and was attended by over fifteen hundred people. The Dalai Lama’s support of the conference together with the support of another highly respected monk, Bhikkhu Nyanaponika from Sri Lanka, emphasized the
importance of focusing on women in Buddhism. In his speech, the Dalai Lama expressed his support for the women’s re-establishment of a female monks’ order. He said:

Speaking personally as a Tibetan Buddhist, if an authentic bhiksuni lineage like this could be established within the Tibetan tradition, this would truly be something to be welcomed. [–] One point I would like to stress here is that you bhiksunis and other nuns are now showing concern and taking responsibility. Therefore, it is important that you establish relations with those in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. (Tsomo 1988: 44–45)

Sayadhita has organized nine conferences up to now, and the tenth will be held in Mongolia in 2008. Asian countries have hosted all the conferences, which have been held in India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Ladakh, Cambodia, Nepal, Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia. The international networking initiated by Sakyadhita implies the end of the isolation of many Buddhist women. The participants at the conferences are not only from different countries and different parts of the world, they have also different backgrounds and special interests. The schedule of the conferences mirrors that diversity by integrating academic research, spiritual practice and social action in the programs. The differences between issues of importance for Buddhist women in Asia and North America became evident at a conference in California in 1997 that was jointly sponsored by Sakyadhita and the Claremont Colleges. In North America the prominent issues seem to be sexualities, environment, race, sexual exploitation and social engagement. In Asia, by contrast, the major issues are survival, education, training and ordination (Tsomo 1999: 4).

The Sakyadhita conferences have attracted attention in the Asian host countries. In 1991 when the second Sakyadhita conference was held in Bangkok, organized by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, the knowledgeable, educated and respected bhiksunis from Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam and the West proved to the Thai people that female monks existed and that the ordained life was open to women outside Thailand. At the time of the third Sakyadhita conference, which was held in Colombo in 1993, the issue of the ordination of the female monks was a highly sensitive one and the Ministry for Buddhist Affairs warned the organizers against discussing the bhikkhuni ordination. However, groups of Sri Lankan women were working hard for the re-establishment of the female order and it was impossible to avoid that burning issue. In spite of the warning, the topic was addressed at the conference and today the bhikkhuni order is re-established in Sri Lanka.
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The Sakyadhita association has been actively involved in the ordination of female monks and has encouraged research and publications on the topic of ordination which have been important for the issue. In 1996 ten Sri Lankan nuns, dasa sila mata, received bhikkhuni ordination in Saranath in India and in 1998 twenty dasa sila mata received bhikkhuni ordination in Bodh Gaya, India together with 111 women from different countries. The ordination ceremony in Bodh Gaya was organized by Fo Guang Shan, the largest monastery in Taiwan. However, the ceremony is an example of global networking between different Buddhist communities. This historic event attracted 1,500 participants and the ceremony lasted nine days. The ordination was conducted according to the Chinese tradition which differs from the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions, in which ordination is completed in a single day. By contrast, a Chinese ordination ceremony can take up to 90 days (see Li 2000). Four Thai male monks witnessed the ceremony, but there was no Thai female candidate who participated in the ordination in Bodh Gaya.

Ten respected senior monks from Sri Lanka attended the ceremony. The day before the bhiksuni ordination started, they conducted a Theravadin ordination ceremony for the 20 Sri Lankan female candidates. The Sri Lankan monks took the initiative and invited the monks from Fo Guang Shan to come to Sri Lanka in January 1999 and conduct a bhiksuni ordination ceremony there. However, instead of waiting until 1999, the Sri Lankan monks themselves organized three bhikkhuni ordinations in Dambulla, Sri Lanka in 1998. Thus, the bhikkhuni ordination was performed in Sri Lanka for the first time since the order had disappeared in the eleventh century. Since its re-establishment just a few years ago, more than two hundred Sri Lankan women have received ordination as bhikkhuni. The bhikkhunis are not yet recognized by all Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka, but they are recognized by the Sri Lankan government, which issues identity cards giving them the status of bhikkhunis.

Reactions to Dhammananda Bhikkhuni’s Ordination

After Chatsumarn’s novice ordination, she said that she had experienced two main reactions. One was admiration, the other the awkward silence of disapproval. Her ordination has also been publicly criticized in the press and her TV interviews have been banned. The Thai Journalists’ Association protested the cancellation of the programs and pointed out that the decision was against Thailand’s 1997 constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom to practice the religion of one’s choice. The TV-programs were later broadcast. Religious affairs officials have issued threats
that Chatsumarn’s temple would be at risk if it was not properly registered or if they were to find anything unclear in the temple’s financial accounts (Sanitsuda 2001a).

Manas Pharkphoom, director of the Office of the Secretariat of the Sangha Supreme Council, said in an interview that they do not prevent women from receiving ordination in Sri Lanka. But they will not be recognized by the Thai sangha as bhikkunis (Janssen 2001). Phra Dhepidilok, vice-abbot of the leading royal temple Wat Bowon Niwet, was quoted in the Thai newspaper Matichon, as saying ‘What Dhammananda, or Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, is doing is not a way out. She only wants to take revenge for her mother. In her days, the mother also caused a lot of trouble for religion.’ He also said: ‘If Chatsumarn had any knowledge of dhamma practice and spiritual liberation, she would have known that ordination is unnecessary. Everyone is equal in practising dhamma. Forms are not necessary. What matters is the mind’ (Sanitsuda 2001b). The natural question that follows that statement is: if form and ordination are unnecessary, why do men need to become monks?

Today, monks no longer monopolize knowledge of the Buddhist canons, and Buddhist scholars like Dhammananda Bhikkuni are equally versed in Buddhist scriptures and in challenging the sangha’s authority to interpret the scriptures in ways advantageous to monks. Dhammananda Bhikkuni has been accused of destroying Buddhism through her ordination. Her opinion is the opposite. She said that she chose to be ordained because she wanted to carry on the heritage of the Buddha. Dhammananda stated that she is trying to revive the four pillars of Buddhism – bhikkhus, (male monks) bhikkunis, (female monks) upasaka (laymen) and upasika (lay women) – that will sustain the religion into the future (Atiya 2001).

For Dhammananda, the debate about the continuation of the bhikkhuni/bhiksuni lineage is academic. She said: ‘What I’m trying to prove is that during the Buddha’s time there was no Mahayana or Theravada and ordination was given to women, period’ (Janssen 2001). Without the Thai sangha’s approval, Dhammananda has now received full bhikkhuni ordination and has started building up a female monastic community in Thailand.

Establishment of a Bhikkhuni Order in Thailand

Dhammananda’s ambition is to establish a bhikkhuni order in Thailand with the authority to ordain women as monks. The establishment of a bhikkhuni order in a rather hostile environment demands great efforts, skills and wisdom as well as time. As a first step, Dhammananda has made up a five-year
plan for the female monastic community at her temple, Songdharmakalyani, with the following objectives:

1. To have a bhikkhuni sangha in residence for a minimum of five years.
2. To train the bhikkhunis in residence in dhamma vinaya [Buddhist discipline].
3. To train the bhikkhunis to give dhamma talks, meditation and other social services.
4. To teach English to the younger bhikkhunis and other Thai women who are not yet fluent in the language.
5. To provide an opportunity for the Thai people to come and practice with the bhikkhuni sangha.
6. To provide an opportunity for international women to receive lower ordination in the Theravada tradition (Yasodhara 2002).

On 10 February 2002, Dhammananda organized the first dual novice bhikkhuni-ordination in Thailand at her temple. The woman who received ordination was a 56-year-old Thai nun and she was given the religious name Dhammarakhita Samaneri. Dhammarakhita had been a mae chii for nine years before she became a novice bhikkhuni. She had a diploma in business studies from Australia and before she entered monastic life, she worked as a secretary and translator (Sanitsuda 2002a). The ceremony was conducted in the Sri Lankan tradition, and this historic event was an international gathering presided over by eight bhikkhunis/bhiksunis from Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Indonesia and Thailand. Dhammarakhita's preceptor was the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sadha Sumana, who stated that the ceremony marked the long religious exchange between Thailand and Sri Lanka. When Sri Lanka's monastic order disappeared in the 11th century, the Thai sangha sent a delegation of monks to re-establish Theravada Buddhism there. Now the Sri Lankan bhikkhus and bhikkhunis help the Thai female renunciants (ibid.).

Dhammarakhita's ordination was not met with the same criticism from senior monks as Dhammananda Samaneri's ordination had one year earlier. This time, the religious establishment was openly challenged by the bhikkhuni ordination held in Thailand. Deputy Minister of Education Chamlong Krutkhunthod said that the government could not stop the ordination because the monks who performed it belonged to the Sri Lankan Theravada order, not to the Thai Theravada order. According to the Thai constitution's mandate on religious freedom, the state cannot intervene unless national security is threatened (Sanitsuda 2002b). The media's reactions to Dhammarakhita's
ordination also indicated a more liberal attitude than those a year earlier, when Dhammananda was ordained. Sanitsuda reports that *Thai Rath*, the country’s largest newspaper, attacked the ordination, although most other papers did not share this reaction. *Matichon Daily* gave the ordination its full support and welcomed an end to gender discrimination in Thai Buddhism. Also, TV talk shows gave a balanced viewpoint on the female bhikkhuni ordination (ibid.). Dhammananda’s higher bhikkhuni ordination has, up until now, been met with silence. She said before she went to Sri Lanka that she wanted her full ordination to pass without the sort of turmoil that her novice ordination created.8

Dhammananda has begun to establish a female monks’ community in Thailand and, in 2003, held her first rain retreat (*vassa*) as a fully ordained monk. It was also the first year that her temple had a bhikkhuni sangha in residence. Her temple, Songdhammakalyani, is keeping up the yearly tradition of bhikkhunis coming to spend the *vassa* there. For monks, the rain retreats are an important period for study and meditation practice, and Dhammananda invites female monks from other Asian countries to spend them at her temple, located south of Bangkok. The female monks stay there for three months and recite the *patimokkha* (set of monastic rules) twice a month. The recitals in 2003 were the first done by a bhikkhuni sangha in Thailand.

Dhammananda has the ambition to create a following of female monks in Thailand. However, Thai women have hitherto shown no interest in receiving bhikkhuni ordination and Dhammananda has been extremely selective in choosing candidates for ordination among those who have been interested in taking vows as female monks. Dhammananda explains the mae chiis’ lack of interest in receiving bhikkhuni ordination with their poor social backgrounds and low educational standard. Furthermore, she interprets the well-educated mae chiis’ disinterest in bhikkhuni ordination as based in a fear of the male monks and of the sangha.9

Most of the older mae chiis have not had access to higher education. The Thai educational system’s insufficiency in providing education for women has long been recognized by the mae chiis’ national organization and they have, to some extent, facilitated educational opportunities for mae chiis. The national educational system has recently been upgraded and younger mae chiis today have more opportunities to access education. Poor education is not the only explanation for the mae chiis’ reluctant attitude towards the female monks’ ordination – there are examples of self-confident and well-educated mae chiis who prefer to live autonomously and strive for recognition in their religious roles as mae chiis.
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**Quest for Support**

The female monks need support from the *sangha* and from the surrounding society. The *sangha* and certain influential monks express negative attitudes towards female ordination, but there are individual monks who are in favour of *bhikkhuni* ordination. Some of these have publicly given their support to the establishment of a *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand. The respected monk and scholar Phra Dhammapitaka has taken a diplomatic standpoint in the *bhikkhuni* issue and to a direct question as to whether he personally supports the ordination of women, he answered:

> I agree with the setting up of an appropriate institution. I myself think that there should be some reconsideration of this issue if there exists a real need for women to lead a clerical life. However, this is not something that can be decided in haste. It needs cautious consideration of all the positive and negative factors. (Sanitsuda 2001d)

An outspoken foreign monk who gives his full support to female ordination is the American-born Santikaro Bhikkhu. He had spent twenty years as a monk in Thailand before he went back to America, and in 2004, he left the order. He is openly critical of the Thai *sangha’s* standing in the *bhikkhuni* issue. He compares the discrimination against women with a cancer that weakens Buddhism. Further, he sees the clergy’s privileges as something that weakens them spiritually. Santikaro concludes that female ordination is inevitable. He says that women nowadays are educated and well aware of their religious rights – they will no longer tolerate discrimination (Sanitsuda 2001c). There are also Thai monks who have publicly expressed their support of the revival of the *bhikkhuni* order, for example, the well-educated monk and medical doctor Metta Nantho Bhikkhu and the former monk Tavivat Puntarigvivat. Another Thai monk has actively shown his support by giving two Thai women *samaneri bhikkhuni* ordination in 2003 and 2004.

Good relations between male and female monks are of great importance if the *bhikkhunis* are to be accepted in Thailand. Dhammananda is aware of that and pays visits to male monks at their temples. That gives the monks opportunity to meet her in person, discuss things with her and form their own opinion about the *bhikkhuni* issue. Dhammananda’s visits sometimes become an event, as when she visited the respected senior monk Phra Bhavanavisuddhikhun in Ratchaburi province in March 2003. He received her in the presence of more than a hundred resident monks and gave an introduction to the monks about the possibility of establishing the *bhikkhuni*
sangha in Thailand. Dhammananda also has contact with the influential monk Somdej Pra Buddhacharaya, who is the country’s most senior monk and a possible candidate for the next Sangharaja (the Supreme Patriarch).

Legal Scrutiny

The validity of the abovementioned rule, instigated by the Sangha Supreme Council in 1928 and forbidding any monk to ordain women, has recently been questioned, since the rule contradicts Sections 38 and 80 in the Thai constitution. Section 80 says that the state has a duty to promote equality between the sexes and Section 38 states:

> A person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion, a religious sect or creed, and observe religious precepts or exercise a form of worship in accordance with his or her belief; provided that it is not contrary to his or her civic duties, public order, or good morals.

Before her ordination, Dhammananda consulted some judges and asked if the rule from 1928 was nullified, since it is in opposition to the nation’s constitution. The answer she got was negative. She was told that this rule remains because nobody has ever challenged it, and that the validity of this rule has not been questioned or re-examined until now. On the basis of the new situation since October 2002, which presents the possibility for female monks to receive ordination abroad, the bhikkhuni issue has been of special interest to the Thai Senate Committee on Women, Youth and the Elderly. The board of Senators (upper house) set up a sub-committee led by one of the few female senators, Ms Rabiabrat Pongpanit, to investigate the possibility of establishing the bhikkhuni order in Thailand. A study group spent six months researching the topic. Senator Rabiabrat and the senatorial sub-committee presented their study to the parliament on 11 March 2003. They found that the bhikkhuni order did not defy the principle of Buddhism. Senator Rabiabrat said that the ban issued in 1928 by the Supreme Patriarch, prohibiting monks from ordaining women as novice female monks, should be revoked because it violates the constitution, which espouses gender equality and freedom of faith. In May 2003, the Council of Elders acknowledged receiving the report. The ensuing discussions with representatives of the Sangha Council have so far not led to sanctioning of the establishment of a bhikkhuni order in Thailand. At the time, the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Vishnu Krua-nharm, announced that the bhikkhuni issue was not a case for the secular constitution. However, he urged the Sangha’s Council of Elders to consider the bhikkhuni sangha.
In line with the sangha’s standpoint, in February 2004 the National Buddhist Bureau issued a letter in reply to the Senate proposal, maintaining that there can never be bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand due to the irretrievable dissolution of the lineage of the Theravada bhikkhuni order and the lack of a bhikkhuni preceptor. The Bureau also affirmed the prohibition issued by the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch in 1928 against male monks and novices giving ordination to women (Varaporn 2004).

Conclusion

Dhammananda Bhikkhuni has long been involved in the work of restoring the bhikkhuni order and introducing it to Thailand. She stands up for the rights of women to exercise the religious vocation for which they, according to the Buddhist scriptures, are qualified. She wants to resume the bhikkhuni order that was once established thanks to the struggle of the first bhikkhuni, Mahapajapati. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni has begun to establish a Thai bhikkhuni community and the first bhikkhuni-ordination has already taken place at her temple in Thailand. On the individual level, ordained women do achieve acceptance and veneration from groups of lay people and there are examples of individual monks who are supportive of female ascetics. However, on the structural level, both mae chiis and bhikkhunis are totally excluded from the sources of institutionalized power and prestige.

The objective of establishing a bhikkhuni order in Thailand might be conceived as the most obvious way to tackle the inequity in Thai Buddhism. This presents a doctrinal answer to the quest for religious rights – and a traditional one, in that the bhikkhuni order is integral to Buddhism as established by the Buddha. However, a female monks’ order has never existed in Thailand, and the establishment of one would bring about structural changes, not only in the religious realm but also for gender relations in society in general. The effort to establish a bhikkhuni order would certainly be regarded as threatening to the Buddhist monastic orders, since the bhikkhunis would demand entrance to the sangha. Other threats to the sangha are that its central position in Thai society has been weakened in recent decades and that it is no longer under the strict control of politicians and hence is less important for the legitimization of political leaders. That does not mean that people have necessarily become less religious over the decades. However, many are now looking for new religious affiliations outside the state-sponsored sangha (see Jackson 1997: 76, Tanabe and Keyes 2002: 8).

In contrast to the bhikkhunis, the Thai nuns – mae chiis – do not confront the sangha by seeking formal entrance into the congregation. They
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struggle to achieve legal recognition in their capacity as mae chii without being part of the sangha, which they consider a disadvantage, since that would make them subordinate to the monks in the sangha. However, if the sangha were to accept the bhikkhuni as part of their membership and provide bhikkhuni training, it is likely that more Thai nuns would become interested in seeking bhikkhuni ordination.

The current movement to introduce full ordination for Buddhist women involves a significant reconstruction of religious traditions. The global process of attaining legitimization for female monks is effecting changes in attitudes and institutions in various monastic communities (see also Milwertz and Bu Wei, this volume). However, introducing bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand entails institutionalizing and according official recognition to a female order that has already taken root outside the Thai tradition because of the requirement that the ordination of women must be carried out by both female and male monks. This would complicate the sangha's relationships within the nation and also within the patriarchal international Buddhist community.

Notes

1 Sangha is the monastic community of Buddhist monks and novices in Thailand.

2 Mae chii is the Thai term for women who shave their heads and brows, wear white robes and receive ordination as eight- or ten-precept Buddhist female ascetics. Samaneri is the Pali term for female Buddhist novice. Bhikkhuni is the Pali term for a fully ordained female Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition. The two sisters mentioned in the text did not receive dual ordination.

3 I shall use the term mae chii interchangeably with 'nun' and bhikkhuni interchangeably with 'female monk'.

4 The project was supported by the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research (FRN), the Swedish Humanities Research Council (HSFR) and Svenska Sällskapet för Geografi (SSAG). See Lindberg Falk 2002, 2007. I am currently working with two gender-related research projects in Thailand. One is financially supported by Sida/SAREC and the other by the Swedish Research Council, VR.

5 Bhikkhuni is a Pali term used in the Theravada tradition, while Bhiksuni is a Sanskrit term used in the Mahayana tradition.
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Dharmaguptakā is the name of the order that leads back to the Dharmagupta. Dharmagupta was one of the earliest Buddhist schools in India and the Dharmagupta lineage is thought by some scholars to be a forerunner of the Theravada School. Others consider it a sub-branch of Theravada Buddhism.

The word *Dhamma* (Pali) has many meanings. It generally refers to the Buddhist view of the nature of things; the teachings of the Buddha.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Consciousness-Raising among and beyond Women’s Movement Activists in China

CECILIA MILWERTZ and BU WEI

Since the late 1980s, the women’s movement in the People’s Republic of China has been extended to include non-governmental women’s organizations. These organizations, as well as networks and small informal groups, are engaged in ongoing processes of questioning, exposing and transforming gender norms and patterns in Chinese society. This chapter documents feminist practice by exploring how activists in non-governmental women’s organizing in Beijing first create and then disseminate new knowledge to challenge gender inequality and injustice. Feminist political action is forged through the construction of new consciousness and identities at the collective level (Roseneil 1995), and we are concerned with the micro level of local feminism, developed in a context of international and transnational interaction. We examine knowledge and identity formation processes among activists in women’s groups in Beijing and how these can constitute the foundation for activism. Collective identities are formed within activist communities, but are shaped relationally by both internal and external forces (Robnett 2002).

In China, internal political change since the late 1970s has provided opportunities for organizing, while politically determined boundaries continually limit the scope of activism. In terms of external forces, the engagement of China in the international United Nations system and the transnational interaction among women’s organizations has played, and continues to play, a prominent role in inspiring the base of knowledge and action in new forms of organizing. We focus on examples of the transformation of activists’ knowledge and practices that take place in the course of
their encounter with alternative discourses and practices introduced from abroad (cf. Chapter 4, on how Buddhist nuns in Thailand were inspired by the actions of nuns in India). The new knowledge created in social movements includes both new basic worldview assumptions and new knowledge on specific topics and issues (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), and activists bear new ideas that are disseminated to the surrounding society.

The consciousness-raising practices that we describe are basically similar to those that take place in feminist movements in other Asian countries as well as in other parts of the world. Importantly, these processes are at once firmly rooted in and related to local experience. We recognize that the political and cultural context of organizing is also particular to China, and that activists manoeuvre (see also Chapter 6 in this volume on Chinese women mayors) and strategize in ways that are specific in their locations when they disseminate their new knowledge broadly within the society (see for example Du 2001, Gao 2001, Milwertz and Bu forthcoming). Some of the forms of gender subordination, discrimination and marginalization which activists address are specific to China. However, the processes of recognizing inequality and taking action to create change are in many ways similar to those seen in many other places. While we touch briefly upon political constraints on the dissemination of oppositional knowledge, our main focus is on these consciousness-raising and knowledge-creation processes.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the establishment of non-governmental organizing to address gender equality issues and an introduction to two organizations – the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group and the Queer Woman Group. Next, we shall examine the process of consciousness-raising at the level of the individual activist. We are concerned with how new ideas are created by individual social movement activists in collective processes. In the third section of the chapter, we shall focus on an example of how new ideas, inspired by international and transnational interaction, are disseminated to the general public. The case we explore is a website set up by an NGO – the Network for Combating Domestic Violence. We shall look at how the website – ideally – is used to disseminate new interpretations of violence against women in Chinese society.3 We shall address two aspects of the process of organizing: the formation of individual knowledge and identity in a collective process and the dissemination of new knowledge beyond movement organizations. We shall show how processes that challenge dominant gender understandings in society, redefine interpretations of gender equality issues and name the unnamed are both the starting point for and the intended outcome of activism to create social change.
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Background – Non-Governmental Organizing
The new non-governmental organizations in Beijing developed as an extension of the women’s studies that began to be established by the All China Women’s Federation (a nationwide organization that works in close collaboration with the party-state) and by academics at universities across the country in the early to mid-1980s. These women’s studies and the new non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are part of the new wave of the Chinese women’s movement that also includes the All China Women’s Federation as an important actor (Milwertz 2002, Wesoky 2002). The economic reforms (starting in 1978) have led to new and increased international and transnational interaction in many fields other than those directly related to changes in the economy. In this context, links and streams of inspiration and influence have increasingly been created between the Chinese women’s movement and women’s movements in other parts of the world – primarily Asia, North America, and Western Europe. One particular event, the convening of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, played a major role in bringing activists and academics from the Chinese movement into international and transnational interaction and collaboration with women’s and gender studies and organizing for gender equality (Zhang 2004). At the previous UN Women’s Conferences, the People’s Republic of China had been represented by official delegations whose primary concern was foreign policy related issues. With the exception of a presentation by the official delegation at the 1985 Nairobi Conference NGO Forum, China was not represented at the NGO Forums (ibid). Although there were severe restrictions on Chinese participation at the 1995 Women’s Conference NGO Forum, it was a breakthrough that a limited number of academics and activists from NGOs were able to take part. Moreover, one NGO – the Women’s Research Institute – even succeeded in convening a workshop. In sum, since the late 1980s, new organizations have been established, the monopoly of the Women’s Federation on representing women has been challenged, and increased international and transnational interaction is playing a role in introducing new ideas, interpretations and practices to the women’s movement in China.

In the next section of the chapter, we shall base our exploration on published accounts of activism from two women’s groups established in the 1990s in Beijing – the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group and the Queer Women Group. We use these two accounts because they explicitly focus on individual and collective processes of consciousness-raising and knowledge change in a transnational exchange context. The East Meets West
Feminist Translation Group was established in 1993 by a group of about ten Chinese and non-Chinese, bilingual women in Beijing. Their aim was to take part in preparations for the United Nations Women’s Conference by translating English language texts from the Euro-American second-wave women’s movements to Chinese. The objective was to introduce the history and issues of those movements to a Chinese audience in order to bridge the cultural and terminological gaps created by different social and political structures and histories in China and the West. According to Ge Youli and Susie Jolly (2001), two activists who have written about the establishment and development of the group, they believed that their ‘...translation work would facilitate the creation of a common language and common conceptual framework between Chinese women and women internationally, so that substantive learning, sharing and networking would be possible’ (Ge and Jolly 2001: 63).

It is fascinating that a small group of about ten Chinese and other women meeting in Beijing were confident that they could make a difference – that they could create change in a nation with a population of 1.3 billion through their activism. They believed that ten activists’ translation and publication of English language feminist articles would play a role in facilitating – across immense cultural and political differences – China’s involvement in the Women’s Conference. This may have been naïve. However, since the 1980s, women’s movement activists in China, including the East Meets West Group, have in fact played a role in questioning gendered interpretations of such issues as divorce, sex education, domestic violence, sexual harassment and prostitution in Chinese society. The second group we look at here is the Queer Women Group – a group of lesbians that started meeting in 1995–96 and became more formally established in 1998. The aim of the women in this group was to share their personal experiences in a non-condemning environment. When they started organizing broader social movement activities, several of these were carried out in collaboration with gays. In 1997, a Queer Pager Hotline offering advice to gays and lesbians was set up, and in 1998 the First National Queer Conference was held in Beijing, attended by thirty women and men from several provinces in the People’s Republic of China, as well as from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries. In the autumn of 1998, the First National Queer Women Conference was held in Beijing, and in 1999 lesbians began to publish the magazine – Sky (Tiankong). These were indeed incredible achievements in a setting where homosexuals risked imprisonment and forced treatment at mental hospitals. Homosexuality has not been listed as a crime in the People’s Republic of China. No law has recognized or prohibited homosexuality. However, as noted in the mid-1990s by Frank Dikötter (1995:
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145) ‘... similar to masturbation or chicken pox, it [homosexuality] is interpreted as an acquired aberration or a temporary disease which should be eliminated.’ Homosexuals could be arrested under a ‘hooliganism’ (liumang) clause in the Criminal Law until reform in 1997 removed this provision. In April 2001 the Chinese Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder. This meant that rather than being officially treated as a ‘perversion’ requiring psychiatric care, homosexuality was re-categorized as something similar to an ‘identity crisis’ (Lusby 2003).

In writing about the birth and existence of the East Meets West Group, activist Susie Jolly emphasizes two factors that made organizing possible. First, that a political space was created due to the relaxation of the general political attitude combined with the holding of the Women’s Conference in China. Second, she points to the role of the ‘enthusiasm, commitment and resources of several women’ as important for both the establishment and continued existence of the group. There is general recognition in studies of new forms of women’s organizing in the 1980s–90s that the emergence of an enlarged political space creating opportunities for organizing from below is linked to China’s opening up economically and the corresponding, albeit somewhat restricted, greater political tolerance (Howell 1995, Hsiung, Jaschok and Milwertz with Chan 2001, Yang 1999). Additionally, it is recognized that the holding of the UN Women’s Conference in China meant that the leadership felt pressure from international constituencies to prove its commitment to non-governmental organizing for women’s rights. Focus on the second factor identified – activist enthusiasm, commitment and resources – has primarily taken the form of non-academic participant accounts (see, for example, edited volumes by Wong 1995, Wang 1995, Li 2000).

In addition to these two accounts, the chapter is based on material derived from our study of 1990s and early 2000s non-governmental organizing in Beijing addressing the issue of domestic violence. Our study examines non-governmental organizing in terms of the three entities: organizations, activists and activities. Data-collection, undertaken from 2000 to 2002, included: 1) interviews conducted with initiators/directors of twenty-two Beijing organizations, groups, and networks and women’s studies centres; 2) quantitative interviews with 180 activists on their activism within these organizations, and 3) case studies of six organizations engaged in addressing domestic violence. We carried out interviews with leading activists in each of these organizations. In this chapter we draw mainly on material from our study of one of these organizations – the Network for Combating
Domestic Violence. As one of the authors of this chapter, Bu Wei, is also manager of the Network website, we approach our study of the website from both outsider and insider positions. In the following, we shall look more closely at the processes of knowledge development generated by and generating activist enthusiasm, commitment and resources.

New Awareness of Gender Issues: Collective Consciousness-Raising and the Individual Activist

Consciousness raising is an internal organizational practice that has reached activists in China from the second-wave Euro-American women's movements. Consciousness raising entails the sharing of personal experience as a means to shifting the locus of problems from the private to the public sphere in order to recognise that what has been perceived as the problems of individuals at a personal level are in fact problems at a societal level. The phrase ‘the personal is political’, which was central to Euro-American second-wave women’s movements, is linked to the practice of consciousness-raising. In the process of consciousness-raising, participants’ experience is valued as the main source of knowledge development, and consciousness-raising is a mode of transforming and transgressing pre-existing forms of consciousness and identity (Agger 1977, Ryan 1992). Li Xiaojiang (1999), a prominent pioneer in women’s studies in China, has argued that there are problems encountered in the process of using Western discourse to address Chinese situations and that some aspects of Western feminism are irrelevant and can even cause confusion and damage to the new feminist movement in China. According to Li Xiaojiang, it is potentially harmful to introduce the slogan of ‘the personal is political’ to China. She has argued that in the past half century, politics was felt everywhere in society and the personal was, without exception, considered political in the sense that nothing was private (Li 1999: 275, Milwertz 2004).

The discrimination against homosexuals in Chinese society, as just described, illustrates that Li Xiaojiang’s concern with the degree of interference into the personal lives of citizens is indeed relevant. In relation to activism against domestic violence, there is a discussion among activists on the degree to which authorities such as the police and medical personnel should be encouraged to intervene into the private sphere of people’s lives. Some organizations and groups advocate the need for such intervention. They distinguish between intervention to protect victims of domestic violence and the type of intervention to which homosexuals have been subjected, where the aim was to achieve a normative gender order. Meanwhile,
other activists and academics are critical of any form of renewed intervention into people’s private lives only a few years after a significant retreat by the party-state from the private sphere and the establishment for Chinese citizens of increased possibilities for individual choice.6

The examples of the East Meets West Group and the Queer Woman Group illustrate how the practice of consciousness-raising in the sense of valuing individual experience together with the adoption of the concept of gender from international exchange have transformed activists’ identities and knowledge. Furthermore, consciousness-raising has led to a commitment to social change and to new action to effectuate change. In these two groups, the process of developing new identities and knowledge took the individual activist as a starting point. Although the East Meets West Group was defined as a translation group, according to activist Ge Youli the group began its meetings by reflecting ‘upon who we were, what in our lives had made us realise we were women, and why we were attracted to feminist issues’ (Ge and Jolly 2001: 64). About these sessions, Ge Youli writes:

They were important to me because they helped me to see a pattern in women’s lives. Regardless of who we were or where we originated, East or West, almost all of our awareness of being female was associated with some degree of discrimination and humiliation. (Ibid.)

For example, Ge Youli describes the different ways in which she and her brother were treated when they were children and how she ‘did not have the words or expressions to say clearly what it was and how it worked on me’ (ibid.). Moreover, she writes, and this is where the role of international influence as a catalyst to creating new knowledge becomes visible:

I came to acquire words and concepts such as gender discrimination, gender stereotype, gender roles and gendered structure. I began to put things in perspective, a gender perspective. I was amazed at the effectiveness and forcefulness of these English words in describing and deconstructing women’s secondary position in families and societies. (Ibid.)

He Xiaopei has had somewhat similar experiences concerning the usefulness of naming experiences both within the Queer Woman Group and in terms of experiences of people linked to the group. She writes:

Some people said, ‘Are we sick?’; ‘Why should we change?’; ‘Can heterosexuals change?’ And some people told of their own experience, and of the suffering they went through in pretending to be heterosexual.
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Everyone had much to say, and was bursting to say it all at once. I felt that actually our experience provides the best answers. Through this kind of training we taught ourselves. (He 2001: 46)

Some people were not very clear about their sexual orientation. For example, a woman tongzhi [queer, gay, lesbian] living in Guangzhou who was already married and had a child, had never heard of the word ‘homosexual’, and never thought about homosexuality. One day she came across the English word ‘lesbian’ on the internet, and understood what homosexuality was. (Ibid.: 41–42)

The small groups provided a sense of unity and shared experience. The importance of grounding organizing activities in personal experience as the starting point for analysis of gender inequality as well as the link to activism that goes beyond the activists themselves is emphasised in the work of the group. He Xiaopei writes:

Through the hotline, we further understood the problems we faced. Through helping others, we sparked our own consciousness ... The hotline training was the best way for us to organise and teach ourselves. Through the hotline we could work together, understand our own issues, and help ourselves and others. (Ibid.: 48)

We have moved from being alone to helping each other, from struggling for survival to seeking liberation, from rescuing ourselves to liberating others. As people’s consciousness is raised, and social progress continues, our organisations will grow, and we will in future attain equal rights to existence. (Ibid.: 58)

Finally, He Xiaopei writes about how the process of starting from individual experience is part of the development of collective consciousness:

Women tongzhi activities made us feel we were a collective, not just independent individuals. In women tongzhi discussions, the atmosphere was free, relaxed, with no tension or pressure ... Often organising activities made us more united and stronger. (Ibid.: 52–53)

What, then, has been the role of international and transnational exchange in this process? Li Xiaojiang is probably right in fearing the direct copying of Euro-American feminist practices to China. Whether or not attempts at such copying have actually taken place or whether attempts at imposing certain agendas have actually worked is another matter. It is a bizarre historical coincidence that the second-wave women’s movements adopted consciousness-raising from the Chinese revolutionary practice of ‘speaking...
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bitterness’ and ‘speaking pain to recall pain’ that they had read about in William Hinton’s (1967) book *Fanshen* about the Chinese revolution (Agger 1977, Ryan 1992, Milwertz 2004). However, the history of the practice of consciousness-raising travelling from China to Europe and North America in the 1960s and back to China again in the 1990s show that international exchange in the form of influence and inspiration can be a creative and ongoing back-and-forth process. The practices of the East Meets West Group and the Queer Women Group illustrate that international exchange has been used as inspiration. It has been creatively formed to suit the needs of activists in China and has played a role in their cognitive praxis of transforming identities and consciousness.

Activists are aware of the accusation that they have merely adopted outside knowledge and practices that are inappropriate for the Chinese context. They have acknowledged outside inspiration, but they have also defined themselves separately from ‘foreign imperialists.’ This is illustrated by the following quote concerning the fact that early lesbian organising in Beijing took place in the homes of non-Chinese. He Xiaopei writes:

... because foreigners are not afraid of coming out, they have the material conditions to provide a place for activities, and also experience of organizing, so they often took the initiative in organizing activities. That is how women tongzhi activities started. But our activities were criticised by some for being centred round foreigners, imperialist-led, etc. I am happy to hear such criticisms, because we do indeed need our own Chinese women tongzhi organizations and leadership, but we also welcome help and support from foreign ‘imperialists’ with experience and enthusiasm. I believe that without the help of these foreign imperialists, sooner or later we would have established our own organization, but because of their support, the women tongzhi organization emerged a few years earlier than we might have otherwise, and our sisters received support a bit sooner. I am also happy to see that the present organization does not have foreigners as leaders, but instead local leaders. (He 2001: 56)

In summing up the dilemma of engaging in transnational interaction and the inherent potential risk of being co-opted into forms of activism that do not suit the contexts in which activists are working, He Xiaopei also notes: ‘... I wonder if we should not be grateful to the “early imperialist leadership” of the women tongzhi organisation. If not, then maybe we should even stop using the American imperialist internet’ (ibid.). In fact, the internet is increasingly being used by women’s NGO’s for internal communication among organizations in different parts of the country. The internet is also being used
to disseminate new gender knowledge to Chinese society in general in order to change gender discriminating and subordinating attitudes and practices. An interesting contrast to the way in which women’s movement activists have viewed experiences and knowledge from other parts of the world as a useful inspirational element to their local activism can be seen in the nationalistic interpretations by Chinese ‘establishment intellectuals’ of the threat posed to Chinese culture by the invasion of Western consumer culture and liberal ideology via new information technologies (Lagerkvist 2003). Women’s movement activists have not only adopted globally recognized interpretations of domestic violence as a public, gender issue, they are also using internet technology to document and challenge patterns of gender inequality. In the following section, we shall describe an ideal example of how the Network for Combating Domestic Violence uses the internet to disseminate the new knowledge created by activists to overcome the invisibility of violence against women and the taken-for-granted character of gender-based oppression.

**Disseminating New Interpretations of Domestic Violence to Promote Consciousness-Raising**

In the 1990s, several non-governmental women’s organizations in Beijing began to address the issue of domestic violence. The Jinglun Family Centre attempted to set up a shelter for battered women, the Women’s Hotline (established by the Women’s Research Institute) provided psychological counselling to victims of violence, while two centres set up by lawyers – the Centre for Women’s Legal Services and Law Studies and the Women’s Legal Service Centre – provided legal counselling by telephone hotline and also helped women to take their cases to court. In 2000, activism against domestic violence was consolidated in a new organization called the Network for Combating Domestic Violence, established jointly by several Beijing NGOs (Milwertz 2002, 2003, 2004). These NGO activities were part of an ongoing general redefinition and shifting of the issue of domestic violence in China from the private and semi-private to the fully public sphere of society. This change has been strongly influenced by both government and NGO engagement since the 1990s in activities that have taken place on an international and transnational basis since the 1970s. These activities started with the second-wave women’s movements’ identification of domestic violence as a public issue. They continued with the focus (at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights) on violence against women as a human rights issue (Pietilä 2002). More recently, these activities led to the inclusion of domestic violence in the 1995 Women’s Conference Platform for
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Action Document, where domestic violence is identified as one of twelve areas requiring action by governments, the international community and civil society actors (United Nations 1996). In terms of legislation, the increased focus on domestic violence as a public issue is reflected in the inclusion of a concept of domestic violence for the first time in national level Chinese legislation in the revised 2001 Marriage Law.

When the Network for Combating Domestic Violence was set up, it included three areas of activity. First, through a series of sub-projects, the Network aimed to undertake systematic research to understand the nature, causes and consequences of domestic violence in China. Second, the Network aimed to explore effective intervention models related to domestic violence through urban, rural and medical community projects in collaboration with local Women’s Federations in Beijing Municipality and districts within the municipality, as well as with police and doctors. Finally, based on knowledge acquired from research and community intervention, the project aimed to make policy recommendations to the government of China on how to legislate on and prevent domestic violence in order to guarantee women’s human rights in China. The Network was initially established by four Beijing NGOs. However, by the end of 2002 and the first three-year period of activities, the Network had expanded nation-wide with members in seventeen provinces across China. The members outside of Beijing include non-governmental women’s organizations and women and gender studies centres at academic institutions. Meanwhile, most members are provincial and lower levels of the All China Women’s Federation system. The Network for Combating Domestic Violence has used gender training and media interaction as two important means of disseminating information on domestic violence. The aim is to provide new knowledge to prevent domestic violence and to advocate for new intervention practices among network members, professional groups and the media. Elsewhere, we have discussed the use of gender training as a means of disseminating oppositional knowledge on domestic violence as a gender and human rights issue (Milwertz and Bu 2007), and we have discussed how activists legitimize their promotion of oppositional gender knowledge and experiment with forms of communication (Milwertz and Bu forthcoming). In the following, we shall examine how the Network, by offering new interpretations of domestic violence, aims to promote consciousness-raising processes beyond the social movement to the population in general.

Media interaction

Non-governmental women’s organizations collaborate with many party-state institutions. The organizations are legally required to affiliate and
register with party-state institutions and they also do so to gain legitimacy. In addition, the organizations collaborate with party-state institutions such as, for example, the All China Women’s Federation, the Trade Union, the State Family Planning Commission and the State Education Commission. Cooperation with one particular party-state institution – the mass media – has been extremely important to the development of non-governmental women’s organizing. As is the case in other countries, activists are dependent on the media to transmit their activities to the general public and the authorities. Interaction between NGOs and the media, and the way in which activists in the NGOs use the media, is often mediated by activists who are employed by party-state media institutions (Milwertz 2002). Our study of non-governmental women’s organizing in Beijing shows that one fourth of activists are employed by newspapers, magazines and journals, radio and television and thus can exploit their employment positions in order to promote the social movement agenda in the non-disruptive mode of action adopted by non-governmental women’s organizing in China.

The Network for Combating Domestic Violence has formalized this practice of NGO interaction with the media by assigning the task of developing and maintaining contacts between the Network and the media to the Women’s Media Watch Network – one of the organizations that set up the Network. The Media Watch Network was established in 1996 to promote gender equality by monitoring gender-biased media reporting (Cai, Feng and Guo 2001). In relation to the Network for Combating Domestic Violence the Media Watch Network has two main roles to play. First, its role is to participate in and report on project activities and to raise public awareness of domestic violence. This is done through mass media coverage in the various media by which activists are employed, and by passing on information about project activities to journalists in other media. A second role is to mainstream an understanding of domestic violence as a gender power issue. This is done by providing gender training on domestic violence for journalists and editors.

The Stop Domestic Violence website

In addition to the work of the Media Watch Network, the Network for Combating Domestic Violence has established an alternative media in the form of a website. Websites are commonly set up by NGOs around the world, and Chinese organizations have adopted this practice as internet access has increased especially in urban China. The main objective of the Network website is to provide a platform for disseminating domestic
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violence information within and beyond the network of organizations in Beijing and across the country. The Network targets and interacts with three external user groups: the general public, the media and the victims of domestic violence. Direct website use by the general public is not a main aim of the website, as only a minority of the Chinese population have internet access. In 2001 when the website was established, only one per cent had internet access (China Internet Network Information Centre 2002). Services for victims of domestic violence are not the main aim either, although the website increasingly receives letters from victims of domestic violence, thus illustrating that they have a need for information and advice. The website has focused on the mainstream mass media as its most important external target group. The Network provides information to the media on domestic violence issues in order to influence both the media itself and – through the media – society as a whole. The aims are:

1) To provide interactive resources on domestic violence through the website.

2) To encourage the media to make use of this information in order to reach out to the general public.

3) To introduce intervention practices in a context where the dominant view of domestic violence is that it is a private issue that does not merit or require public intervention.

Thus, the main objective of the website is to provide information and to reach out to the population in general through the media. The need for information aimed at the media has been documented by several studies. According to studies by Media Watch journalists, the mainstream mass media in China in the 1990s was more or less silent on the issue of domestic violence. When not silent, it tended to purport misunderstandings about the problem. Based on an investigation of newspaper reports on domestic violence from 1991–98, journalists GuoYanqiu and Cai Yiping (2000) identified several weaknesses in mainstream media reports. These included denial by the media of domestic violence as a social problem either by failing to report on the issue or by exaggerating or dramatizing domestic violence stories. According to their study, domestic violence was often depicted as an extreme situation of utter brutality. This implied that domestic violence was an uncommon situation which affected only a minority of individuals. Moreover, the media tended to blame the women victims. Such blaming was also shown in a study of media coverage of domestic violence in legal newspapers from nine provinces and cities (Wang 2000).
A great increase in media coverage of domestic violence has taken place since the 1995 Women's Conference. However, according to activists, in accordance with the general perception of such violence in Chinese society, the media mainly depicts domestic violence as a private matter. The Stop Domestic Violence Website aims to break the silence on domestic violence. Based on a gendered analysis of men’s domestic violence against women, the website provides the public with an alternative perspective by offering interpretations of domestic violence as a public matter. This implies challenging dominant understandings of the issue. Due to the inferior status traditionally ascribed to women in Chinese societies (Hong Kong, the PRC and Taiwan), aggression towards women is often viewed as acceptable if exercised in order to preserve family harmony (Tang et al., 2002). Through learning processes that have changed their knowledge and understanding of domestic violence, activists have come to challenge such perceptions. As we have elaborated elsewhere, activists in Beijing did not plan to address the issue of domestic violence (Milwertz and Bu 2007). They began to collect data in order to study the nature and extent of the phenomenon when they were ‘accidentally’ confronted with incidents of violence by women who sought the services provided by their organizations. This happened in a context where they were also being introduced to understandings of domestic violence that had been developed by the second-wave women’s movement since the 1970s. Their own research and their introduction to internationally acknowledged understandings of domestic violence as linked to unequal gender relations led to new interpretations of domestic violence in China. They now saw it as a public issue meriting legal intervention. The main aims of the Network for Combating Domestic Violence – to achieve national level legislation on domestic violence, the establishment of intervention models and a radical change of attitude to domestic violence throughout Chinese society – are all based on a gender analysis of domestic violence. A core Network principle is that activities should be based on a gender perspective. Network leaders emphasize that promoting gender as an analytical tool is a long-term and arduous task. The entire Network does not automatically and immediately understand or agree with a gender perspective and gender training of all network participants (old and new) in an ongoing and continuous process. The website plays an important role in carrying out this internal task by providing material that is aimed at inspiring consciousness-raising processes such as those described in the first section of this chapter. At the same time, website information targets the media.
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Ideal functioning of the website

The Network for Combating Domestic Violence cannot direct or control the extent to which the mainstream mass media is actually willing to use the information provided by its website, nor is it possible to measure the degree to which the website is accessed by journalists. However, there are examples of how interaction with the mainstream media has successfully been achieved. The All China Women’s Federation newspaper, Chinese Women’s News, uses information from the website. There are also examples of the English language newspaper China Daily, covering cases brought to public attention by the Network. Mass media reporting on the play The Vagina Monologues in 2002 provides an example of how the website ideally aims to function.

The Vagina Monologues originates in the USA and is written by journalist and writer Eve Ensler (1998). The play is linked to V-Day, which is a non-profit organization started in 1998. This organization distributes funds to grassroots, national and international organizations and programs that work to stop violence against women and girls. In the performance, one or several actresses narrate women’s experiences and feelings related to their vaginas. The play challenges negative images and connotations related to women and their bodies and it challenges violence against women. The underlying assumption is that if the word ‘vagina’ is not pronounced and made open and visible, the sexual violence enacted towards women’s bodies will also remain unseen, unrecognized and secret. The point of the performance is that by saying the word ‘vagina’ out loud, women’s shame and fear and the violence against them can be challenged. The play aims to break the silence and shift sexual violence, which is considered secret, private, and shameful, into the public domain and start a discussion about sexual oppression. The play is the centrepiece of annual V-Day events on college campuses and in theatres in cities around the world on or around Valentine’s Day. The ‘V’ in V-Day stands for Valentine, Victory over Violence and Vagina. During February–March in 2002, over 800 productions of the play took place to raise awareness for V-Day (Vagina Monologue websites).

One of these performances took place in Shanghai on 22 March 2002. The performance was in English and it was, as far as we know, the first performance in mainland China. Because the profits from the performance were being donated to the Network for Combating Domestic Violence, two representatives from the organization were invited to attend the performance in Shanghai. Following the performance, the Stop Domestic Violence Website carried an article introducing V-day and the play, as well
as interviews with the Shanghai actresses. This article led to telephone calls from journalists in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, who wished to publish the website article in various mainstream media. However, because the word ‘vagina’ appeared in the article, they did not want to publish the full text for fear of being accused of transgressing the boundaries of morally appropriate reporting. Finally, the website manager agreed that the mainstream media could publish the article with revisions and exclusion of the word ‘vagina’. Instead of using the word vagina, the articles were about the ‘V’ monologues. San Lian Life Weekly (Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan) interviewed the author of the website article and reported on the play (6 April, 2002). China Women’s News published two thirds of the article (10 September 2002) as well as a commentary. Then the English version of the magazine China Women and the magazine Public Health (Dazhong Jiankang Zazhi) also published parts of the article. This story of how an article on the website was disseminated to the mainstream media is an example of how the website ideally aims to function: it successfully managed to disseminate alternative views on women’s bodies and violence against women based on new knowledge of gender that challenges the dominant gender order.

Concluding Remarks

Non-governmental women’s groups and organizations in Beijing and other parts of China started their activities in the 1980s and 1990s by addressing specific issues such as unemployment, prostitution, and rural–urban migration. Gradually, in the course of addressing such issues and influenced by international and transnational interaction, some of these organizations came to challenge basic assumptions of the gender relations that underlie such issues. In our study of Beijing-based non-governmental organizations engaged in addressing domestic violence, we see individual and collective knowledge formation processes similar to those described by activists from the two groups presented in the first section of this chapter (Milwertz and Bu 2007). Inspiration for processes of consciousness-raising and generation of new gender knowledge have come from a variety of sources, including for example meetings, training courses, travel abroad, translated books and articles and materials written by other activists. Our study focused on activism against domestic violence. None of the interviewed activists, who now view domestic violence as a public issue requiring legislation for the protection of victims and/or those who subscribe to a gender-power relations interpretation of domestic violence, had these ideas when they began to address the issue. As one activist who encountered domestic violence in
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the 1980s both through her work as a journalist and among her colleagues said, ‘This [violence] was all near to me, but at that time I did not think of this as domestic violence. I thought of this as a couple not getting along.’ In other words, domestic violence was perceived of as ‘normal’ and a private issue rather than as an aberration requiring intervention, until consciousness-raising and learning processes changed such perceptions (Milwertz and Bu 2007).

These various aspects of activism are elements in an ongoing process of non-governmental organizing, regardless of whether they involve consciousness-raising or the use of a website that disseminates new interpretations of domestic violence in order to challenge dominant discourses and practices. These processes shape identity and construct knowledge – and they take place when alternative interpretations are presented which resonate with the activists’ own personal experience – or with experiences gained through activism (Robnett 2002). In the organizing process, outside influences, including the introduction of the concept of gender, have served as catalysts for processes that create knowledge among activists in China. The personal has been named and is being made public and political. New concepts are used to name experiences and emotions that previously had no names. As noted by Deborah Cameron (1998), the political importance of analysing and intervening in language has long been emphasized by feminist activists. Cameron quotes Liz Kelly, who has written that:

[O]ne of the most powerful things feminism has done, and must continue to do, is to create new language and meanings which provide women with ways of naming and understanding their experience … It was our experience of language as a form of power – the power to name and define – which made it such a key issue from the beginnings of this wave of feminism. (Kelly 1994: 48)

Naming an alternative discourse, and – importantly – redefining practices and constructing new meanings, provides the opportunity to accomplish two things, first, to transform individual identity into collective and oppositional identity; and second (for some), to transform collective identity into collective activism. In small groups, such as the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group and the Queer Woman Group, a few women break silences, name their experiences and create new meanings. By using the website to gain mass media coverage of The Vagina Monologues, the Stop Domestic Violence Website potentially functions as a parallel to the small consciousness-raising groups. It does so in the sense that the unspoken is voiced, silences are broken and experiences are renamed and redefined.
This may then set in motion similar processes of challenging dominant gender discriminating and subordinating understandings and interpretations among the recipients of media coverage. This effect is confirmed by chief editor Xie Lihua of the magazine *Rural Women*, who has followed and played an active role in setting the increased media coverage of domestic violence in motion (in both the newspaper *China Women’s News* and in the magazine *Rural Women*) since the 1995 Women’s Conference. She has seen how increased voicing of the issue has given rural women the courage to write letters to the magazine about such violence. She has also experienced how media coverage has made it legitimate to voice experiences of domestic violence and how this has encouraged women all over the country to come forward with their personal stories (interview April 2001). The success of the website in changing the perception of domestic violence from something acceptable to something illegitimate and unacceptable is illustrated by the letters from victims. The writers describe what has happened to them and carefully ask whether the acts of violence that they have experienced can also be defined as domestic violence. Such questions posed by individuals are a first step in consciousness-raising processes that can potentially lead to changing perceptions and practices in society in general as domestic violence is named and its meanings redefined.

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**Notes**

1. In this text we use the term nongovernmental organization synonymously with the Chinese term ‘popular organization’ (*minjian zuzhi*). We define ‘popular’ as bottom-up organizing initiated by the activists themselves, with activities also determined mainly from below by activists. For an elaboration on the definition and use of the term ‘popular organizing,’ see Milwertz 2002.

2. We use ‘international’ to refer to activities between two or more nations. Specifically related to women’s organizing and following Stienstra (2000), we use ‘transnational’ to refer to ‘those sites of resistance where women cross territorial borders to do their work; where crossing of territorial borders includes both physical crossing and the crossing of ideas and practices.'
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3 The full name of the organization during its first three-year working period (2000–2003) was the Project ‘Domestic Violence in China – Research, Intervention and Prevention’. In 2003 the organization started a second three-year funding period and, in line with a change of activities, the name of the organization was changed to the Network for Combating Domestic Violence in China.

4 The following introduction to these two groups is based on Ge and Jolly 2001 and He 2001.


6 A similar suspicion towards interventions into the private domain in the post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe has been noted by Saarinen (2004).

7 The word tongzhi, originally used to translate the Russian word for comrade to Chinese, has been used since 1988 to mean queer, gay or lesbian. The new use of the word started in Hong Kong and has spread to mainland China. As with Anglo-American activists’ adoption of the word queer, an old word was invested with a new meaning (see the lexicon in Hsiung, Jaschok and Milwertz with Chan 2001).

8 See Erwin 2000: 165–66 for an explanation of the historical origins and contemporary use of the practice of ‘speaking bitterness’.

9 See also Chen 1999, Hester 2000, and Wang 1999 on activism against domestic violence in China.

10 The website was opened to the public in November 2001 in connection with the convening of a conference by the Network for Combating Domestic Violence. In Chinese, it can be viewed at http://www.stopdv.org.cn.

11 Some examples of ‘violence against women’ websites that have inspired the Chinese website include http://www.now.org/issue/violence set up by the National Organization for Women, a group of feminist activists in the USA, http://www.aidv-usa.com set up by the American Institute on Domestic Violence as well as Cybergirl Safety Net http://www.cybergirl.com/views/dv. In addition to provision of information on domestic violence, these websites also provide training, telephone and email counseling, domestic violence examination, experience sharing and internet links with other interactive services. For information on the development
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and control of the internet in China, see Ang 2003. For a study of women’s use of the internet in China, see Bu 2003.

12 Within one month of trial operation the website received 2,300 visits. By December 2002, the website had received 25,600 visits.

13 Two major types of information are provided by the website:

1) External information is collected from other sources and is presented in a News Review (Xinwen huigu), a Document Guide (Wenxian zhinan) and a list of Links (Xiangguan wangzhan). The main purpose of these three entities is to provide service to users by collecting and providing easy access to this information.

2) Internal information is generated by the Domestic Violence Project and Network. This information is presented in Newsletters (Xiangmu tongxun), Project Resources (Xiangmu ziyuan), the Domestic Violence Quick Insight (Fanjiabao sucheng) and the Network Express (Wangluo kuaixun).

14 In its first five years, the V-Day movement raised over $14 million, with over $7 million raised in 2002 alone (www.vday.org).

15 St. Valentine, the patron of lovers, is traditionally commemorated on 14 February – particularly in the USA, and increasingly in other countries as the commercialized version of the practice spreads across the world.

16 Here we are not including Hong Kong. The play was also shown here by a theatre group from the Philippines, and a Hong Kong play inspired by The Vagina Monologues was later created and shown by Sealing Cheng (Cheng 2004).

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CHAPTER SIX

Organizing for Change and Empowerment: The Women Mayors’ Association in China

QI WANG

Since the reform unfolded in the early 1980s, the political landscape of the Chinese women’s movement has changed significantly. One of the eye-catching changes is the emergence and proliferation of women’s organizations, especially popular NGOs such as various Women’s Studies Centres and groups at Chinese universities, the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Centre, the Migrant Women’s Club, the Domestic Violence Network and many others (Hsiung et al 2001; Wesoky 2002; Perry 2001; Milwertz 2002). These organizations involve the ‘objective of improving women’s lives, challenging inequality and working to create social change in gender relations’ (Milwertz 2002: 147), and there is a question of ‘female solidarity’ (Croll 2001), since members of these organizations ‘share an overall objective of working for justice and (gender) equality’ (Hsiung et al 2001: 7). No matter how different their organizational structures and relations to the state might be, the activists in these organizations are ‘questioning, challenging, and transforming dominant (gender) identities, consciousness, discourse and knowledge, and they are moving ideological and political boundaries’ (ibid.).

This chapter studies the role of professional women’s organizations, particularly the organizations of women in public life. In the 1980s, Chinese women officials and cadres began to organize themselves (Feng 1997; Howell 1996, 1998; Judd 2002). At the central government level, a soft-ball tennis team came into existence in 1993 and has since functioned as a network...
among women ministers, vice ministers and other officials of ministerial rank including provincial governors (Zhang 1995). The Women Mayors’ Association, founded in 1991, is a nationwide organization for women in mayoral (deputy mayoral) positions and other positions equal to mayoral rank, such as county magistrates and heads of urban districts in big cities. Moreover, organizations of women cadres (mostly called nüganbu lianyihui – Women Cadres’ Society) are established in every one of China’s provinces and municipalities (Ma, interview 2001; Judd 2002). These organizations consist of women cadres in local government institutions, typically at ju (bureau) and chu (department) ranks.

In the following I shall examine in detail the case of the Women Mayors’ Association (WMA). With a membership of 600 (as of 2004), the WMA is the largest organization of women officials to arise in the People’s Republic of China. Also, the WMA is one of the best organized, most active and well-functioning organizations of its kind. A close study of this case will shed light upon the role of professional women’s organizations within the current Chinese women’s movement and help us to understand the nature of organizing by female officials in China.

In this study I shall refrain from applying concepts such as ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist organizing’, given the apparent distance between the feminist principles originating from the second wave of the women’s movement in Europe and North America and the Chinese political reality. Despite the flow of international feminist ideas and practices into China over recent years as a result of China’s opening up, there is still a vast gap between Western feminism and the self-understanding of Chinese women. Many women in China, especially public women, remain critical towards Western feminism. They do not see this as the universal solution to the gender equality question, and their reservations against feminism are rooted in their own life experiences and the socialization process through which they have gone. In Chinese language, the term ‘feminism’ (nüquan zhuyi) carries a derogatory connotation and it is not the sort of vocabulary public women would use to describe themselves and their organizing activities.

The point of departure in this study is to understand the multifaceted consequences of post-Mao political and ideological changes for public women and women’s negotiation for identity, the meaning of gender, resources and power. What is it like to be a woman mayor in China today? How do public women perceive themselves and how are they perceived in the post-Mao gender discourse? What are the challenges, obstacles and constraints with which they are confronted? What are the new possibilities,
spaces in which to manoeuvre and new fields of action that have opened to women in politics? And what strategies has the WMA taken to improve its members’ position and conditions? These are the questions explored by this chapter. In other words, the focus point of this study is not to measure whether the organizing of women mayors in China constitutes a feminist project or not but rather to delineate the political and ideological changes that have made gender organizing possible and examine the role of the WMA in facilitating change and empowerment on behalf of its members.

The study is based on the author’s six-month fieldwork research in China in the period from 2000 to 2002, using semi-structured interviews, a survey and participant observation. During this period, I made three trips to China and interviewed the leaders of the Women Mayors’ Association, the China Mayor’s Association, the leaders of the All-China Women’s Federation, and 28 women mayors and deputy mayors. In the summer of 2001, I conducted a survey of the WMA members in cooperation with the Secretariat of the Women Mayors’ Association and the Sociological Institute of Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences. The number of valid answers was 51. In 2000, I participated in the Second Economic Theory Class for Women Mayors in China, which took place in Guangzhou, and spent a whole week together with more than forty women mayors and vice-mayors. The project was financed by the Danish Social Science Research Council as a two-year postdoctoral project.

Post-Mao Urban Development and the Rise of Women Mayors

As far as gender equality in politics is concerned, the post-Mao era presents a rather gloomy picture. Since the 1980s, women’s participation had declined at all levels. The proportion of women in the CCP Central Committee dropped from 11.4 per cent in 1977 to 4.1 per cent in 1982. The number of women delegates in China’s national assembly, the National People’s Congress, shrank as well, albeit to a less dramatic degree. From its height at 22.6 in 1975, the percentage of women delegates decreased to about 21 around 1978 and fell further to about 20 per cent in 2003 (China Statistics Bureau 2004).

Several aspects of the post-Mao political changes, as Judd rightfully points out, have been disadvantageous to women’s political participation at higher levels (Judd 2002: 175). These include the retreat of the party-state from direct sponsorship of women’s participation in politics, the departure from Maoist policies, the official ridicule of the Cultural Revolution including the gains women had achieved in the political area, the proc-
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ess of political decentralization which was inaugurated to allow a higher
degree of local autonomy in political selection and cadre management,
the reshuffling of leadership which took place in the early 1980s, replacing
Maoist leaders with reform adherents, and the introduction of competitive
mechanisms in leadership selection, such as elections, multiple-candidate

Mayors (and deputy mayors) head China’s municipal governments, the
administrative layer below the provinces and above the prefectures/counties. At this level, women’s participation followed the opposite course.
During the Cultural Revolution, although women in general were ‘swept ...
... even more deeply into the sea of politics’ (Howell 2002: 45), only a few
women were found in the leadership of China’s municipalities. Since the
end of the Cultural Revolution and the inauguration of the reform policy,
however, the number of women in mayoral positions has been in steady
growth. As of 1989, there were 150 women mayors and deputy mayors (out
of a total of nearly three thousand) in China’s 467 cities (Rosen 1995: 325).
In 1992, the number had grown to 200 (Wang 1992). By 2001, the number
of women mayors and deputy mayors across the country had reached 480
(SWMA 2001) and, by 2004, there were about 600 women in China car-
rying a mayoral or deputy mayoral title. They formed the biggest group of
female officials that has ever appeared in contemporary China.

This increase can be attributed to several factors. One is the accelera-
tion of the urbanization process. At the early stages of the reform period in
the 1980s, the official strategy was one of ‘controlling the growth of the big
cities, moderately developing medium-sized cities and actively promoting
the growth of small-sized cities’ (Chan and Yao 1999: 269). In 1986, rural
urbanization was advocated as a means of containing the out-migration of
rural peasants to big cities. Since then a large number of rural counties have
been converted into cities. The total number of cities in China has jumped
from 188 in 1976 to 353 in 1986 and then to 668 in 1997, registering a growth
of 246 per cent over 20 years (Chung 1999). The conversion of former rural
areas into cities has created more mayoral job vacancies.

Second, in order to broaden the constituency of municipal govern-
ments, China has advocated the participation of non-party persons (wu),
intellectuals (zhi), minorities (shao) and women (niu) in city management
since the mid-1980s. The designation of the four target groups symbolizes
the readiness of the ruling party, the CCP, to lift restrictions on political
participation based on class, ethnic and gender classifications. Women are
among the four target groups, primarily because gender equality has been
formally defined as a fundamental state policy by the post-Mao Chinese leadership despite the fact that many aspects of the reform policy have had a detrimental effect for women. Moreover, it is due to the way of thinking that men and women are complementary and that certain responsibilities are best suited to women. Following the deepening of the urbanization process, the role of cities in China has changed from that of productive centers in the past to that of modern metropoles with multiple functions today. Issues like culture, social policies and citizen’s welfare have increasingly acquired an important place on the agenda of municipal governments. These tasks, it is commonly believed, fit women well.

Third, joint political efforts have been taken since the mid-1980s to reverse the descending curve of women’s representation. The independent women’s studies groups raised the issue of women’s political participation in the public sphere and initiated research and public debates on the question. The All-China Women’s Federation, one of China’s three official mass organizations, has actively negotiated with the central Party leadership to get more women into politics (Howell 1996). One result of the ACWF efforts is the adoption of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protecting Women’s Rights and Interests in 1992, which promulgates, among other things, that the state shall actively select and train women cadres. Moreover, the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 obliged the Chinese government to implement the Beijing Program of Action in China. As a response, the Chinese government drew up the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (1995–2000), calling for ‘active efforts to elect women into leading bodies of government at all levels ... and appointment of more women in the leading bodies of industries, departments, enterprises and institutions ...’(State Council 1995). Both during preparations for and in the aftermath of the UN’s Women’s Conference, many provincial and local governments have adopted their own action plans to ensure at least one woman on the leadership squads at all levels (Du 2001).

The Dialectics of Advantage/Disadvantage and Opportunity/Challenge

Members of the current women mayors’ group belong, for the most part, to the post-Cultural Revolution generation. In terms of age, the majority of them are around 40, with a few in the younger age bracket of 30–40 and a few in the older age bracket of 40–50. Thus, most of them came of age in the closing stages of the Cultural Revolution and went to college either in the late 1970s or early 1980s. While 100 per cent of them have had a formal
education at the college level, some (21.2 per cent of the total) have obtained a Master’s or even a PhD degree. They are prominent professionals who have earned social recognition by virtue of their extraordinary work performances. Among them, for instance, are prominent high school teachers, schoolmasters, famous local writers, hospital directors, chairpersons of local Women’s Federations, etc. (Wang 2002; Liu et al. 2001).

Within the Chinese – or more general Asian – context, family background is often one of the factors relevant to a woman’s rise to power. From China’s remote imperial history to the relatively recent history of the communist revolution and the socialist state, examples of powerful women associated with powerful men through marriage and family ties are plentiful. In the women mayors’ path to municipal leadership, however, family connections do not appear to be particularly relevant. The author’s survey and the survey made by the Women Mayors’ Association in 2000 show that none of the respondents except one had any close relatives in the established power circles of state and government. Most of the survey participants came from ordinary families and had made their way up on their own.

For many women mayors, the post-Mao era is an era of opportunity. One of the political changes that this era has brought about is the shift from emphasis on class background to emphasis on individual competence in the leadership process (Lee 1991; Wang 1997). The change means an opening of career opportunities for an entire generation cohort of women who are well-educated, professionally competent, but not born ‘red’. The women mayors whom I have talked to have all personally benefited from this change, without which they might never have been able to make it this far. In the interview and questionnaire survey, many of them expressed their gratefulness to the post-Mao cadre selection police and the efforts being made to bring them in.

However, the post-Mao era is also an era of challenge, and even the increase in career opportunities has its cost. Many women mayors, for instance, point at the lack of transparency and respect for individuals in the appointment process. According to a standard cadre appointment procedure: 1) the recruitment authority first spots a candidate after a thorough screening of the eligible candidate list; 2) then a formal investigation is set in motion to check the candidate’s background, political trustworthiness and leadership potential; 3) in some cases, the candidate will be transferred to a new job assignment for testing; 4) once the candidate has passed the investigation and test, she will be nominated as a mayoral candidate to be elected by the People’s Congress in her city; 5) she will then be appointed
if she wins the election (Ma1, interview 2001). Having been ‘discovered’ in this way, many women mayors admitted that it was a surprise to be chosen for such a prominent position, and some felt that they were ‘arranged’ into politics by the Party’s personnel authority (zuzhi). Mayor Xi, for instance, was not told anything about her mayoral candidacy until the day prior to the election (Xi, interview 2000). She felt that she might have been better prepared for the job if she had been informed earlier. Mayor Ma did not wish to become a mayor. She loved her teaching job and found it difficult to leave her colleagues and pupils. But, since the matter had already been decided by the authorities, she had no choice (Ma2, interview 2000). These women’s stories suggest that while the policy of appointing capable women is working, there are ‘rush-through’ practices in the appointment procedure.

In post-Mao Chinese society, there is an ongoing debate about the compatibility of female gender characteristics and leadership ability. Having departed from the Maoist view of women, signified by the slogan ‘times have changed, men and women are equal. Whatever men can do, women can do too’, there is a clear tendency in the post-Mao discourse on women to naturalize gender differences and to associate women with gender stereotypes (Yang 1999; Chen et al 1995; Meng 1995; Min 1997; Johansson 1998; Hooper 1998; Wang 2002b). A revitalized myth, for instance, is the male versus female, tough and rational versus soft and sentimental dichotomy. A woman’s leadership ability is thus often called into question, and many women mayors felt that they must work extraordinarily hard in order to prove they were just as capable as their male colleagues. Many women mayors experienced male skepticism in their daily work, especially at the beginning stage of their mayoral careers. Well-established male incumbents look down upon them, not necessarily because they lack in quality but rather because they are new and they are women.

In China the total number of mayors and deputy mayors per city varies from 5 to 10 (SCMA 1998a). On checking the national lists of mayors, one would seldom find more than one woman’s name among the mayoral groups in each city. All of the women whom I have interviewed declared that they were the only women on the mayoral teams of their cities. In principle, the policy of incorporating non-party persons (wù), intellectuals (zhì), minorities (shào) and women (nǚ) in city management recommends at least one representative from each of these categories. In practice, however, most cities have picked a woman intellectual with a minority and non-party background, and made her a symbol of all the four designated groups (Liu3, interview 2002). Ironically enough, the Chinese abbreviations for the
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four categories are 无 (wu, meaning non-party persons), 知 (zhi, intellectuals), 少 (shao, minority) and 女 (nü, women). When put together, the four characters form a Chinese word (无知少女) (which literally means ‘ignorant teenage girl’.)

There has been overt or covert prejudice against the individuals in this position, depicting them as weak, incapable, symbolic figures. Despite the fact that China today has no well-defined quota system and that the state recommendation to include at least one woman on every leadership squad is an embarrassingly minimal one, resentment over any practice of reserving a position for women is articulated both in politics and society. Two trends of political thinking are at work that make it extremely difficult to justify morally the reservation of a seat for women in politics. One is the ridicule of the Cultural Revolution period and consequently of the many egalitarian policies of the Cultural Revolution such as gender quotas and other affirmative measures introduced to install gender balance in politics at that time (Wang 2002b); the other is the prevalence of belief in competition. Thus, although the women who fill the reserved seats are selected by virtue of their qualifications, it is generally believed that they come in only because of their gender rather than their capability.

On the job, many women mayors face the challenge of isolation. As the only women in their respective mayoral teams, they have stepped into a male world and must rely on their own courage and ability to manoeuvre to find themselves a place. It works well for some women, but definitely not for all. A central issue brought up in the surveys and interviews regards the cultural barriers involved in socializing. It seems that after decades of communist revolution and socialist transformation, there is still a delicate line drawn between a woman and a man in the public space, and a public woman has to watch and protect her reputation. Mayor Liu said in the interview that she would always keep the door of her office wide open when receiving a male visitor, while mayor Wu would always hold a cup of tea in her hands when meeting male colleagues, simply to avoid a lot of handshaking (Liu and Wu, interview 2000). The problem of isolation also stems from the institutionalized distinction between party and non-party members. Municipal governments in China are under the leadership of a party cell consisting of party-member mayors. A woman mayor will be kept out of the internal party meetings and not receive information circulated if she is the only non-party person on the team. In the author’s survey, 98 per cent of the respondents wished to have at least one more woman added to their mayoral team (Wang 2004: 31).
The majority of women mayors do not think that they have been personally subject to discrimination, but many had experienced differential treatment. Most of them were given vice positions and assigned to areas such as family planning, health and education. Not only are these areas ‘lower in the pecking order than economic management or industry’ (Howell 2002: 43), but vice positions also confer a low ranking. Within Chinese officialdom, rank distinction is a hidden hierarchical order parallel to the formal order represented by one’s job description (Wang 2002c). Mayors doing the same jobs can have different rankings and thereby be placed differently within the system. The higher the rank, the higher the degree of privilege and respect. The fact that up to 90 per cent of the current women mayors come from small, county-level cities means that they cluster at the low end of the rank scale and fall behind their male counterparts in terms of career mobility and access to political fringe benefits. One-third of women in the survey experienced constraints on the job because of their low status. For some, a low status has undermined their authority, making it difficult for them to take command (Liu, interview 2000). For others, it meant fewer resources and less support from their male superiors (Liu, interview 2000).

Members of the current women mayors’ group are ambitious individuals. They treasure the opportunities available to them and aspire to do a good job. Once they embark upon their work, however, many encounter a ‘culture shock’. The real life in the town halls does not quite match what they have read in the newspapers, nor is it what they had imagined. One thing that most women mayors find hard to get used to is the lavish dining and drinking. This is part of the daily routine in official circles, and lots of deals are settled at the dinner table rather than in the office. Drinking poses a problem for many women mayors for two basic reasons: they have no stomach for alcohol, and their male colleagues often grow vulgar when getting drunk (Wu, interview 2000; He, interview 2000). Another surprise is the rather low degree of professional commitment that their male colleagues show. It seems that they are more interested in power and status than in doing the job. To the dismay of mayor Gao, male officials spend most of their time on lobbying for promotion, while women mayors work day and night to get things done (Gao, interview 2000). Additionally, some women mayors found daily meeting arrangements problematic. Most of the meetings take place late in the evening and last until midnight, which is highly inconvenient for a woman with a family (He, interview 2000; Cong, interview 2000).

Moreover, most women mayors found themselves caught between their work responsibilities and their gender roles as women, wives and mothers.
In today’s China, family responsibility is still primarily a woman’s duty in many parts of the country, especially in small towns (Min 1997). Those who had a positive attitude towards family life and domestic responsibilities felt that heavy workloads have, to some extent, deprived them of time for leisure and family, while those whose family burden was heavy felt that they were competing with their male colleagues on an uneven footing. On the one hand, the competition for work results and career advancement does not take a woman’s family responsibility and the time and energy she has devoted to her family into consideration. On the other hand, however, a woman’s professional achievement will not be fully appreciated if family problems (in the form of quarrels or divorce) surface as a result of her commitment to the job.

The coping strategies of individual women mayors vary from person to person. Mayor Liu from Houma played it tough from the beginning in order to intimidate her ‘unfriendly’ male colleagues, and she silenced them quickly. Mayor Wu and magistrate Zhang relied on care and thoughtfulness to ‘break the ice’. They won the hearts of their male colleagues rather quickly. In handling their professional relationships with men, director Qiao from Tianjin carved out a niche for herself as a caring big sister, whereas magistrate Zhang has successfully established herself as a clever, sweet little sister. Both Mayor He and Ma are critical towards the gender blindness of certain bureaucratic routines. While mayor He finds it necessary to go along, Mayor Ma has protested openly and made efforts to change these routines. The way of dealing with the drinking problem is also very individualized. Mayor Wang is a good drinker, so she often beats her male colleagues at the dinner table. Mayor Zheng sticks to her non-alcohol policy and refuses any invitations to drink. Mayor Wu goes along with drinking to save her male colleagues’ ‘face’, but she is deeply concerned about her health. Her tip is to take a glass of milk in advance. Milk, according to her, protects the stomach. Whatever the differences, women mayors have one wish in common: to share their personal experiences with each other and find a way to improve their conditions and the environment around them.

The Inadequacy of Institutionalized Ways of Dealing with Working Women’s Issues

In China, work related to women’s issues ‘has long been viewed as part of the legitimate work of the revolutionary or post-revolutionary state’ (Judd 2002: 172). The state set up a national women’s organization, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), in the 1950s, and it is through
the work of the ACWF that the state mobilizes women into socialist and development projects. The state-monopolized structure for dealing with working women's issues has, however, some flaws. As far as women mayors are concerned, there has been a lack of proper forums in which to discuss issues essential to them.

First of all, as ‘the sole official vehicle available to women to work officially for the specific interests of women is the network of Women's Federations’ (Judd 2002: 163), there is no institutional basis outside of the Women Federation to deal with the issues and concerns of women mayors. In the cadre screening, testing and selecting process, the emphasis is on normative cadre qualifications and personal strength, and candidates are expected to demonstrate their ability to endure difficulties. Gender-related concerns are generally regarded as a personal problem, and it may make one appear weak to bring up these concerns. Once a woman is selected and has set out to work, the male dominance on the mayoral team has prevented concerns pertaining to her from being heard. These issues have either been overlooked or regarded as irrelevant.

Secondly, the Women's Federation system does not take individual memberships, which makes it impossible for women mayors to count on the ACWF or its local branches for individual consultation and support. As a mass organization, the ACWF has neither the power nor the means to influence municipal politics. Local WF branches in cities do not constitute a workable solution either, for their concern is to help underprivileged women such as the unemployed. As such, they lack the experience and expertise needed in working with privileged women like mayors. Moreover, a city Women's Federation ranks lower than the city government, hence lacking the authority and necessary resources to deal with issues concerning a woman mayor.

The last option is to talk to personal assistants, friends or family members, but many women mayors do not see this as a workable alternative, either. In Chinese culture, an official is regarded as a representative of authority. An official therefore has a ‘face’ to keep up and must be cautious about what to say in front of subordinates and family. Revealing too much will disclose one’s weakness and make one vulnerable. In the interview, mayor Zhu recalled how hard it had been to stand alone with all the questions she had through the years she served as mayor (Zhu, interview 2000).

The Founding of the Women Mayors’ Association
Since October 1983, the Organizational Department of the CCP Central Committee has been running a mayoral training program jointly with the
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Ministry of Construction and the Chinese Society of Science. The program is a response to the intensification of China’s developmental reform, which presupposes the increase of decentralization, a free-market system, privatization and the localization of the entire process of transitional management. In this process, cities began to play a crucial role in ‘shaping the path of national economic development’ (Chung 1999: 2). The aim of the mayoral training program is to qualify China’s municipal leaders for the task of urban development and provide them with a forum to discuss issues related to urban administration and development (Wang 1992; Ni, interview 2000; Tao, interview 2000). By 1991, fifteen training classes had been held with the participation of more than 800 mayors. Gradually, the program has become known as the ‘special university of mayors’ (Wang 1992).

A woman named Zhang Ying, then vice-mayor of Yulin city in Guangxi Province, attended the tenth training class. In her opinion, the training was good and inspiring but something was missing. Upon her graduation, Zhang wrote a letter to the organizers and pointed out the lack of discussion of issues concerning women mayors. She appealed to the organizers to pay more attention to women mayors and based her appeal on the argument that ‘women mayors often encounter “special problems” due to their psychological and physiological differences from male mayors’ (Wang 1992: 400–401). At the end of the letter, Zhang suggested convening a national conference for women mayors and, via the conference, setting up an organization of women mayors.

During the socialist period, women’s organizations in politics were strictly banned due to the belief that the Party and state automatically represent women and the fear of (gender) separatism. In the post-Mao political context, however, to request an organization of women mayors, as Zhang Ying did is no longer a risky move. This is mainly because gender equality, once a political project of the Communist Party and the Chinese state, is now more and more promised based on market conditions. The Party has given up its monopoly on women and gender issues, and women have been encouraged to rely on themselves for gender equality or whatever else they wish to achieve. The depoliticization of gender issues in the post-Mao era has prepared a much more relaxed and liberal atmosphere than before for women’s organizing.

At the time when Zhang wrote her letter, the mayoral training program was led by powerful men, such as Vice-Minister of Construction Ye Rutang and the chief engineer in urban planning at the Ministry of Construction, Chu Chuanheng. Zhang’s letter was directly addressed to them. They wel-
comed Zhang’s idea and immediately gave it the green light. These male leaders’ positive response derives from the mixed approach to women which characterizes the post-Mao Chinese leadership. On the one hand, despite the erosion of women’s rights in various spectrums of social life, gender equality is still listed as a fundamental principle of the national policy. Very often, male leaders will adopt the equality rhetoric and symbolically support a woman’s request in order to demonstrate their commitment to women’s development. On the other hand, there is a deeply-rooted tradition among male leaders for not taking women seriously – and hence treating them with a certain degree of forbearance and tolerance.

Zhang Ying was not alone. A great supporter of her idea and the subsequent chief architect of the coming Women Mayors’ Association was Tao Siliang, a woman with a distinguished family background and good connections. She is the daughter of Zeng Zhi, deputy director of the Organizational Department of the CCP Central Committee in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and Tao Zhu, former secretary of the CCP Guangdong Provincial Committee and then director of the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee from 1966 to 1969. Zeng Zhi was a lifelong revolutionary.
and highly respected woman within the Party, while Tao Zhu ranked number four in the top national leadership, right after Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in the 1960s. Tao Siliang suffered a period of career setbacks because of the disgrace of her father during the Cultural Revolution. She studied and practised medicine. In 1984, after her father was posthumously rehabilitated, she got a position at the Organizational Department of the CCP Central Committee. Although not a high-profile political figure herself, Tao has deep roots within the system and is able to utilize her ties of friendship to many top leaders.

Zhang Ying’s letter expressed the wishes of many women mayors. At that time, there were about 150 women mayors in China. In Beijing, there were two prominent women deputy mayors. Tianjin and Shanghai each had a deputy woman mayor, while Hangzhou had three! They had established an outstanding career in municipal politics and become well-known figures in the public eye. When the enquiry was sent out to all of them, they passion-
ately supported Zhang’s initiative (Wang 1992). With the endorsement of more than 100 women mayors, including the women mayors from Beijing and Tianjin, the two largest cities in China, the first national conference for women mayors was held on 1 March 1991 in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province. Nearly one hundred women mayors were present, covering 22 of China’s provinces (Wang 1992). The conference announced the birth of the *Nüshizhang Lianyihui*, Women Mayors’ Society (WMS) and elected a leading body for the organization, the Executive Committee, consisting of 31 members. Wu Yi, then deputy mayor of Beijing, was elected president, and twelve other women, including Zhang Ying herself, became vice-presidents. Several months later, the China Mayors’ Association (CMA) was set up. At that time, the WMS decided to join the CMA. It changed its name to the Women Mayors’ Association (WMA) and became a department of the CMA. This is how the WMA came into existence.

**The WMA as a Women’s Space**

The WMS was formed in order to address women mayors’ concerns. The objective was to organize activities suitable for women mayors, discuss the problems that they faced in common and promote urban development in the areas of their responsibility, for example, social welfare, public health, culture and education (*Dujiangyan Daily* 2001). What the WMA leadership envisaged in the beginning, however, was a kind of ‘loose network’ whereby women mayors would gather together and discuss the issues of their concern once in awhile (Tao, interview 2000). The first national conference of women mayors in 1991, however, turned out to be such an emotional explosion that no one could ever doubt the importance of this network. At the conference, Tao Siliang recalled, the participants talked about their lives and listened to each other’s stories. Many were moved to tears (ibid.). Many participants felt that they had had to suppress their feelings up to this point; to hide what they had experienced as women.

Discussing personal experiences in front of others is a powerful experience that has had therapeutic and consciousness-raising effects. As mayor Zhu from Quzhou said, ‘I thought I was alone. It was me who had a problem. The conference in Hangzhou made me realize for the first time that I was not alone. Many others were in the same situation as I was’ (Zhu, interview 2000). Through sharing each other’s experiences, the WMA members became able to transcend their own personal experiences and name the problems they faced in common as women. As magistrate Chen put it, ‘I finally realized that it is not we women who have problems. Our
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society is male-dominated and biased. All the puzzles and dilemmas we face as women actually originate from the fact that “male” is the standard of measurement’ (Chen, interview 2000). Finally, through talking to each other, women mayors developed a collective consciousness. They learned something from each other and became able to draw on each other’s strength and support.

After the first two national conferences, the WMA developed series of activities in parallel to the CMA agenda and began to focus more on enhancing women mayors’ professional competence. The shift, as Tao Siliang explains, does not mean that ‘speaking up personal experiences’ had lost its importance. Rather, it was because the emotional intensity witnessed at the first two conferences gradually receded (Tao, interview 2000). Also, the WMA leadership wants to find a balance between addressing gender-specific concerns and more general, work-related concerns. This balance is necessary as long as the WMA remains affiliated to the CMA and receives political and organizational support from it. The WMA risks losing its ‘connecting point’ to the CMA if its focus is solely devoted to gender concerns. As Tao Siliang puts it, the WMA should under no circumstances become a women’s club.

Since that time, the WMA has no longer worked directly to address gender-specific concerns. Using its regular meetings and other scheduled activities, however, the WMA has created a women’s space in which it is legitimate for women mayors to talk about and address issues of special concern to them. The 2001 survey of women mayors shows that during sessions of all-woman gatherings women mayors tend to chat with each other on a variety of issues rather than work-related topics alone, as they would do during sessions of mixed-gender gatherings. When women mayors came together, they talked about family, children, health, cosmetics, personal style, fashion, attire and so on besides discussions on leadership art, problem-solving techniques and the like. The importance of a space for this is best illustrated by magistrate Chen. She said: ‘You can only talk about women-related topics when you are in a women’s gathering. Otherwise it won’t be possible to bring such a topic up. There is simply no atmosphere for it’ (Chen, interview 2000).

In the following, I shall look specifically at two examples that show the role of the WMA as a women’s space. The first case concerns attire. In post-Mao China, the tension between gender identity (individuality) and official image (authority) is a continual challenge to women in public office. A major point in this discussion is attire. Should women mayors appear in public in gender-neutral dresses or should they wear feminine dresses? While some...
of them find the dichotomy highly problematic and are therefore critical towards the commercialized feminine image of women (Zhang, interview 2000; Zheng, interview 2000), many have developed a positive interest in their appearance. Having come of age during the Cultural Revolution, where gender was erased in order for women to achieve equality, women mayors aspire to explore the multiple dimensions of their lives. For many of them, their attire is a means by which they contest the old socialist formula which says that women can be equal to men if they look like men. It is also through this project that they mark their individuality and signal their personal strength and ability to combine different roles with ease and grace.

A personalized style of dress and an official 'look', however, prove to be an uneasy combination. A typical dilemma is that, while a woman in gender-neutral dress can be seen as unfeminine, feminine clothes can also accord a woman an unserious, unprofessional look. Many women mayors, as the interviews show, cope with the dilemma, not by questioning the dominance of the gender ideology, but rather by what Soh calls compartmentalizing their daily lives (Soh 1993). On certain occasions, they appear in gender-neutral clothes and 'hide' their personality away. On other occasions, however, they put aside their official image and let their personal style shine through. Each of these occasions forms a compartment in their life, and it is through constant shifts between these compartments that they manage the uneasy balance between their gender identities and official images. The all-woman gatherings convened by the WMA are a precise example of a space where women mayors can dress according to personal preference. Magistrate Chen illustrates this point:

When we gathered together, we took the opportunity to dress as colorfully and attractively as we could. You would notice it immediately, if you took a quick look around. We blossomed like flowers because we knew that the 'flowers' would soon have to 'wither' after the meeting. Back at work, we must dress in the way that is considered as proper according to our position. Here we can relax and enjoy our beautiful dresses. (Chen, interview 2000)

The second case concerns the Telephone Hotline that the WMA opened for its members on 8 March 2000. Although many women mayors in my interviews showed confidence in dealing with the dual roles of a public figure at the office and a wife and mother at home, some of them had encountered problems to various degrees within their marriages. The problems mounted typically at the time when the woman advanced to a mayoral position, hence obtaining a higher social status than her husband. When the husband found
it difficult to adjust to the change, his bitterness often was expressed through ‘cold war’, quarrels, non-cooperation, neglect, abuse and even violence at home (Zhu, interview 2000). Mayor Zhu said in the interview that she knew some women officials who had collapsed due to the pressure at home and had finally committed suicide. One of the stories she told concerns a female party secretary in one county. She was busy at work, and usually came home very late. Unhappy about the situation, her husband took it out on her. Sometimes he would lock the door from the inside. Sometimes he would invite many friends home, ordering his wife to serve them for hours. He would then humiliate her in front of the guests if he found her service unsatisfactory (ibid). The problem described here is highly gendered, for it is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural norms that a husband enjoys a higher social status than his wife, not vice versa.

Although meetings and other organized activities have provided women mayors with an opportunity to address the problems of their concern, there could always be a need for personal consultation in the intervals between the scheduled meetings and activities. The opening of the Telephone Hotline created a special space for sharing and exchange, where women mayors could call in and reach out for help. Like any other kind of telephone consulting service, the Hotline listens to the callers’ problems and gives advice on an anonymous basis. Those taking the calls are retired governmental officials who work as volunteers for the Hotline. While somewhat reluctant to go into detail on the calls that have come in, magistrate Chen confirmed that ‘the problems often have to do with sexual and marital relations and require deep psychological analysis’ (Chen, interview 2000). When questioned how often and to what extent the Hotline service has been utilized by women mayors, both the WMA leadership and magistrate Chen, who started the initiative and manages the Hotline, hesitated. For magistrate Chen, it is important that ‘the Hotline is there, ready to help’ (ibid.). In its work report in 2001, the WMA Secretariat described the Hotline as ‘a bridge of communication and exchange’ through which ‘we have been able to share the success and joy of women mayors and to ease the problems and frustration they have encountered’ (SWMA 2001).

**Popularizing the Women Mayors’ Image**

At the founding of the WMA, women mayors were barely known to the general public. Individually, they all worked hard and had achieved remarkable results, but ‘the public knew little about them as a group’ and ‘the higher authorities often failed to notice them’ (Tao, interview 2000).
To tackle the problem, the WMA has taken a series of steps over the years to ‘popularize the image of women mayors and to enhance the contact between women mayors and all walks of social life’ (SWMA 2001). To this end, the WMA launched a media offensive and adopted a strategy of ‘going public’. The rationale behind it is simple: the more the media write about women mayors, the more visible they become.

At this point, the WMA enjoys its cooperation with the All-China Women’s Federation. The ACWF runs the national women’s magazine, Zhongguo Funü [Women of China], and a national newspaper, Zhongguo Funübao [The Chinese Women’s News]. For both the magazine and the newspaper, the WMA activities are interesting stuff, not only because they are women’s activities but also because the actors are not ordinary women, but women mayors. For the WMA, it is desirable to have its activities covered in the national magazine and newspaper for women, whose readership is nationwide. Over the years, the WMA has developed collaboration with the women’s media. The Zhongguo Funü magazine, for instance, uses a specialized journalist to cover the WMA activities (Wang2, interview 2000). In 1993, the WMA celebrated International Women’s Day jointly with the China Women Journalists’ Association. About twenty women mayors were invited to mark the day together with a group of Chinese and international female journalists. The event was extensively covered by both Chinese and foreign newspapers.

Apart from working with the media, the WMA also has sought to promote the image of women mayors in the public through publications. Since 1992 the WMA has published four books on women mayors. The first book came out in 1992 as a result of the Hangzhou meeting in 1991 and the National Working Meeting in Guilin in 1992. It included a total of 78 essays, all written by women mayors. Of these, 61 essays dealt with women’s double role in the public and private domains, while the remaining 17 addressed issues related to urban administration and economic development (Wang 1992). The second book was published in 1997 and contained 54 essays presented to the Second National Congress for Women Mayors in Huadu city in 1996 (The Women Mayors’ Association 1997). The third book is an illustrated catalogue published jointly with the Women’s Federation in 1995 during the run-up to the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women. It presents the illustrated stories of 52 women mayors (The Women Mayors’ Association, the Organization and Liaison Department of the ACWF and China Women Publishing House 1995). The fourth book, entitled Women Mayors in China (Zhongguo Nüshizhang), came out in 1999 to mark the
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50th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. It was a follow-up on the 1995 catalogue and contained more updated stories and information on the mayors who appeared in the previous catalogue (Zhong 1999). In 1996, the WMA also launched an essay competition in cooperation with the Modern Leadership magazine (Xiandai Liangdao) in Beijing, inviting essays on ‘The Charisma of Women Mayors’. The campaign brought forth several hundred articles on women mayors in newspapers and magazines (Tao, interview 2000).

These publications portrayed a dual image of women mayors. On the one hand, the focus was devoted to the women mayors’ professional performance. Through highlighting attributes such as: hard-working, devoted, courageous, capable, tenacious, strategic and successful in yielding results, the narratives described women mayors as competent, trustworthy, open-minded and successful urban leaders. These qualities represent the normative characteristics that are generally required in politics and appreciated by the public. On the other hand, the narratives highlighted women mayors’ gender by depicting their clothes, thoughtful gestures made by them and scenes of singing, dancing, cooking, ironing or spending time with their families. In the illustrated catalogue published by the WMA in 1995, for instance, each of the 52 stories contains a paragraph describing how the woman mayor in question fulfilled her gender roles as a woman, mother and wife. Over one third of the stories are accompanied by illustrations depicting the mayor in a domestic situation, be it cooking, knitting, ironing, or sitting together with her child/children. Some of the stories have titles such as ‘A Perfect Housewife’, ‘Enjoy Cooking’, ‘I Love my Family’, etc.

Such images conform to rather than challenge the dominant gender ideology of the post-Mao era. Currently, there is a general tendency to gender stereotype in the public opinion on publicly employed women in China (Wang 2002b; Meng 1995; Judd 2002). They are expected to qualify as women on top of managing their political careers, and criticism will follow if they fail in either of these roles. Instead of questioning this gender stereotype, which is based on an essentialized notion of women and motherhood, the WMA articles about women mayors strive to prove that a perfect woman, who is doing well in both the public and the private domains, does exist and that a perfect combination of public duties and womanly virtues is achievable.

While pandering to the post-Mao patriarchic ideas of gender and pleading for social acceptance and moral support, the WMA is transmitting a positive message with the image of women mayors outlined in the publica-
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tions. First of all, such an image appeals to the cultural tradition ‘of strong women asking much of themselves’ (Judd 2002: 181), which appreciates an individual’s ‘sustained and disciplined striving’ (ibid.). Second, the image of perfect women symbolizes national modernity, and as the post-Mao national modernization commenced concurrently with the re-creation of the gender order, women’s gender roles have become a signifier of the nation’s modernity (Rofel 1999; Anagnost 1997). Within this context, the image of ‘perfect’ women connotes women’s willingness to progress in pace with the national modernity. Third, the image somehow also highlights women’s capability in coping with different roles and diverse demands.

Many women mayors identify themselves with this image. For them, the image represents a historical departure from the socialist ‘super-strong’ stereotype of women, and thus contains a progressive element. Mayor Ma stated in the interview, ‘I do not consider myself a career woman. I am my husband’s wife and my son’s mother, that’s all’ (Ma, interview 2000). In the 2001 survey, 39 participants (76 per cent) agree with the statement ‘a woman should be a good wife and mother at home even if she is in a high position and often very busy at work’ while 12 (24 per cent) disagree. Also, this image offers individual women mayors an easy and safe solution to the domestic problems that they may run into in their careers. Instead of challenging their husbands’ male chauvinism, many women mayors strive to satisfy them in order to maintain peace at home. As several women mayors have expressed:

It does not matter if I have to do the cooking and the washing up every day. It is hard, especially when you have just had a long working day. But I am willing to do it as long as everybody at home is satisfied. I will do whatever it takes to maintain harmony and peace at home, so I can concentrate on my work. (Yang, interview 2000; Ge, interview 2000)

**Empowerment**

The WMA is fully aware of the disadvantageous position of women within the mayoral force and aims to do something about it. However, as the following analysis will show, the WMA has no intention of challenging the male domination of power and resources. Instead, it manoeuvres to improve the condition of women mayors within the existing pattern of resource allocation. The strategy is to organize separate activities for women mayors as compensation for the lack of equal opportunity that they have experienced. The negotiation for more resources is premised on the concept of ‘quality.’
The WMA argues that the women mayors’ quality is still relatively low and therefore needs to be improved.

Concerns about quality in contemporary China derive from the ‘still large project of improving the quality of the entire Chinese nation’ (Judd, 2002: 19). The current Chinese leadership sees national development as a goal and human development as a prerequisite for the realization of the goal. Within this context, quality has emerged as the crux of the women’s movement in China. The concept appears both in discourses on women’s development and in concrete development programs aimed at raising women’s quality (ibid.). The WMA’s concern about women mayors’ quality harmonizes this large development discourse, for quality improvement symbolizes the women mayors’ willingness to transform themselves in line with the transformation of the nation. Such a stance reveals the mixture of patriotism, self-discipline and self-cultivation which lies at the heart of the Chinese culture. The WMA’s concern with women mayors’ quality also harmonizes the specific discourse on urban development, which sees mayors as a locomotive in the development of urban districts. To work on women mayors’ quality is both justifiable and politically correct, for the vision, knowledge and level of commitment of mayors (men as well as women) will shape the direction and the degree of China’s urban development.

While quality in general ‘embraces a variety of meanings and multiple implications’ (Judd, 2002: 19), the statement that ‘women mayors’ quality is still low’ can be interpreted in different ways. As a description of the women mayors’ status quo, it addressed the problems women mayors faced without phrasing them in terms of discrimination, although the ‘low quality’ of women mayors, if it is, in many aspects is a result of covert or overt gender discrimination. It is thus a non-provocative statement. It caters to the male perception of women and does not challenge male supremacy. The letter written by Chu Chuanheng and Ye Rutang to support setting up the WMA shows clearly how male power holders use the same ‘quality’ rhetoric and how they can be supportive of an initiative taken by women when the initiative is phrased in terms they can accept. The letter reads:

Female talent is a great source of manpower which has not been fully tapped yet. Just like human brains need a balanced development between the right and the left cell, we should also see to develop and utilize women’s talent in politics. We are used to write with the right hand [men (ed.)], but now it is on time for us to learn to write with the left hand [women (ed.)]. And the left hand can write well, if we keep practising. (Chu, cited in Wang 1992: 401)
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In the following, I shall look into the WMA’s work in three areas in order to show how the WMA attracted resources to the advantage of women mayors.

Work inspection (gongzuo kaocha) is a basic technique for emulation, learning and professional exchange within the Chinese cadre bureaucracy. In a typical work-inspection situation, the organizer would select a model to emulate by virtue of his or her deeds in a particular area. Then a delegation of visitors from other parts of the country would come to inspect the model’s work and study the model’s experiences. Back home, the visitors were to imitate what they had learned from the model and generate similar work results. In this way, the good methods used in one place would spread to other places. Work inspection constitutes a powerful process of inclusion or exclusion, as it determines the direction to take and decides who will be selected as a model. As mentioned earlier, up to 50.2 per cent of women mayors work in the areas of culture, education, social welfare and public health. Since these areas are deemed as less important, ranking lower than economy and industry, women mayors have often been bypassed in the selection of models, hence, they have lacked a platform for establishing merit.

The WMA began to organize work-inspection tours for women mayors in 1993. The aim was not to challenge the premise of the work-inspection process in general, but rather to readdress the lack of attention to women mayors. The work inspection organized by the WMA placed women mayors in the centre. The models to be emulated were selected only among women mayors, and once a woman mayor was selected, the whole inspection process would work to set the spotlight on her and enhance her political weight in the local context. Not only would she be given the credit for winning honour for her city, but she would also take charge of all the events taking place under the work inspection. Up to 2001, the WMA had launched five inspection tours with the participation of nearly 100 women mayors (SWMA 2001). According to Tao Siliang, these activities have added value to women mayors’ work and promoted women mayors’ political visibility significantly (Tao, interview 2000).

Networking is another top priority of the WMA. Within the Chinese officialdom, network and personal connections are the two most important factors that affect upward political mobility (Lampton 1986; Oksenberg 1968, 1969). Although women mayors characteristically work hard – a fact
that is widely recognized by both men and women – the lack of connection and powerful alliance hampers women mayors’ further political advancement in one way or another. The WMA promotes networking among women mayors. WMA membership is based on a mayoral appointment. With the passage of time, some members have left their mayoral offices and moved to other or higher positions. In order to facilitate socializing and networking between junior women mayors and more highly-placed women party-government officials, the WMA has adopted a flexible membership policy based on the principle of ‘making new friends while maintaining old friends’ (guangjiao xinpengyou buwang laopengyou), which allows former members to continue their affiliation to the WMA and the WMA to continue to involve them in various activities (Tao, interview 2000). Wu Yi, former deputy mayor of Beijing and now China’s only female state counselor, serves as such an example. The second WMA Executive Committee meeting in 2000 elected Wu its honorary president. At that time, she had already taken up a position in the central government. Currently the most highly placed and most powerful woman in Chinese politics, Wu serves as a source of inspiration for many women mayors and is a powerful patron of the WMA.

In order to usher more women mayors into higher party-government positions, the WMA has set up a database called the Bank of Talented Women. The bank holds dossiers of detailed information on each woman mayor. Based on this information, the WMA regularly submits formal recommendations to the recruitment authorities, such as the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee, the national Women’s Federation and provincial governments, in hope that vacant positions at a higher level will go to some of the candidates whom they recommend. The recommendations are of an advisory character and may not have any binding effect on the recruitment process and praxis. However, as the claim that ‘there are no eligible female candidates’ is often used as an excuse for not filling an important position with a woman, the database run by the WMA provides hard evidence that such candidates do exist. According to the work report of the WMA, a number of women mayors have been promoted to provincial positions as a result of the WMA recommendation (SWMA 2001).

Access to training is another issue with which the WMA has been dealing. Training is a basic approach to qualification improvement within the Chinese cadre force. Participation in training magnifies a trainee’s political
‘capital’ by exposing the trainee to new information and knowledge and by facilitating new network connections. In the Chinese cadre management process, training opportunities are often assigned to cadres in connection with the prospect for a job change, mostly in an upward direction. In the consciousness of Chinese cadres, being sent on a training course is the prerequisite for career advancement. Access to training is thus strictly controlled by the Party’s recruitment authority and has always been competed for intensively. Ironically enough, although women are normally perceived as less qualified, they have been given far fewer chances than men to receive professional training. In the author’s survey in 2001, the participants were asked ‘what is the biggest problem you have ever encountered since you started your career as mayor?’ Thirty-five of the 51 participants, 68.6 per cent, answered the question. Among them, 12 persons (34 per cent of the valid answers) singled out ‘unfair treatment’, which, among other things, refers to the lack of opportunity for on-the-job or outside training.

The WMA began to run a special training program for women mayors in 1993. Again, the strategy is not to confront the male monopoly on training opportunities, but rather to find an alternative for women mayors which the mainstream could also accept. The China Mayors’ Association owns two training centers. One is located in the Communication University (Jiaotong Daxue) in Shanghai, and the other in the China Mayors’ Tower in Guangzhou, a splendid, 24-storey, five-star hotel built by the Guangzhou Municipal Government as a gift to the CMA. The Shanghai Research Class, as it is called, specializes in issues related to administration, management and leadership techniques, while the Guangzhou Research Class focuses mainly on issues related to economy and urban development (Ni, interview 2000; Tao, interview 2000). As a sub-department of the CMA, the WMA is entitled to use these training facilities for its own training purposes. The aim of the WMA training program, according to Tao Siliang, is to ensure at least one training course for each woman mayor within the term of her mayoral service. ‘In case they don’t get a training opportunity anywhere else, they can always get it from us’ (Tao, interview 2000). Up to 2001, the WMA had held three classes in Shanghai and two in Guangzhou. More than 150 women mayors attended these courses.

The author participated in the second Guangzhou Economic Class for women mayors, which took place in Guangzhou from 27 November to 3 December 2000. Nearly 40 women mayors were present. The training took the form of lectures. The invited speakers were high-level party-government officials, well-known party propagandists and theoreticians and academic
experts. Among the lecturers, there was only one woman, the deputy mayor of the host city of Guangzhou. The lectures dealt overwhelmingly with macro-economic issues, using titles such as ‘Socialist Market Economy and Reform of the State-Owned Enterprises’, ‘WTO’, ‘Global Economic Development and Asian Economic Crisis’, ‘Technology and Economic Development’, ‘Economic Development in China’s Western Regions’, ‘Economy in the Zhujiang Delta Region’, and ‘Computer and Internet Technology’.

In its content, the class was quite identical to other mixed-gender training classes under the mayoral training program. Gender issues were absent, as were gender perspectives. The absence of gender in the training of women mayors is mainly due to the fact that the WMA has identified the lack of training opportunities and not the content of the training itself as a problem, and the WMA aims at making training available for women mayors rather than at gendering the content of training. Second, as mentioned earlier, the WMA is trying to avoid the image of a women’s club, fearing that too much emphasis on gender issues may jeopardize its professional image and the cooperation with the CMA. Third, in the face of the growing importance of economy-related knowledge to urban development politics, the WMA is impelled to lift women mayors up to a new level of knowledge
so that they are able to fully participate in development planning and the development debate in their cities. Too much focus on gender issues may divert them away from the centre of development politics (Tao, interview 2000).

The author interviewed a number of trainees during the course. Though they admitted that not all the lectures were directly relevant to their work, the trainees seemed to be predominantly positive towards the training. Typically, they appreciated it for two reasons. First, they found the lectures inspiring and highly informative, and felt that they had learned something new. Mayor Xi said, ‘I became better informed about national and international economic situations. I also learned new theories and new ways of thinking. My mind has become more open than before’ (Xi, interview 2000). Second, they treasured the opportunity being given to them. Several of them recounted that they were incessantly overworked at the office and lacked the time or energy to study. A week-long training in Guangzhou was a rest for the body and a refresher for the brain (Xi, interview 2000; Yang, interview 2000; Hu, interview 2001).

**Balancing between Two Identities**

So far the WMA has not shown a clear intent to engage in broad gender issues and to profile itself as an agent of feminist gender politics. Nor has the WMA engaged in direct interaction with NGO women’s organizations dedicated to gender equality and women’s rights. Annoyed by the WMA’s official facade and non-engagement in gender policies, NGO activists and ordinary citizens alike are often skeptical towards the WMA. As a national organization for women mayors, the WMA is affiliated both to the China Mayors’ Association and the All-China Women’s Federation. It is thus positioned between two agents of state power – the CMA (the strong agent) and the ACWF (the lesser agent) – and faces the challenge of how to negotiate and balance between them. Both affiliations entail advantages and constraints, and the WMA leadership’s careful positioning and manoeuvring between these two agents of state power as well as between two identities – a specific gender identity and a more general identity as a mayoral organization – has a vital influence on the nature and the roles of the WMA.

As a daughter organization of the CMA, the WMA is able to access the state power lying in the hands of the CMA as well as the CMA activities. The relationship makes the CMA obligated to support the WMA and to sponsor its activities (Ni, interview 2000; Tao, interview 2000). As the national mayors’ organization, the CMA has the obligation to share its resources and
facilities with the WMA (SCMA 1998b). On the other hand, however, the willingness of the CMA to support the WMA is premised on a condition that the WMA operates within the political and organizational framework of the CMA. This means that the WMA, in the pursuit of gender identity and gender-specific concerns, must navigate carefully to avoid a sole focus on gender concerns, a strong, separatist profile, or a critical stance towards its mother organization, the CMA.

The symbiotic relationship between the WMA and the CMA reflects the physical locations of the two organizations. The WMA is run by a secretariat which consists of Tao Siliang, the vice-president, and 2–3 secretaries. The secretariat is located in the northern wing of the Ministry of Construction compound, the same building where the CMA secretariat is located. The mother and daughter organizations coordinate with each other on a daily basis and this close attachment to the CMA is desirable to the leaders and senior members of the WMA. Having come of age during the socialist period, they still use Marxism, Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong as the point of reference in relation to gender. To them, gender-related problems cannot be solved by women alone but should be solved by the joint efforts of both sexes. As Tao Siliang puts it, ‘we don’t want two separate mayors’ organizations in China, one for men and one for women. It won’t do any good’ (Tao, interview 2000). Moreover, leaders and senior members of the WMA favour a close attachment to the CMA for ‘safety’ reasons. They have their own and the members’ political, career and personal interests at stake in running the WMA, and the safest method is to stay as close as possible to the mother organization.

The relationship between the WMA and ACWF is, however, a less amiable one, although the ACWF endorsed the establishment of the WMA from the very beginning. Kang Ling, director of the Organizational Department of the ACWF, was present at the Hangzhou conference, and she offered congratulations on the birth of the WMA on behalf of the ACWF. Subsequently, the ACWF granted the WMA a group membership status, bringing Tao Siliang, the chief architect and vice-president of the WMA, into the Executive Committee of the ACWF (Wang 1992). The initiative taken by the ACWF to reach out to the WMA reflected a gradual change in the role of the ACWF. The ACWF occupied a predominant position in the Chinese women’s movement during the socialist period, where virtually no other women’s organizations were allowed to exist (Judd 2002). This monopoly was seriously challenged from the 1980s, given the rise of problems concerning women, the organizational incompetence of the
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ACWF to deal with these problems, and the emergence of new women’s organizations outside the ACWF framework. In order to revitalize its role as the national organization for women, the ACWF has made a great effort to penetrate urban economic units and public institutions and to reach out to other women’s organizations (Howell 1996).

The WMA saw a group membership of the ACWF as beneficial and definitely utilizes these benefits. For instance, the ACWF commands great research resources. It has its own research institute, which ranks highest in the ACWF research network. The institute has helped the WMA to survey its members and has conducted research on women and leadership based on the WMA case. Also, the ACWF commands great media resources. As the owner of a national women’s newspaper, a national women’s magazine and a women’s publishing house, the ACWF is able to mobilize women’s media to the advantage of the WMA. Moreover, the ACWF has become an influential player in the political selection process. It runs a reserve pool list and recommends women candidates for posts at different levels (Judd 2002). A close cooperation with the ACWF will open up more job opportunities for women mayors in the future, when their mayoral service has ended.

Nevertheless, it seems that the WMA is keeping a certain distance to the ACWF. In terms of identity, it seems to have been reluctant to identify itself with the traditional constituency of the ACWF. The ACWF has, since the 1980s, increasingly involved itself in women’s development and the protection of women’s rights and interests. The major targets of the ACWF’s development project are various resource-poor women’s groups that cry for help. The WMA can hardly find itself fitting into the image of the ACWF constituency because it is dealing with government officials and highly motivated individuals. Also, the ACWF, being influenced by its past legacy, has a tendency to control and dominate other women’s organizations, whereas the WMA with its direct connections to government and state power stands as a rival to the hegemony of the ACWF. One of the secretaries of the WMA says that ‘it is an illusion that the ACWF sees itself as the legitimate leader of all women’s organizations in China just because it is the national organization of women’ (Zhang, interview 2004). In addition, the WMA has a working agenda which is quite different from that of the ACWF, although both organizations adhere to the post-Mao approach to women’s development. The ACWF focuses on the vast female population, especially rural women, whereas the WMA primarily concerns itself with women mayors and their roles in urban development management.
This situation has determined the degree of the WMA’s involvement in broad gender issues. While the social effect of the WMA as well as the role of the WMA in influencing policy remains ambiguous, the WMA does stand for individual women mayors’ rights. Among other things, it provides legal aid to women mayors and enjoys a reputation as the women mayors’ ‘natal family’ (niangjia). Some years ago, a discotheque in Urumchi caught fire and was burned down, causing the death of many youngsters. At the time of the accident, the mayor in charge of recreation in Urumchi was a woman. She was dismissed and sentenced to seven years in prison. Finding the penalty unfair, the WMA intervened. The woman had rushed to the spot immediately when the fire was reported. While organizing the fire-fighting, she rescued several boys and girls by herself and was therefore terribly burned. When the judgment was pronounced, she was lying in the hospital in very critical condition. Based on these facts, the WMA appealed for a milder verdict, arguing that the woman had done what she could. Finally, as a result of the WMA intervention, the sentence was reduced from seven to five years (Liu3, interview 2002).

The WMA has involved women mayors in poverty-relief campaigns aimed at the western region (Zhang1, interview 2004). This kind of social involvement takes the form of donations and relies on women mayors’ individual resources. Donations of varying amounts go towards girls’ education and women’s health in poverty-stricken regions such as Gansu and Ningxia. While it is only recently that the WMA has engaged itself in social work of this sort, many of the local Women Cadres’ Societies have been doing so over many years. By supporting women in poverty, women officials side with the broad female population and demonstrate their personal inclination to social justice, equality and female solidarity. For many of them, the donations symbolize their personal contribution to women’s development. Of course, these donations do not touch upon the root cause of female poverty, namely male control of social resources, but only alleviate the symptoms of the problem.

**Contrast between the Organization and Its Members**

The lack of strong commitment to gender equality in society from the WMA’s side does not mean a lack of attention to women’s issues among the WMA members. On the contrary, as the author’s survey in 2001 indicates clearly, the WMA members seem to be highly conscious of women and gender issues. In the survey, twenty-four current gender issues were listed to elicit the participants’ answers to the question ‘How are you concerned
about the following issues and what issues concern you most?’ As the result shows, there are five top concerns as shown in the following: women’s right to education (80 per cent); equal employment opportunities (78 per cent); trafficking of women and children (76 per cent); equal pay for equal work and women’s unemployment (75 per cent); female poverty and illiteracy (71 per cent). Clearly, there is a high degree of concern among WMA members about the key problems facing Chinese women today.

The WMA members are quite positive towards independent women’s studies and NGO women’s organizations. The survey result shows that up to 68.7 per cent of the survey participants appreciate the role of women’s studies. Another 19.6 per cent indicated that they are generally positive towards women’s studies but doubt their capability to solve women’s problems. Only 11.8 per cent stated that they know very little about women’s studies. With regard to non-governmental women’s organizations, up to 80.4 per cent of the survey participants answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘do you think that women in politics should work side by side with women NGOs in order to promote and protect women’s rights and interests?’ Only 5.9 and 7.8 per cent respectively answered ‘I don’t know’ or ‘probably not’, and 5.9 per cent gave no answer. In short, most women mayors are able to appreciate the roles of women’s studies and willing to cooperate with women NGOs.

Also, it seems that women mayors have been quite active in pursuing pro-women policies. In the survey, the participants were asked to indicate if they had put forward policy proposals in favor of women so far. 82.3 per cent of the survey participants answered ‘yes, I have’, whereas only 17.7 per cent either answered ‘not yet’, or did not answer. Then the participants were asked to indicate whether they intended to put forward pro-women policy proposals in future. The result was once again overwhelmingly positive. ‘Yes’ was the answer given by 82.4 per cent, while only 11.8 per cent said ‘not sure’, 3.9 per cent said ‘haven’t thought about it yet’ and 2 per cent did not answer. What happened to the policy proposals posed by women mayors?

In the survey, over half of the participants (66.7 per cent) stated that their proposals had been adopted, 9.8 per cent of them still had their proposals in process, and 2 per cent of them had got their proposals partially adopted. Only 3.9 per cent of the participants stated that their proposal had not been adopted, while 17.6 per cent refrained from answering. In the interview, the informants were asked whether they thought that women in politics should pay special attention to women’s issues and act, in one way or another, to the advantage of women. The response was overwhelmingly positive. As
many as 92 per cent of the informants gave a firm ‘yes’. More than half of them added emphasis to their ‘yes’, either by stressing the tone or using body gestures.

There is other evidence of women mayors’ inclinations regarding gender and women’s issues. In the WMA organized policy debates, for instance, they often took the opportunity to incorporate women’s issues in their analysis of policy issues. For instance, at the second national conference for women mayors in 1996 (with the theme ‘social insurance’), a number of women mayors discussed various gender aspects of the social insurance policies. Among the 23 papers focusing on social insurance polices in general, seven (nearly 30 per cent) discussed the importance of ‘maternity leave insurance’ and reported on the development of this form of insurance in their cities. Among the six papers on employment policies, two dealt specifically with women’s employment, and one discussed women’s employment parallel to other employment issues.16

The observed degree of concern over the pressing problems facing women in current Chinese society, the positive attitude towards women NGOs, and the degree of commitment to pro-women policies among the WMA members suggest that if the placement of feminist gender politics in current China is not within the WMA, then it certainly exists in the personal attitude and daily work of the individual woman mayors. It also suggests that gender relations are being negotiated at the individual level every day, although the WMA as an organization has not developed a strong foothold in gender politics. Women mayors’ personal commitment to gender issues can be attributed to different sources of influence and inspiration. For those working in areas pertaining especially to women, for example, family planning, their professional ‘habit’ gives a natural concern for issues related to women. The same applies to those mayors who previously worked for the Women’s Federation. Regardless of their present responsibilities, they tend to think about women and about how to integrate women’s issues into the overall agenda. What is more common is that members of the current group of mayors have grown up during the socialist period, making their way to the top by virtue of hard work. Their present interest in women’s issues has deep roots in the socialist education that they received at a young age.

Concluding Remarks
While feminist studies perceive organizing as an effective way to bring about social change, the present study has presented the case of a women’s organization whose goals and actions are not based on an idea of change
for all women. The WMA has a restrictive membership which requires an established status, and thus has little to do with the most vulnerable and underprivileged groups directly. Instead of engaging in broad social and equality issues, the WMA is primarily preoccupied with the welfare of its own members, who are privileged and well-established in the society. It has carved out a space where women mayors can address the issues of their concern. With the help of the media and publications, the WMA has projected the women mayors’ image to the public. Above all, the WMA has brought about better resources for women mayors and improved their conditions by organizing all-woman activities.

The case sheds light upon a number of issues that are important to the study of feminism, women’s organizing and the women’s movement. First of all, there is a question of ‘positioning’. Women of different cultural and social backgrounds are placed differently within the political structures and gender relations of their societies, and the nature or the direction of women’s collective engagement will be determined by women’s conscious assessment of their ‘position’. In the case of Chinese women mayors, they belong to a privileged and well-established group in comparison to the average Chinese woman. Within the mayoral force, however, they constitute a marginalized and underprivileged group. The immediate challenge for women mayors is thus to change the conditions and status quo of their own group rather than that of women in general. The WMA as an organization stands between two agents of state power, the CMA and the ACWF, and has to carve out a space between them in which it is safe and effective to manoeuvre.

Second, the case illustrates that women can carve out some spaces of their own within the established, male-dominated system with its dominant gender ideology, which is conservative in nature. This is basically because gender relations, which are subtle and complicated, are constantly subject to negotiation and change. Within the Chinese political system, for instance, women’s organizing in politics was forbidden during the socialist period but is now tolerated. When organizing women mayors for change and empowerment, the WMA caters to the dominant gender ideology of the post-Mao era rather than challenging it. For instance, the idea that men and women are different (although highly problematic) gives women mayors the opportunity to organize themselves. Equally problematic is the claimed need to improve women’s quality. However, by arguing in support of this need, the WMA is able to mobilize resources and male support.

The study of the WMA adds another aspect to the picture of the current Chinese women’s movement and calls attention to the diversity and
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complexity within the movement. While popular women’s organizations or NGOs combat gender inequality and discrimination through changing norms, values and practices in society, and while the Women’s Federation makes great effort to protect women’s rights and interests as well as to promote their development, women mayors have, with the help of their organization, the WMA, taken an initiative to shape their working environment, project a more visible public image and negotiate for better conditions and more equal opportunities. Whether they challenge the existing political and ideological order or not, women mayors and the WMA have seized the opportunity to change and improve their own condition. Even in the absence of an active involvement in broad gender issues, perhaps the role of the WMA in supporting and empowering women mayors should be given the recognition and credit it deserves.

List of Abbreviations

ACWF  All-China Women’s Federation
CCP  Chinese Communist Party
CCPCC  Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee
CMA  China Mayors’ Association
NGO  Non-governmental organization
WF  Women’s Federation (local)
WMA  Women Mayors’ Association (formerly WMS)
WMS  Women Mayors’ Society

Notes

1 This kind of women’s organization is professionally based and is open only to members that meet certain criteria within the field of their profession, such as women lawyers, police officers, judges, entrepreneurs, journalists, artists, academics, officials, etc.

2 The percentage of women in the CCPCC has stabilized at around 7 per cent since 1987.

3 Further losses for women took place at local levels. In the 1950s, 70 per cent of China’s rural villages had a woman head or director, whereas in the 1990s, only 10 per cent of village leaderships included a woman (Wang 1999: 19).
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4 Municipalities (shi) in China vary in size, population, economic features and rank. Roughly speaking, cities are divided into four different ranks. The first category includes cities under the central government (zhixiashi), such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. These cities rank equally with provinces. The second category is medium-size cities under provincial governments, such as Xi’an, Shenyang, Nanjing and Hangzhou. The third category includes small cities of a prefectural rank, and the fourth category includes even smaller cities, which rank as counties.

5 During the Cultural Revolution, China’s municipalities were governed by a leading body called the ‘Revolutionary Committee’, which typically consisted of established party cadres and representatives of the workers, peasants and soldiers. Many women were on the Committees, but only a few were chair or vice-chairpersons of the Committees.

6 For the growth of China’s cities, see The Editing Committee of the ‘Contemporary China’ Series (comp.) (1990), and Roger C. K. Chan and Yao Shimou (1999).

7 See articles 11 and 12 of the Law.

8 For more examples of the local governments’ action plan, see (The Women Mayors’ Association 2000, pp. 52–57).

9 See SWMA 2001.

10 See the report by the Female Mayors’ Branch of the Mayors’ Association in China (2000), ‘Situation of Women’s Participation in Political Affairs in China’s Local Governments’, pp. 62–72.

11 For more about cadre ranks, see Goodman 2000.

12 Tao was singled out as the third ‘capitalist roader’ after Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution and was persecuted to death in 1969.

13 For this topic, see Anagnost 1997 and Rofel, 1999.

14 See the statute of the China Mayors’ Association, item 5, under article 3.

15 See the report, ‘Situation of Women’s Participation in Political Affairs in China’s Local Governments’ submitted by the WMA to the Asia–Pacific Summit of Female Mayors and Parliamentarians in 2000.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

‘No Fire in the Belly’: Women’s Political Role in Singapore

PHYLLIS GHIM-LIAN CHEW

‘Singapore’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Singapura’, meaning ‘the lion city’, for in the early days, many lions were said to roam its idyllic shores. Another species, less known but just as rare, may be said to be the political woman. Indeed, this has been even more so since Singapore achieved its independence from the British in 1959. While pre-independence women have been known to be vociferous and active, the post-independence period has seen depoliticized, apathetic women. Gender-specific factors – such as low self-esteem of women vis-à-vis men (Lee, Campbell and Chia 1999); the lack of female role models for political leadership (Kho 2004); and the constraints faced by many women in balancing family and work (Quah 2003) – have been cited to explain the current under-representation of women in politics. However, it is pertinent to look more closely at what has led to such a remarkable change in women’s political role in Singapore. As a past president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the leading women’s advocacy group in Singapore, I suggest that the importance of material values has played a significant role in determining women’s lack of political participation and that an inclusion of this important and hitherto neglected perspective accounts for the current depoliticization and apathy of women in Singapore.

The 1959 election manifesto of the People’s Action Party (PAP, the only political party that has ruled Singapore since then), pledged to improve the status of women by encouraging them to take an active part in politics and helping them to organize a unified women’s movement to fight for women’s rights. The PAP won a resounding victory in 1959, leading to the conclusion...
that their victory was due in large measure to the women’s vote (Kho 2004). Five women consequently entered parliament in 1959, but this number dropped to three in the 1963 election and declined even further to a solitary PAP woman in 1968. After this lone contender retired in 1970 ‘to make way for new blood’, the ruling party did not endorse a single female candidate until 1984, when it finally recruited three. All three female candidates were elected. In the next 15 years, the representation of women hovered between two and six per cent. The numbers began to rise dramatically in the late 1990s. Currently women account for 10 out of a total of 84 members of parliament (MP), a staggering 11.9 per cent. This remarkable figure prompted one female MP, in her speech at the 2002 Singapore Women’s Congress on ‘The Art of Success’, to highlight this achievement as a ‘quantum leap increase’ in the face of a government that is aware of and sensitive to its international standing:

To date we have two women ambassadors, two women Permanent Secretaries and ten women Members of Parliament ... the quantum leap increase in the number of women MPs is significant and is a true reflection of the Government’s recognition of the importance of a woman’s perspective and voice in Parliament. (Madam Ho Geok Choo, MP, opening address at the Singapore Women’s Congress, 8 March 2002. Quoted in Kho 2004: 1)

Statistics must, however, be viewed in perspective. It should be noted that no women were appointed to the Cabinet after the last General Election in 2001. The likelihood of women entering the ‘inner circle’ of politics is further diminished by the fact that no women currently serve as ‘apprentice ministers’ – in addition, all ten Ministers of State are men. Not surprisingly, women MPs have pleaded with the government to ‘listen to us as equals’ (Today 2004). A similar picture arises concerning political leadership at the district or constituency level. Here, women make up only one-quarter of the 18,000 leaders. On closer examination, however, one notices that of this quarter, 75 per cent of these women are in the lower-ranked, broad-based Residents’ Committees and very few women are in the higher-ranked premier committees. The 109 Peoples’ Associations oversee community centre management committees which conduct activities in the community centres, and have only 275 women members, accounting for seven per cent of female grassroots leaders. This figure falls further to three per cent, or 144 women, in the 81 Citizen Consultative Committees which coordinate all constituency local level activities and constitute the highest level of local leadership (Chew 1999a: 58). Moving away from formal politics to private
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enterprise management, while a significant number of Singapore women are engaged in electrical and electronic assembly-line work (Lee 1998), only very few women manage these enterprises. Yuen Kay Chung (2003) reports that women who attempt to break into male-dominated fields often have to deal with discrimination and prejudice. While more women have moved into middle management in the last two decades, women are still unable to reach the top – and the glass ceiling is very real. In 2000, for example, women made up only eight per cent of directors of both government-linked companies and statutory boards.

Despite such dismal statistics, the Singapore woman is, on average, educated and socially mobile. About 60 per cent of the female workforce in Singapore has at least a secondary education compared with 50 per cent of males. While women comprised only 29 per cent of the total student population in 1965, the figure had jumped to 44 per cent by 1975 and by 1985, there were more female than male students admitted to the university – a phenomenon that has continued since (Labour Force Survey of Singapore 1997). The under-representation of half of the country’s human talent, intellect, and life experience in political decision-making is a loss for society at large. Most importantly, while the dearth of women in political roles in Singapore has been bemoaned, not just by politicians but also by the public at large in recent years, what is less known and staggering is that this is not a static, descriptive appraisal of a lack. On the contrary, the lack of politically active women today is a dynamic ‘change’ from the period when political women did exist and were active, as they were in the 1950s and 60s in Singapore. There have always been active women in public life in Singapore in the less-researched pre-independence era. Indeed, pre-independence saw the Singapore woman remarkably politically conscious and socially articulate.

Thus, the next section will summarize how the political role of women in the period after the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) and before the attainment of independence (1946–1965) was played out. The ‘political role’ of women refers to women whose leadership in governmental or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) challenges them to be in the public eye and whose beliefs and advocacies lead to potential changes in public and governmental policies which help to promote human rights and lead to more equal opportunities for all. This section will be followed by reflections from political women in Singapore on the political role of women in the past and present. Some reasons for the lack of political women are then proposed, followed by a survey that sets out to verify these hypotheses. The
chapter concludes by discussing some political, social and psychological reasons behind the relatively unknown but striking lack of political women in contemporary Singapore.

**Political Women in Pre-Independent Singapore**

*(1946–1965)*

Long before the call for civil society, the rise of consciousness-raising groups, and the start of the feminist movement in the 1960s in the United States, hundreds of women had joined the Communist Party of Malaya and its guerrilla army. They saw it as an opportunity not just to oppose capitalism and imperialism but as an opportunity for liberation from their circumscribed lives in society (Khoo 2004). Thousands more had emerged following the Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942–1945) with a greater confidence in their own capabilities to survive social and political change. They were ready for new changes, having witnessed the humiliating defeat of British forces in the march of Japanese militarism and, along with it, the destruction of the myth of the supremacy of the white colonialist. During the war, women volunteers manned the feeding centres set up by the colonial government to cater to the thousands of children who roamed the streets, looking for food. They contributed to the war rehabilitation efforts, and for the first time, took up jury service and became Justices of the Peace. Many of these volunteers were from existing women’s organizations such as the Chinese Ladies’ Association and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA).

Women became overwhelmingly active in civil society. Alumni or ‘old girl’s associations’ were the first to be formed, and they were followed by other societies related to work, welfare and recreation. By 1952, there were many alumni associations, recreational clubs, community service clubs, religiously inspired organizations of women, ethnic groups, wives’ groups, professional groups, and women’s mutual help groups. One example of women’s political involvement can be seen in the work of the Family Planning Association of Singapore (FPAS) during the period of 1949–1965. The work of this organization was particularly innovative if one recalls that it was only in 1973 that the UN Economic and Social Commission on the Status of Women officially recognized the importance of family planning in improving the status of women. Initiated in 1949 by a group of women headed by Mrs Constance Goh, the FPAS began its work at the grassroots level with a meal program for children in Singapore’s busy Chinatown district (Ng 2002). The food was prepared in the General Hospital and was
distributed free of charge to the poorest of the poor. Up to 365 children per day had at least one good meal. The FPAS also worked with the YWCA to provide skills, training, and basic literacy, especially for girls, as they were regarded as the most disadvantaged. Their pioneering work came to an end in 1965, when the Singapore government set up the Family Planning and Population Board that was now accountable to the Minister for Health.

While the 1950s has often been deemed to be a fallow period in US feminist history – a time when women were encouraged to limit their aspirations to marriage, babies, and advice from Dr Spock – the Singapore NGO scene, on the other hand, was dynamic and controversial at that particular time. In 1949 the Malay Women’s Welfare Association of Singapore was formed, concerned that women were ‘caged birds’ hiding behind a curtain. The founder of the association, Zahara bte. Mohd. Noor, was an early opponent of the system of forced marriages and early divorce (Dancz 1987). The year 1952 also heralded a ‘new’ kind of women’s organization. The Singapore Council of Women (SCW) was established under the leadership of Mrs Shirin Fozdar and Mrs George Lee. Not content to walk the rounds of charity or to promote education in traditional skills and crafts, the SCW sought to change the status quo of relationships between men and women. From the beginning, the SCW was resolved to reform the ‘obsolete and oppressive marriage laws and to enact suitable legislation that would tend to the civil rights of women in Singapore’ (Chew 1999b). The group’s single-minded thrust against the practice of polygamy resulted in widespread publicity and, for the first time in Singapore’s history, excited and engaged the loyalty and energy of women from different ethnic groups and religious faiths towards achieving a common goal (ibid.).

In view of the era in which it operated, the SCW used astonishingly sophisticated strategies to attain its goals. These women aggressively lobbied the British authorities, the leaders of the Muslim community, and the leaders of the Chinese Advisory Board, the latter being the British Governor’s chief advisor on Chinese matters. They also wrote to all the Sultans in the state of Malaya and to dignitaries such as President Gemal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, the dominant force in Arab politics at the time, asking him ‘to come to the rescue of Muslim women all over the world and to legislate for monogamous marriage, so that other Muslim countries could follow the progressive trend in Egypt’ (ibid.: 15). Last but not least, the SCW also pressured local politicians and political parties, which were fast gaining political clout in a Singapore gearing up for self-government. In all these activities, they employed strategic use of the media to achieve their goals.
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Singapore women also began to enter the formal political arena. The highest decision-making body at that time under the auspices of the British colonial governor had only two female representatives. Mrs Elizabeth Choy was a teacher and wartime heroine who was nominated to the Legislative Council by the Governor after two unsuccessful attempts to obtain an elected seat, the first time as a Labour party candidate and the other on a Progressive Party ticket. Another decision-making body that welcomed a female representative in 1949 was the City Council. Mrs Robert Eu, a teacher, became the first woman to win a seat in the City Council, a body responsible for the running of markets and issues such as health and housing. As part of her successful campaign, she stated that ‘the future of Singapore depends as much on its women as on its men, and the time has passed when women leave all the thinking and planning to men’ (quoted in Lam-Lin 1993: 114). Legal assistant Mrs Amy Laycock joined her on the council in 1951, and three more women were added to the list in the 1957 City Council elections. Mrs Eu later tried to politicize women by forming the non-partisan Singapore League of Women’s Voters in 1955. The mid-fifties also saw a new breed of Chinese-educated women who were willing to give up their lives ‘to achieve a new society where men and women could walk hand in hand as equal political and social partners’ (quoted in Lam-Lin 1993: 117). One of these groups, the Singapore Women’s Federation, was formed in 1955 and banned two years later by the British as a communist front group. Its aims included uniting all women and striving for equal and political status in society.

The People’s Action Party (PAP) had their own Women’s League to help them, and they also recognized women as part of the oppressed class who were dominated by the colonial masters. On International Women’s Day in 1956, the League organized a rally that was attended by ten thousand women. The vanguards of this party women’s group were Chan Choy Siong, Ho Puay Choo, and Oh Su Chen. In 1956, they formed the core of the League, established to ‘unite all the women in Malaysia irrespective of race, class or creed so as to promote a spirit of mutual friendship and mutual cooperation’ (Manifesto, Women’s League 1955). Literacy classes and vocational activities such as sewing and cooking for women were organized, and members were mobilized into political and social activities. Many helped out in electioneering activities by distributing pamphlets, putting up banners and posters, and making house calls to explain the party’s policy. Some of these women stood on platforms to deliver emotive speeches at party rallies. In 1959, five of the eight women who ran for elections were also voted into the Legislative Assembly, capturing 9.8 per cent of the seats.
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The Women’s Charter Bill was passed in 1961, a concession to the SCW and the Women’s League, which sanctioned the chief demands of women at that time. In brief, the bill contained provisions regarding offences against women and girls and consolidated the law relating to the registration of marriages, divorce, the maintenance of wives and children, and the minimum age of marriage. It conceded that the only form of marriage permitted from then on would be monogamy and that women could from then on sue for adultery and bigamy and receive both a hearing and justice under the law. The Charter is remarkable because it set Singapore way ahead of most parts of the world where women's rights were concerned. For example, although Indonesian women had united as early as 1964 to form KOWANI (Indonesia Women’s Congress), it was not until 1974 that the status of women in marriage was safeguarded by a Marriage Act which recognized the principle of monogamy in marriage and allowed polygamy only with prior approval from the first wife and a court of law. Again, it was only in 1962 that the United Nations passed a convention concerning consent to marriage, minimum age for marriage, and registration of marriage. This was followed in 1965 by a United Nations resolution aimed at prohibiting child marriages and safeguarding the principle of free consent to marriage. In 1967, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. It is astonishing that the Singapore Women’s Charter of 1961 had preempted the social and legal reforms set out in the declaration that gave birth to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with regard to the protection of women and children, the equal rights of women to education at all levels and to work, have free choice of an occupation and equal remuneration with men.

The early 1960s saw lively debates. Prior to the election of the Legislative Assembly, political women voiced strong opinions about discrimination by the government in the workplace. The Singapore civil service had a practice of transferring women to a temporary service scheme once they were married, effectively denying them their pension rights. During the election year of 1962, women in two political parties – the People’s Action Party and Barisan Socialist Front – prepared their resolution for the implementation of equal pay for women, which they had planned to announce on International Women’s Day. The Barisan Socialist Front claimed that they prepared the resolution but that the Women’s Bureau of the PAP quickly approached their Finance minister on this issue to pre-empt their plans (Straits Times 1962). The lively competition sparked publicity that
was essential for the endorsement of the bill and the subsequent abolition of separate salary scales by 1965. By this time, however, political women began to disappear from the scene. In 1966, Parliamentarian Low Miaw Gong, a member of the opposition Barisan Socialist Front, was arrested as a result of her involvement with civil unrest and she subsequently resigned from Parliament. When the Barisan Socialist Front boycotted the 1968 election, the PAP was left without a strong opponent, and since then they have remained the only viable choice for the electorate. This might explain why women’s political weight as voters and candidates diminished, as there was no longer a need to mobilize women in vigorous campaigns to win the women’s vote.

There were no women in parliament from 1970 to 1984, a particularly striking phenomenon at a time when women in the West were making headlines with feminist ideals. The PAP Women’s Bureau, a successor of the PAP Women’s League, which played a major part in gaining victory for the party, also became defunct in 1975. Another surprising factor was that Wanita Umno (the women’s wing of the ruling party in neighboring Malaysia) was achieving a higher profile during this period. While doing research in Asia in the 1970s, scholars Joyce Lebra and Joy Paulston (1980:19) commented on the lack of political participation (Singapore was then the only Asian state which did not have women in politics) as ‘very surprising in view of advances by Singaporean women in profession and in history’. Indeed, in drawing up a non-discriminatory policy for citizens of the new Republic, the government saw no valid argument for including ‘gender’ alongside the existing categories of ‘religion, race, descent or place of birth’ in the Constitution of Singapore, which has been amended on numerous occasions since its separation from Malaysia in 1965.9

Voices from the Past and Present

In 1980, when questioned by reporters about the lack of women in Parliament, Mr Goh Chok Tong (at that time the election committee chairman for the PAP and later Prime Minister), said that the PAP had considered several women but could not find one as a suitable candidate: ‘Can you find a woman who has the same kind of quality as a man, who is as good as a man, and whose husband or potential husband or boyfriend would allow that woman to carry on a hazardous profession?’ (Goh Chok Tong, quoted in Lam 1993: 122).

Likewise, recent scholarly research on women’s political and social involvement has provoked similar comments, such as: ‘Singapore women are
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a shadow of our former selves’ – a quotation found in a study on Singapore women in higher education management by Carmen Luke (1998: 247). Data from my own interviews with six political women revealed similar sentiments: ‘In the past, we were vociferous and played an active role in politics but now we are happy only to echo the words of men’ (Interviewee 4, transcript line 146).

These are not particularly exceptional Singaporean views. In 1991, Claire Chiang, the President of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the foremost women’s advocacy group in Singapore and later, a nominated Member of Parliament, is reported to have said – with reference to the need for women to represent themselves politically: ‘I don’t feel that fire in the belly’ (quoted in PuruShotam 1998: 150). At the same time, Anamah Tan, the President of Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations, the umbrella body for women’s organizations in Singapore, explained: ‘Politics is not foremost in the woman’s mind. Foremost is, which tutor to get for her daughter, what class to send her to; ballet or piano or both? You ask them if they want to go into politics, they’ll ask you, “Where got time?”’ (Singapore woman, quoted in ibid.: 150). Physician Dr Nalla Tan, who has been addressing women’s rights issues since the 1960s, said in a public speech in 1974: ‘Women have become so content with money, pseudo-modernism and materialism that they have lost sight of matters which are vital to them’ (Dr Nalla Tan, quoted in Lam-Lin 1993: 87). Linda Tan, a founding member of the University of Malaya Socialist club in 1951, Chair of the National Women’s Congress, an influential grassroots organization founded in 1956, as well as the founder and President of the Singapore Women’s Federation in 1955, commented in a rare interview in 1997: ‘Nothing can be more different than the past. We are in a different time, a different place, a different world’ (interview with Linda Tan in 1957).

Another veteran of the pre-65 period was Chan Choy Soing, an MP from the People’s Action Party. In 1960, as head of the Women’s Bureau of the PAP, she characteristically asserted in a radio broadcast: ‘We must use the strength of women in the fight for a democratic, independent, non-communist and united socialist society. Only when this target is achieved can the woman be said to be completely liberated’ (quoted in Lam 1993: 85). However, the same Madam Chan, then the sole woman Parliamentarian, would say a decade later in 1970 that:

The standard of women has improved, coupled with the achievement of greater stability. However, this economic uplift and influence of western cultures [has] turned many women towards the pursuit of
luxury and vanity ... They have disregarded the movement for the enjoyment of the present peace and leisure. (Quoted in Lam-Lin 1993: 121)

Another veteran, Shirin Fozdar, the secretary general of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), left Singapore shortly after it achieved its independence to start a school for girls in the impoverished Northeastern region of Thailand, as a means of rescuing them from prostitution and a life of drudgery. The association that she founded, the SCW, became inactive and was taken off the list of registered groups in 1971. When interviewed in 1985 on why she did not stay on in Singapore to continue her work with women's rights, she responded: ‘The younger generation appears more interested in the pursuit of materialistic goals rather than in service to humanity’ (interview with Mrs Shirin Fozdar 1990).

The invisibility of gender inequality issues is perhaps most apparent in books written by the few opposition parties that exist today. One would assume that the opposition might capitalize on the gender-blind policy of the PAP by courting the neglected population of half of the republic. But this does not appear to be the case. In the books printed by the opposition parties, there are chapters criticizing the government on issues such as education, the media, distribution of wealth, rights and rules of law but none on women’s issues. Perhaps opposition parties, like the government, also believe in gender-blind policies, or else they envisage no political mileage in the inclusion of gender issues. One may then surmise here that while Singapore appeared as the shining star of the women's cause immediately after the Second World War, that star has now lost its luster after major goals were attained, and has now slid into a lethargic slumber. In addition, it is not surprising that few people are aware that Singapore was ironically, one of the last few countries to sign the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).  

Possible Reasons behind the Lack of Political Participation

Nowadays, few women in Singapore venture into political life. According to my interviews, they prefer to devote themselves to ‘minding their own business’ and ‘earning a living’ as well as ‘depending on the government for directions and initiatives’ (Interviewees 3 and 4). As one interviewee puts it: ‘I can think of better things to do than spend time on this ... Isn't this [joining a woman's organization] an unnecessary burden?’ (Interviewee 9, transcript line 558). Another interviewee responded with the following
when asked what she would do with regard to the injustices prevalent in society: ‘If the men are not able to solve the problems of the world, how can we who are just women do so?’ (Interviewee 5, transcript line 412).

The PAP’s MP, Dr Seet Ai Mee, who lost the election in her ward by a narrow margin to a male opposition leader in 1991, attributed her defeat to her sex: ‘Women prefer the leadership of men, and men prefer the leadership of men’ (quoted in Sunday Times 2004).

One of my interviewees, a female senior professorial colleague of mine in the Faculty of Education and a leader in her own field of expertise as well as a volunteer with the hospice movement, was extremely puzzled as to why I continue to ‘tally’ with women’s issues, since ‘there are no inequalities in Singapore’. Initially astounded, I later found that this perception was not exceptional, as proved by my focus group session with other women. Comments of this nature have unfortunately solicited descriptions of the republic as a ‘nanny state’ (Lingle 1996) under the watchful eye of what Gerald Heng (1995) has termed ‘state fatherhood’. There has also been widespread reference to its citizens as ‘apathetic’ (Mak and Hwang 1978) and kiasu, that is, ‘scared to lose’ (Ramakrishnan 1999). According to sociologist Beng Huat Chua (1995), the state is ‘pragmatic’ and ‘survivalist’ and is driven by an overriding goal of ‘economic prosperity’, dictums which he argues, have influenced both GO and NGO engagement in political life. Political scientist Hussin Mutalib argues that the ‘political compliance’ and ‘depoliticization of the citizenry’ was a result of ‘exclusionary corporatism’, which is, in other words, ‘an interventionist, centrally coordinated and paternalistic role in many sectors of society’ (Mutalib 2000: 316).

Certainly, there have been many explanations provided for the dearth of political participation by the citizenry as a whole. Perhaps the major reason behind the depoliticization of the citizenry is the peculiar politics of the republic. As mentioned, the People’s Action Party has led the government in Singapore since 1959. The opposition is weak or nonexistent. Some political scientists have labeled Singapore ‘the administrative state’, in which government and politics are combined into a single undertaking of state management with the following characteristics:

1. Allocation of resources according to centrally coordinated programmes rather than competitive bargaining or political confrontation
2. Depoliticization of the citizenry
3. Augmentation of the power and scope of the bureaucracy with civil service as the preferred path to political involvement.
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Officially unacceptable things are public protests, the signing of public petitions, and any kind of confrontational approach. Instead, what is preferred is feedback to the government through channels such as the public feedback session provided by the Ministry of Community Development and oral or written submissions to government ministers transmitted through NGOs such as the Nature Society and the Singapore Association of Women Lawyers. These NGOs can also influence public opinion by writing to the press, and often the relevant government department will reply to the letters explaining their position. Thus, a dialogue of sorts has developed between the citizenry and policymakers in the press. However, press laws are strict. Newspapers are licensed and licences can be revoked any time. Journalists must also be cautious of the Internal Security Act, under which they can be detained without trial. The Official Secrets Act deters reporters from receiving leaks, while libel laws compel journalists to take extreme care with any information that could hurt officials’ reputations. In addition, government ownership of the vast bulk of housing and the extensive intrusion of the ruling party into businesses, the infrastructure and universities provide it with the capacity to inflict considerable pain on those citizens who raise their voices in opposition.

James Gomez (2000) addresses the self-censorial behaviour of the majority and the absence of risk-taking at the philosophical and political levels when an individual who has an alternative viewpoint, instead of circulating it, chooses to evaluate the consequences. Based on a supposedly rational calculation of the situation, individuals opt to modify their political opinion or refrain from expressing them altogether, especially when they go against the ruling regime. Hence, in Singapore it is difficult to break out of self-censorship and the few who do so are often independently self-employed people.

Dissatisfied with these rather generic reasons behind the depoliticization of both men and women, I decided to attempt to examine whether there were more specific reasons behind the decline of women’s political participation. I wanted to probe more specifically into women’s fears, aspirations, and needs and to glean from their immediate responses possible reasons that could explain the disparity between pre- and post-independence women. In order to do so, a one-page questionnaire entitled ‘Lifestyle Survey’ was randomly distributed to 480 women in February 2003 at the entrance of ‘Lot 1’, a mega-mall in Choa Chu Kang, which is one of the many townships in Singapore built in the last two decades. The mega-mall, which contains several levels of shopping as well as a supermarket, can be considered the ‘heart’ of the
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Choa Chu Kang neighbourhood, a township which could be deemed as representative of the many new townships in the republic. Residents from the neighbourhood, ‘typical’ Singaporeans, also frequent the mall, which makes it a viable location for a survey. The questionnaire was designed to be simply understood and completed in ten minutes, as it was felt that anything more than this would meet with reluctance. In addition, I interviewed ten women, six of whom were at one time or another in leadership positions, either at the governmental or non-governmental level. The remaining four women were randomly selected while filling in the questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire and interviews, I held a focus group discussion with three women, with whom I discussed the issues that were brought up in the interviews and questionnaire. These three women, all activists in various NGOs, considered themselves well-informed on the women’s NGO scene in Singapore. They provided insights into the situation, giving me interpretations of some of the data that I had obtained. In many ways, they provided a more in-depth narrative than that of the ten women whom I interviewed. Some of the comments were, of course, ‘off the record’ and, in writing this article, I am particularly aware of confidentiality concerns. Thus, my own writing here is necessarily a little restrained.

Respondents represented the slightly more educated segment of the Singaporean population and may be characteristic of the crowd which frequents the shopping mall rather than, for example, the wet market – a ‘traditional’ market frequented by older women and full-time homemakers. There were two main sections in the questionnaire – the first entitled ‘What I want in life’ and the second entitled ‘How important are these to you?’ Some space at the bottom of the page was left for respondents’ comments, should they wish to write any. The first section ‘What I want in life’, required respondents to tick four choices from a list of ten items (see Table 7.1). The respondents chose the following items as their top five: ‘good health’, ‘love and happiness’, ‘security’, ‘wealth’ and ‘marriage and children’. ‘Good health’ is commonly understood by Singaporeans as physical fitness requiring minimum medical expenditures; ‘love and happiness’ is a catchphrase used by the media as part of the government’s pro-family policy to encourage more singles to marry – singlehood is commonly equated with loneliness and feeling unfulfilled; ‘security’ in the Singaporean psyche is related to a secure income and home ownership; ‘wealth’ relates to material resources; and finally, ‘marriage and children’ refers to the government’s pro-family policy, with extensive media images equating marriage with children and prosperity.
We can see that there is a great concern with ‘pragmatic’ or practical values such as ‘health’ and ‘security’ as well as with ‘love and happiness’. On closer examination, I realized that ‘health’, which was on nearly everyone’s list of priorities as well as ‘security’ as a close third, may not necessarily be ‘a want’ but a ‘means to a want’. This is because it is the common Singaporean perception that without ‘health’ and ‘security’, one may not be able to achieve ‘love and happiness’, the second priority. There are numerous Asian proverbs, such as: ‘to get rich, never risk your health’ or ‘without health, there is no wealth’. Similarly, ‘security’ basically means home ownership, as is evident in the government’s very successful home ownership scheme; a pragmatic scheme to ensure ‘bonding and attachment’ by the citizenry to a home – a place – and hence to a tenuous, newly-created republic. In this sense, ‘love and happiness’ can be identified as the dominant goal of respondents, since this is not possible unless one has ‘health’ and ‘security’. What is interesting, however, is that ‘wealth’ comes immediately after these priorities and that ‘marriage and children’ follows wealth. Perhaps ‘wealth’ is considered essential for the upbringing of children, since ‘marriage and children’ follows rather than precedes it. The last three choices left were: ‘good looks,’ ‘equal opportunities with men,’ and ‘freedom of speech’. ‘Good looks’ were not considered that important, being chosen by only eight percent of respondents. We may conclude here that this rather physical value has not yet ‘caught on’, despite the fact that the shopping mall was decorated to the hilt with eye-catching displays. More significantly, no one ticked ‘equal opportunities with men’ or ‘freedom of speech’ as important enough

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<td>Good health</td>
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<td>Love and happiness</td>
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<td>Security (job and home)</td>
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<td>Wealth</td>
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<td>Marriage and children</td>
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to merit their top choices. In my focus group discussion, we felt that this was probably because most women didn't know precisely what these things really meant. Nonetheless, we eventually concurred that the Singapore woman in general is very literate and that perhaps the respondents genuinely did not find these choices very important after all. This brings to mind a comment made by celebrated Singaporean author Catherine Lim in 2004 – that ‘the need for political space is only for the vociferous few’, as ‘the majority are concerned about bread-and-butter issues’ (Lim 2004).

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to gain more insights into the wants and needs of Singapore women. The data collected in this segment would enable us to validate results from the first section as well as give us further insights into fathoming the preoccupations and aspirations of the Singapore woman. Here, respondents were asked to indicate the importance they attached to factors such as ‘marriage/relationships’, ‘childcare facilities’, ‘success in career’, ‘human rights’, etc. The first five items in Table 7.2 were chosen as elements of the good life, because they are common ‘public’ topics for Singaporeans. This fact may be gleaned from a survey of the topics in talkback shows on radio, television interviews and from the common themes of contemporary plays and novels by Singaporean women. The results were as follows:

The items that were important to most respondents were ‘affordability of properties/car’, ‘success in career/job’, and ‘amount of leisure time’. In contrast, the values which were identified as ‘unimportant’ were ‘amount of freedom’, ‘human rights’ and ‘freedom of speech’. Women were ‘not sure’ about the fol-

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<td>Affordability of properties/car</td>
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lowing three items: ‘medical benefits for women’, ‘women representation in parliament’, and ‘human rights’. Indeed, the space for comments on the questionnaire reflected women’s unfamiliarity with these terms. Some examples of the comments are: ‘What are medical benefits for women?’ or ‘Sorry, what are human rights? ... Please give examples’. Most respondents were not familiar with these terms and that may be the reason for the high percentage under the column ‘Not sure’. This shows that respondents, although well-educated by worldly standards, particularly in mathematics, science and technology, are rather poorly educated in humanistic discourse and are not aware of the debates of the past decade between government and NGOs on the need for equal medical benefits for both sexes.\(^{16}\) What we may conclude from the second part of the questionnaire is that respondents appear materialistic and pragmatic. They seemed eminently concerned with success at work, in marriage and the acquisition of wealth, while more abstract values such as freedom of speech or equal opportunities were not regarded as important.

The results of my small-scale survey are in line with trends recorded by several other surveys. Two other surveys have shown a similar lack of interest in human rights and freedom of expression in Singapore. A survey conducted in 1996 by *Asia Week* in countries in the Asia-Pacific region on the respective citizenries’ concern with human rights indicated that Singaporeans were the least concerned.\(^{17}\) In another survey, values such as ‘discipline’, ‘helping others’, ‘harmony’, ‘respect for authority’, and so on were suggested to respondents. Only Singaporeans broke ranks with almost everyone else by voting against freedom of expression as important (quoted in Birch 1999: 26). In my survey, what was important was ‘job success’ and ‘marriage/relationships’. Women definitely wanted to work besides having a relationship (marriage). This resonates with a survey of Singaporean values and lifestyles from 1998, which found that a significant proportion of people held fairly conservative views of women’s role in society. For example, 59.2 per cent of women agreed that a woman’s life is fulfilled only if she can provide a happy home for her family. At the same time 73.5 per cent of respondents felt that a woman should have her own career (ibid.: 94–96). In my survey, 41 per cent and 40 per cent respectively responded in favour of ‘women’s representation in parliament’ and ‘human rights’. Once again, this tallies with a joint survey by Gallup Singapore and the National University of Singapore’s Center for Business Research and Development on the status of men and women in Singapore, where three-fifths of the respondents said that having more women in politics would ‘make no difference.’\(^{18}\) In contrast, similar Gallup findings elsewhere show that 72 per cent of Thai
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respondents are confident that more women in office would result in better government. Overall, the Gallup survey reveals Singaporeans to be a fairly happy lot – satisfied with their lives and confident about the future. About three-quarters of the Singapore respondents – the highest worldwide – believe that society treats men and women equally (Business Times 1996).

Hence, my survey confirms a trend that shows that Singapore women on the whole are busy, practical, and focused on marriage, children, housing, cars, etc. This may, therefore, explain their social and political apathy. Certainly, the survey results suggest that it is not likely to be merely a matter of fear, self-censorship, or the authoritarian rule of the state, as expounded by Chua (1995), Mutalib (2000) and Gomez (2000), although these factors do form a significant part of the societal backdrop. Other, more insidious, factors also appear to be at work, of which a chief one is materialism.

Change and the Material Culture

I’ve discussed what I’ve learned of Singaporean values with a local journalist.
‘What is the “national interest”?’ I ask.
‘Peace, happiness, you know. That sort of thing.’
‘How do you find it?’
‘Shopping,’ she reveals, lighting another Winston.

This exchange portrays a snapshot of the materialistic Singapore woman, which together with the emphasis on material values indicated by my survey, deserves to be examined more closely. Materialism is commonly understood as a dominant attachment to material possessions or the tendency to allocate excessive attention to goals involving material objects. The results of my survey show that respondents appear to have what Tim Kasser and Allen Kanner (2004) term a ‘materialistic values orientation.’ Ostensibly, respondents have voted for material goods such as health, security, wealth, and marriage and children. However, while we all invest attention in material goods in order to survive, there is a threshold along the continuum after which any further investment detracts from the ability to experience other aspects of life – such as aesthetic experiences, or the development of body and mind. In the survey, this latter aspect may include values such as ‘amount of freedom’, ‘human rights’ and ‘freedom of speech’, all of which were ranked as ‘important’ by 47, 40 and 51 per cent respectively.
How has this happened? Perhaps the media is one arena that contributes to the drive for materialism and consumption. We are now continually exposed throughout our lifetimes to messages suggesting that we should work hard to earn money, which we then can spend on products and services, or which we can invest to make even more money. An interesting commercial is one launched by the very successful Singapore International Airlines (SIA). The image of the Singapore woman, sold by the state on the airline services market, may be regarded as a sexual one, but this is not something generally apparent to the citizenry. What is important is that the airline is profitable and that every male business traveler around the world knows that the ‘Singapore girl’ continues to be ‘a great way to fly’. When people are exposed to thousands of commercials a day, they become objectified in a very specific manner. Their value and worth as human beings is reduced to that of consumers. As a result, people’s identities become increasingly based on their ability to buy things. In *Endangered Lives*, Ellyn Kaschak (1992) writes about the ‘male gaze’, which occurs when men look at women as sex objects rather than as whole, complex human beings. Similarly, we may speak of the ‘commercial gaze’ that corporations turn on people when they reduce them to commercial objects. Consumption is part of the materialistic culture and has increasingly taken on an enchanted; sometimes even a sacred and religious character for people. Shopping malls have been described as ‘cathedrals of consumption’, places where people go to practice their ‘consumer religion’. My survey took place in a mall-superstore, as that is where the people congregate. A materialistic culture also experiences the presence of fast food, chain stores, electronic shopping centres, supermarkets, book superstores, malls, cruise ships and theme restaurants.

According to my survey and the results of the focused group discussion, it does appear that Singaporean women have progressively become so busy juggling work at the office and at home, preoccupied with the affordability of houses and cars, and immersed in ensuring a ‘high standard of living’ that they have very little time or need for ‘non-material’ issues such as ‘equal opportunities’ or ‘human rights’. In this respect, the government can be said to have positioned women where they wish them to be. Here, postmodern theory offers a useful corrective to the idea that the means of consumption control and exploit consumers. Although there is control and exploitation in the sense that people are led to buy and to spend too much, the fact is that people are not only being coerced into doing so, but are quite eager to carry on in these particular ways (Ritzer 1999). Materialistic values promote a generalized sense of betterment and improved social mobility. Its transform-
ing qualities on human life have been recognized as ‘progress’. Women are afraid to lose what such values can offer, and these include changes in housing situation, job and career choices, higher wages, expanded educational achievements, ownership of household technologies, ownership of stocks and real estate, and an expanded access to leisure activities. As women gain access to individual incomes, they are also better positioned to enjoy a monogamous marriage with a man of their own choosing, educational and career opportunities abroad, access to interior-designed homes, membership at golf and country clubs and, last but not least, youthful bodies clothed in the latest Western fashions. Materialism can be completely addictive, and the addict, having tasted its allure, continues not only to crave more, but fears losing a secure hold. Can it be that the Singapore woman is afraid to return to the past? In this past, a girl grew to womanhood with at best a year or two of schooling and few job opportunities – these for the most part menial and miserably paid – and faced twenty years of more or less continual pregnancy in marriage to a man who had little schooling, while struggling with low earnings and an insecure livelihood (Wee 1999: iii).

Materialism has offered her powerful opportunities. The Singapore woman presently enjoys a range of childcare, play school, and tuition centers where her children can be educated. She consumes literature such as *Bring Out the Genius in Your Child* and *I Am Gifted: So Are You*. The library is fully stocked with self-improvement books of all types, and it may be fair to comment here, in view of the pragmatic orientation of the society, that these investments in time are ostensibly more for material rather than spiritual gain. She also enjoys full-time foreign domestic maids brought in from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, China and Myanmar, and although she may occasionally complain about the difference between women’s and men’s wages in Singapore, she is oblivious to the idea of hiring a foreign domestic maid on terms no Singaporean would ever accept.¹⁹

During the last forty years, the PAP government has attempted to construct a female identity comprised on the one hand of a traditional feminine domesticity and, on the other, a modern liberated outlook emphasizing equal competition with men in the marketplace so as to achieve economic goals. Women therefore have no choice but to build the nation as mother, worker and wife, all three of which engender time and responsibility. Family life advertisements promote this ideal and are a commonplace type of blurb in Singapore, appearing in the media, as posters at train stations and painted on the exteriors of buses. Introduced in the late 1980’s, these advertisements persuaded single women and men to get married and, ide-
ally, to produce three children. The advertisements suggest that any other type of lifestyle is undesirable. Women are perceived as an intrinsic part of the family, and single persons are portrayed as physically and emotionally isolated – represented by characters who sit alone, absorbed in their own thoughts, or at work in the office (Lazar 1999).

The dual roles of women have raised their standard of living, but as a result, women have also become busier, thus lacking any time for reflection. In 2003, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, slated to be the next Prime Minister of Singapore, commented on the situation:

> We will work even harder to bring more women into parliament the next time. The task should get easier as more women advance in their careers and distinguish themselves. But I think for a long time to come it will be harder to recruit women than men into politics. It is not so easy for a woman to cope with the demands of being an MP, plus her professional career, plus her responsibilities as wife and mother (Lee 2003).

This brings to mind an observation from a woman educator in her 50s: ‘When a man goes out to work and comes home, he expects lunch and dinner on the table. But when a woman comes back, they’re all waiting for her to lay out the food’ (cited in Chin and Singam 2004: 16). A veteran MP from the People’s Action Party, Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, supports her party’s view that ‘women’s priority is the family, followed by work’. It is not that men do not want more female politicians, but that ‘women themselves may not be prepared to sacrifice their time’ (Lam-Lin 1993: 55).

What is missing in the observations by both Lee Hsien Loong and Yu-Foo Yee Shoon is the lack of a compulsion to ask whether Singaporean women might be more prepared to take on the double burden if Singaporean men were to take on some of the moral burden of producing ‘successful’ children. Their opinions belie the PAP’s consistent stand on the preservation of traditional mores such as upholding the man as the head of the household (Wong 2005).

Because the family needs the woman’s income to maintain a higher standard of living, the continued economic progress of Singapore is on everybody’s mind. ‘It is better to be on the treadmill than to starve’, declared an interviewee, the eldest girl in a family of six. Wee recounts the plight of the eldest daughter in the Singapore of the 1950s:

> Nor did the woman have many options to supplement her husband’s earnings ... Once a daughter reached seven or eight she was deemed
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ready to take on home and baby care, and her mother might make a few dollars as washerwoman to a number of households. Or if they lived near the docks, mother might be on call from a contractor, who collected a team of women when a ship’s hold needed scrubbing out. The price of these small extra earnings, which could mean a little schooling for the younger children, was the sacrifice of the eldest girl. A survey carried out in the 1950s showed that the first born daughter was significantly less likely to be sent to school than were younger children. (Wee 1999: iii)

Certainly, there is a spectre of impending disaster and crisis that has been drummed into the psyche of each and every Singaporean. Every schoolchild is aware of the republic as a small island, highly vulnerable to the exigencies of the outside world. A siege mentality persists with Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore, giving characteristic pronouncements such as the following: ‘This is 1995. Can it go on for another 50 years? I’m not sure. Can it go on for 20 years? Maybe. Can it go on for 10 years? I would say, most probably’ (quoted in Chew 2000: 135).

Indeed, this spectre has led to the Parliament’s bold suggestion in 2004 to double Singapore’s current population of 4 million to 8 million so as to gain a competitive edge. This is not a proposal to be taken lightly; already it is being quietly put into practice. For example, Singapore’s population grew from 2.4 million in 1980 to 3.1 million in 1990 and to 4 million in 2000 (Dept of Statistics, 2001). In other words, between 1980 and 1990 the population grew by 29 per cent and between 1990 and 2000, it grew by yet another 29 per cent – a total of 67 per cent in 20 years. What is novel is that this increase is not a result of the natural birth rate, since the fertility rate had sunk below the replacement level as early as 1975, and was one of the world’s lowest, at 1.25 in 2003. The proposal is indeed unique, since no country in the world has ever wittingly sought to make its own citizens a minority. The population increase has therefore stemmed from migration, notably from China and India, so as to raise the level of competition both in school and the market place. Many scholarships have also been awarded to students from China and India in the past two decades because, as Lee Kuan Yew explained: ‘If one out of four foreign students from China or India stayed behind in Singapore … Singapore’s talent pool would outweigh that of any neighboring country’ (Today, 14 October 2004, p. 2).

Not surprisingly, the materialistic preoccupation has influenced policies made by current women NGOs, the best known of which is AWARE, founded in 1986. Since the necessity of economic development appears to be
the only reality, AWARE’s priority has always been how best to save women from the fetters of social, cultural, political and economic discrimination as well as how women best can serve the nation’s economic and political needs. Nirmala PuruShotam has critiqued this stance as something between ‘compliance and resistance’, a ‘moderate feminist orientation’ and ‘selective feminism’, where the attachment to an improved lifestyle becomes more important than the value of human rights itself (1998: 144). Lenore Lyons (2004) calls this ‘a state of ambivalence’. This produces a situation whereby AWARE must center all its programmes around the PAP’s own language of meritocracy and phrase its activities within a patriarchal context in order to survive. This is not dissimilar to the strategies adopted by the few women currently in parliament. They focus on issues to ‘help women’, to ‘alleviate their stress’ and to ‘help in population control’ so as to build a ‘happy and prosperous society’, rather than on questioning the structural inequality of the system. This is an interesting corollary to the research by Wang on the Women Mayors’ Association in China and by Eto on Japanese women activists (see Chapters 2 and 6 in this volume).

Like all the other women’s organizations, AWARE is careful to stay close to concrete concerns rather than to tackle the larger issues in which they are embedded. Usually, it tries to clothe its feminist concerns under a ‘humanistic mantle’ of providing services. Rather than taking on the role of a pure advocate, over the years it has, understandably, come to emphasize community and welfare services to women. In 1991, it established a telephone ‘Help line service’ for distressed women. By doing so, it achieved two things – it raised money for the help line rather than for ‘feminist causes’ and it gained public legitimacy as an organization that ‘helps abused women’.

Even when AWARE chooses to adopt a feminist issue such as rape, considerations of political legitimacy and state issues have to be confronted. In 1998, AWARE organized a large campaign for the legislation of rape as a war crime. 50,000 signatures were collected and a mass public exhibition was staged. As a result, the association attained a great deal of media publicity (Frederick 2001). However, in her research, Ruey Rui Constance Ho (2000) concludes that the primary impetus for the campaign may not be so much a ‘feminist’ one but ‘pragmatic’ in the sense that a non-governmental organization is dependent on public funding and is therefore constantly in search of new issues that might grant them accessibility to donors and media publicity.

Indeed, issues such as rape and domestic violence have become ‘materialistic’ in the sense that the larger feminist analysis of gendered power
relations has gradually been submerged under the umbrella of service provision with the passing of time. They were also depoliticized in the sense of becoming oriented towards the provision of services. In addition, over time, the issue of violence against women has been progressively ‘co-opted’ into the mainstream by other social service and state agencies.

AWARE appears to have few choices for its strategies and must remain conscious of its position in a state imbued with incredible power. Fear of being perceived negatively or shut down means that the organization tempers public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism. Lenore Lyons (2004) notes that, in an Asian context, closed-door negotiation works better than public lobbying; consequently, militants run the risk of losing their credibility. Unlike its predecessor, the SCW, that staged public rallies, petitioned the legislative council, and wrote to leaders abroad to support its causes, AWARE uses research papers, hosts educational seminars, and pens letters to the local newspaper in order to be heard.

In addition, like other NGOs in Singapore working within the constraints of a materialistic orientation, AWARE has a problem finding volunteers to do the work it wishes to do. Some extracts from my interviews underscore the chronic problems surrounding volunteerism in the women’s NGO scene:

‘Women want the good life, trips to Europe, branded goods, designer clothes, and showing off.’ (Interviewee 1, transcript 48)

‘You can get volunteers, but they don’t stay … probably they have to stop work and look after the kids. Only a few want change, and most are not interested in speaking up.’ (Interviewee 3, transcript line 568–70)

‘Once in a while we get a couple of new volunteers, but they don’t last. After they find out that they got to give, give, give and not receive anything, they leave.’ (Interviewee 8, transcript line 40–42)

‘Women are saying: “We earned it, so we must spend it”. It’s no point making a lot of money and then not rewarding yourself.’ (Interviewee 7, transcript line 500–1)

‘I am neglecting my husband and children. I got a duty to them. How do you expect me to contribute? I think it’s better to look after my husband and children first.’ (Interviewee 6, transcript line 67–70)

‘There is a great pressure to perform. If you leave your office at 7 pm, it’s supposed to be early. There’s so much competition nowadays – we can’t help it if our job consumes our whole life.’ (Interviewee 10, transcript line 677–680)
Conclusion

Pre-independence Singapore experienced women as politically conscious and socially articulate, willing to participate in nation-building and to create a better society for all. On the other hand, post-independence Singapore rendered women relatively depoliticized and apathetic. Singaporean women were once eager to fight for what they perceived as their basic human rights, risking body and soul for an uncertain future. However, women nowadays are better educated and financially secure, and they have little free time or ‘fire in the belly’. While it is commonly assumed that the modern Singaporean woman should have an increased appetite for civic responsibilities, the reverse appears to be the case. A scenario of post-colonial depoliticization could certainly help explain the lack of engagement in gender equality issues of both the government and the opposition. Doubtless, it could also reflect a situation somewhat similar to post-independence Indonesia, where, once the main struggle for independence was felt to be over, the women’s movement became quiescent. Political leaders may also feel that the promotion of gender interest might be divisive in a vulnerable new nation state.

In addition, the administrative state and its strict control is an obvious contributing factor to women’s lack of political participation, since one of the defining features of Third-World feminism has been the presence and intervention of the state (Heng 1997: 32). As we have recounted, the opposition is weak or non-existent and self-censorship is rife. Unlike pre-independence women, post-independence women have no choice but to work in a depoliticized way in order to be heard. Unlike the SCW, AWARE needs to adhere to the matrix in which it finds itself, and speak the language of that matrix in order to survive.

There is also the economic factor. As a newly independent state, Singapore chose to industrialize in order to survive economically. Women were encouraged to work in the 1970s to supplement the family income while still caring for the home. Slammed with this double-burden, women were robbed of the time and energy to engage in civic work. With the dearth of women in politics, little was done to improve their status, leaving them progressively dependent on prevailing political good will and administrative practice. For example, while AWARE has for more than a decade petitioned for a right to maternity leave and more flexibility for working mothers in the workplace, the government has only lately agreed to these appeals, not because it recognizes them as rights, but because it needs to support
measures to increase population growth, which is deemed imperative for economic well-being (*Straits Times* 2004).

Other contributory factors are the ideological and psychological hindrances to women's legislative participation including gender ideology, cultural norms, and values that assign certain roles to men and women, women's lack of confidence, women's perception of politics as a dirty game and the ways in which women are portrayed in the media (cf. Shvedova 2002). However, I have specifically earmarked a very significant trend in favour of pragmatic ideals of immediate functional value and an impatience with relatively vague political concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’, and I would argue that the cause of women's lack of political engagement, in addition to political, social, ideological and psychological hindrances, is also market forces and economic success. For some Singaporeans, political and social apathy may be linked to the fear of losing what is commonly perceived as ‘the good life’, an offshoot of increased materialism and consumerism. Indeed, a materialistic orientation appears to be part of the global neo-liberal trend sweeping the industrialized globe. Such a trend is often insidious in its ability to increase self-preoccupation at the expense of more holistic and humane perspectives. In Singapore, this has possibly led to increased self-centredness, lack of interest in politics, and a focus on values benefiting the individual, physical self. While capitalism has catapulted Singapore into the developed league of nations, it has left in its wake a population distracted by materialism and fearful of losing its seductive lustre. The fear of failure or loss (*kiasu-ism*), together with the love of a life of convenience, have created a society seemingly complacent and unmotivated in humanistic concerns.

The materialist orientation of Singaporean women has forced AWARE to gravitate towards women's needs and aspirations. In the current political context, women's wishes are simple: they will support a system that delivers economic benefits for themselves and their families. They are not concerned with freedom of speech or human rights. Indeed, such clarity of vision together with the right to vote makes them the strongest supporters of government polices and keeps the PAP in perpetual power. As long as women ‘fear to lose’ the good life, AWARE's feminist agenda must take a careful second place with regard to women's preoccupation with security, wealth, and job success.
Gender Politics in Asia

Chronology

1819 Founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles. Singapore is governed by the British administration in Calcutta.

1867 Singapore becomes part of the Straits Settlements (together with Malacca and Penang) and is made a Crown Colony of Great Britain.

1941 Japanese occupation of Singapore

1945 Japan surrenders. Britain retakes Singapore

1955 Election for limited self-government. Mr David Marshall becomes Singapore’s first Chief Minister.

1957 A Citizenship Ordinance is passed which provides Singaporean citizenship for all those born in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, or for foreigners who have resided there for a minimum number of years and are willing to swear allegiance to Singapore.

1959 The British Parliament changes the status of Singapore from that of a colony to that of a state and elections are held for the Legislative Assembly. The Peoples’ Action Party wins 43 out of the 53 seats. Lee Kuan Yew becomes the first prime minister of the state of Singapore.

1963 Singapore becomes part of Malaysia (together with Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsula Malaysia).

1965 The federation with Malaysia is terminated. The Republic of Singapore is formed with its own Constitution. Lee Kuan Yew once again becomes the first prime minister of the new Republic.

1990 Mr Goh Chok Tong becomes the second prime minister of the Republic of Singapore, with Mr Lee Kuan Yew as its senior minister.

2004 Mr Lee Hsien Loong becomes the third prime minister of the Republic of Singapore, with Mr Goh Chok Tong as its senior minister and Mr Lee Kuan Yew as its minister mentor.

Notes

1 ‘Singapura’ has existed since 1297 when it was one of the three kingdoms of the Sri Vijaya Empire.

2 The author was an elected President of AWARE from 1998 to 1999 and has served AWARE during the last decade in various voluntary capacities.
'No Fire in the Belly': Women's Political Role in Singapore


4 Gender-segregated data is not easily attainable in Singapore, since little research has been done. There is no government bureau or systematic programmes of women's studies at the universities, which would be the natural centres for research and repositories of such information.

5 Singapore attained internal self-governance in 1959 from its colonial master, Britain. It became a state in the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. It separated from Malaysia in 1965 and since then has been an independent republic.


7 The manifesto of the Women's League declared: ‘Today the people of Malaya are struggling for a democratic and independent Malaya. The people have united to fight for their inalienable elementary rights. The women's emancipation movement must be aligned to this movement for independence. The women's movement is only part of the whole social movement, and only when the whole society is free can there be a real solution for the women's peculiar problem … The Women's League of the People's Action Party believes that we, the women of Malaya, can also be free. But we require support from all our fellow sisters so that we can be a force in our national struggle for a free, democratic and independent Malaya.’

8 It was not until 1974 that the UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

9 Article 12 of the Constitution of Singapore states that ‘there shall be no discrimination against citizens of Singapore on the grounds of “religion, race, descent or place of birth”’.

10 Madam Tan was arrested in 1956 under the Internal Security Act by the colonial government because they believed she was attracted to the communist cause as a means to fight colonialism and establish equal status for women. Released in 1959, she was re-arrested in 1963, this time by the PAP government under ‘Operation Cold Store’ which saw 110 communists and subversives rounded up. She was released within a year. She never returned to politics, but her interest in women's rights motivated her service in a voluntary capacity at AWARE.

Singapore eventually signed in 1995, but with reservations to Article 2 and Article 16. The need for sensitivity with regard to minority customs and religion was given as the reason. In brief, Article 2 states: ‘State parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, and agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women.’ In brief, Article 16 states: ‘State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations.’

The questionnaire was designed to capture three basic characteristics of the respondents, age, education and housing situation. In terms of age, there was a good cross-section of the population – 42 per cent were in the 18–35 age group, 34 per cent were in the 35–50 age group and 24 per cent were in the 50–70 age group. In terms of ‘education’, there were 65 per cent with ‘O’ levels, 18 per cent were polytechnic and university graduates, and 17 per cent had a qualification of Primary School Leaving Certificate or below. In terms of housing, respondents came from a representative cross-section of Singapore: 65 per cent of the respondents lived in 4-room flats, 32 per cent in 5-room flats, 2 per cent in executive flats, and 1 per cent in ‘private’ buildings.


See, for example, Verena Tay (2004) *In the Company of Women*. Singapore: Singapore National Printers, as well as the novels of Catherine Lim. Their themes are predominantly materialistic – centering around money, careers and possessions.

Since the completion of this chapter, in August 2004, Singapore has got a new Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong. He began his term by giving in to the pro-family, pro-women call, announcing such things as equal medical benefits, extended maternity leave, and a five-day work week.

47 per cent of Singaporeans were not concerned, compared with 39 per cent for Hong Kong, 31 per cent for Malaysia and Thailand, 29 per cent for Asian expatriates, 27 per cent for Taiwan, 26 per cent for South Korea, 24 per cent for Indonesia, 21 per cent for the Philippines, 16 per cent for Japan, and 14 per cent for both Australia and Western expatriates.
The number of people surveyed included 663 men and women, using face-to-face interviews. Respondents were representative of the population in sex, age, race, economic status and housing type.

One in seven Singaporean households has a domestic worker (Gee and Ho 2006).

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