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**Leaning to the Left: The Post-War Political Reorganisation of Chinese Women
Activists within the CCP United Front Framework (1945-1949)**

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Abstract

The political transformation and reconstruction in China after the Second World War was marked by the Communist Party's successful implementation of the united front framework (tongyi zhanxian 统一战线) in the Kuomintang-controlled areas, in order to form a political coalition against the Kuomintang regime and to found a "new China" in 1949. Chinese women activists, who had established a variety of resistance organisations and built connections with different political parties and groups during the War of Resistance (1937-1945), also engaged in this framework and eventually leaned to the political left. By investigating the political reorganisation of Chinese women activists within the united front framework in different Kuomintang-held urban sites, this article aims to deepen the understanding of women's political roles and goals in their engagement with the Communist Party for the post-war national reconstruction, and to reveal the complexities of the process of their "leaning to the left".

Keywords: *Chinese women activists, China Women's Association, the CCP united front framework, post-war political reconstruction, the Chinese civil war.*

On 13th February 1945, about half a year before Japan's surrender and the end of the Second World War, the *New China Daily* (*Xinhua ribao* 新华日报), the organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published a "statement of women in Chongqing on the current political situation", made on behalf of Chinese women who had contributed to the national resistance against Japan, and who expected to tackle the prolonged national crisis that was due to Japanese aggression as well as the dissatisfactory performance of the Nationalist government. The statement explains that:

One of the main causes of today's crisis is the lack of political democracy. Since there is no political democracy, people have no right to participate in national affairs, real talents have no opportunity to contribute to the government, while human and material resources cannot be mobilised for national resistance, and different political parties and factions cannot unite under the government to contribute their ideas ... The central government has promised to convoke the National Assembly, to terminate political tutelage and to implement constitutional governance as soon as the war finishes. Therefore, we urge the government to immediately invite different parties and groups to discuss national affairs together, to reach a consensus with people, to return the freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of association to people. In today's movements for democracy and national resistance, we women must make a great effort and participate in different kinds of work, so as to achieve "national resistance and reconstruction" (*kangzhan jianguo* 抗战建国) ("Chongqing funü dui shiju de zhuzhang", [1945] 1991: 840-842).

This statement, signed by 104 women activists on Chinese New Year's Day in 1945, later became the founding statement of the China Women's Association (*Zhongguo funü lianyihui* 中国妇女联谊会, hereafter the CWA). Affiliated with the CCP South Bureau in Chongqing, the CWA consisted of women activists from a variety of women's organisations and groups, with their political affiliations ranging from the CCP and the Kuomintang (or the Nationalist Party, hereafter the KMT), to minor political parties and groups such as the Democratic League, and non-partisans (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 386-387). As the founding statement stresses, the CWA was born as a women's movement both for national resistance and for post-war political reform and reconstruction. Although the kind of democratic political system that was desired by its members remains unclear in this statement, the founding of the CWA with the support of the CCP South Bureau, to a large extent, shows the integration of Chinese women activists in Chongqing as a civil opposition against KMT political

tutelage, and their political alliance with the CCP to advocate political pluralism and women's political participation.

However, the CWA was not the only women's organisation active in the KMT-controlled areas during the War of Resistance (1937-1945); nor was the CCP the only political choice for women activists to achieve their goals for national resistance and reconstruction. Emphasising the political initiatives and diverse affiliations maintained by women activists in the KMT-controlled areas, this research aims to draw scholarly attention away from the more thoroughly researched CCP "women's work" (*funü gongzuo* 妇女工作) in communist base areas, and to contribute to the understanding of the CCP's subtle approach to women political leaders and activists in the KMT-controlled areas. Elisabeth Croll (2013: 185-222) argues that in the base areas the CCP criticised the "narrow feminist standpoint" of the "liberated women intellectuals" such as Ding Ling on the one hand, and tightened its grip on women's participation in rural production on the other. Tani Barlow (2004: 190-252) points out that the Party's approach towards these "liberated women intellectuals" in Yan'an was actually a sophisticated one; instead of simply making them a target of criticism, Mao was more interested in transforming them into "ideological intellectuals" who could further the Maoist institutionalisation of culture.

If the CCP's handling of "women's work" in its own base areas was far from static or dogmatic, what about its political interactions with the majority of women activists who moved to the KMT-run free China during the war, and who had wider choices for fulfilling their political ambitions and achieving their political goals? The CCP's adoption of the "New Democracy" policy and its advocacy for an alliance among all political parties and forces against the ruling KMT has been briefly discussed by Levine and Pantsov (2013: 354-358), but it is mainly Party ideology and theory that concerns the authors—little has been said about how this policy was implemented and received among the population outside of the communist base areas (Lary, 2015: 12). This research, therefore, demonstrates that the CCP's artful application of the united front framework in KMT-held cosmopolitan urban sites was extremely important for the Party in enhancing its political influence and legitimacy among the more sophisticated urban populations, including the aforementioned women activists.

Despite criticising the women’s movement led by those elite women activists in the KMT-controlled areas as “bourgeois feminism” (*zichan jieji funü yundong* 资产阶级妇女运动), during the wartime period the Communist Party, apart from stressing the importance of mobilising female workers and peasants for political support, did not articulate a distinct agenda for “proletarian feminism” (*wuchan jieji funü yundong* 无产阶级妇女运动) (“Funü yundong jueyi”, [1928] 1991: 430-440, “Zhonggong zhongyang fuwei guanyu muqian funü yundong de fangzhen he renwu de zhishixin”, [1939] 1991: 31-42).¹ Neither did the Party, as this article will show, draw a clear line between so-called bourgeois feminists and communist women activists. On the contrary, it adopted the same political language of “national resistance and reconstruction” as the KMT, and shared the political enthusiasm of women leaders active in the KMT-controlled areas for realising peace, constitutional governance and democracy, as well as women’s political representation. Therefore, against the backdrop of the United Front for Resistance, it is the more inclusive discourses of “nation”, rather than those of “class”, that contextualised the wartime women’s movement in general.

As Gail Hershatter (2007: 94) points out, during China’s extended wars in the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese women’s political movements and activities were far from being scarce or lacking diversity. She argues that feminists in this period did not remove themselves from politics in spite of lukewarm or hostile responses on the part of the ruling KMT, nor did they wait to have rights handed to them by a benevolent government. As a matter of fact, the war saw more middle-class women involved in war-related welfare work, and more young women attracted to feminism. Diana Lary (2010: 92-110) also argues that the war brought opportunities for women to lead public lives and engage in national politics. With respect to women’s political activities in the KMT-controlled areas, Louise Edwards (2006: 6) highlights women’s continuous political activism in promulgating the Double Fifth Draft Constitution of 1936 and realising constitutional governance along with women’s suffrage, despite the instability

¹ The CCP stated in the “Resolution on the Women’s Movement” in 1928 that women’s final emancipation could only be achieved through the nation’s liberation under the leadership of the proletariat. But apart from the Party’s focus on female workers and peasants, its call for equal social and political rights during the War was not significantly different from that of the so-called bourgeois feminists in the KMT-controlled areas.

of the political and military situation in China in the late 1930s and 1940s.² Li Danke (2010: 9) agrees with Edwards that women's lives were dramatically changed by the war, but more importantly, women were also changing the political landscape of China. Based on the oral accounts of her interviewees, Li (2010: 133) argues that the war mobilisation provided opportunities for traditionally marginalised political groups, such as women and middle-ground organisations, to step into the political spotlight and have a voice in China's wartime politics, and that the wartime mobilisation tolerated relative political pluralism.

The expansion of the KMT's "New Life Movement" Women's Advisory Council (WAC) in Wuhan in 1938 demonstrates the enlarging political space for women's participation in wartime national politics and signifies the political pluralism tolerated by the KMT at the beginning of the war. Xia Rong's (2010: 122-124) research on the WAC provides detailed information on the active communication and cooperation among the WAC members recruited by Madame Chiang Kai-shek (Song Meiling) to work under the anti-Japanese United Front. These women leaders and activists hailed from different political parties and groups, including the KMT, the CCP, the National Salvation Association and, later, the Democratic League. Focusing on the same women's organisation, Helen Schneider (2012: 215) points out that women activists in the WAC were, like their male peers, "literate and hence had cultural power, and they saw themselves as more civilisationally advanced and necessarily involved in the struggle over culture and political development." And more importantly, as Schneider (2012: 219) argues, these women activists believed that their resistance and reconstruction efforts would assure them political and social leadership roles in the post-war period.

Under the anti-Japanese United Front, the aforementioned political parties and groups, including the CCP, urged the KMT to terminate its political tutelage and fully promulgate the constitution, propelling a vigorous constitutional movement which engaged not only male political leaders but also women activists (Xia, 2010: 244-249). Growing pressure from the political opposition led

² Chinese women gained equal suffrage rights with men in 1936 with the passage of the May Fifth Draft Constitution, or the Double Fifth Draft Constitution, under the Nationalist government. But this constitution was not fully promulgated due to the War of Resistance.

Chiang Kai-shek to establish the People's Political Council as a political institution that summoned councils of delegates to discuss national issues and supervised the promulgation of the constitution. Functioning as a "wartime parliament" under the regime of Chiang Kai-shek, the People's Political Council included all political parties and groups, as well as non-partisans, in the discussion of national affairs, and also provided women activists with a platform to circulate their political ideas and networks (Edwards, 2008: 193). Amongst the 200 members of the first council, 10 were women activists. While the majority of them were selected from the KMT Central Women's Movement Committee, all of the non-KMT women members, namely Shi Liang, Liu-Wang Liming, Deng Yingchao and Wu Yifang were unexceptionally affiliated with the WAC and the Democratic League (*Guomin canzhenghui shiliao bianzuan weiyuanhui*, 1962: 9-10).

The Democratic League, like the WAC, formed another political "middle-ground" between the competing KMT and CCP for women's political engagement both during and after the War of Resistance. Established in 1941 and restructured in 1944, the Democratic League was actually an umbrella organisation comprised of six minor political parties and groups, namely the Youth Party, the National Socialist Party, the Third Party, the Rural Reconstruction Association, the Vocational Education Society and the National Salvation Association (Fung, 2000: 146). During the War of Resistance, seeking political shelter under a major party was neither an automatic, nor the only, choice for promoting women's movements. Many women activists chose to join the Democratic League while maintaining a neutral position between the KMT and the CCP. The Women's Committee of the Sino-Soviet Cultural Association (hereafter SSCA Women's Committee), for example, was in fact led by a group of women leaders affiliated with the Democratic League in Chongqing (*Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu*, 1986: 310). This research shows that although they were subjected to the political centralisation and persecution conducted by the KMT in the immediate post-war period, these women activists still endeavoured to maintain their political autonomy and spontaneous activism outside of any party-state structure.

Within this relatively liberal political milieu engendered by mass mobilisation for national resistance, Chinese women activists gradually enhanced their

political positions and connections, and voiced their political goals. Following the retreat of the Nationalist government from Wuhan to the wartime capital Chongqing in 1938, they also revamped their organisations to sustain the diversity and flexibility in their political engagement.³ Political connections and cooperation were rapidly built among women's organisations and groups, most notably the WAC led by Madame Chiang and Shi Liang, a famous female lawyer and leader of the Democratic League; the SSCA women's committee led by Li Dequan, the leader of the Democratic League and wife of the KMT general Feng Yuxiang; the Chongqing Women's Service Group for Refugees led by Ni Feijun, a non-aligned activist and wife of the mayor of Chongqing; and the *Modern Women* (*Xiandai funü* 现代妇女) magazine edited by Cao Mengjun, who was also leader of the Democratic League and wife of the KMT official Wang Kunlun. Until the establishment of the China Women's Association in 1945, the only women's organisation under direct leadership of the Communist Party was a women's committee attached to the CCP South Bureau, led by communist women leaders Deng Yingchao and Zhang Xiaomei (Chongqing Municipal Archives, n.d.; Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 309, 315, 483-484).

Given the diverse affiliations maintained by Chinese women activists through to the mid-1940s, which ranged a spectrum of political institutions and positions, it would not have been easy for the CCP to penetrate women's organisations and networks in the KMT-controlled areas by the end of the war, and consequently dominate the women's movement by 1949. Yet as Wang Zheng correctly puts it, the founding of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 1949 signalled the successful conclusion of the CCP's institutionalisation of the women's movement, and also marked the closing of the space for the spontaneous activism of Chinese women that had been witnessed during the war (Wang, 1997: 133; Wang, 1999: 143).

Very little research, however, has been conducted to explain this seemingly sudden "closing of space" for women's spontaneous activism and the presumably abrupt transition in the women's movement in the immediate post-war period. If the CCP South Bureau was merely one of the institutions that had provided a platform in support of women's political activism in Chongqing, why

³ Regarding wartime migration to Wuhan and later to Chongqing, please see MacKinnon (2008).

in 1945, as shown at the beginning of this article, did the 104 prominent women leaders favourably respond to the CCP's advocacy of post-war national reconstruction, and join the CWA with the backing of the Bureau? And why did they eventually coalesce their organisations into the ACWF in 1949?

Chinese women activists' political reorganisation in favour of the CCP was clearly not a sudden action enabled by the CCP's consolidated power in 1949. This article will analyse their political integration into the CWA in 1945 in Chongqing, and later into its much more famous successor, the ACWF, in 1949 in Beijing. Through this analysis, I attempt to argue that Chinese women activists' political engagement and accommodation with the CCP was a gradual process through the entire course of the war, but which accelerated in the immediate post-war years for the following two reasons: first, the space for women's spontaneous political activism and independent organisation rapidly shrank under the dispiriting political and economic conditions of KMT-controlled urban sites, and the choices became increasingly limited for women activists seeking to maintain their political position and participation during the ensuing KMT-CCP civil war (1946-1949). More importantly, the CCP united front framework provided them with ideological and institutional support for continuously pursuing political pluralism and democracy in the post-war national reconstruction. As a result, it was inevitable that Chinese women activists would "lean to the left".

However, it is important to point out that the political reorganisation of women activists in favour of the CCP in the late 1940s does not indicate their personal loyalty to the Party, and that their integration into the ACWF was a fragmented process. This article will draw attention to the complex political roles and goals of these women activists in their engagement with the CCP's united front framework by answering the following questions: how and why did women activists in the KMT-controlled areas, despite their diverse political affiliations and bourgeois background, build connections with the CCP South Bureau by the end of the war? Why did their political positions change during the civil war? And what did they expect to achieve through participating in the CWA and later in the ACWF?

The CCP South Bureau and the United Front Framework for Women Activists

Originating in the KMT-CCP anti-Japanese United Front and developing to become a theoretical and institutional structure aimed at winning over the hearts and minds of the hesitating masses and undermining the popularity of the KMT, the CCP united front framework enhanced popular support for the Communist Party and strengthened its legitimacy both during and after the War of Resistance (Barabantseva, 2010: 42). Challenging the view that the United Front was forced on the CCP by external circumstances, in particular the Comintern directives, Van Slyke (1967: 49, 186) believed that it was the CCP's own decision to continue to use the strategy during the war years. Importantly, the united front framework did not fail after the New Fourth Army Incident in 1941. As Kui-Kwong Shum (1988: 147) argues, "the escalation of clashes between the KMT and the CCP actually propelled the CCP to adhere more closely to the united front in order to oppose its opponents." The CCP United Front Department (*tongzhan bu* 统战部), created by 1938, was attached directly to the Party apparatus, while the "New Democracy" policy was instituted to make theoretical preparations for the Party's further implementation of the united front framework in the post-war period. Mao (1940) published his famous article "On New Democracy" in Yan'an in 1940, which articulated the CCP's tasks and goals in building a new Chinese democratic republic. Distinguished both from the "old republics" controlled by capitalist classes in the West, and from the dictatorship of the proletariat thriving in the Soviet Union, the "new Chinese democratic republic" was perceived as a coalition regime ruled by all revolutionary classes. By undermining a radical, and class-based, party line, the enforcement of "New Democracy" policy and the implementation of the united front framework in the 1940s were, as Van Slyke (1967: 112, 117) puts it, "both a bid for support (away from the KMT) and a statement of the kind of multi-class coalition regime that the CCP desires to lead and to expand."

In January 1939, the CCP South Bureau was officially established in Chongqing. Directly led by the renowned party leader Zhou Enlai, the South Bureau supervised the development of the united front framework in the KMT-controlled south, and south-west China (Li, 2009: 10, 28). A women's committee was immediately formed under the South Bureau, led by Zhou's wife Deng

Yingchao, which was responsible for strengthening political ties with women activists of other political parties and groups in Chongqing, and integrating them into the united front framework. While the KMT tightened central political control over women's organisations and pressured local women activists into serving the political purposes of the party, the CCP united front framework, as will be demonstrated in this section, in contrast sustained the diversity and flexibility of women's political engagement and therefore provided women activists in the KMT-controlled areas with an appealing alternative.

After the New Fourth Army Incident in 1941, the relative political pluralism that had been tolerated by the KMT at the beginning of the war was in decline as the clashes between the KMT and the CCP escalated.⁴ In Chongqing, as well as in other unoccupied cities, the KMT hastened to recruit female members from local schools and universities, and frequently intervened in activities organised by non-KMT women's organisations. From 1944 onwards, orders were sent from the KMT Central Organisation Department to local KMT Women's Movement Committees, stressing the importance of increasing the percentage of female KMT party members to 25% (Yunnan Provincial Archives, 1944 and 1945). Local police and secret agents also conducted strict surveillance on the activities of non-KMT women's organisations.

Although the above-mentioned SSCA Women's Committee was comprised of members mostly from the Democratic League, the KMT and non-aligned activists rather than from the CCP, it still became one of the victims of police surveillance in Chongqing. When Jin Zhonghua, the chief editor of the magazine *World Knowledge* (*Shijie zhishi* 世界知识), came to give a talk at the SSCA Women's Committee, the event was interrupted by the local police. According to the report filed by the Chongqing Municipal Police, two police officers had been sent to the meeting venue to cancel the talk only half an hour before it started. The vice chair of the Committee came forward to stop the officers, arguing that Mr. Jin's talk—"From Crimea to San Francisco"—was purely on current international affairs, and more importantly, the wives of high-ranking

⁴ The New Fourth Army Incident, also known as the Wannan Incident, happened in January 1941. The superior KMT forces surrounded and destroyed a column of 10,000 troops from the CCP-led New Fourth Army under Ye Ting and Xiang Ying near Maolin. For more information, please see Benton (1999).

KMT officials, including the mayor's wife Ni Feijun, would be present. Afraid of irritating any VIPs, the two officers only audited the talk and then submitted a report to the Chongqing Municipal Police (Chongqing Municipal Archives, 1945: 109).

Not only in Chongqing, the political centre of free China during the war, but also in comparatively peripheral areas such as Kunming, the KMT attempted to dominate local women's political organisations and activism. Towards the end of the war, letters from the KMT Central Organisation Department arrived in Kunming, pressuring local KMT women's organisations to recruit members from among school students and career women (Yunnan Provincial Archives, 1944 and 1945). The KMT Three Principles of the People Youth Corp was also active on campus, ensuring that all board members of local girls' schools were selected by the KMT, and coercing all female students to join the party (Liang & Zeng, 1983: 58-62). Under political pressure, KMT women's organisations had no choice but to curb the activities of other political parties, in particular the CCP, within local women's communities (Li, 1983: 12-13).

However, the strict political control and police surveillance exercised by the KMT failed to impede the CCP's development of networks among women's organisations in the KMT-controlled areas, which was carried on secretly or "underground" through to the end of the war. According to Yang Hansheng's memoir, over one third of SSCA members in Chongqing became undercover communists who kept one-way communication with the leaders of the CCP South Bureau (Xiong, 2012: 49). Women activists working at the aforementioned organisations, such as the WAC, the SSCA Women's Committee, the Chongqing Women's Service Group for Refugees and *Modern Women* magazine, also contacted CCP women leaders Deng Yingchao and Zhang Xiaomei through strict "one-to-one connections" (*danxian lianxi* 单线联系), with most of their political networks unexposed to the public. While maintaining their political networks "underground" was a necessary strategy for survival, "making friends" became a networking technique that was essential for development. The "stronghold" technique (hereafter, *judian* 据点) was therefore initiated by the CCP South Bureau to make new friends within local women's communities, hence strengthening the united front framework in KMT-controlled areas.

Unlike the KMT's ambitious recruitment plan that was enforced by party apparatuses upon local women activists, *judian* aimed at building a flexible network and increasing the CCP's influence outside the Party. According to a document from the CCP South Bureau, *judian* should be neither a party organisation nor a civil group with an official name, membership, structure or regular schedule. The *judian* was a new form of network between the Communist Party and the masses. Basically, within one district, a party member could establish a *judian* with three to five non-communist friends, and each of the *judian* members could further reach out to three to five new friends (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 99-101). Comparable to the early communist cells formed before the first CCP Congress and the underground communist organisations in Shanghai during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937), the *judian* was a new networking technique applied to developing the united front framework in KMT-controlled areas in the 1940s.⁵ A *judian* network was based on the common interests shared among its members instead of communist ideologies, norms or regular work agendas. *Judian* members were not only communists, but men and women from different political backgrounds and social classes.

The *judian* technique successfully supported the implementation of the united front framework among women activists in wartime Chongqing. Between 1942 and 1945, the CCP South Bureau gradually established broad personal contacts and friendships among women activists at the WAC, the SSCA Women's Committee, *Modern Women* magazine as well as the Chongqing Women's Service Group for Refugees, and increased its influence over female students and career women from all walks of life. Starting from the second half of 1942, small study groups, reading societies and women's forums flourished in the wartime capital and by the end of the war, there were already more than a dozen women's *judian* networks in Chongqing that were affiliated with the CCP South Bureau. Women activists who had the same occupation, shared similar interests, or simply lived close to each other were motivated to meet fortnightly. During their get-togethers, brochures and other printed materials were spread out for discussion on women's issues and current political affairs (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 386). Both the form and the

⁵ For more information on communist cells and networks, please see Van de Ven (1991: 57-81) and Stranahan (1998).

content of these discussions were flexible, thereby attracting women participants from different social, political and professional backgrounds. More importantly, although these women's networks were connected with the CCP South Bureau, they were not established for the purpose of promoting any radical, class-based communist ideology. Instead, as Gerry Groot (2004: 24) argues, the CCP advocated democracy and constitutional reform to appeal to non-proletarian classes and bourgeois groups.

Because of the expanding *judian* networks across local women's communities and organisations, women activists in Chongqing were able to maintain flexible but effective political connections with the CCP South Bureau. It was on the basis of these women's networks and the connections formed between the CCP South Bureau and local women activists that the China Women's Association was finally established. The *New China Daily* and Cao Mengjun's *Modern Women* magazine also played an essential role in circulating women's political claims and movements in Chongqing. By the time the CWA was established, *Modern Women* had already published 6 volumes and over 30 issues, with a mature editorial team and numerous contributors ready to continue their political activism and movements after the War of Resistance. And as soon as the CWA was founded, *Modern Women* became its official organ ("Jinhou funü gongzuo yingdang zenyang zuo", [1945] 1991: 1-5). The founding of the CWA and the CCP's timely call for peace and democracy in 1945 further helped with unifying and integrating women activists in the KMT-controlled areas for the purpose of terminating KMT political tutelage, stopping the civil war, and achieving peace and democracy in the post-war national reconstruction.

The China Women's Association: For Peace and Democracy

The China Women's Association was officially established on 15 July 1945, only one month before the Japanese surrender to the Allies. Although the CCP South Bureau played a crucial role in cultivating and connecting women's organisations in wartime Chongqing, it did not immediately pronounce its leadership over the CWA, at least not in public. The board of directors comprised 39 women leaders in Chongqing, of whom the majority were affiliated with the WAC, the SSCA Women's Committee, the Chongqing

Women's Service Group for Refugees and *Modern Women* magazine. Li Dequan, the chair of the SSCA Women's Committee, was elected chair and the executive director of the CWA. Among all the directors, only Zhang Xiaomei and Wu Quanheng were from the CCP South Bureau. Du Junhui, Peng Zigang and Han Youtong were undercover communists affiliated with the National Salvation Association. The political backgrounds of the rest of the women leaders were extremely diverse: Shi Liang, Liu Qingyang, Cao Mengjun, Liu-Wang Liming, and Hu Ziyang were all women leaders of the Democratic League; Ni Feijun and Tan Tiwu were affiliated with the KMT despite their involvement in left-wing women's organisations; Zhou Zongqiong and Rao Guomo were local businesswomen who had provided financial support to the CCP South Bureau in the 1940s; Bai Wei was a well-known female writer whilst Bai Yang was a rising film star in wartime Chongqing who later starred in *The Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chunshui xiang dong liu* 一江春水向东流), a famous film produced in 1947 which revealed the trials and tribulations in the heroine's life over the eight years of the wartime period (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 387).

Under a leadership composed of women elites, whose educational and social background put them in the category of "bourgeois women intellectuals" (*zichan jieji zhishi funü* 资产阶级智识妇女) ("Funü yundong jueyi", [1928] 1991: 430-440), the CWA, while connected with the CCP South Bureau, clearly was not yet dominated by communists. Instead, it was established against the backdrop of the growing political movements for peace and democracy among Chinese intellectuals and students after the War of Resistance. As Suzanne Pepper (1999: 133) suggests, it was the relatively liberal climate that had been established among the Chinese intellectuals if not among political leaders that allowed the anti-civil war movements to thrive in the post-war period. However, this "liberal climate", having also enabled women's political participation during the War of Resistance, was seriously threatened under the shadow of the enlarging civil war and the KMT's tightened political control. The primary goal of the WAC was therefore to demand peace and democracy for the post-war national reconstruction, as well as for women's political rights and representation.

The CWA warned Chinese women of the still frustrating post-war political situation facing them: "Three months after Japan's surrender, the people in

China are still enduring chaotic politics, inflation, economic recession and an expanding civil war; we therefore urge Chinese women to protest against the civil war and to give our own suggestions to the government” (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 393). On 9 January 1946, one day before the First Political Consultative Conference (*zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 政治协商会议) called by the Nationalist government, the CWA hosted a tea reception at the SSCA to discuss the urgent issues that concerned women after the war. To ensure that their voice was heard at the conference, the CWA also invited more than ten political representatives from the KMT, the CCP, the Democratic League and the Youth Party, who would attend the conference the next day (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 89-92).

According to the report published in *Modern Women*, not only CWA leaders but also many ordinary women in Chongqing enthusiastically participated in this event. One hour before it started, the two-storey house of the SSCA had already been crowded with over 100 women attendees. Many of the women activists present, such as Shi Liang and Liu Qingyang, had also participated in the constitutional movement during the war, and had urged the Nationalist government to terminate political tutelage and promote constitutional governance (Xia, 2010: 244-249). Their movement became stagnant towards the end of war because the government had been—using the “exigency of warfare” as an excuse—hesitant to either summon a national assembly or promulgate the constitution. Therefore, these women activists considered the First Political Consultative Conference as the best opportunity to push the Nationalist government to amend the Double Fifth Draft Constitution, to hold a general election and to eventually form a coalition government with participation by all political parties (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 92-93).

Without any tedious introduction or ostentatious opening remarks, the CWA chair Li Dequan went directly to the topic: “The purpose of the Political Consultative Conference is to achieve peace and democracy, so that the government can be elected by the people and women can enjoy their equal rights and shoulder equal responsibilities” (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 90). Following Li’s talk, Cao Mengjun further articulated women’s basic claims to political and electoral rights, career

opportunities, social security and healthcare for mothers and children. She emphasised that, after the war, the right to freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of association should also be the basic rights of women: “At the moment we women activists do not even have the freedom to sit together and discuss our own issues. We are either interrupted by the police or spied on by suspicious people eavesdropping at the window” (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 89-92)

The political representatives on stage were all impressed by the political enthusiasm showed by the women activists who were present. Non-partisan representative Hu Lin stated that it was the first time for him to speak to so many women, and it was also the first time that he realised women had such an in-depth understanding of national affairs. Democratic League representative Shen Junru suggested that women establish a mission of military investigation, and a committee for the study of the constitution, so as to devote their own efforts towards “peace and democracy”. Believing general elections and women’s suffrage to be the foundations of democracy, Luo Longji, also a representative of the Democratic League, encouraged Chinese women to unite and fight for their own rights like British women had done after the First World War (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 94-96). Nonetheless, choosing their words carefully, most of the representatives only made general promises to involve women in national politics and realise women’s rights in the future. These promises did not satisfy the audience. In the middle of the meeting, a note from the audience was passed on to Li Dequan, and Li read it aloud to the delegates on stage:

We are teachers of many poor children who were separated from parents during the war. These children were told that there will be no more wars, but a civil war has just started. I hope that everyone on stage today will be responsible for what you have promised, stop the civil war immediately and let these poor children go back to their mothers (“Zhongguo fuyun shi shang bu pingfan de yi ye”, [1946] 1991: 97).

The active interactions between the audience and the political representatives demonstrate that Chinese women activists were both

determined and prepared to play a crucial role in post-war political reform and national reconstruction. In the face of enduring chaotic politics, economic recession and an expanding civil war, they articulated their claims regarding a cease-fire and democracy, and used the CWA as a platform to enhance and circulate these claims. For these women activists, who had just experienced the Second World War in China, “democracy” was neither simply the rhetoric applied by political parties to obtain support and legitimacy, nor was it the political panacea that could be prescribed to heal China’s diseases overnight. Rather, these women activists adopted concrete political goals and expected to achieve them through post-war peace and democratic movements: they advocated women’s rights to freedom of speech, organisation and assembly in public and therefore to be able to further participate in national affairs; they requested fairness and equal opportunity for women at work; and they campaigned for women’s political representation at the to-be-summoned National Assembly so as to veto the civil war and to bring back peace to mothers and children.

It is apparent that their feminist concerns were deeply intertwined with their political objectives to realise peace, constitutional governance and democracy. As Tani Barlow (2004: 3) points out, Chinese feminism has, since its birth, been tightly connected to contemporary deliberations about the nation and its development. And given the prolonged social and political disorder in post-war China, the feminist agenda of the CWA—expressed in general terms of women’s political and electoral rights, career opportunities, social security and healthcare for mothers and children—was inextricable from its broader political claim, regarding a ceasefire and national reconstruction.

In the name of “women’s unity and friendship” (*funü lianyi* 妇女联谊), the CWA provided Chinese women activists, despite their different political backgrounds, with an inclusive and flexible workshop to continue pursuing their political goals in the immediate post-war years without joining the Communist Party. The enhanced networks and communication among these pro-CCP women activists reciprocally reinforced the united front framework and enabled the CCP’s effective use of the meagre social and political resources in the KMT-controlled areas. By mid-1946, the CWA had already developed 25 sub-groups with approximately 350 members in Chongqing; local branches were

firstly established in Kunming, Beiping,⁶ Shanghai and Nanjing, and later in Chengdu, Guilin and Hong Kong (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 468).

However, following the outbreak of a full-scale civil war in 1947, the political and economic conditions in the KMT-controlled areas further deteriorated and the liberal political milieu for women activists' independent and spontaneous activism was in rapid decline. Sustaining the diversity and flexibility in their political engagement, and holding a neutral political position, became increasingly difficult for Chinese women activists during an enlarged civil war between the KMT and the CCP. In terms of their political position and their relationship with the Communist Party, it was as James Wilkinson (1981: 106) has pointed out with regard to their counterparts in France: "Choice during the Resistance was easy: one was for or against the resistance; it was black or white. Today—and since 1945—the situation has grown more complex."

Leaning to the Left

The civil war between the KMT and the CCP in the late 1940s, like the eight-year War of Resistance, brought about significant social and political changes to China. Because of the administrative chaos, military threat and economic recession, the cosmopolitan urban sites of Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing were already in decline (Westad, 2003: 89-96). Women activists who returned to the urban areas in eastern China after the war not only encountered a worsened political climate for their public activities, but also struggled between the battling political parties to sustain their political position and participation. Although the majority of them had expected to maintain a relatively neutral position by joining the Democratic League, and to pursue their political goals within the inclusive structure of the CWA, they could no longer do so after 1947 for the following reasons. First, the KMT outlawed the Democratic League and launched a full-scale persecution of political activists who were suspected of supporting the CCP. Second, the sharply deepened recession and hyperinflation made any independent women's organisation and activity difficult to continue

⁶ The name for Beijing between 1928 and 1937, and between 1945 and 1949.

in the KMT-controlled urban sites. Third, the CCP's military victories over the KMT troops in Manchuria and north China made it more reasonable for them to go to the "liberated areas" (*jiefang qu* 解放区) than to follow the defeated KMT to Taiwan. As a result, Chinese women activists leaned further to the political left by the end of the 1940s.

In 1946, following the Nationalist government's "return to Nanjing", most CWA members left Chongqing for Nanjing, Shanghai and Beiping, while a few local women leaders stayed in Chongqing to organise the CWA Chongqing branch. Women activists who were originally from the Nanjing-Shanghai region, such as Tan Tiwu, returned to Nanjing and established the CWA Nanjing branch, while Liu Qingyang and Zhang Xiaomei returned to Beiping to lead the Beiping branch. The rest of the CWA members went back to Shanghai and combined their branch with local women's communities led by Xu Guangping (widow of the eminent writer Lu Xun) during the war. The standing committee of the CWA Shanghai branch included many famous names such as Xu Guangping, Shi Liang, Cao Mengjun and Hu Ziyong (Nanfangju dangshi ziliao zhengji xiaozu, 1986: 391).

Also returning to eastern China after the war were women activists who had been affiliated with the KMT. With most of its local branches and service groups dismissed by the end of the war, Madame Chiang's Women's Advisory Council (WAC) was reorganised in Nanjing in 1946 (Chongqing Municipal Archives, 1946a: 81-92). On 24 March, only the WAC director-general Chen Jiyi and 33 chief leaders flew from Chongqing to Nanjing (Chongqing Municipal Archives, 1946b: 281). The scale of the organisation and its membership were in rapid decline, since most of its chief leaders had left for Shanghai, Guangzhou or Taiwan during the civil war (Song, 2012: 79). Along with the dissolution of the WAC, the focus of the Nationalist government was changed from mobilizing women for resistance to the development of the KMT. The KMT Central Women's Movement Committee, previously under the administration of the KMT Central Organisation Department, was reorganised directly under the KMT Central Executive Committee, with 46 provincial/municipal branches and 851 county-level branches established in most parts of China except for Manchuria by July 1947 (Hong, 2010: 320-322). In this regard, the WAC—a wartime cross-party women's organisation for national resistance—was by then replaced with

a KMT party organ to recruit women members as well as to investigate and contain non-KMT women's political activities (Hong, 2010: 325).

Political tension further heightened in 1947 after the peace negotiation between the two major parties had failed and the Democratic League had been outlawed by the Nationalist government. In order to purge the political left wing, the KMT sent secret orders to local institutions, schools and universities, demanding a fight against both "the wicked CCP (*jian dang* 奸党) and the wicked Democratic League (*jian meng* 奸盟)" (Kunming Municipal Archives, 1946, 1947 and 1948). Many leaders and members of the Democratic League were arrested by the KMT secret police (Groot, 2004: 53-54). The inability of the Nationalist government to achieve peace and democracy after war and the KMT's abuse of power further disappointed women activists who used to prefer a neutral position. For many of them, as Edmund Fung (2000: 307) argues, "By mid-1947, the Nationalist government had absolutely lost its legitimacy and moral leadership."

CWA members who were affiliated with the Democratic League, such as Liu-Wang Liming and Cao Mengjun, went to Hong Kong in 1947 to avoid political arrests and assassinations and to restructure their political organisation. Liu-Wang Liming, who was also the president of the China branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), told journalists in Hong Kong that, "The political situation on the mainland is too bad to do anything, so I had to come to Hong Kong to continue my career." When asked about her experience as a delegate to the People's Political Council, she explained that she had to "sing high praises, make political declarations, meet VIPs and endure economic crisis" (Si, 1947: 11-12). Having escaped from the KMT-controlled areas, these women activists soon organised a CWA branch in Hong Kong to enhance the connections between the CCP and local women's communities in Hong Kong and Canton (Li, 2004: 329).

In January 1948, the Democratic League called the third plenary of the first Central Committee in Hong Kong and officially announced that the League would cooperate with the CCP to achieve peace and democracy in the post-war national reconstruction (Li, 2004: 326-328). The official cooperation between the Democratic League and the CCP further strengthened the CCP united front

framework; as Mary Mazur (1997: 51) argues, during this period, members of democratic parties joined willingly in the transitional realignment of the United Front. This “realigned” united front between the CCP and the Democratic League, not only appealed to the League members who moved to Hong Kong in 1947, but also to the majority of women activists who stayed in mainland China during the civil war.

For women activists who endured both political persecution and economic disorder in the KMT-controlled urban sites on the mainland, their final leaning to the left was, to a great degree, because the Nationalist government left them no hope for survival, neither physically nor politically. The recession and hyperinflation in the late 1940s significantly hampered women activists’ political organisation and activities. Keeping a low political profile and securing a source of income was the only way for many of them to survive the civil war. CWA leader Hu Ziyang stayed in Shanghai as a single mother with her daughter while her ex-husband, the famous Democratic League leader and financier Zhang Naiqi, went to Hong Kong. Working for a bank, Hu Ziyang witnessed how the recession and hyperinflation destroyed people’s lives. She experienced the panic-buying and hoarding among housewives and shared their concerns about the future:

Feeling anxious and sad, all the housewives in town joined scalpers in the crazy buying and hoarding. They tried to buy anything available no matter whether they needed it or not. Shops in Shanghai were emptied within a day. And since yesterday, some women have even started queuing up to buy coffins (Hu, 1946).

The sight of housewives queuing up to buy coffins not only illustrates the socio-economic disorder in post-war Shanghai, but also reflects the pessimistic view of the future shared among locals. Given the dispiriting political and economic conditions, to maintain any kind of political organisation or activism was difficult for women activists who stayed in the KMT-controlled urban areas. Almost all CWA branches on the mainland were forced to cease activity. Although members were still trying to continue underground activities among local career women and housewives, the Beijing branch became virtually

paralysed after Liu Qingyang and Zhang Xiaomei left for Xibaipo, the erstwhile CCP headquarters, in September 1948 (Liu, 2009: 220). Shi Liang, Hu Ziyang and Ni Feijun in Shanghai also felt the difficulty of sustaining the Shanghai Branch after 1947. After she returned to Shanghai, the Democratic League leader Shi Liang worked as a lawyer under strict surveillance by KMT agents. As soon as the retreating Nationalist government started murdering communists and any political activists suspected of being communists, Shi Liang became one of the most-wanted figures in town. Secret agents arrested almost all of her relatives and household staff, and tortured them in an effort to discover her whereabouts, while she moved from one place to another to escape the KMT's execution order (Shi, 1987: 71-72).

Parks M. Coble (2008: 130) has pointed out that, during the civil war, not only had the economy been shattered by fighting and hyperinflation, but the end of extraterritoriality further eliminated the "neutral zones" that had given the many nongovernmental organisations a degree of autonomy. This is particularly true in terms of women activists' political reorganisation in the post-war period. Due to the KMT's strengthened central control over the women's movement and its persecution of opposition activists, the relatively liberal milieu for women's political participation and organisation ceased to exist in the late 1940s. And after Madame Chiang's Women's Advisory Council was replaced by the KMT Central Women's Movement Committee, and the Democratic League had coalesced into the CCP party structure, the "neutral zone" for women's political engagement also disappeared. Disappointed by the KMT's political performance while longing for post-war reconstruction, political pluralism and democracy, Chinese women activists who stayed on the mainland eventually leaned to the political left and accommodated themselves within the CCP's united front framework.

Going to the Liberated Areas and Founding the All-China Women's Federation

By the end of 1948, the CCP's Liberation Army had secured military victory in northeast China and was advancing quickly down to north and central China

(Zarrow, 2006: 343).⁷ In order to also expedite its political victory over the KMT, the CCP invited prominent intellectuals, left-wing political activists and social elites in the KMT-controlled cities and in Hong Kong to come to the liberated areas to establish a new government (Mazur, 1997: 57). This call, like the CCP's call for an anti-Japanese United Front in 1935, came right in time to stimulate political activists who had been longing for the end of civil conflicts and the beginning of national reconstruction (Groot, 2004:16). Invited to Xibaipo and later to Shenyang and Beijing were also a number of women activists, whose political support was equally important for the Party to showcase its achievements in the area of "women's liberation".

In the remaining KMT-controlled cities in east and south China, except for a small number of KMT women leaders who had gone to Guangzhou and Taiwan to prepare for the retreat of the Nationalist government, the majority of KMT women activists were dismissed and returned to their hometowns. By the time the Nationalist Government retreated to Taiwan, there were only three women leaders left in the KMT Central Women's Movement Committee (Hong, 2010: 321). For the remainder of women activists scattered in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing and the rest of the cities still under KMT control, going to the liberated areas and supporting the CCP to establish a new democratic government became the best available choice to maintain their organisation and achieve their political goals.

Despite the long and arduous journey crossing the battlefields of the civil war, going to the liberated areas was a memorable experience for many women activists. In August 1948, Shen Zijiu, the previous leader of the Women's Advisory Council, who had left the mainland to escape KMT persecution during the war, went to Xibaipo together with her husband Hu Yuzhi. Disguised as businessmen on a British ship, they firstly set out for Dalian, a port controlled by Soviet troops, and then took a boat headed for Jiaodong Peninsula. After waiting in a fishing village on a small island for a few days, they then went to Shijiazhuang, where they met with some other political activists and social elites

⁷ Known as the CCP's three major military campaigns against the KMT during the civil war, the Liaoshen Campaign, Huaihai Campaign and Pingjin Campaign lasted from September 1948 to January 1949. By the end of the three major campaigns, Chiang Kai-shek's main forces had been destroyed, and the Liberation Army began moving across the Yangtze in the spring of 1949.

who had come from Hong Kong through Tianjin, a city still under the KMT's control at that time. Shen Ziju and Hu Yuzhi's arrival in Xibaipo was highly appreciated by CCP leaders. It was already 3 am when they finally arrived, but Zhou Enlai and Deng Yingchao still got up to welcome them in person. The CCP Social Department organised a welcome party for them the next day. And over the following days, the couple was invited to join CCP leaders at different meetings and dinners. Mao Zedong also came to meet with them at a dinner party, which was followed by a ball. Mao himself was fond of dancing and therefore expected to impress his two guests who had studied and worked overseas with this stereotypically Western social activity, and presumably also hoped to shorten the distance between political elites hailing from KMT-held regions and the Communist Party. However, to Mao's surprise, both Shen Ziju and Hu Yuzhi had never learnt ballroom dancing (Hu, 2009; Yu, 2011: 330).

Not only the party leaders in Xibaipo, but also the staff members of the CCP United Front Department in the liberated areas succeeded in making a positive impression on women activists. After Shenyang (formerly known as Mukden) was taken over by the CCP, another group of eminent intellectuals and political activists went there from Hong Kong and Shanghai, joining those in Xibaipo in supporting the CCP to found a new government. CWA leaders Li Dequan, Cao Mengjun, Xu Guangping and Li Wenyi were within this group. As Li Wenyi remembered, the staff of the United Front Department in Shenyang treated them as privileged guests of Mao Zedong. Not only was good food served to them in their hotel every day, but a tailor was sent to make new Zhongshan suits, coats, leather hats, and shoes for each of them. Furthermore, having suffered from insecurity and instability during the wartime period, Li Wenyi and her colleagues were able to briefly resume the old life-style and leisure activities they had enjoyed before the war: they went out to purchase antiques and paintings, and they had a good time choosing and buying artworks in the street and then sharing their favourite pieces with each other (Li, 2004: 362). After Beijing was taken over in January 1949, these women activists took a special train from Shenyang to Beijing; as the Party's most honoured guests, they stayed at the renowned Beijing Hotel, only a five-minute walk from Tiananmen Square (Li, 2004: 363-364).

Overwhelmed with all the attention and respect they received from the CCP, it was no coincidence that most Chinese women activists, whose political activism had been restricted in the KMT-controlled areas and whose careers and safety had been frequently threatened during the civil war, found themselves ready to go to the liberated areas and take on new political endeavours and responsibilities for the post-war national reconstruction. Their own need to promote political unity and to build a “new China”, as Mazur (1997: 57) argues, motivated their choice to support and participate in the founding of the new Chinese government under the leadership of the CCP. Despite their diverse political affiliations and bourgeois background during the war, they congregated in the liberated areas and participated in the workshops organised by the Central Committee of the CCP in order to prepare for the first National Conference of Women’s Representatives and for the establishment of the All-China Women’s Federation.

In April 1949, half year before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the All-China Women’s Federation was established in Beijing (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui sishi nian*, 1991: 1-3). It is noteworthy that, before becoming a CCP women’s organisation, the ACWF firstly functioned as a “united front” institution for the purpose of accommodating the various political organisations, societies and networks maintained by women activists during the War of Resistance (“*Zhongguo funü yundong dangqian renwu de jueyi*”, [1949] 1991: 390). Prominent CWA leaders who had participated in a variety of political institutions and women’s organisations in the KMT-controlled areas, such as Li Dequan, Shi Liang, Li Wenyi and Liu-Wang Liming, were “elected” into the executive and standing committees of the ACWF. The CWA, together with the remainder of independent women’s organisations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association and the WCTU, was eventually merged within the structure the ACWF (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui sishi nian*, 1991: 5, 59; Beijing Municipal Archives, 1960). At the first National Conference of Women’s Representatives, a resolution for the women’s movement was also passed, which called for the unification of Chinese women to pursue the revolution against the KMT regime and to build “a brand-new People’s Democratic Republic of China” (*zhanxin de Renmin Minzhu Gongheguo* 嶄新的人民民主共和国) as the only path towards women’s liberation (“*Zhongguo funü yundong dangqian renwu de jueyi*”, [1949] 1991: 390).

Since the liberal political environment that had existed at the beginning of the War of Resistance was already long gone by the end of the civil war, the establishment of the ACWF and the “brand-new People’s Democratic Republic of China” did at least bring hope to Chinese women activists seeking a re-opening of the space for their political activism and organisation. But it would be arbitrary to argue that at this moment, all the women activists integrated within the ACWF framework firmly believed that their feminist and political goals would be achieved under the CCP’s leadership. Suzanne Pepper (1999: 200) points out the prevailing concern of Chinese liberal activists that the “New Democracy” could be only performed under Communist Party control. Worse still, as soon as victory over the KMT was secured in 1949, Mao, striving to escape from the bounds of “New Democracy”, tried to return to the radical party line, that is, to upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat, and making other political parties and forces leave the political stage (Levine & Pantsov, 2013: 357-358).

Despite the high political status given to them within the ACWF, doubts and fears soon arose among those bourgeois women activists hailing from the KMT-controlled areas: during the preparation period between late 1948 and early 1949, Li Wenyi (2004: 364-365) complained about the dominant CCP women leaders who demanded that she take on a heavy workload, but who eventually took the credit for her work. After the WCTU had merged into the ACWF, its president, Liu-Wang Liming, was also irritated by the fact that some party officials had tried to stop her from attending the 18th World Conference of the WCTU in Hastings, England in 1952 (Huang, 1990: 143-144). Other previous CWA members were upset when they realised that “our organisations have been swallowed by the ACWF!” (Beijing Municipal Archives, n.d.: 26). And as the CCP further launched a series of campaigns and movements in the 1950s, during which surveillance reports, denunciation letters and the so-called “heart-to-heart” talks (*jiaoxin* 交心) became the main channel of communication between ACWF members and the Party, the space for Chinese women activists’ spontaneous and independent political activism was, instead of reopened, finally closed.⁸

⁸ Beijing Municipal Archives file 84-1-42 gathers letters and reports sent from both ACWF members and anonymous persons to Zhang Xiaomei, the CCP leader and chairwomen of the ACWF Beijing branch, concerning the problems, antagonisms, and inappropriate words or deeds

Conclusion

The establishment of the ACWF signals the completion of the political reorganisation of Chinese women activists within the CCP united front framework. From the CWA to the ACWF, the successful organisational transition, and the maintenance of membership, also suggest the continuous and active engagement of women with the CCP in the KMT-controlled areas both during and after the War of Resistance. The united front framework, equipped with the “New Democracy” ideology and the extensive *judian* networks, allowed elite women activists in the KMT-run areas, despite their different political backgrounds, to effectively engage with the CCP without joining the Party. And therefore, it played an essential role in their gradual integration into the CWA and later into the ACWF.

However, as this article demonstrates, Chinese women activists’ political reorganisation in the post-war period was not simply prompted by the increasing political penetration of the CCP, but also by the fast-shifting political and economic conditions in the KMT-controlled areas during the immediate post-war period. On the one hand, the socio-economic disorder in the urban sites of eastern China, and the KMT’s purge of political opponents, resulted in the declining popularity of the Nationalist government among women activists. On the other hand, the outbreak of a full-scale civil war and the official cooperation between the Democratic League and the CCP in 1947 sharpened the cleavage between the political right and the left. Therefore, the space for women’s cross-party political activism and organisation was already fast shrinking, long before the communist takeover. To adopt a neutral position became increasingly difficult, while “leaning to the left” appeared to be the only available choice for Chinese women activists to maintain their political position and participation in the post-war national reconstruction led by the Communist Party.

of other members. For instance, in 1952, Zhang Xiaomei received an anonymous report entitled “For Chairwoman Zhang to archive and please consider whether to show it to comrades Peng Zhen and Liu Ren”. This report—more than 10 pages—questioned Liu-Wang Liming’s personal property and savings, and harshly criticised her political behaviour and her social relations (Beijing Municipal Archives, 1952: 8-16).

It is also important to underline that it is the relatively liberal approach adopted by the CCP, and the cross-party communication endorsed by the united front framework, that appealed to these bourgeois women activists hailing from the KMT-controlled areas. Therefore, their political reorganisation in favour of the CCP in the post-war period does not indicate their exclusive political loyalty. The CWA consisted of women activists from different political parties and groups, who were persistent in advocating political pluralism and democracy, and in pursuing their political goals through national resistance and reconstruction. After they lost confidence in the KMT regime during the civil war, they expected these goals to be achieved within the CCP united front framework, regardless of the political labels attached to them. In 1947, Tan Tiwu, one of the CWA leaders and a female legislator in the Legislative Yuan, told a *Modern Women* journalist that, “I do not know what is leftist and what is rightist ... I have always believed in peace, independence, democracy and freedom for my country, regardless of whether it means that I am a leftist or rightist” (Hui, 1947:10).

Despite their enthusiasm for going to the liberated areas and supporting the national reconstruction under the CCP’s leadership, they were not prepared for the CCP’s party line and centralised control over the ACWF from the 1950s onwards. Unfortunately, for many of these women activists, as Louise Edwards (2010: 63-64) puts it, prior to 1949, the CCP adopted a flexible approach to women with “bourgeois feminist” positions and saw the diverse women’s associations as a crucial avenue into an important segment of the politically active population. But after their victory in 1949, the need to maintain such niceties subsided. Although the development of the ACWF and the political experience of Chinese women activists after 1949 are beyond the scope of this research, a deepened understanding of how and why Chinese women activists had reorganised themselves within the CCP party framework by 1949 will provide valuable historical perspectives for the study of the shifting relations between the Party, the ACWF and Chinese women activists during and after the Maoist era.

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