

# The Historical Transition of All-China Women's Federation

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**ABSTRACT:** All China Woman's Federation (ACWF) is the sole official institute dedicating to gender equality in China, and had served for more than 76 years of history. Recently, however, the recognition of the organization among the public has been noticeably falling. In hope to answer the question "why and through what process has the influence of ACWF fell", the researcher explored the development of Chinese public's perception over ACWF's role during the 1946 - 1978 period, in which the organization first took shape, by chiefly looking into the A Brief History of Contemporary Chinese Women's Movement, a document written by a sub department of ACWF, largely academic and functions more as an historical research, and a list of most frequently used words by the largest, government funded Chinese newspaper People's Daily in describing ACWF during the period. The researcher finds notable discrepancy between the two sources, which helps to explore the power dynamic of the ACWF and its direct supporter, the CPC government, as well as the image that CPC government has propagandized its people to think of the ACWF. The research functions as part of a longer research that examines the change of Chinese public's recognition over ACWF for the entirety of its history.

## 1 Introduction

There are many institutions that have participated the course of gender equality and women's right. However, few are like All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), more frequently referred to as "Fu Lian" by Chinese people. Fu Lian is considered as the largest women's organization [1, 2]. The uniqueness of Fu Lian can be found in its nature as a semi-government department. Being a government department, ACWF has more powerful measurements to change women's lives than other civil organizations. The power is, however, largely given by the state government, and ACWF's decisions are often influenced by the state government [3].

As the engraving scenes in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's collective past* presented, Fu Lian played a crucial role in the collective era of China as a progressive force that pushed the live quality of women forward. However, by investigating people's awareness of Fu Lian in 2022, in a sample size of 100 people, merely 16 percent of them knows how to contact the organization and only 9 percent of the subjects reorganized it as a "very important" organization. This no wonder raised the question: why and through what process has the influence of ACWF fell?

The paper aims to examine the development of Chinese public's perception over ACWF's role in contemporary China, specifically from 1946 – 1978, a stage when the institution first took shape.

By chiefly reviewing the titles of reports on ACWF on People's Daily, the largest new paper under the direct control of the central party of the Communist Party of

China (CPC), on a ten year basis and comparing it to a document, *A Brief History of Contemporary Chinese Women's Movement*, by Women's Studies Institute of China (WSIC), an official research institution of women's right and gender issue serving both the ACWF and the central party committee, the research discovers remarkable discrepancy between the actual actions conducted by ACWF and the reports presented by People's Daily which shapes people's perception of ACWF.

The paper is part of a larger study that examines a larger time span of ACWF's development and answers three questions, "what ACWF was, what it is, and what it would be in the future", of which this paper corresponds to the first question: "What ACWF was".

## 2 Primary Sources & Methodology

The main source recognized as the "official document" of ACWF's action is *A Brief History of Contemporary Chinese Women's Movement*, which will hereafter be referenced as "the WSIC document" or *The Brief History* [4]. The WSIC document is one of the most important sources of ACWF's history, as WSIC is a research department serving directly to ACWF, therefore making it ACWF's "official historical record". Though the WSIC document, as the its name implies, is a general documentation on the modern women's movement in China from 1949-2000, its central subject is still the development of ACWF, as it was the main push force behind most of the major progress of the women's

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movement during the 1949–2000 period.

The writing style of the documentation is described by the summary as “an organic combination between macro and micro history” and is compiled with “solid references” [4], yet the book’s emphasis on many of ACWF’s actions are insufficient, generally documenting the history of ACWF in the way that the CPC preferred it to look like. Most notably, it lacks specific evidences that reflect the public’s reaction to ACWF’s policy. Sequencing wise, the book divides the development of women’s movement as 5 stages from 1949 – 2000, primarily according to important events in the history of CPC [5]. Additionally, the publication date of the book is also worth of mentioning. Though the book is a documentation on the history of ACWF from 1949 – 2000, the book is published only in 2017.

The second main source that the research references is a sheet of titles of reports on ACWF by People’s Daily from 1946 – September 2021, created by the researcher. The reports on People’s Daily are different from the WSIC documentation because as a newspaper under the direct control of CPC, its reports served the purpose of national propaganda, demonstrating the state power of CPC. The image of ACWF presented by People’s daily is thus the direct reflection of what CPC expect people to know and to think about ACWF and would help to explain the decline of ACWF’s influence among the public of China through the lens of central government’s propaganda on ACWF to its people. Though the WSIC document is also filtered through the political lens of the CPC, it should be noticed that the document is most likely not targeted towards the mass public as average Chinese citizens would have little incentive to purchase a documentation surrounding the very specific topic of women’s movement. Additionally, the news reports are filtered through a set of dynamically changing political lens from the 1946 to 1978 while the WSIC publication is very likely filtered through merely the political lens of the 2017 CPC government. Another detail to consider is WSIC’s major role as a department of ACWF, which allows it to be affected less directly by the central government. Thus, A Brief History of Contemporary Chinese Women's Movement is at some degree a self-documentation of ACWF, while the reports presented on People’s Daily is more directly the reflection of CPC’s characterization on ACWF.

To have a bird view of the mass data counts, the author first extracted the report titles from People’s Daily and then separated them as ten-year periods from 1946 to 1978. Noticeably, this division is not made based on the historical events, therefore the periods divided in the investigation cannot fully overlap with the records on the WSIC document. After separating the titles on a ten-year basis, the author filtered the titles of every ten-year period through an online word-frequency-analysis site called “weiciyun” (may be briefly translated as Micro Word Cloud). With weiciyun’s built-in dictionary, key words used in the reports are sequenced by the frequency they are used on several Excel sheet. The most frequently used terms of the decades are used to represent the state’s characterization on ACWF during these periods. While importing the titles to the weiciyun filtration, the author removed certain words that may reflect little about the

image of ACWF. Incomplete words and words that may refer to the name of ACWF are removed from the word frequency ranking lists. The word frequency ranking lists may be found at the end of the paper as appendixes.

Apart from the use of the two main sources, the author also referenced the work of Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s collective past* to examine the local impact of ACWF’s acts, as the two main sources are broad official records on the macro effects of ACWF, and introducing Hershatter’s work would allow the effects of ACWF to be better evaluated at a micro scale as the book include valuable record from the local gazetteers regarding the effect of ACWF actions.

### 3 1946-1956 Development Analysis

1946-1956, the first ten years of People’s Daily’s reports and the records on The Brief history showed a preference correlation. Noticeably, reports on the international voicing of ACWF significantly outnumbered reports on their domestic efforts. The most frequently used terms like “democracy” (Minzhu), “international” (Guoji), and “meeting” (Huiyi) generally all reflected the theme when traced back to the original report titles.

The theme of international voicing is also presented in the WSIC document. The WSIC document included the subtitle of “the opening of the new status for new-China’s women’s international conversation” as one of the major themes of Chin’s women’s movement in the 1946 – 1956 period, which largely overlaps with the report period and the phenomenon it presented. The “international conversation” presented by ACWF generally tends to be “international support”, as many of the international voicing during the periods are supports to communist parties in other countries, chiefly Communist Party of Greece and the North Korea Communist Party during the 1946-1956 period. The subjects of international support during the era demonstrated ACWF’s place as a central supporter to the central government’s political decisions, including its diplomatic attitude.

Noticeably, however, when making direct conversation with certain institutions of the foreign countries, the organizations directly contacted by ACWF are often the countries respective women’s right organizations than with diplomatic departments. This tendency may indicate the slight differentiation between ACWF’s international image and CPC’s, rendering ACWF as fundamentally a women’s right institution even though their supports are often upon matters barely relevant to the subject of women’s right, chiefly oppositions against worldwide wars.

Upon the theme of “international support”, the second most notable trend of the decade is “meeting”. Considering ACWF’s creation in merely 1949, the first ten years is the rime that the organization refined itself as a proper national political institution.

Trending words of the decade provided firm support to the conclusion as the word such as “meeting” (Huiyi), “Representative” (Daibiao) and “big conference” (Dahui) The WSIC depicted the process as “the organization and refinement of women’s working institution and women’s

organization, as well as the beginning of women's work" [5]. This trend essentially reflects ACWF's early-stage development through the form of hold meetings of various sizes and topics. The topics of the meetings, according to the report topics presented on People's Daily, include both international topics such as Asia women's conference (Yazhou funü huiyi) and local topics such as the propaganda of the new marriage law of 1950.

Overall, when referring to the result presented in the appendix, the reports of ACWF during the 1946-1956 period focuses more on the organization's international voicing efforts than their local efforts. Discrepancy is observed when People's daily's depiction on the image of ACWF is compared to the documentation of WSIC in their 1949-1956 period document. The WSIC document focuses chiefly on ACWF's local efforts, generally mobilization of women to participate various new policies passed by the central government. While the policies are often released by the central government, and some are simply general policies that treat women and men population with little difference, such as the land reformation policy, it is notable that the majority of policies propagandized by ACWF targets specifically women. Some of the most specified policies includes the abolition of prostitution, the new marriage law and the popularization of the new-style midwifery. Furthermore, it is noticed that even when dealing with the general policies, the ACWF would work from the lens of gender equality. In the matter of land reform, for instance, The Brief History documents that ACWF members focused on the education of rural women on their civil rights so that those who are long suppressed by the feudalistic norms may participate in the process of land reform [4].

Therefore, the image of ACWF presented by People's Daily reports and the image of ACWF presented by the WSIC document presented a preference correlation, a partially accurate propaganda on the effort of ACWF focusing chiefly on their international voicing and ignoring many of the domestic efforts of ACWF. Generally, however, both the sources highlighted ACWF's support to the central party's decisions but also showed its unique nature as an women's welfare institute.

#### 4 The 1957 – 1967 analysis

In the 1957-1967 period, the high frequency words could barely reflect the efforts of ACWF in the WSIC document.

The Brief History, in its 1956-1966 chapter, recorded various efforts of ACWF on local topics. The efforts includes both involvement in government agenda and discussion of gender issue.

The involvement in the government agendas, such as the anti-right (Fanyou) movement and the great leap forward (dayuejin) movement. The involvements of ACWF, however, shows little about its identity and image. The ACWF essentially acts much similar as any other mobilization government agency would in involving the agendas. In the great leap forward movement, for instance, ACWF mobilized women to participate more intense labor, similar to what a people's commune would do in that period. Notably, however, though ACWF demonstrated

high support to the central government's decision, the relationship between the two tightly connected groups deteriorated slightly in anti-right movement. The WSIC document pointed out that by the end of the movement, "the progression of women's movement was damaged" [4]. In September 1957, 6 of the women's representatives was identified as right wings in the third national women's representative meeting. According to the WSIC document, as the anti-right movement spread in the country, various civil women's organizations ceased to be active. The event ended with ACWF becoming one of the few organizations working on women's interests, yet, as the forementioned, the political activism of the central party has nonetheless made its relationship with ACWF more intense.

"Making the visible invisible" is one of Hershtatter's main criticisms towards the communist party's revolution in women's social role. Hershtatter argues that in the process of attempting to liberate women from housewifery, the communist party wrongfully ignored the agency of family and treated it as a remnant of the federal "old society", leading to depreciation and reflectance of domestic works [6]. Interestingly, there has been a discussion regarding the appreciation of domestic labor lasting from 1956 – 1957. The discussion was initially triggered by a letter published on the "Chinese Women" magazine in 1956, titled "is it ok for employed women to quit work in order to participate housewifery?", regarding the story of a women who was employed but find it more economically efficient if she stays at home and take care of her children than working while hiring a baby sitter. The publication led to intense civil discussion following the publication of later issues of "Chinese Women" on how employed women can resolve such problem. The discussion was so popular, to the point where many important political figures including the vice president of ACWF, head of personal bureau of the state council and vice-chairman Nenlai Zhou made statements in 1957, addressing that domestic works should be equally considered as any other forms of labors [4]. Domestic labor, however, as described by Hershtatter, remains to be invisible after the declaration of government leaders. Two hypotheses can be made. The first being that reflectance of domestic labor is simply the result executional failure — the proposal was somewhat successfully performed as a subsection of the "great leap forward", but eventually failed with the movement, as Hershtatter described that the "great leap forward" movement aimed to socialize traditional domestic labors, but the collapse of the movement marked the end the attempt. Relating the statement to document of WISC, the sequence of events matches as the "great leap forward" movement was initiated in 1958, after the addresses were made, which explains how the attention to family realm was eventually lost. The second explanation would be that any attempts to further concern women's domestic labors were probably ceased by the criticism towards the proposal of "be industrious and thrifty in managing a household" (Qinjian chijia), one of the slogans made to encourage domestic labor in the "cultural revolution" activism starting from 1967.

The Brief History also documented ACWF's

participation on various agendas that aims to improve the health of women during the period. Among them, ACWF's participation in the childbirth reform (jiesheng gaige) and the birthrate control (jihua shengyiv) agenda are the two most important ones [4]. The Brief History documented that by the December of 1962, the party central and the state council have together released the "instruction regarding the serious popularization of birth control plan" in response to the dramatic increase in birth rate following the economic and welfare improvement in the same year. The record indicated that by 1965, the birth rate control policy has achieved significant effect by dropping the birth rate from 7.5 from 1963 to 6.0 in 1965 [4].

The theme of the ten-year efforts is thus described in the publication as still political synchronization with the central government, as the executive agency of its proposal regarding women's interest. The newspaper report HFWs however, continues to focus on Fulian's function as an international speaker of the central government on international affairs. Various terms such as "Zhichi" (support), "Guoji" (international), and Zhidian (call) occupy the top of the frequency list. Even terms usually lead to the image of domestic revolutionary struggles in the 1950s and 1960s such as "Renmin" (people), "Douzheng" (struggle) leads to texts that refer to Fulian's efforts in supporting the agenda of foreign countries against the American political expansion at the time. Suggested by the HFW list, Japan and Cuba were most frequently mentioned by Fulian in its international voicing. Tracing back to the original text, on Japan, Fulian chiefly supported its feminism movements, and left-wing movements, more specifically Japanese people's act against the US-Japan security treaty; on Cuba, Fulian chiefly supported its effort against America's military invasion and political sanction [4]. Though increasingly tough supports on foreign political struggle are presented during the period, feminine tone is still presented in the voice of Fulian, as the word "Furen", referring to the first lady diplomacy, and "Chahuahui" (tea party), were both used for 34 times, merely 9 times less than the usage of the word "Ribei" (Japan) and "Guba" (Cuba), the major political subjects of the ten years.

## 5 1968-1978 Analysis

The 1968-1978 decade is one of the darkest periods in ACWF's development. The first half of decade marks ACWF's major conflict with the central government and its period of complete standstill and by the latter half, its reconstruction.

In May 1966, the infamous "cultural revolution", a political purge that eventually cause national disturbance, took place, leading to cruel political conflict within the party. Many political and administrative activities were sabotaged by the political insurrectionists "the gang of four". ACWF suffered great lost in the event. The Brief History described the period as "The paralyze of Women's organizations and the standstill of women's work (work to improve the life quality of women)".

According to the WSIC document, by the second half year of 1966, the local women's federation of Tianjin,

Shanghai, Beijing, Anhui, Heilongjiang, Hunan and Xinjiang have ceased all their work [4]. From the second half of the 1966 to 1967, ACWF ceased all its activities aside from formal mobilizations with the central union and central of the Communist Youth League, as well as necessary international affairs [4], however, according to The Brief History, even the international affairs of ACWF were disturbed as the number of affairs declined significantly. ACWF did not send representatives to the World Children's conference held by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in October 1966 and ceased to contact with the organization. By the November of 1967, ACWF stopped all its international communications. In June thirteenth 1968, ACWF was put under the "military monitor" of military representatives from the central government. In the same year's September, all ACWF organizations were dismissed by the newly formed "revolution council" [4].

The restriction of ACWF started at before the end of the cultural revolution, in 1973. A social comment from People's Daily in March of 1973 suggested that women women's organizations should be reorganized, started the reconstruction process. The reconstruction was quickly preformed in 1973, and by April 1975, all the districts of China had their women's representative meetings held [4]. Kang keqing was voted as the new president of ACWF, after Cai chang. She will lead the ACWF to redefine itself in the next decade.

Politic wise, ACWF displayed discrepancy with the central government, rejecting its radical leftwing agenda. Many officers of ACWF sacrificed their lives in the process, and some more wrongfully accused by the central government for unjust reasons [4]. Comparing to the earlier decades, the discrepancy between the institute and the party reached a pinnacle in during the cultural revolution.

The international voicing of ACWF also recovered, following the reconnection of China with UN in 1971 and the involvement in the UN's Commission on the Status of Women in 1974. The most remarkable achievement in the reconnection is probably the present of ACWF in the status commission's meeting in 1975 [4].

The recovery of medical system was also an important agenda in the recovery process of ACWF. Like the other recovery agendas, the process started in 1971. The two major achievements that falls into the category are the continuation and reinforcement of birth control policy, achieving even lower birth rate by the end of 1976 than the birth rate of 1968, and the recovery of medical facilities dedicated for women and children, which, unfortunately failed to recover to its 1966 state by 1976.

People's Daily's reports in the 1968-1978 period are extremely rare, merely 48 (including several reports on women's federations in other countries rather than ACWF) reports comparing to the 381 reports during 1957-1967, and 513 reports during 1946-1956. Despite of the scarcity of reports, the image of ACWF presented generally correspond to The Brief History, as most reports of the time reflect the reconstruction process of ACWF, as the most frequently used terms are generally related to the women's representative meeting as well as the election of Kang, such as "Zhaokai" (hold; holding meeting),

“Xuanchu” (elected), “Zhuxi” (president), “Shida” (tenth(referring to the 10th women’s representative meeting held at the time)) and “Huiyi” (meeting) .

Noticeably, however, there are only three reports before the reconstruction of ACWF in 1971, which indicate that all the criticisms and abolitions actions conducted by the CPC government upon ACWF were not reported. It is unknown whether this is result of media focus of the time was on other events or that the CPC concealed related reports due to certain political concerns.

In general, the 1968-1978 period marks a time of great tension between the CPC and the ACWF, which concludes the early exploration stage of ACWF in its identity and agency as an axillary mobilization and diplomatic organization for the central government, specializing in gender issues. After the reconstruction of ACWF, the institute lost many of its early, experienced members and received many proletarian farmers instead , which led to a long restoration process of the institute’s executive ability, as well as a redefinition on the institute’s identity in the next decade.

## 6 conclusion

While the agency of ACWF in the 1946-1978 period includes both domestic mobilizations and international voicing, the research discovered that the CPC government seemed to prefer reports on its international activities. It is, however, no clear answer to the preference; the preference is arguably strange, given that the main influence of ACWF to the public would be on their local mobilization. It is possible that their mobilizations are displayed elsewhere, such as revolutionary mural or local newspapers, and that the international reports acted as a supplemental note on the organization’s work. The research nonetheless has no evidence for the explanation and further research is required.

In the contemporary China, when feminism is again an active agenda in the political discourse of China, we need to rediscover the history of ACWF --- feminists under the supervision of the central government, in hope that we can learn more about the dynamic of civil right agendas and governmental intervention in the Chinese political environment.

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