

International Foundations' Engagement in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and in the Chinese Feminist Movement

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Abstract

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), organized by the United Nations in Beijing in 1995, launched a new era of internationalization for the Chinese feminist movement. The conference facilitated the legitimization of non-state-led organizations and activism that advocated for women's rights, as well as gender and sexual equality. During this time, interactions between domestic feminists and international foundations increased dramatically. After the conference, Chinese feminist advocacy and mobilization expanded beyond the party-state system and gained momentum in the decade following 1995. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) investigated the engagements of the Ford Foundation (FF) in safeguarding women's rights and advocating for gender equality in China, and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) during the FWCW. This essay draws upon the preliminary findings from my archival research, focusing on the FF's activities in China relating to women and gender issues from the late 1970s to late 2000s, for which the FF archival collection at the RAC is available. The RF's sponsorship during the 1995 Conference is also included. I start with a brief introduction of my research project and materials I found helpful, then elaborate on the two foundations' activities in three sections in a diachronic order, highlighting files available at the RAC and their contribution to my dissertation research. This essay provides only a sketch of the FF and RF's engagements in China, as further investigation of the files I collected at the RAC has not yet finished.

International Foundations’ Engagement in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and in the Chinese Feminist Movement

By Jiling Duan¹

Introduction

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), organized by the United Nations in Beijing in 1995, launched a new era of internationalization for the Chinese feminist movement. The conference facilitated the legitimization of non-state-led organizations and activism that advocated for women’s rights, as well as gender and sexual equality. During this time, interactions between domestic feminists and transnational actors, including international organizations, foundations, and feminist groups, increased dramatically. After the conference, Chinese feminist advocacy and mobilization expanded beyond the party-state system and gained momentum in the decade following 1995.

This advancement in feminist activism ended abruptly in 2015. On the eve of International Women’s Day, five young Chinese feminist activists were detained for planning to distribute anti-sexual harassment flyers on public transportation in several major Chinese cities. The incident symbolizes the moment when the tension between the authoritarian state and the feminist movements, as well as the divergences among feminists reached their peak. The detention of the “Feminist Five” also sparked widespread transnational feminist solidarity and outrage, which played a pivotal factor in their release. One year after the detention, the 2016 National People’s Congress adopted a new law² on foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), making it more difficult for

transnational feminist actors to continue their activities in China. This law, together with the detention, signaled the decline of both the funding resources and the legitimacy of feminist activism outside the party-state in China, as well as communication between Chinese feminists and transnational actors.

During my previous fieldwork, I visited archives in China where I found abundant oral histories of women who worked from different positions, and women leaders who have been active since the FWCW. I interviewed former cadres, researchers, journalists, professors, and activists who participated in FWCW. Many of them have connection with or have been directly funded by the Ford Foundation (FF). Both the archives and interviews provided me with stories of what Chinese feminists experienced at the FWCW, and what they have achieved ever since. However, to examine the trajectory of the Chinese feminist movement and its relationship to both transnational actors and state dominance, it is crucial to know the stories from the other side: How was the FWCW organized? What roles did the international foundations play? What are the standards by which they choose their grantees? How are the rules made? What barriers or difficulties might they have faced in China, in particular? How do the international foundations, the feminist community, and the Chinese state communicate with each other? How has this communication influenced the foundations' funding policies in China?

To answer these questions, I conducted five weeks of extensive archival research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), starting in June 2019.³ As part of my dissertation project, my research at the RAC focused on the archives of international foundations, particularly the Ford Foundation, as it has been one of the most active foundations since the late 1980s, and funded most of the women- and gender-related programs in China. Specifically, I examined the grant-making records and reports of women-, gender-, and sexuality-related programs, and the correspondences between the grantees and the program officers. I have also investigated the FF's structures, regulations and processes of grant-making and its program categories, as well as meeting memoranda and correspondence between officers. For example, files in FF collections FA544, FA673, FA738, FA739 provide substantial records on the FWCW; grant records on the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) programs in FF collection FA732A document the

communication between FF and ACWF; catalogued reports in FF collections FA739A and FA739E show how some gender and feminist ideas were introduced through training and workshops; grant files in collections FA732B and FA732I shed light on the FF's activities in the process of establishing women's studies programs in China.

My archival research at the Rockefeller Archive Center greatly benefited from the Ford Foundation catalogued reports, made available online for downloading, and the newly available Peter Geithner Papers (FA1408). Peter Geithner was the FF's first representative in China in 1988, when the foundation's new Beijing Office was established. He then served as Regional Director of the Asia Programs from 1990 to 1996. Consisting of six series, the Peter Geithner Papers provide invaluable records of how the FF started establishing its office and launched programs in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The FF's guide for program officers⁴, Geithner's first-hand observation of Chinese society in his trip notes, and his correspondence with friends, family and colleagues are also available in this collection.

I also took advantage of the abundant Rockefeller Foundation (RF) records deposited at the RAC. While women and gender issues were not within RF's funding priorities in China, the RF did contribute to supporting the FWCW, especially its NGO forum and media converge programs.⁵ I found particularly interesting the final reports of these programs to the RF.

Next, I will elaborate on the activities of both the FF and RF in China in the following three phases.

Early Engagement: Late 1970s-1988

In the 1970s, the Ford Foundation started its early "testing of the waters" in China, although its interest in China began much earlier.⁶ In 1977, a study group went to China to "stud[y] an unfamiliar society with eyes alone."⁷ The group carefully, but distantly, observed many aspects of Chinese society, including the "Sex Roles and

the Position of Women.” Interacting with cadres of the Women’s Federation was unsurprisingly frustrating to the study group, who eventually came to believe that the ACWF clearly “was an auxiliary political arm of the Party,” and seemed to be only “parroting of correct lines.”⁸ The group’s understanding of China at the time, as well as women’s status in the society, was limited by their access to a variety of people; the shy openness of Chinese society; and the overall research level of China Studies in the U.S. in the 1970s. Obviously, the FF was aware of the last aspect, and had been one of the driving forces for developing China Studies programs, not only in the universities in the U.S., but worldwide. Nevertheless, the study group concluded its report with idealism, hope, and enthusiasm of conquering a big unlearned country, at the same time, seizing the opportunity of China’s new openness. As reported, “one of the things that most struck us in touring China was some of the similarities between that vast country and the United States. That statement will undoubtedly shock both recipients of these notes in China and those in the west.”⁹

Starting the following year, and continuing through 1980s, the Ford Foundation deepened its communication with political leaders inside various governmental institutions, scholars in research institutions and universities, and business leaders in China.¹⁰ The FF established its Beijing Office in 1988, partnering with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as the Chinese law requires a local trustee unit.

The major goal of the Ford Foundation at the early stage was articulated as to “enhance U.S. capability for dealing with China,” and to encourage communications “between U.S. and Chinese leaders.”¹¹ Therefore, women and gender issues were not its primary interest in China at that time. However, reports and correspondence show that women issues have always been the FF’s concern. For example, in a letter to then FF’s representative, Carl Green¹², a group of scholars sponsored by the FF shared its observation about women’s status in China; the scholars also discussed their interest in developing women’s studies in China and the possibility of cooperating with the ACWF.

Taken as a whole, the women’s rights programs were included under the leadership of Franklin Thomas. They were extended by Susan Beresford during

her presidency at the FF from 1996 to 2008, by supporting programs such as gender mainstreaming, gender and development, reproductive health, and sexual education. This path resonated with the United Nations' agendas of the "Decade for Women" from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s and carried out the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action following the 1995 FWCW. More importantly, it illustrates the effort of integrating the gender lens into the FF's work by a group of feminist professionals at the FF like Susan Beresford¹³ and some other program officers I will mention below.

Prior to and during the FWCW: 1988-1995

After the Ford Foundation had established its Beijing office, the first batches of grants that were made in women and gender areas mainly went to the ACWF or institutions affiliated with it, other governmental units such as the Population and Family Planning Committee, and universities or research institutes that worked on women-related issues. This might seem to be surprising, especially to those in China where some of the women NGOs have been under enormous pressure for taking "foreign money." This is even more the case after the issue of the new foreign NGO law took effect after January 2017.

Ford Foundation grants were made to support research and training projects, as well as workshops and meetings. Reproductive health, women and development in the rural area, and legal protection of women's rights were some of the major themes of the proposals that the FF sponsored. Most of the grants were made to support institutions located in Beijing, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ACWF, Beijing Normal University, and Beijing Agricultural University. However, regional projects in Yunnan, Henan, Hunan, and Zhejiang, etc. were also supported.

In accomplishing the Ford Foundation's goals in China, some program officers in the Beijing Office undertook tremendous work, as the former FF president Susan Beresford recognized in her remarks at an awards ceremony:

In practice, the Foundation's work on reproductive health is carried out by the program officers of the Foundation, and I would here like to recognize the special contribution made by our program officers in the Beijing Office: Mary-Ann Burris, Joan Kaufman and Eve Lee. All of them are specialist in the field and well-known to colleagues in China.

- Mary-Ann Burris began our program here in the early 1990s and supported a large range of people working for women's development.
- Joan Kaufman deepened that work and developed the strong program of engagement with the SFPC and the quality of care program that is recognized in this award today.
- Eve Lee has just joined our office in Beijing and is looking forward to expanding our work still further.¹⁴

As Beresford points out, Mary-Ann Burris was the key person for sponsoring women and gender programs during this period of time, while Kaufman, Lee, and another program officer, Susie Jolly, who joined the FF in 2010, thus not mentioned here by Beresford, were some of the key figures in the post-FWCW phrase of the FF in China. It is also important to recognize the effort made by many other FF consultants and program assistants, mostly young Chinese women who spoke fluent English, in the FF's Beijing Office. By maneuvering between the international and local actors, they made exceptional contributions to the development of women NGOs and advocacy of gender equality along with the program officers, who were usually American. Although I failed to find many relevant files in the FF archive at the RAC illustrating their contribution, I did manage to record some of their stories through interviews, which I will elaborate further in my dissertation and future writings.

The FF very much appreciated the significance of the FWCW and its work, as Beresford cited, it could:

- (1) help put women's issues on the map in a new way;
- (2) help define how people understand key issues involving women;
- (3) create policy momentum in countries seeking to appear in a positive light at the conference;
- (4) motivate and generate new organizations;
- (5) inspire people at all levels; and
- (6) offer a venue wherein diverse groups can find a common language and understanding.¹⁵

Therefore, the FF sponsored women NGOs worldwide not only to attend the 1995 FWCW in Beijing, but also to prepare them for more productive participation by supporting women to attend workshops, regional preparatory meetings, and training prior to the conference.

Unlike the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation did not sponsor individuals to attend the FWCW. However, among the organizations that the RF supported, one was the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC), whose work during the FWCW interests me the most. CCMC's mission was to "preserve the Cairo consensus on population"¹⁶ at the 1995 conference in Beijing. CCMC, according to its final report to the RF, was "instrumental in helping NGOs and the U.S. delegation convey the message that 'Women's Rights Are Human Rights.'" Its core strategy was to forge networks "among NGOs, U.S. and other government officials and the world's news media."¹⁷ To do so, some of their activities in Beijing included:

- Conducting regional training program preparing feminists, grassroots leaders and media practitioners for the U.N. NGO Forum on Women;
- Functioning as a "Speakers' Bureau" that recruits notable figures to make speeches and disseminates them widely;
- Being the liaison between the departments of state and others;
- Preparing the press kit that was mailed to "5,000 journalists, policymakers, and NGOs."¹⁸
- Coordinating research program on public opinion;

The attachments in CCMC's final report to the RF also provide an evaluable glimpse of the media coverage on the FWCW in the English-speaking world and the vigorous debates on women and gender issues around 1995.

Post-FWCW: 1996-Present

During the FWCW, through supporting various groups of women in China to attend the preparatory meetings and the Beijing conference, the Ford Foundation

successfully linked them to international discussions and agendas on women issues. These helped the feminist professionals and activists gain momentum in advocating gender equality in the decade after the 1995 conference.

Furthermore, as the FF expected, the FWCW indeed “motivate[d] and generate[d] new organizations” in China. More and more women NGOs were founded either right after the FWCW or in the following years in China. Some Chinese feminists were inspired and motivated by the conference directly and almost immediately established their organizations with the support of FF program officers in Beijing. They helped those newly-founded organizations, not just with financial support, but also in ways of putting them in networks, and linking them with experts and other resources both in China and overseas. The non-financial support was also much needed at the time, according to many of the FF grantees.

The newly-founded organizations included: the Women’s Rights Protection Centre at Peking University founded in 1995, Media Monitor Network in 1996, and Anti-Domestic Violence Network in 2000, are among the most significant NGOs in protecting women’s rights, transforming the media and culture, and advocating for the Anti-Domestic Law in China after 1995. Women organizations that were established before the 1995 conference also developed with the support of the FF, such as the then Women’s Research Institute, which later became Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center; and *Rural Women Knowing All* magazine developed into Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women in 2001.¹⁹

For women- and gender-related NGOs in China, the Ford Foundation has been the most important sponsor for decades. Programs supported by the FF, with broader themes, have extended to areas other than Beijing and several other major cities in the post-FWCW era. This era overlapped with Susan Beresford’s term as the president till 2008, which was also seen as “the golden era” by some Chinese women NGO leaders. That decade was “golden” not only because of the availability of the FF’s financial, network and resource support, but also the comparatively looser state control of NGO activities. The FF in Beijing continued to support women, gender, and sexuality programs after 2008 until very recently, around the time when the new foreign NGO law became effective in China in early

2017. The FF was one of the first overseas NGOs that successfully registered in China under the new law. For women NGOs²⁰ in China, however, the lack of funding support is only one of the many challenges they are facing today.

Acronyms

ACWF: All-China Women's Federation

CCMC: Communications Consortium Media Center

FF: The Ford Foundation

FWCW: The Fourth World Conference on Women

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

RAC: The Rockefeller Archive Center

RF: The Rockefeller Foundation

UN: The United Nations

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² The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Activities of Overseas Non-Governmental Organizations within the Territory of China.

³ Thanks to the research stipend award the Rockefeller Archive Center provided, I was able to pay a five week's research trip to the archive from June 16th to July 20th, 2019. I thank Michele Hiltzik Beckerman and other archivists at RAC for their professional and amiable assistance; and senior research fellow Patricia L. Rosenfield for her valuable information as an expert in philanthropy studies.

⁴ The Ford Foundation Guide to Foundation Actions, FA1048, box 93, folder 1205, RAC.

⁵ FA477, box R3283, folder PS9513, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, RAC.

⁶ See: An inter-office memorandum written by David Finkelstein, FF's first East Asian specialist, in January 5, 1968, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 019693, RAC; also a special conference paper entitled "China and the program Interests of the Ford Foundation" by John Bresnan in March 14, 1979, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 010043, RAC.

⁷ C. Arnold Anderson and Mary Jean Bowman, "Notes on A Trip Through China," August 1977. Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 013060, RAC.

⁸ Ibid, pg 87.

⁹ Ibid, pg110.

¹⁰ See: Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Reports No. 009005, 009006, 007037, and 010043, RAC.

¹¹ John Bresnan, "China and the program Interests of the Ford Foundation," March 14, 1979, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 010043, RAC, pg 14.

¹² Untitled letter to Carl Green re status of women in China, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 007916, May 27, 1980, RAC.

¹³ See: Susan Beresford's speech at the CGIAR workshop on gender issues, November 1, 1991, Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 018634, RAC.

¹⁴ "Remarks at award ceremony, Beijing, China," January 12, 2002. Ford Foundation Catalogued Reports, Report No. 019352, RAC.

¹⁵ FA544, box 2, Ford Foundation Archive, RAC.

¹⁶ FA477, box R3283, folder PS9513, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, RAC.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The process of these changes and the path of their development in the following years are complicated for me to elaborate here.

²⁰ Even among women NGOs, different types of organizations face different challenges. Some were cracked down or closely monitored by the state, while some others are surviving just fine. I do not differentiate among them here, but will in my future research, as this short essay aims to give the readers a general idea of the status quo.