

Research Report

Women's online participation and the transformation of citizenship

In Hong Kong and Guangzhou

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Hong Kong

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Table of contents

Acronyms	6
Executive summary	7
Background	9
A) Rationale.....	9
B)Context and assumption.....	10
1.Hong Kong	10
2.Guangzhou, China.....	14
C) Objectives	16
Methodology	17
A) Methodological choices.....	17
1.Organisational analysis.....	17
2.Political and social history analysis.....	18
3.Discourse analysis.....	18
Hong Kong.....	18
Mainland China	19
B) Limitations.....	20
Findings	22
A) Hong Kong.....	22
1.Gender mainstreaming: Institutional & non-institutional approach.....	22
AAF - Gender mainstreaming and institutionalisation.....	23
NTXS - A marginalised position.....	25
2. Institutional approach and non-institutional approach.....	27
3.Experience on media technology - Techno-mediated public sphere.....	29
AAF - Resource centre and publications.....	29
NTXS - From virtual to real-life community.....	31
Individual activists - A socialising space.....	32
4. Techno-mediated public sphere.....	32
AAF – Conventional media strategy.....	32
NTXS - Internal empowerment.....	35
Individuals - Interplay of different form of media.....	36
5. Interaction between the public and the counter-public.....	37

6. The “male” domain?.....	38
7. Equality, sexuality & reflexive citizenship	39
B) Guangzhou.....	42
1. Institutional and non-institutional approach.....	42
Guangdong ACWF - The role of a political organisation.....	43
GMA - Feminist network.....	44
Marginalised actors.....	46
2. The use of media technology.....	48
ACWF - Propaganda or deliberation?.....	48
GMA - Interplay between old and new media.....	50
Individual activists - Information bridging.....	51
3. Citizenship and rights discourse.....	52
ACFW – Mass / people or individual citizen?.....	52
GMA - Structural violence	54
Individual activist - Grassroots right defenders	55
4. Negotiation between the state and the civil society.....	56
Individual activists at the frontier.....	58
GMA – Amplifiers of grassroots voices	58
ACWF – From patron to opinion leader.....	59
Discussion.....	61
A) Civil society and political society.....	61
B) Feminist active citizen in the rise of populism.....	62
C) Techno-mediated public sphere.....	64
Policy implications.....	65
A) Gender mainstreaming.....	65
B) Digital divide and access impact.....	65
C) Feminisms and active citizenship.....	66
D) NGO internal governance and new media.....	66
Overall conclusion and reflection.....	68
References.....	69

Acronyms

AAF: Association for the Advancement of Feminisms

ACWF: All-China Women's Federation

BOR: Bill of Rights

BBS: Bulletin Board System

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CEDAW: Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

COIAO: Control of Obscene and Indecent Article Ordinance

EOC: Equal Opportunities Commission

GMA: Gender and Media Action

ICCPR: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

LGBT: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

NTO: New Territories Ordinance

NTXS: Nutong Xueshe

SDO: Sex Discrimination Ordinance

SODO: Sexual Orientation Discrimination Ordinance

WTO: World Trade organisation

XRL: Express Rail Link

Executive summary

Against the background of the shift of socio-technological paradigm, this study attempts to explore the dynamics of the emergence of multiple counter and alternative public spheres in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, two distinctive Chinese societies under the regimes of post-colonialism and authoritarianism. The research examines the uses of new media among different social agents - women's organisations and activists - in community building and campaigns for social justice.

This research has assumed two major strategies for women to engage with the online practice of citizenship: the institutional approach of women's NGOs and the individual approach of female activists. Each approach engenders different aspects of citizenship in the public sphere and interplays with the other. This study, thus, attempts to address the following questions:

- How do women's NGOs and female activists enact their idea of citizenship on the Internet?
- How do their interactions with the government (or institutionalisation process) affect their imagination of their citizen rights, self-positioning in public engagement and appropriation of online tools?
- What kinds of public spheres do they create respectively? What are the differences and the dynamics between them?

We identify three approaches towards ICTs which are best described as instrumental, organisational and social. Established women's organisations tend to adopt a conventional media approach such as in the form of online resource centres and have very limited interaction with the public through the Internet. Network organisations, committed to community building and self-empowerment, are more active in representing themselves and engaging in discursive battles in the online public sphere. Individual women activists, based upon their social network, can further engage in politics beyond their lived communities by organising events and campaigns which in the long run evolve into a counter-public that share similar political agenda.

While the liberal discourse has become the guiding principle in gender mainstreaming, it is weak at addressing the situations of social minorities. This weakness becomes more acute in the rise of right-wing populist discourse against sexual minorities, foreign domestic workers and new immigrants in the online public sphere. Hence, network organisations and individual women activists play an increasingly

important role in this engagement.

Overcoming the problems of gender mainstreaming, the global women's movement should adopt a more decentralised, diverse and rooted approach for advocating gender equity. Instead of addressing the issue of digital divide in the general sense, as the stories from Hong Kong and China illustrate, cultivating active woman citizens and online feminist counter-culture is not simply important for overcoming the dominance of male voices and opinion leaders in the Internet, but also is a counter-movement against right-wing populism. For women's NGOs, the most pressing issue is to adjust their bureaucratic structure and organisational culture by giving power to individual participants and their networks for developing spontaneous campaigns through the use of ICTs.

Background

A) Rationale

As an independent media organisation, inmediahk.net¹ has been using new media to advocate the practice of citizen journalism as a form of grassroots democracy in Hong Kong, a post-colonial city where the formal democratic system has yet to be accomplished because of the constraints imposed by the Chinese central government.

Since 2003, the city has been through a new wave of local social movements in which the Internet media have increasingly played a significant role in mobilisation. While online forums and Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes) were the most visited sites in the initial phase, the blooming of Internet radios since 2004 and the rise of citizen journalism practice such as inmediahk.net have resulted in the formation of a counter-public sphere in Hong Kong². They robustly challenged the mainstream media's representation of the anti-World Trade organisation (WTO) protest in December 2005 and generated a momentum for a series of cultural and historical preservation campaigns which were rarely covered by local civic groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) previously.

It has been acknowledged (Lam and Tong, 2007) that the emergence of online media has facilitated a new form of social mobilisation based upon an intertwining of social and information network, rather than conventional civic organisations although the mobilisation may eventually consolidate itself in the establishment of new social groups.

Ip Iam Chong's research on the development of independent media in 2008/09 (Ip, 2009) argued against the technological determinism framework by pointing out that the rise of independent and citizen media in Hong Kong was 3 years after the DotCOM bubbles in 2000. The development of Internet media did not spontaneously create a counter-public sphere; it is the active appropriation of technology, and thus, the introduction and dissemination of techno-power to the grassroots by active social agents that unleashed the potential of new media technology.

On the one hand, online mobilisation has changed the landscape of social movements. Conventional NGOs and movement sectors are less visible in using new media technology for their campaigns and

1 The web-based organisation was established in 2004 in Hong Kong by a number of intellectuals and activists.

2 Every year on July 1, there is a rally organised by a pan-democratic alliance, the Civic Human Rights Front, to express the citizens' desire for democracy.

works. On the other hand, the Internet generation of activists is more and more hesitant to engage with conventional civic groups which are increasingly disconnected from the practice of online activism.

The tendency mentioned above is also taking place in the women's NGO sector in Hong Kong. Feminists are one of the pioneers in developing the concept of counter-publics vis a vis Habermas' ideal type of bourgeois public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Although women's organisations in Hong Kong have been critical of the mainstream media's gender stereotype, they are yet to make use of new media tools to develop their own alternative / counter media. The most active sector in feminist circles in terms of the use of online media is the LGBT community. However, surprisingly, for the young generation of women activists, many of them are not interested in feminist theory and some of them even find it irrelevant to their online practice.³

In China, women's NGOs, social groups and individuals are all active in using Internet media, though their objectives and tactics differ. The rise of civil rights movement since 2003⁴ has taken form in a seemingly gender-neutral tone of voice dominated by male actors, while issues in relation to sexual violence against women, reproductive rights, etc. are less visible. In the context of modern China, feminism has long been entangled with the official rhetoric of “women's liberation” by the Chinese Communist regime. Since the 1990s, feminist voices have been appropriated as a capitalist consumerist drive by the commercial sector. The emerging sector of civic associations, emphasising more solidarity rather than gender sensitivities, further marginalises feminist practices in the civil rights movement.

This research provides an opportunity for us to examine closely the appropriation of the Internet technology by women from different social positions. With attention to the political dynamics and structures, it attempts to reflect upon and re-strategise feminist practice in engaging with local politics through new media.

B)Context and assumption

1. Hong Kong

The space of civil society was largely confined to the elite groups of the colony of Hong Kong. Under the authoritarian rule of the British-Hong Kong colonial authority, the pro-Communist organisations

3 In my interview with individual women activists, those who were born after late 1970s have little knowledge about feminist theory and find it irrelevant to their practice.

4 As a result of the successful online campaign on the Death of Sun Zhigang which had resulted in the abolition of detention of non-registered population in cities, 2003 is called the year of online rights defense.

and the camp of the pro-Nationalist party saw Hong Kong as a space of Chinese refuge, and engaged in serious political conflicts during the Cold War. Following the new rise of local consciousness and locally born generations in the 1970s, the development of representative politics in Hong Kong began in the 1980s and through the 1990s. In response to the June 4th Massacre in Beijing in 1989, the local social movement and political groups underwent a new wave of politicisation. The first political party was established and the local residents obtained their voting rights in the Legislative Council⁵. However, after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the city's constitutional reform has been frozen and remained incomplete. The Beijing government and its political proxies, including the pro-Communist parties and the big business rings, attempted to tighten their grip on the nascent civil society of Hong Kong by passing legislation to protect and uphold "national security". People's political frustration together with economic downturn brought half a million people to the streets in 2003 and 2004 respectively and paved the way for more direct political participation in the past few years.

Women's organisations in Hong Kong have been developed along a similar political trajectory. The first women's organisation which addressed the status of women was the Hong Kong Council of Women, established in 1947. It campaigned for the abolition of the legally sanctioned polygamous system in 1971 and pushed for legal reform to protect women from different forms of violence and discrimination. The Council was very much affected by western values, such as Christianity and the Second Wave of western feminism. The Council's members were mostly westerners. (Lai, Au, and Cheung, 1997)

Between the 1950s and 1960s a number of women's welfare, charity and service organisations were established; most members of these organisations were wives of male political elites. In the 1970s, professional and business women's associations began to emerge. With the introduction of the District Council and grassroots election in 1982, community based women's organisations also began to flourish (and the Women's Council was transformed into Women's Centre), and extended their work to the community services around the same period in the 1980s (Cheung, 1989).

Another political trajectory that nurtured the first generation of local feminists was the involvement of students and social workers in grassroots social services and struggles back in the 1970s (Lai, Au, and Cheung, 1997). The campaign for equal wage in the 70s and the struggle for rights of abode for boat

⁵ The British government decided to speed up the democratisation process in Hong Kong after the Tiananmen Massacre in Beijing.

people's wives from mainland China in the 80s are two of the landmark campaigns for young woman activists at that time. In search of theoretic and ideological support for their practices, some of them decided to introduce and inject feminist theories into the local social movement sector. In 1984, the Association for the Advancement of Feminisms (AAF) was founded.

Following Betty L. L. Lai, Au Kit-chu, and Fanny M. Cheung 's categorisation (ibid), there are two types of women's organisations: those with feminist agenda and the desire to reform the social structure, and those upholding women's tradition as a force contributing to social stability. It is the former groups which have actively opened up institutional space for women's political participation in the 1990s.

In 1989, 20 women's groups formed a coalition to lobby for setting up the Women's Commission and extension of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to Hong Kong. Eventually, the enactment of Hong Kong Bill Of Rights (BOR) in early 1991 has furthered the development of civic sector with a legal and institutional framework that is based on citizens' rights. The legal reform was followed by the Legislative Council election, in which women's groups lobbied the candidates for the establishment of a Women's Commission and the ratification of CEDAW (Wu, 1994). Their campaigns paved the way for further anti-discrimination legislation⁶ and the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission in 1996.

A major campaign in relation to the CEDAW is the campaign for female inheritance in 1994. The momentum started with a NGO report to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 1991, submitted by the Hong Kong Council of Women, which criticised the Chinese customary law in the New Territories (New Territories Ordinance - NTO) (that had restricted the inheritance rights to male villagers) using human rights terminology and argued that this practice had violated both the CEDAW and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Encouraged by the international human rights community, the Legislative Council formed an Anti-Discrimination Female Indigenous Residents Committee in October 1993 to review the NTO upon receiving some complaints from indigenous women. A few months later, in March 1994, a coalition of women's organisations was established to campaign for the amendment of NTO and the bill was eventually passed in May 1994. Although the campaign only lasted for less than one year, it successfully popularised the discourses of human rights and equality among local communities (Merry and Stern, 2005).

⁶ The Sex Discrimination Ordinance was passed in 1995, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in 1997, Family Status Discrimination Ordinance in 1997, Race Discrimination Ordinance in 2008.

In response to the pressure of women's organisations' call for the ratification of the CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women,, the CEDAW was finally ratified in Hong Kong in 1996 and a Women's Commission was established accordingly in 2001. The interaction between the human rights legislators and women's organisations in the female inheritance campaign as well as the introduction of Equal Opportunities Commission and Women's Commission has opened up opportunities for the inclusion of women's participation within the government and its consultation bodies.

In order to compete with the progressive women's organisations, the pro-establishment women's organisations have set up a large number of district and neighbourhood women's groups to expand their influence within the government and in the grassroots. For example, the Hong Kong Federation of Women established in 1993 has so far developed 53 affiliated organisations, while the Hong Kong Women Development Association established in 1996 and restructured in 2007 has developed 22 organisation memberships. The pro-Beijing and pro-establishment forces have successfully built a united front among the community-based women's organisations to counter the influence of progressive feminists who demand more political and social reforms.

After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, on the one hand, progressive women's groups are by far outnumbered by pro-establishment ones in their policy advocacy work within government and its consultation bodies. On the other hand, having locked in the institutional relationship, these women's groups tend to have missed the opportunities to join the new wave of civic engagement and grassroots mobilisation facilitated by online media.

The online counter public sphere growing out of the 2003 and 2004 July 1st Rally⁷ has been very much dominated by masculine voices. Although AAF has attempted to intervene into the public discourse with a number of web-based projects, the initiatives were short-lived and with little impact. Gender perspectives and feminist discourses become more and more marginalised in the online world despite the fact that young women are getting more vocal and active in both online and offline campaigns for social justice.

⁷ For more information on the Rally, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_1_July_marches

2. Guangzhou, China

The context of the women's movement in China is very different from its western counterparts. The idea of gender equity was introduced to China in the second half of the 19th Century by a number of reformists who advocated constitutional monarchy. During the May Fourth Movement (1917-1921), the patriarchal Confucian tradition and culture which justified the subordination of women and the continuation of imperial political system were under serious attack from Westernised intellectuals. Since then, women's liberation was intertwined with the national building movement led by male leaders. Women's status had been eventually improved after the establishment of the Republic of China (1912-1949). In the 1930s, the new government granted women, property and marriage rights; women's organisations continued to campaign for education opportunities, elimination of concubines, feudal marriage, etc. However, there was little fundamental change in the patriarchal system (Meng 2010).

Under the influence of socialist feminism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) advocated gender equality and encouraged women to participate in economic production and social activities. The All-China Democratic Women's Federation, predecessor of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), was established on March 24, 1949 in the first national people's representative congress of Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing. Since then all women's organisations have been placed under the umbrella of ACWF, which is a *de facto* CCP's women's branch for building united front in the society. After the Cultural Revolution, the ACWF re-established itself as a more active mass organisation and helped the restoration of the social order by catering to the needs of women with considerable autonomy in management and project implementation. However, the control of mass organisations remains very strict, as their leaders are appointed by the party and their staff members are civil servants.

At the same time, the social reality keeps reminding female social workers or *funu gongzhuozhe* that the emancipation of women has not been fulfilled. Women continue to face discrimination in workplace, such as "same work-different pay" and they have to take up the double-burdens of domestic work and social production. The situation has been worsening since the late 1980s as women workers were among the first group of people to be laid off in state owned enterprises (Zhou, 2003). The exploitation of women, in particular rural migrant women in privately run factories, is getting severe. The expansion of sex industry has left sex workers vulnerable to male violence, and the one-child population policy has also led to tight control of and violence against women's bodies by the

administration and the patriarchal social system. The state and party interpretation of socialist feminism has become inadequate to explain the institutional and systematic violence towards women under the rule of a capitalist authoritarian state. Against such background, Chinese feminists have begun to adopt the global feminist concept of gender to analyse the subordination of women in the socio-economic and political system (Wang and Zhang, 2010).

With the emergence of new gender challenges, more autonomous women's organisations emerged cautiously in the 1980s and expanded rapidly until the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. As a part of the crackdown, the CCP introduced a set of regulation to restrict the growth of social organisations. Nevertheless, the hosting of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 provided a conceptual framework for ACWF cadres and feminists to address gender inequality as well as an opportunity to transform ACWF. Indeed, a large number of women's organisations had gained their legitimate status by affiliating themselves to the ACWF since early the 90s, until the State Council proclaimed a new management regulation on the registration of social organisations under the Ministry of Civil Affairs to clamp down social organisations in 1998. Yet, by then, new women's groups had been inhibited from formal registration again (Howell, 2003).

Under the leadership of the CCP, the ACWF remains a government-organised Non-government organisation (GONGO). Some critics argue that the institutional dependency of women's organisations on the party state may compromise their gender and human rights advocacy work while others believe that the strategies of "embeddedness" help NGOs gain support and exert influence on state policies (Zhang , 2009; Lu, 2007; Cooper, 2006).

On the other hand, since 2003, the civil rights movement (*weiquan yundong*) has come along with the rise of individualised online media. A large number of opinion leaders have emerged in BBSes, blogging platforms and social networking sites; their political discourses have cultivated a strong awareness of "citizen's rights", "social justice", "liberty" etc. among the populace. The new state patronage finds it difficult to control the online public sphere where individual activists practice alternative citizenship (Yu, 2006) in a highly unorganised and individualised manner across the Internet (Yang 2009; 2003). Some woman activists, rather than going through the institutional channel, also choose to speak and act out in the online platforms.

Guangzhou is one of a handful of Chinese cities enjoying a limited degree of freedom. The Guangdong region has been the testing ground for economic reform since the 1970s. In addition, with its

geographic and linguistic proximity to Hong Kong, its residents have been influenced by Hong Kong's popular and political culture. The Southern Media Group based in Guangdong province has been considered as the most outspoken media group in China. On the other hand, as a result of direct investment from overseas Chinese, it has also been the first region to be exposed to the capitalist mode of exploitation. The online civic rights movement sparked by the death of Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou detention centre⁸, hence, was not at all surprising. Yet, the feminist frontier of civil rights struggle is not as successful and visible even though there has been quite a number of online campaigns addressing sexual violence against women.

C) Objectives

The mainstream and popular citizen rights movement in both cities aims to challenge the undemocratic government and strike for civil rights while feminist discourses are marginalised. Regardless of the cause, populist sentiments can be rather non-reflective and exclusive. The recent reaction against mainland Chinese pregnant women who give birth in Hong Kong is an example. In addition, conventional women's NGOs are comparatively weak at engaging with the online social mobilisation and rights movements in both cities. They prefer to follow their formal channels to engage in policy changes and advocacy. However, many women activists with less organisational affiliation choose to speak out and participate in public affairs through various informal channels such as online individual-based networks. This research has assumed two major strategies for women to engage with the online practice of citizenship: the institutional approach of women's NGOs and the individual approach of female activists. Each engenders different aspects of citizenship in the public sphere and interplay with one and other.

⁸ Sun Zhigang was a university graduate from Hubei province. He was detained by Guangzhou city police under the charge of living in the city without residency permit during his graduation trip. He was beaten to death in the center on that day. Within days, the incident had spread through the country's universities' BBS forums. Students organised online and offline activities to protest against the Guangzhou police and eventually the central government stepped in and abolished the residency permit system. The incident is a milestone for online civil rights movement in China.

Methodology

This study, thus, attempts to address the following questions:

- How do women's NGOs and female activists enact their idea of citizenship on the internet?
- How do their interactions with the government (or institutionalisation process) affect their imagination of their citizen rights, self-positioning in public engagement and appropriation of online tool?
- What kinds of public spheres do they create respectively? What are the differences and the dynamics between them?

Under the assumption that there are two major strategies, namely institutional and individual, for women to engage with the online practice of citizenship, with an awareness that there is active interplay between the two, our research focuses on three types of social agencies: women's NGOs, women's organisations that have not yet been well-established, and individual female activists. Our methodological choices are hence: organisational analysis, historical analysis and discourse analysis.

A) Methodological choices

At the very beginning, we chatted with some informants in Hong Kong and Guangzhou respectively to identify the organisations and individuals who play important roles in the shaping of feminist organisations and practices. We then studied their organisational structures and history, and individual biographies. Finally, we picked up some recent key debates from our preliminary interviews and collected further information. We also asked them to comment on these issues by locating their roles and positions in these debates.

1. Organisational analysis

In this research, we have looked into the history, development and practices of two well established organisations, namely the Guangdong All-China Women Federation (GD ACWF) and Association for the Advancement of Feminisms (AAF), as well as two less established organisations, namely Gender Media Action in Guangzhou (GMA) and Nutong Xueshe (NTXS) in Hong Kong.

Data concerning the organisations have been collected through documentation of organisational archives, email discussion groups, organisation newsletters, websites and unstructured interviews with core organisers, with particular focus on the organisations' positioning in relation to the government, their capacities and ways of resource mobilisation.

The research analyses how the different forms and degrees of institutionalisation of women's NGOs would affect their strategy in their citizenship campaigning and their application of online media to their work.

2. Political and social history analysis

The organisational analysis of women's organisations and networks would be put into the context of local political and social movement and technological development history. The research stresses the interaction between individual agencies and structural forces by asking our interviewees to outline their paths of institutionalisation or network formation and highlighting the critical moments for their developments.

3. Discourse analysis

In order to examine the different public spheres generated by the women's organisations, networks and actors, we have chosen some social debates for content analysis. The debates include:

Hong Kong

a) Controversy over "the actress I want to harass most"

In June 2006, a local radio show launched an online vote for "The Hong Kong Actress I Want to Harass Most". The program instantly stirred up fierce protest and criticism from women's associations who accused it of severely insulting women's dignity and advocating sexual harassment. The Broadcasting Authority punished the radio station for violating the terms of broadcasting license. However, some local radio fans defended the program and criticised women's associations as moralistic and encouraging censorship on sexual expression.

b) Edison Chen sex photo scandal

In January 2008, a series of photos depicting the sexual relationships between Edison Chen (a movie star) and several famous actresses were posted on the Internet. It not only shocked the entertainment industry, but also the general public, particularly after the Hong Kong police took action to stem the

spread of the photos. On the one hand, the prosecution of Internet users who spread the photos encountered protests. On the other, a series of debate on morality, privacy, sexual freedom and censorship emerged.

c) Feminist confrontation with hyper-masculine netizens⁹

In July 2010, a group of netizens mobilised guerrilla-style protests against the government's political campaign for public support of the "election reform package". Since the government package has retained the undemocratic functional constituency in the Legislative Council and increased the barrier (the number of nominators) for being a candidate to run for the city mayor, many believe it to be a political setback. However, eventually the government has gained the support from the Democratic Party through some under-the-table negotiations between leaders of the Democratic Party and the China government representative in Hong Kong, and the civil society has split into two camps. Some netizens accused the Democratic Party for betraying the democratic movement. In response to netizens' verbal attack, a female member from the Democratic Party, Wong Pikwan, who had taken part in negotiating with the China government over the political reform package, attacked the protesters for their sexist and vulgar language. She yelled in a public forum: "Have you ever heard of the word feminism? Your sexist language is so patriarchal and oppressive. How dare you talk about changing the society?" Wong's response stirred up a lot of discussion in Facebook among activists and feminist circles.

d) Mainland pregnant women

Since the mid-2000s, thousands of pregnant women have come to Hong Kong to give birth to their babies, which has resulted in a crisis of the local public health system. A series of regulations (medical certificate requirement, extra fees, quota system, etc.) were introduced to constrain the number of mainland Chinese pregnant women. While some local citizens, particularly the pregnant women and their spouses, accused mainland Chinese women of causing the crisis of public health services, local men who have wives in mainland China protested against the new measures.

⁹ The term **Netizen** is a portmanteau of the English words Internet and citizen. It is defined as an entity or person actively involved in online communities and a user of the internet, especially an avid one (Wikipedia)

Mainland China

a) Deng Yujiao

In May 2009, in Hubei province, a local official attempted to rape Deng Yujiao, a 21-year-old female pedicure worker. Deng tried to fight him off by stabbing him with a small knife, resulting in his death. She was arrested and charged with homicide. This case shocked the netizens across the country who were enraged by the immorality of officials and the treatment of a victim of sexual violence. Under a lot of public pressure, the prosecutor dropped the murder charge and charged her with “intentional assault” instead. She was also pardoned of sentence for the reason of her alleged mental problems.

b) “Song Shanmu incident”

In May 2010, Song Shanmu, a high-profile entrepreneur in Shenzhen, was arrested for blackmailing and raping one of his female employees. It was later found that he had sexual relations with a number of his female employees. Since then, there have been debates on the immorality of Chinese wealthy men and the sexual harassment and violence against women working in office environments. Song was sentenced to four years.

c) “Tainted milk powder” scandal

By November 2008, a series of scandals of infants dying and suffering from kidney problems broke out. It was believed that the chemical added to milk formula was the cause of these incidents. This aroused public panic and concern about food safety and corrupted officials who had been covering up the problems. Despite punishment of some officials and shutting down enterprises involved, the parents of victims launched a campaign for fair compensation and thorough investigation. However, this campaign was repressed by the government and some activists were put to jail.

This study examines the discursive formations of the media texts produced by different actors and stresses the gender subjectivities enabled by their discursive practices.

B) Limitations

Since we cannot make official contact with the GD ACWF, we are unable to obtain access to their internal documentation. Much of the information about the organisation's development is therefore collected through interviews and online resources, which are rather limited in their depth of

information.

Because of the censorship problem, much of the critical debate about Deng Yujiao has been deleted and we had to reconstruct the debate and discussion through our interviews.

The discussions among online activists in Hong Kong happen mainly in Facebook in a dispersed manner, and because of this, we also needed to reconstruct the debate and discussion through our interviews.

Findings

A) Hong Kong

The strategy of gender mainstreaming has been implemented in Hong Kong since the early 1990s and brought forward a series of local legislation against discrimination in the past two decades. The interaction between the Legislative Council, Equal Opportunities Commission and women groups had opened the door for women to become involved with policy making. In fact, in 2001, in addition to the Equal Opportunities Commission, the women groups have successfully lobbied the Hong Kong government to set up a Women's Commission, a high-level central mechanism "to take a strategic overview over women's issues, develop a long-term vision and strategy for the development and advancement of women, and advise the Government on policies and initiatives which are of concern to women."

1. Gender mainstreaming: Institutional & non-institutional approach

Despite the fact that more institutional resources have been channeled to women's organisations for services and researches, the situation in terms of women's political participation has not improved since 1998.

During the period of 1998-2008, women's engagement in economic activities (working population, part timers and self-employed) had been increasing steadily from 45.6% (1998) to 49.7% (2008) while its male counterpart had been decreased from 74.5% (1998) to 69.7% (2008). Even though the gender income disparity had not improved much, from an average net difference of HKD1,200 (1998) to 1,000 (2008), men and women, particularly those in the middle to higher income groups, more or less enjoy equal pay. (Hong Kong Women's Commission, 2009)

When compared to the improving economic data from above, women's political participation remains low within the government. In fact the portion of female members in decision making bodies has been decreasing. In the Executive Council, the portion of male to female members in 1998 was 10 to 4, while in 2008 the portion had been reduced to 26 to 5, which means female participation rate had been reduced from 28.6% to 16%. In the Legislative Council, male to female-ratio had remained more or less the same from 1998's 50:10 to 2008's 49:11. (Hong Kong Women's Commission, 2009)

While these figures are very disappointing, the gender ratio of registered electors as well as gender balance in terms of voter turnout has been more or less equal since 2004. Additionally, women's participation in voluntary work has been much higher than their male counterparts' across all sectors - among economically active people, home-makers, retired persons and students. This implies that despite the enthusiasm among women to participate in community affairs, they are very much marginalised in the institutional channels of political participation.

On the other hand, women's organisations have comparative advantage when compared to other civic groups in obtaining government resources as many of them provide grassroots-based social services. In addition, under the guiding principle of gender mainstreaming, the government has set up a "30% gender benchmark by 2011" in 2010 to encourage women to participate in government's 200 plus advisory and statutory bodies (Home Affairs Bureau, 2010). The Women's Commission has also been designed as a central mechanism for incorporating a gender equality perspective into policy-making by actively seeking responses from women's organisations on policy areas such as "children's and parent's education", "women's health care", "protection of female labour", "women's welfare and service", "domestic violence", etc.. (Legislative Council, 2010)

Similar to the situation of other developed countries, the institutionalisation of gender perspective in policy making has been limited to issues that are directly related to women and has not successfully been integrated into large policy areas and in important decision-making process (UnmuBig, 2008). What is even worse in Hong Kong is that the democratic reform has been deferred and the advisory and statutory bodies are functioning as political decoration to relieve the conflict between the government and the civil society with no decision making power. While the progressive and radical front of the women's organisations has been diluted by numerous pro-establishment community-based and women's organisations, the patron-client relations between conservative women's organisations, pro-government parties and the government have become more and more obvious in the eye of the public. As a result, women's organisations engaging with the politics of gender mainstreaming, to a large extent, have failed to become the key players of the radical frontier of the civic movement.

AAF - Gender mainstreaming and institutionalisation

The history of AAF is illustrative in many respects of the development of women's movement in Hong

Kong.

Founded in March 8 1984, AAF is the first women's organisation in Hong Kong that stresses local identity and puts "feminism" into practice. Its founding members were mostly activists in student and social movements. They came together as a study group in 1983 with the consensus that the women's movement should also criticise the patriarchal-capitalist system and work for the liberation of women for all classes. At the beginning, AAF had only about 20 members. In the late 1980s, there were about 90 members and now it has 150 members. Most of the members have university degrees and come from middle class backgrounds, and have been working in the field of education, social work, NGOs, etc.

AAF started employing part-time organisers in 1989. In 2007 the organisation had a team of three full-time and one part-time staff. However, in 2011, as a result of shrinking overseas funding support, its staff had been reduced to two part-time members. Currently AAF has 7 working groups including: Women affairs watch, Sexuality and human rights, Resource and documentation, Publication, External Affairs, and Administration and Fund raising. The core members of the working groups are usually members from the Executive Committee.

In the 1980s, AAF adopted a very strong grassroots orientation. A grassroots outreach team organised seminars and workshops in the communities, and helped grassroots organisations to set up women's teams. The grassroots outreach team was dissolved in 1990 after a series of re-orientation discussions in response to the Tiananmen incident in Beijing in 1989. They reviewed women's movement experience in Eastern Europe and USSR and decided that the organisation should aim at bringing about structural changes rather than serving the grassroots movements. AAF repositioned itself to the role of facilitator and mediator in relation to the community. Its campaigns to fight for policy change include "Campaign for pre-school child care service" in 1990, "Empowering woman voters" and "Women's 10 major agenda" in 1991 and "the NT female inheritance campaign" in 1994. At the same time, much of the organisation's efforts were directed at following up on anti-discrimination legislation upon enactment of Bill of Rights in 1991 and the establishment of Equal Opportunities Commission in 1996. Their interaction with other grassroots organisations took place through issue- or policy-based NGO alliances, such as the "Alliance for Women's Equal Opportunities".

Around 2000, in response to the Beijing =5 Action Plan and the setting up of the Women's Commission in 2001, AAF started moving towards the strategy of "gender mainstreaming". Since then, AAF has

followed closely on women related policy, anti-discrimination law, political reform and annual budget by giving policy submissions to the government, writing statements and press releases. One of its senior members Leung Lai-Ching had been appointed to Women's Commission as committee member in 2009 and re-appointed in 2011. Given the fact that AAF has established institutional channels to the government, its policy advocacy does not incline to involve direct participation from the community.

NTXS - A marginalised position

Faced with the lack of institutional channels to impact government policy, LGBT group, NuTongXueShe (NTXS), with its Gdot.TV online media project, has developed a popular approach in its policy advocacy work.

Different from the women's movement, which has successfully pushed through the legislation of Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) in 1995, the legislation of Sexual Orientation Discrimination Ordinance (SODO) has received a lot of resistance from the community. The two rounds of consultations in 1996 and 2000 regarding SODO had stirred up a lot of homophobic outbursts in Hong Kong. In 2005, when the working group on SODO from the Legislative Council suggested the government continue its legislation process, Hong Kong Alliance for Family (a right wing Christian initiated secular group) launched an online signature campaign and published an advertisement with 9,800 individual signatures and 374 organisation endorsements against the legislation. The Home Affairs Bureau eventually suspended the legislation process in June 2006.

Since homosexual behavior was decriminalised in 1994, the LGBT communities are active in making friends online but most of them prefer to hide in the closet to avoid discrimination rather than come out to fight against public opinion. At the same time, there are very limited resources from the Equal Opportunities Commission to help the LGBT advocacy work. Most of the resources have been allocated to the male homosexual groups to combat the spread of HIV.

Reflecting upon the Waterloo battle in the legislation of SODO, Joseph and June, two young activists on sexual minority related issues, among others decided to get organised in 2005. At first the collective was a 7-person study group looking into the existing theory and practice of LGBT activism around the world. In 2008, NTXS had secured some resources from overseas to launch the GdotTV project - an online TV station.

Between 2008 and 2009, together with other online media, NTXS launched a campaign against the extension of the Control of Obscene and Indecent Article Ordinance (COIAO) from conventional media to the online world. Apart from submitting opinion to the Legislative Council as a NGO, it set up a campaign website titled nocensorshiphk.com and mobilised citizens to submit individual opinions to the government directly. To facilitate the process, NTXS had written an online program for users to generate individualised opinion letters by choosing from a list of 13 arguments against the proposed amendment. The campaign website collected more than 16,000 public opinions in a period of less than three months and the government eventually withdrew the proposed legislation.

The public engagement process is also a public education process. The draft of the COIAO amendment was written in very difficult technical and legal terms and media activists had to explain to the public through articles and videos the content of the amendment and its impact on online freedom of expression. Through such process, NTXS recruited more young activists to join in as volunteers, built solidarity with other online media platforms and a large number of netizens.

Individual woman activists - flexible actors

Three of the individual woman activists, who are all university graduates (two have obtained their M.Phil. Degree), had joined the online campaign against COIAO amendment. They never joined any women's organisations and their participation is not based upon feminist theory or practice, but their support and sympathy to LGBT groups' causes and particular issues. Their practices feature more flexibility than those who are working within institutional boundary as they are free to move around different organisations and set up their own media platform for networking and solidarity building for different issue-based campaigns.

OB, a lesbian blogger, had her first social movement experience with the anti-WTO protest in 2005.

“At that time I was having some health problems and got to mingle with green groups and organic farmers. I didn't realise that I was participating in a social movement even though I was demonstrating in the street. After the WTO protest, I felt the sharp contrast between the mainstream world and the movement group as if the two are in two different realities. I remember I started to read from and even write for inmediahk.net after the WTO. I also had a blog back then, but my blog posts are more personal while at inmediahk.net I tended to write more social and political observations.”

She has never joined any LGBT groups as she does not feel the need to obtain others' approval of her

sexual identity. She has never come out to her friends and family explicitly, but many of her acquaintances know that she is a lesbian. For her, identification with a place is more important than sexuality.

“People have multiple identities. You know that my research is about mainland Chinese migrants in Hong Kong. I did not have strong identification with Hong Kong until recent years after I witnessed the change after 1997. Suddenly I find the disappearing community and culture is very precious to us. During the star ferry preservation, nobody mobilised me, I just went to the site and joined the crowd there.”

After the star ferry and queen’s pier preservation campaign, she has become very active in the historical and community preservation movement. She was not very active in the anti-COIAO amendment campaign but did follow the news through online platforms and passed on the news through her blog.

BB, a church related NGO organiser, was alerted by the online campaign about the COIAO amendment and persuaded her organisation to submit an oppositional opinion to the government by explaining to her organisation that the amendment would affect the freedom of expression in Hong Kong.

“I read about the anti COIAO campaign from inmediahk.net and became aware of its implications. You know the Catholic Church is rather conservative, we need to persuade and frame the issue in a way that won’t challenge its moral principle.”

G, a designer and secondary school teacher, saw the campaign as an opportunity to enlighten her students about the meaning of free expression. She brought the online discussion to her school students and encouraged them to express their idea about sex through drawings and installations.

“I remember at that time there was a group called SEXpress which had an article online discussing ‘sexual expression’ and ‘creative expression’. I found it inspiring and asked my students to have an Art project on artistic and creative expression of sex. They came up with very inspiring designs. In the process, I also explained to them about the content of the law amendment and its potential threat to freedom of expression. They understood it right away.”

Many of her students had also submitted their opinions to the government against the legislation in that period.

2. Institutional approach and non-institutional approach

The policy advocacy of NTXS and individual woman activists seems to be more effective in making an impact on the government than AAF's engagement. The fact that SODO could be introduced in the Legislative Council in spite of the strong opposition from the right wing church was due to the active involvement of progressive woman lawyers and academics (many of whom are affiliated with AAF) in lobbying the Home Affairs Bureau and the Legislative Council's working group. However, without open debate and public education, the legislation was stopped by right-wing mobilisation of homophobic fear, under the rubric of preventing "reversed discrimination" against straight people which was allegedly entailed in the SODO (The Society of Truth and Light, 2005).

In the amendment of COIAO, the drafted law was introduced by the government with the backup of a joint force of right wing groups and conservative women's organisations who demanded more representatives in the proposed censorship body. Marginalised by the conservative forces, AAF failed to differentiate clearly its stand from other conservative women groups. Publishing its statement on its website and contributing commentaries to newspapers did not help much in drawing people's attention, not to mention in terms of mobilisation.

On the other hand, NTXS, among other online media, has adopted a non-institutional approach and engaged in public education and developed a participatory model in policy advocacy. Such approach enabled concerned citizens, such as OB, BB and G, to participate in the policy debate from the standpoint of their own social positions.

As the democratisation process keeps being deferred, the relation between the government and progressive civil society is getting tense and there is a very strong tendency for the government to work with pro-Beijing and pro-establishment conservative forces to table policies in attempt to weaken the power of the democratic alliance. Progressive women's organisations which have been working inside advisory and statutory bodies are getting more and more marginalised and they are yet to develop their strategy to engage with the public.

SC, a core member from AAF, is aware of the change and in the past few months has been actively using Facebook to organise campaign action, such as the anti-Parda protest. Yet the new model would entail a restructuring of the organisation decision making process.

"There is a lot of discussion about the anti-Parda protest in the Facebook and people are really excited

about it. However, all these discussions happen within a network of friends. Those who are not in the circle or do not have a Facebook account cannot participate in the discussion. The decision making process happens very fast in Facebook. Once the circle feels the momentum, then people say 'let's do it'. In the past, we had to call a meeting and have a lot of face to face discussion to make action take place. But now it just takes a day or two. I have already heard some complaints from the older generation that they feel excluded in the process. Such generation gap has been there for long. For example, the reason why we still publish hard copy Nuliu is to tackle the need of some members who want to flip the page instead of clicking the computer mouse."

3. Experience on media technology - Techno-mediated public sphere

AAF - Resource centre and publications

AAF started building its first website in 1998 for putting their "Women's Handbook" online. The organisation is among the first NGOs in Hong Kong to integrate the Internet into its projects.

AAF's resource and publication project has been the organisation's key project area since its establishment. The objective of the project is "firstly to collect resources related to women's movement and build a resource centre for the women's movement in the Chinese speaking world; and secondly to make contact with individuals and organisations for exchanging information and resources." The centre was initially opened to its members only, until it became open to the public as well in 1991. Pretty soon, it had become a hot spot for undergraduates to look for information related to feminism and the women's movement. Since the mid-1990s, after Gender Studies entered local universities, the centre has changed its focus to collect gender and women's policy related publications and materials so as to support AAF's advocacy work. At the same time, it also kept publishing educational material, such as *Sexual Harassment Handbook* (1996), *Equal employment opportunity handbook* (1996), *Women and poverty* (1997) , *Women's Handbook* (1998), *Campus Sexual Harassment Handbook* (1998), etc. In addition, AAF also publishes books related to gender and women's policy and women's movement, including *Women and Hong Kong Welfare System* (1990), *The other half of the sky -- Post War Women's movement in Hong Kong* (1992), *Hong Kong Women's File* (1993), *Hong Kong Women's movement's strategy -- conference paper collections* (1995), *A resource book on rights to equal inheritance* (1995), *Hong Kong Women's Service -- Theory and Practice* (1995).

The organisation's web-projects are an online extension of its existing works. The idea of its first

website was put forward by a member during the annual general meeting in 1998 who explained to others the advantage of engaging with the worldwide web. At that time, most of the members only knew how to send email. The first web-project was to archive the *Women's Handbook* and the website was launched in August 2000, followed by the organisation's website (aaf.org.hk) in March 2001. The latter is a platform for AAF's public statement and activities, with a built-in member-only discussion forum. However, there has not been much discussion taking place in the forum so far.

The third website, "Fem.Sex.Web" was launched in October 2003. It aimed at providing a platform for women to discuss and reflect upon issues related to sex and sexuality. The website was run by a sub-group on sexual minorities' rights. However, there had been very little interaction with the readers in the collective blog and its visit rate remained very low. KY, a former senior staff member at AAF explains the process:

"At that time, some younger members wanted to use the blog to discuss sexual politics. However, the blog attracted many pornographic comments and I still remembered spending a lot of time moderating them. There isn't much discussion among the writers because they all know each other and do not need to discuss the issue in an open platform. But in the online world, you need to stage some public discussions to draw others' attention and it takes a huge amount of time. The group is not ready for that."

The blog was shut down in 2006 because of technical problems. In 2005, AAF launched its *womenresources.org* website for collecting women's news, activities, campaigns and resources and in November 2006, AAF republished its bi-monthly women's magazine *Nu Liu* and put up an online version in the form of blog.

Apart from its website, AAF has been quite active in running online campaigns since then. In 2004, it designed a large number of online stickers, computer screen backdrops and a calendar under the theme "equality and tolerance" for the public to download. In 2005, AAF launched a SODO resources web page to collect other countries' experiences in the legislation of SODO. Since 2007, it has been using Facebook to connect with members and publicise its work. In 2009, it put up its *Sexual Equality Education Kit* online. Despite all the efforts and resources spent on the Internet projects, they were not very visible to the public. Although AAF's organisers also found the project outcome not very rewarding, they can't really explain why they are not successful. KY tried to account for her frustration:

“Technical frustration is one thing, the data company had lost the content of the Fem.Sex.Web and we had entered into legal disputes because of that. Apart from the technical reasons, there isn’t any interaction. Our main website has a built-in forum, but nobody is using that. They are not used to it. For public engaging project, people did circulate the calendar as the designs were very attractive. But there isn’t much public interactions and discussions. Why? You tell me!”

NTXS - From virtual to real-life community

The core members of NTXS met each other through various online platforms, such as inmediahk.net where they had participated in public debate on issues such as the legislation of SODO. They read each other’s’ articles, chatted online and then decided to meet face-to-face. We may well say that the organisation was a result of online deliberation.

There were seven founding members in 2005 and some of them had been compiling LGBT news and information in their individual websites. Hence the first step was to put together all the content from the individual websites in a central platform called *leslovestudy.com*. Later, they invited some scholars and activists to form an executive committee to help them further develop their projects and secure project funding. GdotTV was launched subsequently in 2008.

The online-TV project’s idea came from an executive committee member YC, who had experience in working at an LGBT TV station in the U.S. The mission of GdotTV (*leslovestudy.com/tv*) initially was to counter the mainstream stereotype of LGBT and present a more diversified picture of the community. As a volunteer- and amateur-based organisation, they haven’t been able to match the the quantity and quality of the productions of mainstream media. However, through their training workshops, NTXS has successfully built a community of young LGBT people who are active in advocating the agenda of sexual minorities and engaging in public debate with the mainstream community. Joseph Cho, a core member of NTXS, recalled the process:

“At first, our idea was really running an alternative TV station as suggested by YC. However, given our limited resources, we had failed to produce enough programmes for keeping up the channel. Moreover, our productions were too raw. Then we realised that the process is more important. In the LGBT community, there is a very strong friendship network, but they seldom discuss about social and political affairs. The training workshops provide opportunities for the participants to present their viewpoints to the public and develop a sense of awareness of the power relations in media representation.”

Individual activists - A socialising space

Most of the interviewees are university graduates. There is a very clear generational gap in the use of media technology. For those who were born in the 1970s or before, their first encounter with media technology is more instrumental, mostly related to work or study. They feel reluctant to adopt a new media tool unless they find it of practical use in their everyday life. Many of them apply their ideas about conventional media to online media, regarding it as a space for searching knowledge and a platform for presenting their ideas and world views to the public. They are more hesitant to interact with others in forums and social media, and find it too time-consuming.

Those who were born in the 1980s or after grew up in a computer-mediated environment. They make friends through instant message devices, pick up alternative knowledge through blogs and online videos, and kill time with online games, etc. However, their sense of public and private in the online world is very blurred and they prefer to speak to a network of friends as in Facebook rather than to speak to an anonymous public via conversation forums.

4. Techno-mediated public sphere

Peter Dahlgren (2005) analyses the public sphere in terms of the structural, the representational and the interactional. The structural dimension includes media organisations, legal and political framework. The representational refers to the media outputs, while the interactional is the discursive interactional process in response to the mainstream media and among various counter-publics. The interaction between the counter-publics created by AAF, NTXS and individual activists with the mainstream public shows how woman agencies make their choices in the media space which is shaped by social, political, economic and cultural forces.

AAF – Conventional media strategy

As a well-established organisation, AAF is well connected with the mainstream media. Many of its members are able to negotiate for space in major newspapers' opinion pages and mainstream reporters like to invite them to comment on gender-related issues. Thus, their strategies of engaging with the mainstream public sphere are usually through press conferences, public statements, interviews and opinion posts. At the same time, they are very cautious of the commercial media's tendency in consuming women's image, as well as their stereotyping of lower-class women and sexual minorities. In fact, AAF has published several research articles criticising media stereotypes in its bi-monthly

magazine, *Nu Liu*.

Before the emergence of the Internet, AAF's strategies in building the feminist counter-public were through the organisation of internal study groups, members' meetings, public seminars and publications. When they first heard about the Internet in their annual member meeting in 1998, their immediate response was to digitise their own publication and make them accessible to the public. Two years later, it launched its official website with a built-in members-only forum for consolidating the feminist counter-public and a collective blog to engage with the public. However, it had not been prepared for any interactive public debates.

In the past few years, a number of debates have happened on local online platforms such as *inmediahk.net* regarding women's organisations' positions on censorship, and more recently on Facebook regarding the "feminist claim" made by politician in rebuking the masculine language and symbol used by some political groups.

Cheung Choi-Wan, a senior member in AAF in her fifties, decided to move out of AAF and debated with a group of young netizens at *inmediahk.net* in 2006 over a petition call made by a coalition of women's organisations to condemn a commercial radio programme which used "the actress I want to harass most" gimmick. The coalition urged citizens to join an online signature campaign calling for an apology from the radio station, more gender equity training for mainstream media organisations, intervention by the Broadcasting Authority and the Equal Opportunity Commission to eliminate future discrimination in public broadcast and to prevent similar discriminatory remarks from appearing in the mainstream media.¹⁰ The statement surprisingly resulted in a strong reaction from young people, who were fans of the radio programme's host, and were active Internet users. They criticised women's organisations and their statement in online forums, sent angry emails, faxes and phone calls to these organisations. Most of the reactions were emotional and aggressive. More elaborated and rational arguments appeared at *inmediahk.net*, including the following statements: 1. women's organisations' rhetoric was very similar to the right-wing Christian group, which takes youth as immature sub-citizens whose rights should be limited and "protected". 2. The programme is playing with fantasy rather than advocating harassment in reality. 3. Women's organisations should not ask the Broadcast Authority to impose regulation on media because state intervention on speech is dangerous and could not solve moral controversies. 4. As newspapers have been using more sexually violent language and images,

¹⁰ The statement is accessible at inmediahk.net/node/119286

they don't understand why women's organisations were selectively targeting that particular radio programme, etc. At the same time, activists from sexual minority groups and liberal feminists also disagreed with some of the rhetoric and demands the women coalition made. In response to the debate and complaint, the coalition issued another statement to clarify their stand.

Cheung was working as a part-timer at AAF at the time of the debate and she was referred to *inmediahk.net* by a younger AAF member who tried to promote the petition through the platform but received a number of criticisms in the comment section. It was the first time Cheung openly debated in an online public platform. Though intimidated by sexually violent languages, she continued to engage in the discussion and dialogue with the radio programme's fans (Cheung, 2006). Since then she has been rather actively following up online discussions via online forums and later, Facebook. When she reflected upon the incident in a recent interview, she said:

"My heart beat increased when reading the violent comments made by 'How', an anonymous user at *inmediahk.net*, but I am also a fighter. However, the incident had a serious impact on AAF. Most of the core members had been intimidated by all these calls and faxes and did not want to be the target of public criticism any more."

Cheung was disappointed by AAF's core members' reluctance of confronting with the online publics and the degeneration of feminist discourses and practices within AAF. For example, she explained, during the leaking of Edison Chen's sex photo in 2008¹¹, a core member of AAF planned to express her personal feelings to a reporter in, saying she would have committed suicide if her sex photos were leaked and circulated. She asked for preventing netizens from spreading the private photos. Although the plan was cancelled, Cheung was very surprised by her "un-feminist" argument implying a sort of chastity. The "suicidal feeling" was symptomatic of the "patriarchal value towards women's sexuality".

Cheung could not explain how such degeneration of feminist discourses happened within the organisation. However, she pointed out that in the 80s and 90s, AAF would organise an internal study group on feminist theories and practices. Since the late 90s, similar efforts have been missing. It is very likely that after Gender Studies Programmes have been established at local universities, the intellectual function of AAF has been largely reduced. The de-linking of gender studies with social movements has also led to a de-politicisation of feminist discourses. At the same time, with gender mainstreaming as

11 In February 2008, a large number of photos showing a local pop-star, Edison Chen's love making photos with a number of female pop-star was leaked in the Internet. The incident has resulted in the police random arrest of netizens who circulated the photos online under the charge of the spread of obscene articles even though the photos had not been rated by the Obscene Article Tribunal.

the organisation's major undertaking, more effort has been invested on policy research, such as "gender auditing", which seldom involves theoretical reflection and debates. The "productive antagonism" within AAF has been slowly eroded.

As a result of de-politicisation and absence of "productive antagonism", feminist theories and discourses are getting less attractive to young activists. Compared to other woman activists, OB has paid more attention to feminist discourses. However, she finds many feminist discourses resembling statements of position rather than critical dialogues with the society. An incident which has left a negative impression among young women on feminist discourses is related to a comment made by Wong Pik-Wan, a female politician of the Democratic Party, against a group of young male activists by pinpointing at their "patriarchal" language used in a public forum. The forum was about the political reform package put forward by the government and endorsed by the Democratic Party. It aroused more radical democrats' criticism and eventually resulted in the split of pan-democratic alliance. OB hates the hyper-masculine language, but she cannot support Wong's comment which had shifted the discussion from the structural violence of the reform package to protest culture. G, a woman artist and activist in her 20s, said that "if feminism is to ignore structure violence while pinpointing at people's wrongs in their wordings, I cannot accept it."

NTXS - Internal empowerment

In contrast to the AAF, NTXS began with a study group and many of its members are "warriors" in online discursive battles. In Hong Kong, most of the gay and lesbian websites are virtual communities for LGBT to make friends; they are not very politicised and seldom have critical debates and discussions. Against such background, NTXS has put a lot of effort on writing and sharing of knowledge from the very beginning. Apart from writing articles online, they also organise internal study groups on issues like the history of homophobia, sexual citizenship as well as right-wing Christian fundamentalists.

Before they started the GdotTV project, they were active in organising and participating in LGBT arts exhibitions and film festivals. Their programmes at GdotTV attempted to unpack the stereotype of LGBT and to question the prejudices of heterosexuals towards sexual minorities. However, their productions are very often subject to bashing from other netizens and rated as "indecent" in public video platforms. Gradually the project has developed into a community building process, through

which new members not only learn the technical skills but also strengthen their storytelling ability, awareness of the politics and ethical sensitivity of representation. Joseph Cho, a core member of GdotTV, believed that the workshop and production process had empowered the new members to come out and speak out for the LGBT community.

Individuals - Interplay of different form of media

Many young woman activists have grown up in a techno-mediated environment and are used to migrating across different media platforms according to the techno-cultural environment. From 1995 to 2006, they used ICQ, forums and blogs. Later, they migrated to Facebook to mobilise social actions and to build their activist community. All woman activists interviewed in this research are very conscious that their Facebook is a tool for social mobilisation. G, BB and SW can be considered social media expert in local social movement circles, and all of them have more than 2,000 connections in Facebook. They are very communicative and spend a lot of time reading and commenting on their online status. For them, Facebook is both their private and public life; they would update their personal feelings and opinions and engage in public debate at the same time.

G, a designer, was a key person in the anti-Express Rail Link (XRL) campaign, which had mobilised over 100,000 people in besieging the Legislation Council for three consecutive days in Jan 2010.¹² As a designer, she is very sensitive towards the distinctive form of each medium:

"Every medium has its own logic and every culture has its effective medium. You have to learn their language in order to become effective in communication. For example, in Golden Forum, you have to play with their satirical genre; and in Sina Weibo¹³, you have to use witty language to get around political censorship. If you design your online sticker in square size, people will be more likely to adopt it as their profile picture."

SW is a writer, columnist and radio host. Before she migrated to Facebook, she had a blog for her cultural and political commentary. She is famous for her witty writing and sharp arguments. She has been active in a number of social movement campaigns, such as the Star Ferry Pier preservation in 2006 and the anti-XRL campaign from 2009-2010. BB is a main organiser for the anti-XRL campaign. As a NGO worker, she has participated in many civic coalitions and is able to bridge the NGO sector

12 The anti-Express Rail Link Campaign started in 2009 against the construction of an express rail road linking Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The mobilisation in January 2010 is to stop the legislative council from passing the HKD69 billion budget plan.

13 Sina Weibo is a micro-blogging platform in China and it has a very sophisticated censorship mechanism.

with the individual activist circle. She likes to mix her daily life with social happenings on her Facebook status. Occasionally, she would post some politically incorrect photos (sexy photos) on her Facebook to catch her friends' attention.

Even though they have a large number of connections, they are aware that there is a limit to their circle and they cannot reach out to the wider public by talking within Facebook. On the one hand, they believe that such echo-chamber is needed for social movement actors to consolidate their community and build consensus. On the other hand, they are actively finding ways to bridge different circles and reach out to the public. G is now working on street arts and exhibitions for connecting to the grassroots communities. As for BB, she is very active in social protests and recently co-founded a new political group, League of Land Justice, and joined the election campaign for District Council¹⁴. SW is very conscious of occupying strategic positions in different media outlets, including newspapers, radio and TV.

We can see a very strong interplay in the use of different media by the new generation of activists. Without institutional baggage, the new generation of individual activists are more flexible in their use of new and conventional media for their advocacy work. Moreover, with the awareness that their circle is just a cyber-ghetto, they are more open to collaboration with other social groups and organisations in issue-based social campaigns.

5. Interaction between the public and the counter-public

From the description above, we can see three online communication models at work. The resource and publication strategy adopted by AAF is following the conventional mass media communication model characterised by centralisation and less horizontal interaction. The strategy adopted by NTXS is in the form of counter-media in which a minority community interacts with the mainstream online community. The network of individual activists, facilitated by social media and the interplay of different forms of media, have formed a heterogeneous interactive model which involves “one to one”, “many to many” and “one to many” simultaneously.

It is generally agreed that one of the greater contributions to the women’s movement by the ICT era is a space for the growth of feminist counter-public. However, in the case of AAF, given the resources invested in their own web projects, as well as its established speaking position in the mainstream

¹⁴ The League of Land Justice is established in 2011 by a coalition of movement groups which have been actively involved in land and planning issues in Hong Kong.

media, we are yet to see an active feminist counter-public to come into being. NTXS's DIY online TV station has consolidated a group of LGBT activists in producing counter discourses about the sexual minorities. Yet, being structurally marginalised, it remains a cyber-ghetto in the local Internet public sphere.

In contrast with the models of “gender mainstreaming” and minority media, the individual-based communication facilitated by social media has resulted in a new form of political engagement that centres around friendship, is semi-private, emotive and inclining to partiality (Devere and Smith, 2010). The activist circles in social media are more or less a result of the technology mediated aggregating effect and a subjective selection of acquaintances who share common interests (hobby, taste, political views, etc.) Based upon such social networks, activists can further politicise their extended network by organising events which in the long run evolve into a counter-public that share a similar political agenda. The social network formed during the preservation of star-ferry pier (2006-2007) and the anti XRL mobilisation (2009-2010), in which BB, G and SW had been actively participating, has already been evolved into a political group advocating for land justice, alternative lifestyle and sustainable development in Hong Kong. Of course, although face to face meetings and down-to-earth organisation work will continue to play a crucial part in the formation of the political group in the near future, it would have been difficult for the political group to materialise without the series of online campaigns and the extended network of friends and supporters communicating with each other in everyday life. Since the Star Ferry Pier preservation campaign in 2006, the activist network, through a series of real-life campaigns and the interplay of different media forms, has conjured up a counter public sphere covering various social and political issues. However, we are yet to see similar feminist friendship networks emerging in Facebook.

6. The “male” domain?

In addressing the techno-power aspect of the Internet, much of the attention has been in the digital divide, the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and gender is one of the most visible gaps in developing world. In our research, all of our interviewees from Hong Kong are middle-class, well-educated women and their accessibility to the computer is more or less equal to their male counterparts. The gender divide in term of access is not applicable in our analysis. In term of the Internet culture, most of the interviewees do share the feeling that men have dominated the public online forums. Very often, their participation in online forums is limited to reading. G has once organised her students to participate in a

popular forum with an attempt to influence the general opinions presented in the forum, but failed. “The forum users do not trust newbies and they can only accept opinions that they share. There is no way you can change their attitude through dialogue,” said G.

However, in social media platforms such as blogs, micro-blogs and social networking sites, male domination is less visible. OB points out that blog is considered a personalised public space, and others are not supposed to post articles in that space. Readers can leave some angry comments, yet with the awareness that the space belongs to the writer. The comments are more about genuine dialogue than pure bashing. On Facebook, users can choose who to follow and filter out the undesirable ones. Although the interviewees observe that there are more male opinion leaders on Facebook than female, BB believes that the result is less to do with the masculine nature of the technological setting. She even finds Facebook more favourable to women “because it is a private/public space and women are more at ease talking about personal feeling and daily life.” She believes that “the fact that there are more male public opinion leaders is more to do with the mainstream popular culture and education. If you are a woman and you are capable of commenting on politics, it is easier for you to get more fans than men as you are the rare kind.”

SW also disagreed that the Internet is dominated by men. “It is difficult to tell who is male and female; many women speak like men online,” said SW. With a post-structuralist feminist perspective, she said:

“It is a space for performance, I can speak like a tiny little girl in some settings, like a layman in others, rational in some occasions, sentimental in others. You can shift your gender performance whenever you like. I like to choose an effective gender role in delivering my message online.”

She seldom participates in online forum debates but stresses that it is because of her personality not fitting into the subculture, rather than the dominance of male users or their masculine manner.

7. Equality, sexuality & reflexive citizenship

Before the introduction of CEDAW in Hong Kong, the major concern among women's organisations was about improving the grassroots women's condition through community-based services and empowerment training. In the early 1990s, the “equality” discourse was introduced in Hong Kong and triggered a new wave of citizenship movements which were based upon the liberalist framework of demanding equal rights between males and females in terms of work, inheritance and social opportunities (such as education). Gender mainstreaming has become the most effective strategy for

ensuring government policies to pay full attention to women's rights.

As the principle of equality between men and women has been officially endorsed in the Communist China, the pro-Beijing government women's organisations have adopted the discourse of gender mainstreaming without much hesitation. In fact, it has provided them with the opportunities to enter the institutional position. However, other citizen's rights beyond the equality between male and female are dismissed and sometimes even suppressed by the pro-Beijing women coalition, such as the rights of sexual minorities. AAF has tried very hard to differentiate itself from the pro-establishment women's organisation by building alliance with pro-democracy parties, sexual minorities and sex workers.

In the past years, several debates have taken place internally regarding AAF's position in the women's movement. The most critical one happened in 1998 when AAF, together with a number of pro-democracy women's organisations formed a coalition and put forward a set of "women's agendas" for candidates of the Legislative Council election to adopt. A woman candidate from the pro-Beijing labour union adopted the women's agenda and demanded the coalition to support her election campaign. Eventually several of its members with pro-democracy labour union background resigned. Such outcome can be anticipated and is inevitable as local feminists have been questioning the leadership of the democracy movement in Hong Kong since the late 1990s for their over-arching agenda in formal democracy which marginalises other social and political agendas. The 1998 "women agenda" is a direct response to the male dominant democratisation process. It challenged the partisan division between the pan-democratic front and the pro-establishment by putting forward a set of social agendas, including the recognition of sexual minorities' and sex workers' rights. Despite the negative responses from its members, AAF continues to put forward the "women's agenda" in all Legislative Council elections. The feminist position, to certain extent, serves as a reflective force for the local civic movement.

However, the women's agenda has remained a ritualistic and declarative statement and failed to become a popular social discourse, in particular in the Internet era. Given the fact that citizenship is a highly contentious and contested issue, claiming the rights of a subordinated group is far from enough. Joseph from NTXS believes that the negotiation of sexual minorities' citizen rights should be put forward and highlighted through discursive practices in the form of current affair commentaries, online debates, DIY self-representations, art works, etc. Individual activist, BB has been very concerned about the campaign on the right of abode for Hong Kong citizens' mainland offspring, but she found feminist discourse missing in responding to the issue. The issue has turned into a legal and moral debate despite

the fact that many woman activists have taken the leading role in the movement.

On the other hand, right-wing populist discourse against sexual minorities, foreign domestic workers and mainland Chinese new immigrants remain the dominant voices in the online public sphere, fuelled by the anxiety derived from the city's economic structure which has been increasingly depending on financial and property market. In addition, the failure of the democracy movement and the direct intervention from the Beijing government has dis-empowered citizens who have been pursuing political reform. Worst still, instead of developing a comprehensive social welfare policy to address social problems raised by income disparity, the government has retreated to cash handouts to permanent residents in Hong Kong in its budget plan in early 2011. Under such pseudo-fairness, "citizenship" has become a social and economic resource which instigates politics of inclusion and exclusion and results in the twist of citizen movement for electoral rights to a defence of local interest against the so-called "invasion" of new immigrants, non-permanent residents, non-citizens, etc.

The right wing politics are operated through rounds and rounds of social debates, such as the mainland Chinese pregnant women debate in early 2011. Since 1997, an increasing number of mainland Chinese pregnant women have travelled to Hong Kong to give birth so as to avoid forced sterilisation in mainland China's hospitals. Moreover, the new born baby will automatically obtain Hong Kong citizen status. The large number of mainland pregnant women has created pressure on the local hospital facilities and led to the degrading of public health services, which generates public outrage. Angry parents called the mainland pregnant women "locusts" in their campaign and asked for stricter border control. Eventually, the Hong Kong government has introduced a policy to stop pregnant women who come to Hong Kong without medical papers; and imposed a quota system on public and private hospitals to make medical service less available to mainland Chinese pregnant women.

AAF has been trying to frame the discussion as an issue of public health and to direct public attention to the shortage of medical facilities for women since the mid-2000s when the debate began to emerge. However, the policy suggestion has failed to address the public anxiety over the complicated social, cultural and political relations between Hong Kong and mainland China. So far the public discussion has been channelled to the issue of restricting citizenship by legal means rather than to a more reflexive and comprehensive programme of social reform to expand the scope of citizenship and address the diverse needs of various displaced social groups.

The populist sentiment behind the citizenship debate is driven by a rejection of social security based

upon redistribution, justified by the perception of the subordinated groups (lower-class, women, children, sexual and racial minorities) as social burden and irresponsible citizens. Feminist discourses in the discussion of social differences, needs and rights, private and public, can help re-politicise the debate and engender a new movement dynamics for redefining the relation among social groups in a society and in relation to the state.

B) Guangzhou

1. Institutional and non-institutional approach

The emancipation of women is a major agenda for the liberation movement and nation building movement of modern China. It has been upheld both in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution by the founders of the Republic of China and in the 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution by the founders of the People's Republic of China. However in the past 30 years, since the economic reform in the 1970s, women have become more and more subordinated in a resurgent patriarchal social and economic system, resulting in making women's emancipation an empty political slogan.

According to the reports in the *Gender and Poverty Conference* organised by China Women Research Association on November 29, 2010, women have become a major component of the "new poor". In 2000, women only constituted 37.6% of the workforce in formal sector in contrast to 62.9% of in the informal sector in urban areas. Among the 147 million floating population in 2005, women constituted 49.7% and male rural migrant workers' income was 20.3% higher than their female counterpart. In addition, rural women would lose their rights to land after their marriage.¹⁵ Among the various informal sectors, the sex industry always attracts public attention. According to a conservative estimation put forward by media worker Zhou Ruijin in 2006, there were about 4 million sex workers in China in 2005 and the sector contributed RMB500 billion to the national GDP (Zhou 2006), while the the US State Department's estimated number of Chinese sex workers reached as high as 10 million (French: 2006).

The subordination of women in China has led to the increase of sexual violence both in the workplace

¹⁵ The data comes from a wiki based website, Hudong, under the term New Poor. <http://www.hudong.com/wiki/>□□□□

and in intimate relationships. There have been many media reports on sexual violence but so far no public data is available. Gender bias and violence are also reflected in the imbalanced sex-ratio. While in 1982 the sex-ratio between female and male was 1:1.085, the ratio reached 1:1.169 in 2000 and 1:1.206 in 2008 (Meng Fei: 2010). Under the one-child policy, many Chinese families, in particular those of rural background, prefer to carry to term male babies.

All these problems have been acknowledged by the ACWF. However, under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Federation cannot decide their own intervention campaign and provincial ACWF has to implement their work according to the guiding principles put forward by the Party Secretary.

Guangdong ACWF - The role of a political organisation

The Guangdong ACWF was set up in February 1954. The Federation has one president and four vice presidents to oversee a number of departments: general office, communication department, propaganda department, women's rights department, children's department and research department.

As a party-led NGO or political organisation the two guiding principles for defining its area of engagement are "development" and "women's quanyi or women's rights and benefit", and children, women and families are their main target for social management and public service¹⁶. However, in reality the organisation's work plan depends very much on CCP's direction presented in the annual People's Congress. For example, when the Party Secretary of Guangdong, Wang Yang, said earlier in 2010 that the province had to promote the concept of "Xinfu or Happiness", the ACWF drew its work plan accordingly. Eventually it carried out a survey asking what is needed for building a harmonious family but the result is all about the need to improve social security policy. Even though the leader might have expected the ACWF to work on some propaganda campaigns for advocating harmonious relation and family culture, there are still spaces, though limited, for the staffs to inject more progressive ideas into the empty slogans.

Although ACWF is a registered NGO, all its staff members are civil servants and recruited through annual civil servant examination. Most of its staff have not been exposed to gender and feminist theories. Training opportunities are available for its staff; however, it depends very much on an individual's motivation for attending the training. Its semi-governmental status has given it the legitimacy to receive letter petitions and visit petitions, and it has the institutionalised authority to

¹⁶ A transcript of the Chairperson of Guangdong ACFW, Wen Lanzi's speech on the Guangdong Women Development Forum (2009) has been posted on Web. Chinese text. (Accessible on October 20 2011) <http://news.oeeee.com/channel/3207.html>

request related government departments to change their practices, to provide legal assistance and submit suggestion to the upper ranking governmental bodies. One of the major tasks for the women's rights department is to receive inquiries and cases from the public. The majority of inquiries are about divorce and the splitting of property (65%), followed by workplace discrimination disputes (20%). The remaining (15%) are about sexual violence and rural women's rights to collective land after marriage.

Apart from daily routine in receiving inquiries and implementing the work plan, the Federation has been rather rigid in responding to current affairs or social incidents that are related to women. For example, during the tainted milk scandal in 2008, the Federation avoided making any comment on the issue even though the incident was directly related to women's and children's rights and well-being. The Federation would need political endorsement from above for making any public statement and comment. According to the division of labour within the government, the tainted milk incident had to be handled by the Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ). There is no space for ACWF to follow up the incident.

However, in mid-2011 the head of Rights Department, Yang Shiqiang, did comment on a sexual harassment case upon an interview request made by a newspaper's journalist and the report was widely discussed online. Before he addressed the case, he had sought approval from his supervisor and he stressed that it was a bold move, "one has to be careful about the nature of the case and prevent crossing the line when making comment". With his legal training and liberal mind, compared to most cadres of ACWF, Yang is more confident and willing to take political risks.

The Federation mainly works with its member organisations because the women's groups outside its umbrellas are not properly registered under the current regulations and laws regarding association in China. ACWF has a stable financial source to give funding to its member organisations and the Federation has also been working with woman lawyers in legislation work, such as the revision of marriage law in 2008 and the recent discussion about legislation against domestic violence.¹⁷

GMA - Feminist network

Gender and Media Action Group (GMA) was established on November 25 2004, the day of the Global Action against Sexual Violence, with a launching declaration statement. The network was facilitated by

¹⁷ A recent statistic shows that around 30% of Chinese family has the problem of domestic violence, which has been ignored by the police. Although the Marriage Law has stated explicitly that domestic violence is not allowed, it does not have guideline for law enforcement. News feature report from news.163.com. Chinese text. Web. (Accessible on October 21 2011) <http://news.163.com/special/reviews/stopdomesticviolence.html>

a workshop, New Media and Gender Awareness, organised by the British Council with the support of Oxfam (Hong Kong). Its core members initially were professional woman media workers who are devoted to advocate gender equality and abolition of cultural prejudices that reproduce violence towards women. The network later was extended to include lawyers, professors and NGO organisers, many of whom are also members of the "Woman / Gender Studies Development Network", an academic network for gender studies professors and graduates who have attended the Gender Programme organised by UM-Fudan Joint Institute for Gender Studies in Shanghai. The network is very conscious of the difference between the conceptual framework of gender as opposition to the official discourse of "equality between man and woman". Currently the group has more than 70 members.

As the group cannot be registered as an independent NGO, it operates in the form of a social network and its main activities are seminars, talks and training programs on topics such as "women and employment", "Taiwan women movement", "woman's status in marriage market", "violence in intimate relation", "woman genealogy", etc. The most recent activity organised by the network was an exhibition held in March 2011 when women artists, activists and groups presented their ideas of gender violence. The network had tried to approach Guangdong AWCF for co-hosting the exhibition as one of the events for the Women's Day 2011, but was rejected because the AWCF preferred a "celebratory mood" for it. The Federation did not want to include LGBT in their work and found the idea of "woman genealogy" too "avant-garde". Eventually, the Federation organised another dinner buffet featuring political leaders' speeches for the Women's Day. Marginalised by the institution, GMA has been forced to reach out to the community to pull together resources for their activities. For example, they have invited a number of co-organisers, including university gender studies groups, artists, LGBT and woman workers groups for the exhibition. Although the exhibition was held away from the city centre due to the difficulty of finding a proper venue, given their media background, it was well featured and its opening was live-casted online by a commercial web portal.

Apart from serving as a curator for public activities, the group is a local node of a wider network consisting of academic, professional women groups from all over the country. The national network channels information and social resources through email and social media and provides spiritual support for its network members. Each individual in the network helps to disseminate the agenda and discussion of the network to a wider public through their online and offline activities. Without

institutional boundary, the bridging of alternative public sphere (discussion and consensus within the network) and the mainstream public happens spontaneously. Some of its members are actively advocating feminist perspectives by actively commenting on social incidents. One of the examples is a public opinion campaign on a workplace rape case called “Song Sanmu incident” in Guangdong.¹⁸ Although the defendant, Song Sanmu, claimed that it was a consensual sexual relation, the online public views, fuelled by hatred of the rich, strongly condemned him. Members of GMA intervened into the discussion and channelled the public opinion to address the gender power relation in the workplace, the problem in law enforcement when dealing with sexual violence and the missing legal definition on "sexual harassment" in existing Chinese law. Another example is a public call for support to a mother who had killed her 13-year-old brain paralysed twin out of desperation in May 2011. GMA, together with the Gender Education Forum in Sun Yat-sen University and Guangdong Women and Gender Studies Development Network, drafted a public statement pleading for leniency for the mother and urged for better social support to family caretakers, in particular those taking care of family members with disabilities . They had managed to collect more than a thousand signatures for the campaign's petition.

The fact that GMA does not have institutional limitation has created a very strong momentum for its network members to take initiative in public debates, as their strongest resource is their knowledge and speaking position in various areas such as news media, online forums and academic institutions.

Marginalised actors

Many individual woman activists were once members of the party-state establishment but were forced to leave and work independently after they had been labelled as trouble makers by the authority. Professor Ai Xiaoming is one of the most typical examples.

Ai Xiaoming is a locally trained scholar, the first woman PhD graduate in Chinese literature after the Cultural Revolution. She started teaching Chinese Literature at the Sun Yat-sen University since 1994. From 1999-2000 she joined a visiting professor programme of Women Studies at the Tennessee Southern University, where she realised that Women Studies could bring change to a society. After she came back from the U.S., she developed a number of courses on Women Studies and Feminism. In January 2003, she organised a series of seminars on "Gender Education". The death of Huang Jing, a 21-year-old primary school teacher, in February 2003 had become a living example for her to discuss

¹⁸ Song Sanmu is the head of a famous training center and in December 2010 and was found guilty of raping his company's intern.

the issue of sexual violence with her students. In the process, she advocated for a thorough investigation of Huang's death. Inspired by netizens' online campaign website, *Paradise Garden*, for Huang Jing, and together with a number of students and teachers, she launched a campus-based web project "Gender Education Forum" (<http://genders.zsu.edu.cn>). In December 2003, she introduced the feminist theatre "Vagina Monologue" to China and organised her students to adapt it to a local version. They managed to have the performance in Guangzhou but it was banned in Shanghai and Beijing. In order to record the production of "Vagina Monologue", she learned how to use a video camera. Since then, she has become a documentary maker and most of her works and civic engagements are connected to her video camera.

Taking the Beijing +10 occasion in 2005, Ai hosted a video workshop for NGO organisers in Guangzhou. Coincidentally the news about Taishi village referendum to dismiss a corrupted cadre popped up in newspapers and she decided to enter the village to record the incident¹⁹. She was suspended from her teaching in Sun Yatsen University as her involvement in Tai Shi had upset the Guangdong authority. Since then she has been spending more time on making documentaries and so far has produced more than 12 documentaries, most of them very politically sensitive, including topics like the AIDS patient village in Henan, Sichuan Earthquake, prosecution of rights activists, etc. Because of the nature of documentary work, she has to enter different social incidents in person and put forward her version of the stories, which are usually different from the official versions. Her work enables her to network with a large number of individual dissidents and grassroots petitioners.

As China's first generation feminist scholar, Ai is very well respected in the circles. At the same time, women within the institutions have tried to avoid making connection with her since 2005 as it will upset their authority and ruin their career. Ai is also very conscious about her status and keeps a distance from her old friends, particularly those working in or with the government. On the other hand, she is very active in networking with netizens and activists who don't have institutional burdens or who are being forced out of institutions like her. The activist network is both an information distribution and a supportive network - whenever any one of the network members is being prosecuted by the authority, others would campaign for their release. For her, the development of Chinese civil society depends a lot on the network:

19 Villagers in Tai Shi found out that the Village committee have withhold compensation of land acquisition from the villagers. More than 400 villagers signed up for a village level referendum to re-elect the village committee in July 2005. The case was widely reported in the newspapers but eventually was crackdown violently by the Panyu district government.

“There are many circles in the Internet that share common values, and different circles would help each other when in need. Let’s say when Ai Weiwei’s team needs help, we would make public statements to support them and they would do the same for us. Usually after activist training workshops, a small circle will be formed through email and skype groups. The circles are based on beliefs and values. Not organisation and funding.”

Occasionally, the network also calls for flash mob action to raise awareness of social incidents.

Two other individual woman activists, a woman lawyer (GY) and a retired woman engineer (HL), have shared similar stories of marginalisation by the state and party authority. GY was also involved in the Taishi referendum incident and she lost her lawyer license afterwards while the retired engineer, a party member, was prosecuted by Panyu police for destroying private property after her involvement in the anti-garbage incinerator campaign in a residential district.

2. The use of media technology

Most of the staff we interviewed in ACWF are not active internet users. When they go online, it is mainly work-related; otherwise they just consume the online information and connect with friends via social networking tools.

ACWF - Propaganda or deliberation?

At the organisational level, ACWF started a number of online projects since 2009 after the Party Secretary Wang Yang put forward the idea of "online policy deliberation". This idea came after Wang followed Chinese President Hu Jintao's example of online dialogue with netizens²⁰. At first the Federation had adopted the official approach of "propagating the women to the society and propagating the society to the women". The first so-called policy deliberation website is "New Era, New Women and New Life - Guangdong ACWF online policy deliberation" (gdwomen.oeeee.com/) in which the President of the Federation followed Hu and Wang's examples by meeting netizen online. In addition, it co-organised an essay competition with a local newspaper, the *Southern Metropolis*, and organised a Women and Development forum in September 12 2009, which was live-casted on the Internet through video streaming. The second major online project was also an essay competition, under the theme "Good Father and Good Mother" in September 2010.

The Federation's main website is Guangdong women e-home (www.gdwomen.org.cn). It is divided into

²⁰ Head of CCP and Chinese President Hu Jintao staged an online dialogue with netizens via state-run media People's Daily's websites in June 2008. After the event all state-media outlets keep propagating the notion of "online policy deliberation" as democratic practice.

four major sections: news, service, interaction and women forums. The news section is mainly party propaganda. The service section is the Federation's major project areas: a women hotline, women's health, family education, etc. The interaction section, even though consisting of policy deliberation and selected commentaries, is not genuinely "interactive" because all deliberations are carefully selected and largely staged in nature. Women forums run like commercials of fashion, daily life, entertainment, finance & investment, food, love life, etc. The staff explain that when they have to put the articles online, they have to submit the articles to their supervisors for approval, then pass them to the Internet office for posting online. The contents are closely monitored and most of the information is to educate women on how to become good mothers and good wives. As the internal bureaucracy is very rigid, some of the projects, such as the previously mentioned policy deliberation websites and essay competitions are in cooperation with other websites or media organisations.

Young department leaders in Guangdong ACWF are rather conscious about the lack of advocacy dimension in engaging with active citizens in the online world. The head of the women's rights department Yang Shiqiang had put forward an online advocacy proposal and most of his suggestions have already been implemented. Yang pointed out in our interview that it is necessary for the rights department to engage with the public to promote gender awareness so as to help them draw the boundary of one's rights as well as its violation. Apart from the existing hotline for receiving cases, Yang proposed a new blog and micro-blog for public engagement, both of which were launched in March 2011. So far, the blog, hosted under Sina (blog.sina.com.cn/u/1999442777) is not very successful as the posts are either state-run newspapers' article clippings or articles from the Federation's website. The micro-blog (weibo.com/gdflqyb) is more popular, with 15,218 followers or fans in 7 months. Its posts are comments or statements with strong views and information sources are more diversified. To some extent, the micro-blogging tool has enabled the Rights Department to attain more autonomy to comment on public incidents.

Jiao Yaqiong from the Children Rights department agreed that the Internet has opened up new opportunities for engaging with the public although she pointed out that the rural grassroots women are yet to be connected. Currently the Federation does not have a new media strategy for engaging with the rural grassroots, and its approach is still limited to "propaganda and service".

GMA - Interplay between old and new media

Members from GMA are more active than ACWF in the use of online communication tools as the group depends on the Internet for internal discussion, planning, activity promotion and advocacy campaigns. However, they do not have an independent website for their network as an individual domain would require proper registration, be subject to daily censorship and overseeing by the authority, and probably result in crackdown. Instead, they have a group blog in Sina.com, a commercial portal website, and an internal forum set up in 2009 for sharing information and news. As their network covers media workers, NGOs workers, university teachers, lawyers, individual activists, etc., information can be spread very quickly and members are capable of mobilising social and network resources when they are needed.

The media workers in the network are very aware of the limitations and problems of both state-run media outlets and the commercial online portals. All the conventional media outlets such as newspapers and TV are tightly controlled by the CCP's local propaganda bodies stationed at the news room. Even though Guangzhou is famous of its liberal environment, there is still a set of political parameters that media workers cannot violate. For example, daily briefings and directions on censored items and official views are delivered by the propaganda department to all media. Apart from political censorship, some woman journalists also point out that the idea of "journalistic professionalism", seemingly gender-neutral in news reporting, has shown its gender blindness or even biases in news reporting. Furthermore, commercial media in China, like their counterparts in the West, manipulate women's sexualised images as commodities for sale in the market. In spite of all these setbacks, commercial media outlets still provide some rooms for spread and exchange of new ideas. For example, Guangzhou-based web portal *Netease* had taken the initiative in 2009 to organise a special feature on "New Feminism" (news.163.com/special/00013R06/nvquanzhuyi.html) and invited six Guangdong-based feminist opinion leaders to talk about gender and sexual politics in China, even though the very design of the web page is full of stereotypical images of "professional women". In addition, the web portal also provided live-cast to GMA's exhibition in March 2011. Thus, on the one hand, GMA members would actively make use of the free space in commercial portals to build their community and consolidate the public opinion on certain social incidents to open up space for follow-up reports. The Song Sanmu rape case is one example of a case where public opinion generated from online platforms attracted reports from local TV stations and newspapers and eventually ACWF's public statements and comments.

Individual activists - Information bridging

Although most individual woman activists rely heavily on the Internet for their advocacy work, they did not have any background knowledge on computer use and electronic technology. But when they feel the need, they pick up the tools very quickly. For instance, Ai Xiaoming started to use the computer in 1995 and only used the desktop email tool for communication. She started searching around the worldwide web when she worked as visiting professor in the US. There she learned about censored information, including the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. She kept on using the search engine to prepare her gender curriculum when she returned back to China in 2000. At that time, BBS was already very popular in university networks, but it was still run like a sub-cultural space. The year of 2003 was a turning point when Chinese netizens started using the Internet for advocacy purposes. Both the death of Huang Jing and Sun Zhigang were widely discussed through the university BBS networks and major web portals, which inspired Ai and her students to open a web-based university group: Gender Education Forum. Ai picked up the video camera in 2004 when she needed to record her student performance of “Vagina Monologues”. In a couple of weeks she had already learned all the basic techniques of video editing and became a professional documentary maker by 2005. After the Taishi incident, she was suspended from teaching and since then video documentary has become her major social engagement. At first she distributed her documentary films through offline independent distributors in Hong Kong but later decided to distribute them freely online in 2010 because she was banned from leaving China and the circulation of her work was very limited. In addition, she was worried that someday she would be arrested by the authority and she wanted the world to know what she was doing all the time.

She opened her first blog in Sina in 2009 when she needed to post the photos that she had collected in the Sichuan earthquake areas and the letters from the parents of child victims of “bean dreg” school constructions. Her blog was banned within a few months by the commercial portal in October the same year, after which she moved to an overseas portal, bullog.com. She was compelled to learn how to use the circumvention tools to get over the Great Fire Wall²¹. She started using Twitter in early 2010 when she received an urgent phone call from a friend from Sichuan earthquake region whose husband was arrested by the police. She felt that she was responsible for his arrest because the couple had helped her in her documentary work. Then she made up her mind to register an account in Twitter and spread the

21 The Great Fire Wall is a very sophisticated filtering mechanism. It blocked certain websites and a large number of politically sensitive words from appearing in the Chinese Internet World.

message, which was re-tweeted by Ai Weiwei and many prominent micro-blogger to more than 70,000 people overnight. It turned out that her friend's husband was released on the next day. She is still active in using Twitter for bridging censored information, in particular the incidents of civil right movement of the grassroots society, to the world. "There are so many illegal detentions and violations of individuals' rights in the grassroots level, there are cases that the police illegally detained a person without trial for more than 10 years. That is why there are so many petitioners in China. It is important to get their stories out so as to give pressure to the corrupted authorities," said Ai.

Many other individual activists have similar experience. GY often uses QQ [instant online chat tool] as a hotline to give legal advice to women who suffered from domestic violence. HL only learned how to go online because of the campaign against garbage incinerator in 2009. She asked her son to teach her so that she could collect more information about the law related to environmental impact assessment and the impact of garbage incinerator on the environment and people's health. After that, she has become active in community organising work and decided to run for the district's property owner committee in May 2010. The resident election was disrupted by the property developer and she had to turn to online platform for petition and rights defense. Her first move was to post an open petition letter to the city mayor online. She started using a micro-blog in September 2010 and now has more than 1000 fans. Most of her posts are comments on news revealing government corruption to the public.

3. Citizenship and rights discourse

Some of the staff in ACWF are quite uneasy about the representation of women's image in official discourses, such as the video advertisement put up at Wall Street in January 2011 before President Hu Jintao visited the US. ACWF is often caught up in a situation when the male party leaders want to promote certain women's role models such as "good wife" or "good mother". The Federation is obliged to follow the order and to implement the project.

ACFW – Mass / people or individual citizen?

According to the official ideology of the CCP, women and children are always regarded as constituents of "mass" or "people". Therefore, despite lip-service paid to "individual rights", the authority never fully recognises women's and children's individual rights in its policy. Sometimes, it even upholds the

values of “collectivity” by explicitly criticising the liberal-individualist ideology of the West. Therefore, ACWF is caught between the government's policies and orders, and the mission of protecting individual rights and providing services. For example, ACWF is responsible for propagating population control and the One-child Policy, the extension of state power into women's body and their reproductive activities, while it is an NGO that works to protect women's and children's rights.

ACWF's difficult and paradoxical situation is not only due to its institutional position, but also could be explained against the background of modern political development. The idea of 'human rights' and 'citizen' has entered Chinese political discourse and developed into political movement since the early 20th century, parallel to the modern nation building movement and the overthrow of imperial dynasty. However, the process of nation-building in the first half of the 20th century resulted in the establishment of the Leninist party-state featuring the ideology of “mass line” and a complex hierarchy of political cadres. The voices of civil rights from the society, for example, the intellectual criticisms of newly founded regime in the 1950s or the Beijing student-citizen movements in 1989, had been seriously repressed by the regime.

Despite the crackdown on the nascent Chinese civil society, the Chinese government is still desperately looking for various non- or less political ways to gain recognition by the West. The suspension of political reform following the June 4 massacre in 1989 did not stop Chinese legal system from selectively adopting the western ideas of individual rights since the 1990s, in particular those related to property right. Apart from China's entry into WTO, the "Property Rights Law", which it took 13 years to draft and finally passed in 2007, is another landmark of China's history of adopting the Western discourse of individual rights.

The latest wave of citizen rights movement started around 2000 by the middle class, who wanted to defend their consumer and property rights through legal means. The movement was quickly politicised through the massive public deliberation and participation in a number of outraging social incidents. The death of Sun Zhigang in a Guangzhou detention shelter is the landmark case in 2003 - the year of online rights defense. Sun, a graduate from Hubei University, was mistaken as floating population and detained by the Guangzhou police during his graduation trip. He was beaten to death in the detention centre at night. Local media picked up the story and it was spread through the whole country's university network in a couple of days. In order to pacify the public outrage, the central government abolished the notorious system of detention shelters which had been existing for more than 40 years.

However, all these incidents did not fundamentally change the repressive regime. The struggles between people's campaigns for civil rights and ensuing crackdown by government continued and eventually turned into a new form conflict in 2007 when citizens began using communication tools for massive protests. The first successful mobilisation happened in Xiamen 2007 when tens of thousand of citizens received mobile and online messages and took to the street to protest against the construction of a chemical factory. Eventually the factory was relocated to a less populated area in Fujian province. In 2008, Shanghai citizens followed Xiamen's example in organising a 'strolling' (a substitution for the politically sensitive word "demonstration") against the construction of magnetic train. The central government not only contained the spread of these scattered movements, it also reacted quickly by shutting down a number of social networking sites and imposing new regulations on the one hand, and by taking a more active role in channelling public opinion on the other. The CCP started using the term "political deliberation" after the state propaganda People Net (www.people.com.cn) facilitated an online chat between Hu Jintao and a number of selected netizens.

Generally speaking, the central and local governments attempted to establish a new model of interaction between the government, pro-government opinion leaders, such as professional lawyers, university professors, government think tanks, media workers, popular writers, etc., and individual netizens. Henceforth, on the one hand, ACWF engaged itself in issues of civil rights protection and "policy deliberation" in various moderate ways. It also attempted to launch its online projects. On the other hand, it run these projects of civic engagement much more like staged performances for the party-state than social services and activism.

GMA - Structural violence

Many GMA members see the inadequacy of the liberal discourse on civil rights. Yet, instead of upholding Chinese exceptionalism and the priority of collective values, they expanded the scope of the discourse on civil rights to criticise political, economic, social and cultural system that reproduce gender prejudices, stereotypes and injustice. Though most GMA members agree that the citizen right defence movement is very important, it cannot address the violence women is facing in today's China. "The rights to vote or the notion of human rights is too luxurious for grassroots women. Their problems are the everyday violence they are facing at home and in their intimate relationships and the commodification of woman's body in the capitalist world. Many of them cannot live respectfully as a human being...," said one of the GMA members.

Since 2003, most of the social incidents related to women that have broken out on the Internet have been cases of 'unnatural deaths' caused by sexual violence. Huang Jing's case in 2003 is the most well-known example. Huang was a young teacher who died in the school dormitory after a visit from her ex-boyfriend. It was believed that she was over-dosed by her ex-boyfriend in an attempted rape. In spite of Huang's families' inquiries and challenges, the police report had ruled out the possibility of rape-murder without examining her bodies. Both human rights lawyers and media workers treated the case as police's irresponsible investigation. Once the court sided with the police, the case was closed. The issue of women's vulnerable position in intimate relationships had been missing in the public debate. However, date rape and domestic violence are very common in China. A recent statistic shows that around 30% of Chinese women suffered from the problem of domestic violence and 80% of divorce cases are related to domestic violence. In addition, woman victims usually could not get support and sympathy from their families, as the families fear that the exposure of her sexual abuse would be a social stigma and a disgrace for the family. It is not unusual that the family would accept compensation and remain silent about their daughters' cases. LJ, an experienced media worker, sees that "the gender-neutral or gender-blind legal and media discourses have displaced the violence women are facing from its social and cultural dimension to procedural justice of the authority. The distinctive experience of women in relation to the patriarchal system has been dismissed."

Instead of directly helping the grassroots women in defending their rights, GMA's focus is to promote feminist discourses and gender perspectives through different forms of media: exhibitions, seminars, blogs, micro-blogs, signature campaigns, mainstream media reports, etc. However, to maximise their voices in the public across different platforms, they seldom cross the line to criticise the government directly.

Individual activist - Grassroots right defenders

On the other hand, individual woman activists usually directly participate in civil rights campaigns at the grassroots level. They apply multiple strategies in their works, including legal action, citizen investigation, and flash mob mobilisation.

Legal action is the most legitimate form of struggle. Even though under the party-state system the court is not independent, the legal process does open up space for public deliberation. Guo Yan pointed out that many women who suffered from domestic violence do not know that they are protected by law.

Most of the rights activists' concerns are about individuals' rights to vote and be protected from state violence, while the rights for women to divorce, to inherit property and be protected from domestic violence are usually absent in public discourses. "Many human rights lawyers are not keen at taking up divorce and domestic violence cases, partly because they are male and the woman clients are not at ease to talk to them, partly because they do not take the cases as typical human rights violations," explained Guo Yan.

Apart from legal means, many activists have adopted the identity of citizen journalists to reach out to the grassroots since 2004. Rather than persuading the conventional media or male chauvinists to adopt a feminist perspective, Ai Xiaoming prefers to do it herself. All her documentaries are narrated from the woman's perspective – the relation between the mother and children in the AIDS village, the wife of the imprisoned dissident, the woman activist who helped the mother of a suspected rape victim to find justice, etc. She believes that “the concrete and substantial representation of the reality is the best way to counter the ideological and abstract state propaganda”. Thus, when compared to GMA's work, the grassroots activists' engagements are much more subversive. They have exposed government's corruption and the miseries of ordinary people, thereby challenging the very legitimacy of the CCP.

Most of the online opinion leaders and activists are male and Ai is aware of their male chauvinism. However, she seldom enters into argument with them. The dissent circle is so small and she does not want to ruin the solidarity. However, she is very conscious of presenting woman activists' compassion, empathy and common sense of right and wrong in their social engagement as opposite to the self-righteous style of male activists and their antagonistic opposition to the authority. Ai Xiaoming's article about Beijing woman activist Wang Lihong is one of such example.²²

4. Negotiation between the state and the civil society

Since year 2003, active citizens have been taking the lead to foster public opinion to pressure the authorities to respond to people's demands. Whenever a new online tool appears, it is appropriated for social networking, information bridging and mobilisation purposes. Even though Communist China is very strict in the control of media and all media outlets are subject to the monitoring by the CCP, the

²² Wang Lihong, a woman activist based in Beijing, has been found guilty for "inciting social unrest" by Beijing court in October 2011 for being involved in a flash mob action outside the court in Fujian in support of the trial of three netizens who were prosecuted for helping the mother of a victim in a suspected rape murder to distribute her video interview. Ai Xiaoming has written an article to support Wang and advocate for her release. Chinese text. (Accessible October 2011): <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/XIAOMINGAI/archives/380307.aspx>

rise of new forms of media has caught the government by surprise and it has tightened its control over them. By September 2005 the State Council required web-portals to attain special permit for online news, without which the websites could not hire journalists for writing news reports. Since 2007, both BBS and blog platforms have been required to get pre-approval for running online. In addition, they have to follow the daily self-censorship guideline issued by government propaganda and information departments. A huge number of online commentators have been trained by government and party authorities to channel public opinion and manage web contents.

However, the emergence of social media, such as Twitter and its mainland Chinese version, Fanfou, has generated another wave of momentum for massive online mobilisation – such as the anti-chemical factory protest in Xiamen in 2007 and the anti-magnetic train protest in Shanghai in 2008. The netizens' move resulted in another round of crackdown, including the sudden shut-down of Fanfou and the anti-vulgarity campaign in 2008. At the same time, the CCP started promoting policy deliberation and took the lead to channel online public opinion. Since then, large number of opinion leaders and dissidents have been interrogated and threatened by the security police and from time to time, netizens are arrested for their online comments under the charge of spreading rumours or inciting public unrest. In 2009 Sina's micro blogging platform replaced Fanfou and became the most popular micro-blog in China. The platform is equipped with a very sophisticated censorship system. In 2010, all independent websites, including personal blogs, were required to register and conduct self-censorship. This resulted in the disappearance of more than 100 thousand websites. The inaccessibility of a large number of overseas websites in China makes the Chinese cyberspace increasingly like an intra-net. In 2011, the China government targeted mobile messages and circumvention tools to stop its citizens from accessing overseas websites. However, the above mentioned measures have not stopped active citizens from using the Internet for advocacy, but the messages can no longer reach out to the masses as effectively as before because of the extremely strict and sophisticated censorship control.

Despite all the crackdowns and censorship measures, occasionally, active citizens do successfully change the trajectory of a social event, in particular when there is a massive participation in both the online and offline world. The latest success is the relocation of a chemical factory in Dalian in August 2011 after a massive demonstration in the city. Netizens were racing with the net-censors on August 14 in posting photos from the Dalian protest scenes. The support of online opinion leaders and the grassroots mobilisation has created a butterfly effect which generates political pressure for the

government to answer to. The online motto "surrounding gaze will change China" has captured such political interaction between the government and the masses (to a certain extent led by or channelled by opinion leaders).

Individual activists at the frontier

The individual activists are standing at the frontier of social changes. Claiming themselves to be citizen investigators or citizen journalists or "surrounding gazers", they enter the scenes to "investigate", "report", "witness" or "participate" in major social incidents. Even though Ai Xiaoming's accounts of the AIDS village in Henan, the Taishi village referendum movement and the Sichuan earthquake usually resulted in further repression of the grassroots organisations and activists, they were also successful in pushing the authorities to step in to respond to people's grievances. Individual activists are usually the target of police crackdown. In other words, they have put their freedom and future at risk to politicise an event, spark a political campaign or throw a challenge at the authorities.

GMA – Amplifiers of grassroots voices

Opinion leaders with institutional connections, such as the members in GMA, help to magnify the grassroots voices through their institutional social networks, as well as new and conventional media outlets. As political dissidents and activists have been banned from posting in major web-portals, the GMA and other similar kind of networks help to deliver their information to a wider public and frame the issue as one that is more consistent with government policy and concern, thereby creating a stage for the government to step in and solve the problem. They try to avoid being confrontational and adopt a "constructive" approach in their comments. If the social and political incident happens at a county or township government level, the opinion leaders would usually take a firmer standpoint to criticise the local authority for their corruptions and malpractices, calling for the intervention of upper level government. If the incident happens in the upper level governments, they will be more careful to avoid crossing the line and ruining their institutional positions. Such informal networks serve as a bridge between the activists and the publics, as well as between the grassroots and the government. They do not directly involve in the organisation of grassroots, but channel the grassroots opinion to the direction that can bring changes – even minor changes.

The China government noticed the impact of the interaction between the grassroots activists and the online opinion leaders in challenging the authorities around 2007. While it is impossible to stop 0.48

billion netizens (CNNIC, July 2011) from talking online, the government has to train a large number of web-commentators to compete with the progressive and liberal voices. That is also why "online policy deliberation" has become a government strategy since 2008.

ACWF – From patron to opinion leader

ACWF has been considered as a mass organisation in China. Its political function is to reach out to the grassroots to advocate government policy while at the same time help the government shore up legitimacy by providing grassroots services through its member organisations and grassroots outreach program. Such patron-client relation has been a stabiliser for the party state since its establishment. However, with the development of market economy, there are less and less services and benefits that the state can provide to the people. It would result in reducing the political organisations to a bureaucracy propagating an ideology with a shrinking material base. The patron-client relation cannot be sustained and the legitimacy of the CCP has been eroding rapidly since the economic and market reform in the 1970s.

The development of Internet communication technology and the civil rights movement have made grassroots conflicts more visible to the whole country. Ordinary people become more aware of being oppressed by a minority in power. People express their angers and frustrations through commenting on social incidents and exposing the corruption of government officials and other members of the privileged class. They touch upon hot issues ranging from self-immolation in forced demolitions, confrontation with city management patrols, exposure of unnatural deaths in police stations or detention centres, to car accidents that involve young people of wealthy and powerful families²³. Even though there are cases that public deliberations have invited central governments to step in and settle the problem, most of the unresolved conflicts end up in violent repression at the grassroots level. In order to tackle the more and more frequent mass incidents, the public security bureau has introduced a set of strategies called "innovative social management" which includes prosecuting active citizens, strengthening the power of the sub-district office and neighbourhood committee to oversee the community and receiving complaints from the public through micro-blogging.

Some scholars describe this new mode of interaction between government and citizen as "authoritarian deliberations" (He and Warren 2011). On the one hand, the CCP refuses to introduce any political

²³ The second generation rich is a term to describe those who have inherited the power and wealth of their parents and act like modern-aristocrats in relation to the poor.

reform that would challenge its regime; on the other hand, it has completely lost its ideological control over people and thus shifts to the highly manipulated deliberative practice to stretch a tight cloth of civic engagement on its authoritarian rule. However, it does not make the regime less repressive but only fosters an illusion of an open society in which apart from political leaders and ordinary citizens, a group of public opinion leaders in support of the leadership of CCP play an important role. Against this background, AWCF has to transform itself from the role of a patron to an opinion leader. For now, it is too soon to evaluate the success or failure of such political strategy.

Discussion

A) Civil society and political society

Although Hong Kong and Guangzhou are both part of China, Hong Kong had been a colony under the British government for about a century and the city was handed over to China in 1997 under the principle of “one country, two systems”, which means Hong Kong is to retain its capitalist system as well as its political autonomy. The city’s civil society started to develop for the post-war reconstruction of the social system and further strengthened after the 1967 and 1968 riots against the colonial government. Most of the NGOs were social service organisations which acted as the extension of the governmental organ to maintain social stability via community service work. Since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, the civil society has begun to politicise, as democracy, human rights and social justice have become common agendas in the society. However, with the change in the political climate after 1997, the civic sector of political NGOs has been shrinking and the social service NGOs sector keeps expanding. The post-1997 democratisation movement, to a large extent, is sustained by pro-democracy political parties and online media organisations.

Even though there have been quite a number of large-scale political mobilisations in Hong Kong such as the anti-Article 23 legislation rally on July 1 2003, without organisational support, they failed to consolidate into a substantial network to continue a more robust round of democratic struggles and social reform. Concurrently, in the past few years, a number of massive social mobilisations had taken place, such as the anti-Express Rail Link campaign, the mass incidents have failed to create immediate effect to the development project at stake. The post-colonial nature of the political system under the shadow of the Beijing government largely limits the political effects of social mobilisation.

In China, the so-called NGOs are embedded in the one-party state apparatus and do not enjoy autonomous status. The semi-governmental organisations, due to their patronage relations with the state and the bureaucracy, fail to address social grievances. On the contrary, individuals who are motivated to take independent action and initiate change are forced to leave the institutions. The only resource that helps them to sustain their work is a dissent network sustained by the Internet.

The economic transformation to a capitalist market since the 1980s has to a large extent weakened the mass base of the legitimacy of the CCP (and its political organisations). Yet, over the past 30 years, the

local governments have played an increasingly important role in forming collusive alliances between the newly emerged privileged class at the expense of the interests at the grassroots. Forced land acquisitions under the pretext of 'public interest' have resulted in waves of grassroots protests and massive incidents. Facilitated by information technology and a large number of info-activists, local incidents can easily gain public sympathies and echoes throughout the country and develop into nationwide incidents. The death of Sun Zhigang is one of the earlier examples while the Dalian anti-chemical factory rally is the most recent one. Thus when the information of a local social incident spreads quickly through the Internet, the government has to react to pacify public sentiment. In this regard, the interplay between the online public sphere and the offline public sphere is rather effective in achieving short-term goal in mainland China.

In order to cut the channelling of social unrest and grievances into political transformation projects, the CCP has adopted a hard-handed policy towards political dissidents. The latest round of Internet control further marginalises the dissidents by cutting them off from communicating with a larger public. In addition, political acts or networks that potentially challenge the CCP's authority will be repressed immediately. The suppression of independent candidacy of the grassroots people's representation election campaign in 2011 is one such example²⁴.

However, the rule of the CCP cannot be maintained only by coercion. Therefore, it plans to transform its political organisations into a network hub for channelling public opinion for consolidating its legitimacy. In both cities, the NGO sector has been appropriated by the state to contain and marginalise the citizen movement, thereby preventing it from growing into a politically transformative force. In the case of Hong Kong, it is through de-politicisation and the active channelling of material resources to community service organisations for establishing a patron-client relation with the grassroots. While in China, semi-governmental organisations are to transform their role as patrons, into public opinion leaders ,through the political performance of 'policy deliberation'.

B) Feminist active citizen in the rise of populism

When compared to other citizen movements, the women's movement enjoys more institutional spaces

²⁴ Around 3-400 individuals had declared to participate in the 2011 grassroots level people representative election on the Internet. Even though there are more than 2 million contested seats all over the country, the CCP and local authorities cannot tolerate the existence of less than 1% independent candidates.

and resources in both cities because the abstract principle of gender equality has long been recognized by the authorities.

Similar to other NGOs, women's organisations in Hong Kong have been politicised in the early 90s. However, the agenda of mainstreaming gender, with all its technicalities in the implementation, such as gender auditing, has driven the progressive women's groups away from the new wave of social mobilisation and the rising online public sphere. In addition, institutional resources have been channelled to community works rather than anti-discrimination and human rights advocacy projects since the handover of Hong Kong to China. A large number of grassroots based women service NGOs have emerged and the women movement has largely been de-politicised by the newly established patron-client relation with the government or the pro-Beijing political power. In the past few years, women's groups are actively mobilised by pro-government forces to support censorship and anti-migrant policy. The most recent case is the populist campaign against the rights of foreign domestic workers who have fulfilled the 7-year residency requirement to apply for permanent citizenship in October 2011.

Worse still, as the citizen movement for universal suffrage has been brutally blocked by the Beijing government, there is a tendency for the growth of right wing politics within the civil society. The political threat imposed by the Beijing government onto Hong Kong society has been transformed into a fear of mainland Chinese immigrants. Feminist discourses could have help unpacking the populist discourses. Paradoxically, the establishment of gender studies programmes in local universities has somehow destroyed the integration of feminist theory and practice, and feminist discourses have been missing from major citizen movements in the past few years.

In mainland China, women's organisations also fail to take part in the online citizen movement because of their institutional status. At the same time, the autonomous women's groups / networks are caught in a very difficult position: on the one hand, women are victimised by the government policy, such as the one-child policy, for the country's development and further victimised in the patriarchal capitalist system. On the other hand, within the online citizen rights movement which identifies the state authority as its main enemy, women's oppression has been marginalised. The call for public authority to intervene into the private domain could easily be interpreted as an endorsement of its legitimacy.

The individual woman activists' experience and practice, their critical attitude towards the state and their reflection upon the masculine citizen movement, is of great significance for re-establishing an

autonomous feminist tradition for women, in China.

C) Techno-mediated public sphere

Technology in Hong Kong is part of the city culture, while in China it is a tool for obtaining social status (for the middle class) or serving political ends (for activists). For more than a decade, from early 1990s to 2005, BBSes and forums had been the major online communication platforms in Hong Kong. The rise of blogs in the period of 2003-2005 made a very small impact to the online public sphere. Next, netizens started migrating to Facebook around 2006 and the forums began to wither. Apart from these forums and Facebook, online radio has also changed the political culture in Hong Kong. As the online tool is highly integrated into the users' daily life and the boundary for expression is rather loose in the city's liberal environment, the online space is very much segregated according to the users' social circle, racial and class background, as well as their political orientation. Although such virtual grouping can facilitate the formation of a counter-public, the echo chamber effect also creates an environment for the rise of online populism which is based upon shared sentiment rather than respect and public deliberation. Public platforms are becoming more and more "ghettoized" against such development.

On the contrast, in mainland China, netizens are highly aware of the manipulated media environment and they consider new media as means to break the monopoly of opinion in the public sphere. They are ready to adopt any tool that helps them to voice themselves in the public. Within one decade, online forum, QQ (a group chat device), blog, Douban (blog and interest based network), Fanfou (micro-blog), Renren or Kaixin (similar to Facebook) and Sina Weibo (micro-blog) have all exercised their political effect on the citizen movement and most of the above platforms have continued to grow as most mainland citizens are trained to hold multiple online platform accounts for combating the government censorship mechanism. Active citizens are very conscious that the online public sphere is an arena for political contestation; they are willing to spend time on making comments, fighting with oppositional views and spreading information, as they firmly believe that the accumulation of individual voices will bring change.

Policy implications

A) Gender mainstreaming

The agenda of gender mainstreaming was introduced in the Chinese speaking world in the Beijing conference in 1995. However, the principle has been developed in Western society where institutional democracy has been accomplished, while most of their Asian counterparts have a different political system.

In the case of Hong Kong, the agenda of gender mainstreaming helped to introduce a set of legal reforms in the late 90s, yet after the handover, the policy assessment and gender audit operation have directed the progressive woman movement away from the critical mass movement. The practice of women's citizenship led by the group of relatively resourceful women's organisations under the principle of gender mainstreaming is to negotiate with the government for more positions for women in government institutions and policies that address women's needs rather than engage in the oppositional politics that addresses the fundamental social injustice experienced by multitude of social minorities. Such orientation has alienated women's groups from radical politics that challenge the very legitimacy of the government.

As women's organisations are already part of the state apparatus in China, the principle of gender mainstreaming to some extent has helped to facilitate legal reforms. At the same time, women have been tied in a patronage relation with the state and very often being used by the government to justify censorship practice and even repress grassroots elections. It also led to the alienation of the women's movement from the autonomous citizen rights movement.

Instead of exporting the western feminist experience to the Third World, the global women's movement should adopt a more decentralised, diverse and rooted approach for advocating gender equity.

B) Digital divide and access impact

The gender digital divide in Hong Kong and in China is less an issue of "access" and "skill". The stories in China show us that once a woman knows what she wants to do, regardless of her educational background and age, she will manage to find her way out to the online world. At the same time, it is

also true that the Internet public spheres in both regions are dominated by male voices and male opinion leaders. Instead of technical training, more resources should be spent to encourage online feminist advocacy projects that help the cultivation of the subjectivity of active woman citizens and support an online feminist counter-culture.

C) Feminisms and active citizenship

Many research studies have shown that gender, racial, and sexual discrimination and stereotypes keep circulating and reinforcing themselves on the Internet. In addition, social networking tools, with their echo chamber effect, can easily lead to the rise of right wing populist politics. The global division of labour and disparity between the rich and the poor has intensified the ethnic conflict within society, as the role of government in poverty relief is increasingly important and social services and benefits are usually allocated to those with full citizenship. The middle class detests the poor, while the poor detest the illegal migrants who try to obtain citizenship, in this political and economic context. Here, feminist intervention in the debate of citizenship is crucial. It is important to re-politicise feminist discourses and re-connect feminist theory and practice for generating a reflective space in the online public sphere.

D) NGO internal governance and new media

Many NGOs have spent a lot of resources on their new media projects but with little impact. Since social media sites are mainly designed for individual use, the motivation comes from the individuals' friendship networks and spontaneous responses. NGOs usually have an organisation structure that requires collective decision making, and the two communication modes somehow seem to be in conflict with one another. Obviously the existing online tools need to be adapted for advocacy purposes, and it is also necessary to keep the platform aligned with the existing online cultural habits so as to encourage more participation. AAF's online engagement projects have failed to make an impact to some extent on the lack of spontaneous interaction. Or on the other side of the coin, when GD ACWF's rights department decided to use a micro-blog, it had to adjust its organisation's bureaucratic procedure by giving power to its cadres to interact spontaneously to online news and comments. The adaptation of new media for public engagement concerns not only about technical know-how, but also a change in

organisations' culture in interaction with the public, leaving space for spontaneous campaigns initiated by the participants.

Overall conclusion and reflection

The research project helps us to systematically review the women's movement in Hong Kong and China, in particular their use of online communication tool in their advocacy work.

Hong Kong and Guangzhou are historically, culturally and geographically very close to each other. The two cities have a set of shared social problems, such as cross-border infrastructure development, pollution, labour exploitation, migration, and etc. However, most of the exchange among civic groups within China is centering on Beijing – the capital of China. This project has connected some of the women groups during the advocacy meeting to explore possible common agenda for cross-border collaboration.

The feminist social movement tradition has been eroding in Hong Kong in the past decade even though the city is free and has a large number of women's organisations and a well-established gender studies curriculum in the University. The new generation of women activists has no interest in feminism and even found it irrelevant to their social struggle and daily life. Worst still, they see the claim of feminist positions as a mean to obtain institutional status in the undemocratic system rather than a radical force that seeks social justice and equality. There are many explanations for such phenomena – the influence of post-modern and post-structural theory that problematise gender identity based on male and female; the de-politicisation of feminism as an academic subject rather than political practice; the impact of liberalist agenda on the practice of feminism; the impact of pro-Beijing political force in building an united front with women's organisations in Hong Kong; etc. – it is the task of feminist organisations to re-strategise the movement and reconnect with the radical social movement sector.

In mainland China where association and academic freedom is absent, network groups and individuals are actively claiming and practising feminisms in their public engagement, trying very hard to work out a distinctive path away from the state-led agenda which subjugates women to state-led national development, in particular in areas that are related with population and ideological control. Even though these small groups and individuals have very little resources, they have strong sense of solidarity and pull their resources together to create a counter-culture that negotiates with and resists the capitalist liberal ideology and the patronage relation with the state.

An oral history of woman activists would help them to record and reflect upon their practice that opens up a new feminist tradition in China.

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