

# CREATING A PUBLIC SPHERE: A CASE STUDY OF A RURAL WOMEN'S NGO IN BEIJING

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The purpose of this paper is to make a contribution to recent debates on civil society and public sphere in China by means of a case study of a non-governmental rural women's organization in Beijing. Called the Migrant Women's Club (*dagongmei zhi jia*), this is a social club for rural migrant women, set up in 1996 by the editorial office of *Rural Women Knowing All* (Nongjianü Baishitong), China's only national periodical for rural women. It is one of a large number of women's groups and other social organizations (*shehui tuanti*) that have emerged in China in the last decade or so, that are separate from, and to varying degrees independent of, the state.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing, on the one hand, on interviews and participant observation carried out over a number of years<sup>2</sup> and, on the other hand, on recent Western feminist and critical theory, the paper seeks to chart a new approach to issues relating to civil society, public sphere, democracy and citizenship in China.

I begin with a brief critique of the debate about associations, civil society and public sphere in contemporary China as it currently stands.<sup>3</sup> In 1993, Richard Madsen published a paper entitled "The public sphere, civil society and moral community: A research agenda for contemporary China studies." In this paper, Madsen points out that a large variety of groups have recently emerged within Chinese society that are at least partially autonomous from the state. Some scholars, Madsen says,

are calling this whole range of associations – everything from democracy salons to organizations of *getihu* to clan associations to *qigong* clubs – "civil society." But some are certainly more "civil" than others. That is, some are relatively more forward looking and open to rational communication with groups different from themselves. Those with the quality of "civility" might eventually contribute to the creation of a democratic public sphere (which would not necessarily require the establishment of a Western-style liberal democracy).

Those without it may simply push China closer toward anarchic fragmentation. ... This suggests that ... we need to find ways to get “inside” the multitude of newly arising groups to understand the quality of their moral resources. Just because Habermas tells us that coffee houses played a key role in the development of a bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth century England, we should not assume that teahouses might play the same role in China! What matters is not the consuming of a beverage but the fostering of a certain quality of relationship. We have to find ways of assessing the qualities that contribute to a civil society capable of leading the way toward a democratic public sphere. (1993:189-90)

There are a number of ways in which Madsen’s approach differs from most studies of civil society or public sphere, and of the newly emerging associations in China. First of all, as Philip Huang notes, the strength of Madsen’s approach is that he is completely honest about his moral purpose (1993:222). Writing on civil society, indeed the very use and definition of the term “civil society” has always been fundamentally normative. In the case of China, most of the recent scholarship on “the search for civil society” (the title of an influential book by Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan) is motivated by the identification of civil society as playing a major role in bringing about the downfall of communist regimes across Eastern Europe, and a desire for such a force to be found in China (White et al. (1996:2). Autonomy from the state is a particular concern, and seen to be an essential prerequisite for groups to be classified as “true” civil society in this writing, because the exercise of state power is seen as antithetical to individual freedom, an ideal accorded moral primacy in the liberal perspective that underlies this literature. The fact that this literature follows in the wake of the downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe is commonly noted, but beyond this the constellation of normative concerns that underwrites the literature on civil society in China is rarely made explicit, let alone highlighted. Madsen, then, takes an important first step in placing his moral purpose at the forefront of his discussion and in making it available for debate and contestation. There are, however, some problems both with the norms that he outlines and with the conceptual place he accords them. These will be addressed shortly.

Another feature of Madsen’s paper that sets him apart from other scholars in this field is his emphasis on the need to find ways to “get inside” the groups that might constitute civil society, so as to understand the nature and the quality of relationships that those groups engage in.<sup>4</sup> As just mentioned, amongst the several works on associations in China that were published in the 1990s, the dominant concern was to identify a civil society of associations that were independent of the state that, as in Eastern Europe, could play a central role in a transition to democracy. By the late 1990s, however, a general consensus seems to have been reached that whatever civil society could be said to exist in China, it wasn’t really autonomous of the state, and therefore wasn’t much of a force for democratization. Interest in civil society in China waned, but an alternative model that gained a great deal of favour as a way of explaining social and political trends in China was that of corporatism. According to this model, the state seeks to establish or recognize a limited number of organizations as the sole representatives of particular sectoral interests. It then establishes a pact with those organizations, whereby the latter is granted some degree of autonomy in their

spheres of operation, on the proviso that these organizations exercise discipline and control over their membership in the interests of the “greater good” as it is determined by the state (Unger and Chan 1996:95-97).

This model has certain important advantages over the civil society model for explicating the Chinese situation. In the last two decades three things have motivated the Chinese state to allow an expansion in the associational sphere: First, a desire to streamline government administration; second, a recognition that economic associations, including associations of entrepreneurs, professional groups, and industrial and trade associations have an important role to play in stimulating economic development; and third, a search for ways to improve social and welfare services without eating into government budgets (*Civil Society in the Making* 2001:10-11). A further incentive for the Chinese state to allow the growth of autonomous and semi-autonomous associations has been that, over the last two decades, international donors have increasingly sought the participation of non-governmental organizations as a prerequisite for the funding of development projects (Clarke (1998:37). On the other hand, there has been an ongoing fear amongst Chinese state leaders that a diverse and expanding array of social organizations might enable or promote the incitement of social unrest or opposition to the state. The result has been the drafting of regulations for the registration of social organizations that are very much in accord with the corporatist model, including a stipulation that there be no more than one organization representing a particular interest at any one administrative level. This effectively ensures the continued dominance of the state through affiliated mass organizations such as the All China Women’s Federation and the All China Federation of Trade Unions. There can be no second women’s association existing alongside and on an equal footing with the Women’s Federation at any level, whether it be national, provincial or at a lower level. It is possible, however, to register a more narrowly defined association, such as a provincial women’s business managers’ association, for example.<sup>5</sup>

One of the limitations of the corporatist model is that it cannot account for the numerous and varied ways in which groups and individuals have been able to manipulate, negotiate with, contest and get around state power, to the extent that the day-to-day activities and the way in which they get things done often seem to have very little to do with the state policies, regulations and structures that are said to constrain them. It is important to note, for example, that a great many social organizations simply do not bother to register according to the regulations, or else they fiddle the rules with the help of officials in state bodies with whom they have connections.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the corporatist model is most useful in explaining the relationship between associations and the state. But it does little to illuminate the aims of the organizers of associations, the relationship between associations and their members and constituencies, and, perhaps most importantly, the particular ways in which associations, whether they be truly autonomous of the state, semi-autonomous or even wholly within the state, might contribute to a growing public sphere; a forum or forums in which a wide range of opinions are expressed, addressing questioning, challenging or modifying state practices, or otherwise issues of common social concern.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper I follow Madsen’s lead in the three respects just outlined.<sup>8</sup> I argue for, and try to outline, a particular approach to civil society in China that is explicitly

normative. I also view the political effects of civil society as stemming not just from the relationship between its constituent associations and the state but also from the practices and discourses of those associations, the relationships they establish both internally and with others, and the nature and quality of their contributions to the public sphere. In this paper, therefore, I focus less on the relationship between the Migrant Women's Club and the state, but more on the micropolitics of the organization; the aims and orientations of the group's organizers, the relationships between the organizers and the group's members, the gossip that goes on behind the scenes, and the nature and effect of their activities.

There are, however, some deficiencies, first of all in the particular ways in which Madsen makes a claim for a normative approach and, secondly, in his ideals. These need to be clarified before we can proceed.

Madsen's statement of moral purpose accords well with feminist and critical theorists' perspectives, according to which not only is it impossible to keep one's morals and politics out of one's research but, further, that "good research" is that which contributes to efforts to further political aims, in particular justice, equality and freedom.<sup>9</sup> This is a view of research that I am thoroughly committed to, and I have no problems with Madsen's claims that "we have to find ways of assessing the qualities that contribute to a civil society capable of leading the way toward a democratic public sphere" (1993:190). Nevertheless, I agree with Philip Huang when he warns that "the problem with Madsen's type of approach ... is that wishful thinking can all too easily be substituted for an accurate grasp of what was and is. ... Advocatory intent can easily blind us to other important changes and developments, simply because they seem irrelevant to our given concerns. When that happens, even the best intended moral visions can become rigid ideological dictates that distort historical reality" (Huang 1993:222-23). The solution to this, perhaps, is not to reject the idea that research should be guided by moral visions, but to cultivate a degree of humility about one's moral visions: to have a perception of them as being always in process, incomplete and open to debate and contestation; and to be on the constant lookout for other visions, arguments and empirical evidence that indicate flaws in, or viable alternatives to, one's values or approach as well as for evidence that confirms their validity. This is, of course, all the more important when one's research crosses into other cultures, where circumstances, histories and other people's moral visions might make a complete nonsense of one's own.

What, then, of the particular moral purpose that Madsen articulates? On the surface, his desire for groups that are "civil", that are "forward-looking" and "open to rational communication with groups different from themselves" is unobjectionable. But what exactly is "civility?" What is "rational communication," and how are these goals to be cultivated? In his paper, Madsen draws heavily on the early writing of Jürgen Habermas and it is clear that his references to "civility" and "rational communication" are echoes of Habermas's celebration of the emergence of a critical "bourgeois public sphere" in eighteenth-century England and Continental Europe, and his sadness at its deterioration in the nineteenth century.

According to Habermas, with developments in capitalism and the rise of a bourgeoisie, a "civil society" emerged, consisting of clubs and associations, including

philanthropic, professional and cultural groups. The mainly male, bourgeois members of these groups then formed and contributed to a lively “public sphere” of discussion and debate, carried out in coffee houses and other meeting places and in a newly emerging array of periodicals. Initially consisting of literary discussion, this “public sphere in the world of letters” then paved the way for the emergence of a public sphere in the political realm. This led to the creation of a new kind of state, which sought legitimacy in the assent of “rational” public opinion, this being, as Madsen notes, the origins of liberal democracy in Western Europe and America (1993:185). Central to the conception of the “rationality” of public opinion was the ideal of the public sphere as being a sphere that was set apart from both the “private” sphere of the home and the market and the state, a space for debating and deliberating over issues of common concern, rather than for furthering private interests, for buying and selling or for wielding coercive power (Fraser 1999:110-11). In this sphere “equality” and “liberty” were to reign; it was a sphere to which all citizens had equal and free access and in which issues relating to individual status and rank were bracketed in the interest of the common good. I quote from Habermas:

The bourgeois public’s critical public debate took place in principle without regard to all preexisting social and political rank and in accord with universal rules. ... The results that under these conditions issued from the public process of critical debate lay claim to being in accord with reason; intrinsic to the idea of a public opinion born of the power of the better argument was the claim to that morally pretentious rationality that strove to discover what was at once just and right. Public opinion was supposed to do justice to “the nature of the case.” (2001:54)

According to Habermas, the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere were never fulfilled. In particular, the ideal of open and free access to the public sphere was not achieved, for in reality women, being thought to belong solely within the “private” sphere, were excluded, as were those men who did not have an education and did not own property. Furthermore, when in the nineteenth century the public sphere *was* opened up to those beyond the bourgeoisie, it deteriorated into a mass of competing interest groups and, finally, with the rise of modern mass media, corporate capitalism and the modern welfare state, critical public scrutiny of the state gave way to public relations and the manufacture and manipulation of public tastes and public consumption (Fraser 1999:112; Madsen 1993:185).

For all its limitations in reality, for Habermas and for many others, the Enlightenment bourgeois ideal of a public sphere was, and remains to this day, nevertheless an ideal worth striving for, the question being how to achieve it, given the radically altered conditions under which we now live. However, Geoff Eley, Mary Ryan, Nancy Fraser and others argue that there are problems with the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere that go well beyond the fact that it did not quite make it, in terms of achieving free and open access to all. For these scholars, the very notion of “rational public opinion” supposedly distilled from the deliberation of free and equal citizens concerned with the common good was in fact constructed through a process of political conflict, in which a male bourgeoisie sought to legitimate a new form of class rule by excluding other groups from participation in its public sphere and, furthermore,

by excoriating those in counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics and proletarian publics who developed alternative styles of political speech and behaviour (Fraser 1999:116-17).<sup>10</sup> Among other things, as Nancy Fraser points out, this process "helps explain the exacerbation of sexism characteristic of the liberal public sphere; new gender norms enjoining feminine domesticity and a sharp separation of public and private spheres functioned as key signifiers of bourgeois difference from both higher and lower social strata" (1999:114-15).<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary China is, of course, vastly different from eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Europe. However, one can trace certain similarities between aspects of the Chinese scene and aspects of the European Enlightenment outlined in the works of Habermas, Fraser and others. These similarities are enough, I would suggest, to warrant a certain measure of scepticism and caution with regard to Richard Madsen's ideal for China: a democratic public sphere to which "civil" associations contribute on the basis of open and rational communication.

The first questions we must ask are who sets the terms for inclusion into, and exclusion from, public discourse in contemporary China, what are the terms and through what historical processes have those terms been defined? The answer to the first question must be primarily, though not exclusively, the state, intellectuals broadly defined and, increasingly, the market. There are obvious ways in which the public sphere is constrained, we could say crippled, by both the state and the market. First of all, as I have noted, the state has implemented corporatist-style regulations in order to limit the number and variety of social organizations that can operate legally, though its success in achieving this goal is far from complete. A second obvious limitation on public debate results from state policies and regulations limiting freedom of expression. However, whilst the Chinese state continues to assert the right and the responsibility to shape and control its citizens' views and values, processes of economic reform and globalization since the 1980s have made it increasingly hard for it to do so, with the market also becoming a powerful force. Thus, in the mainstream media the chief terms of what gets said are, to put it simply, what will sell, but without pushing too far beyond the boundaries of what is deemed permissible by state authorities. Here, Habermas's concerns about the degradation of the public sphere are at least as relevant as they have been in relation to Europe since the nineteenth century. As Daniel Lynch has argued, far from enabling a critical public sphere to emerge, the loosening of state control over the media has produced a society awash in titillating, violent and (seemingly) apolitical entertainment (1999:235).

There are, however, journals, television programmes and other forms of media, characterized by "serious" investigative journalism that seeks to draw readers' attention to a range of social concerns through lively intellectual debate. None of this is completely autonomous of the state. As Wang Hui, the editor of a prominent intellectual journal, *Dushu* (Reading), notes, all of the well-known "independent" and "unofficial" journals, including his own, are published by state-owned publishing houses, but they have no proper ISBN identification and their legal status is ambiguous. Thus, "the public sphere in China is not a mediating space between state and society; rather, it is the result of the penetration of society into a certain space in the state" (Wang Hui 1998:33). This, I think, is a crucial point. But it does not negate the fact that there is,

nevertheless, a great deal of exposure of social problems and of public, critical debate going on in this sphere over a range of cultural and political issues.

Contributors to this public sphere include journalists, academics and members of associations oriented toward social research, social welfare and development, and social activists, including the organizers of the NGO that I will be examining shortly. Most of these are what they themselves would call “intellectuals.”

Both intellectuals and the state in China today are enormously concerned with “*wenming*,” a term which translates most directly as “spiritual civilization” or “civility” in English and, as part of this, the “*suzhi*” or “quality” of the population. These terms have a somewhat different history and a different set of meanings to the term “civility” as used by Richard Madsen or by Habermas. However, the concerns voiced by Nancy Fraser and others about Enlightenment ideals of “civility” are equally pertinent to Chinese state and intellectual ideals of “*wenming*.”

The origins of the contemporary Chinese concern with *suzhi* and *wenming* can be traced to the period of intellectual ferment in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century and are closely linked to colonialism and to what others have referred to as “internal orientalism” or “self-orientalism” on the part of Chinese intellectuals.<sup>12</sup> During this period, intellectuals were desperately seeking both a new, revitalized role for themselves as the moral guardians and leaders of the nation and an answer to the question “what is wrong with China,” urgently posed by defeat at the hands of colonial powers. This question was and is a key problematic in Chinese intellectual and state ruminations on how to achieve modernity (Fitzgerald 1996:108). By the 1920s it had become almost universally accepted by intellectuals that “what was wrong with China” were defects in the national character, and especially in the peasantry, a stance that was both a reaction to, and in many cases a mirroring of, Western colonial treatises on the topic. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the “peasant” became a central theme in literature and socio-political discourse. As Myron Cohen notes,

The notion of the peasantry as a culturally distinct and alien “other,” passive, helpless, unenlightened, in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs, desperately in need of education and cultural reform, and for such improvements in their circumstances totally dependent on the leadership and efforts of rational and informed outsiders, became fixed in the outlook of China’s modern intellectual and political elites. For the elites governing China, or seeking to assume power over it, this image of the peasant confirmed their own moral claim to an inherently superior, privileged position in national political life, and their conviction that populism or popular democracy were utterly unacceptable if China was to avoid chaos and achieve national strength. (1993:155)

After 1949, the Communist Party instituted structures and policies that bled the countryside dry in order to finance industrialization. However, in theory and in official media and in literature, peasants were most commonly depicted as heroes leading the revolution or, more typically, as the masses who had previously suffered from feudal backwardness, but were now being lifted out of that backwardness by the Communist Party.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao tried to redress the divide between urban and rural residents and that between intellectuals and ordinary people by sending urban

intellectuals and students to the countryside to learn from the peasants. In both the short and the long term, that policy was a singular failure, for what urbanites “learned,” more than anything else, was how different and how “backward” the peasants were in comparison with themselves. With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the demise of Maoism this lesson, combined with the realization that on the world stage China as a nation was itself “backward,” led to a re-emergence of the question “what is wrong with China.” The construction of a range of “answers” to that question by officials, intellectuals and journalists drew inspiration, on the one hand, from capitalism and, on the other, from intellectual discourses dominant in China in the first half of the twentieth century.

Hence, since the 1980s concerns about weaknesses in the national character and the “low quality” of the population, especially the peasantry, women and minority ethnic groups, have once more featured prominently in a range of elite discourses, both official and avant-garde. For example, in 1986 a State Council report on rural poverty laid the blame for China’s backwardness on a deficiency in the quality of the rural population. This report, in turn, was used as background reference material for the television series *Heshang* (River Elegy) in which one of the central messages was likewise, that China was being held back by its backward peasantry (Anagnost 1997:121). Since the mid-1980s one of the Communist Party’s key political campaigns has been the Movement for the Construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization, central to which have been calls to raise the quality of the peoples’ thinking and morals (Zhonggong Zhongyang 1996:10-11). And finally, raising the quality of women is a central concern for the Women’s Federation, coming in at number two in their list of six tasks to undertake in their work with rural women in the first five years of the twenty-first century (Kua shiji 1999).<sup>13</sup>

According to the prominent intellectual Gan Yang,

In China today, mainstream intellectuals suffer a conspicuous deficit of identification with, and commitment to, democracy. This deficit has two results. First, it leads to political philistinism, or what Max Weber calls “short-sighted law and order philistinism.” Ironically, this philistinism often masquerades as pseudoelitism. For Weber, a pseudoelite typically keeps surveillance over the lower levels of society, believing that all dangers come from the masses. Yet, as he points out, the risk of a transitional society does not lie in the masses, since “the key problem of social political problems is not the economic situation of the ruled but the political quality of the ruling and rising classes.” The current fashion in Chinese intellectual society is to blow the trumpet against general democracy in connection with political reform. This only proves Weber’s observation that the backwardness of a nation’s political life applies not to the backwardness of its people but to the backwardness of its elite, and one of the sure signs of the backwardness of a national elite is its use of the cliché “the backwardness of the people.” (1998:52)

I am in broad agreement with Gan Yang’s polemical stance here, and whilst we should not overestimate the role of intellectuals (1998:52), a situation in which intellectuals deem a very large proportion of the population to be “uncivil,” “backward” and not worthy of inclusion into a public sphere does not augur well for Richard Madsen’s ideal of a democratic public sphere that would debate the common good. If we are to heed

Richard Madsen's call to identify which associations in China might contribute to a democratic public sphere, we need, then, to critically examine their relationship to the discourse of "*wenming*."

Beyond this, on what criteria do we base our evaluations of particular associations and their likely political effects? Here, I turn once more to the writing of Western critical theorists and feminists for insights, both into what the critical issues might be and how those issues might be addressed.

First of all, in distinction to most liberal advocates of civil society, critical theorists believe that an ideal democratic public sphere can arise only from a civil society that is, at least conceptually, distinct from the market as well as the state. Whereas liberals see individual voluntarism as the defining feature of an ideal civil society, critical theorists see communicative autonomy as crucial. For critical theorists, then, an ideal civil society is one consisting of associations characterized by communicative interaction that is not distorted either by the state's exercise of power or by market forces (Chambers 2002:93-94). How can such communicative interaction be achieved and maintained? First of all, legal and constitutional safeguards are necessary, but they alone are not enough. In his most recent writing on civil society Habermas argues that a public sphere characterized by communicative autonomy can only be achieved and protected through the efforts of participants themselves to create and defend it. "Actors who support the public sphere," argues Habermas, "are distinguished by the *dual orientation* of their political engagement: with their programs, they directly influence the political system, but at the same time they are also reflexively concerned with revitalizing and enlarging civil society and the public sphere as well as with confirming their own identities and capacities to act" (1996:370).<sup>14</sup>

Second, most feminists and critical theorists see pluralism and diversity as vital for a democratic public sphere. In other words, the notion of democracy as being grounded in the realization of "the common good" through "rational" debate has been replaced by a notion of democracy as consisting of numerous and heterogenous conversations and arguments, never finally resolved, between competing interests and competing notions of the good. In this perspective, it is desirable to have associations in civil society that actively work to increase the diversity of voices heard in the public sphere, perhaps, above all, by providing the resources that would enable the participation of those subaltern groups who would otherwise be prevented through disadvantage or discrimination from doing so. It is also desirable for civil society to include a range of diverse associations or, as Nancy Fraser puts it, for there to be numerous publics and counterpublics, rather than just one public sphere.

Fraser's rationale for diversity stems from a consideration of the problems posed by inequality for a democracy based on the ideal of free and open access to, and participation in, public discourse.<sup>15</sup> As Fraser points out, "in stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday contexts and in official public spheres" (1999:120). Moreover, these pressures, she suggests, are amplified, rather than mitigated, by the political economy of the public sphere. This is a point also made by Anne Phillips, who, in her summary of feminist attitudes toward

civil society, argues that the type and memberships of associations dominating a civil society will inevitably reflect the existing distribution of resources and power in a society (2002:80). Furthermore, she says, “voluntary associations often operate on a borderline between friendship and politics, bringing together like-minded people who share similar views or enjoy the same intellectual or leisure pursuits. Feminists have been quick to spot the potential coerciveness in this, and the way it can work to disempower those who feel at odds with the dominant consensus but lack the confidence to expose themselves before people they regard as ‘sisters’ or friends” (2002:81).

Nancy Fraser argues that “to have a public sphere in which interlocutors can deliberate as peers, it is not sufficient merely to bracket social inequality. Instead, a necessary condition for participatory parity is that systemic social inequalities be eliminated” (1999:121). In essence, it is not possible to have an ideal, democratic public sphere in an unequal society. For Fraser, then, the task of critical theory is, first of all, “to render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them” (121) and, secondly, to ask “What form of public life comes closest to approaching that ideal (of full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation)? What institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups?” (122). The answer, she suggests, lies in arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics and subaltern “counterpublics,” rather than in establishing a single, comprehensive, overarching public (122).

For Fraser, subaltern counterpublics are arenas “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1999:123). Such counterpublics have a dual character, she goes on: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies” (124).

Underlying this discussion of subaltern counterpublics is an understanding of public discourse, citizenship, of identity that is very different from the assumptions embedded in the Enlightenment ideal of public sphere, and in Habermas’s discussion of that ideal. To put it briefly, Enlightenment ideals of public sphere assumed a clear distinction between “private” and “public” and the possibility that citizens could put aside their “private interests” in order to debate the common good. For Fraser and other feminists and critical theorists, however, there is no *a priori* boundary between private and public. Nor do people come to the public sphere with fully formed identities and clear ideas, either of what their “private interests” are or of how those interests relate to the common good. Rather, the public sphere is itself a prime site for the construction and enactment of social identities, interests and values. As Fraser argues, therefore, “what will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through

discursive contestation. It follows that no topics should be ruled off limits in advance of such contestation” (1999:129).

Feminists and critical theorists, then, generally value diversity and difference between associations and between publics. But how much diversity can be tolerated? How, for example, do we evaluate associations that promote racism or sexism or other antidemocratic, illiberal ideas? For Richard Madsen, this issue is of particular concern, because, as did many others in the 1990s, he fears that the fragmentation and divisiveness that emerged in post-Communist Eastern Europe might also occur in China. According to Madsen, civil society in Eastern Europe might have led the transition to democracy by fatally challenging the power of the Leninist state. But the elements of that civil society came together on the basis of “particularistically shared memories” and “it is just such memories, differentially shared and luridly embellished, that are justifying the vicious civil war in the Balkans and varying degrees of ethnic, religious, or just plain fratricidal conflict throughout Eastern Europe” (Madsen 1993:195). Madsen suggests that the solution to this problem is not to suppress particularistic and divisive groups and their memories. Rather, he suggests that contexts need to be created in which overblown and vengeful memories might be deflated or calmed through critical scrutiny and by being balanced with reminders of facts that the vengeance seekers have conveniently forgotten. For this to happen, he argues,

the variegated memories of diverse communities have to be linked to an overarching master narrative - a plausible, resonant common vision of where a complex society has come from and where it is headed. For a while in the early history of the Soviet Union and in the first decade of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Communist Party seems to have created a story of the past and a vision of the future that resonated with the multiple stories that a wide range of diverse citizens told each other about themselves. Private memories were pulled into a public whole. ... In the postsocialist world, bereft of a plausible master narrative, diverse communities of citizens focus their attentions obsessively on the contradictions between their memories, the incompatibility of their hopes for the future. In the present situation, the greatest contribution of visionary statesmen may be to articulate the framework for new plausible, inclusive, generous master narratives that might channel disparate private memories into widely shared public hopes. (Madsen 1993:196-97).

How we judge Madsen’s suggestion might depend on how we define the term “master narrative,” the question being how does one develop a master narrative that is sufficiently coherent and specific to pull diverse memories into a public whole, whilst also being generous and inclusive enough to enable the diversity of a critical public sphere necessary for a democracy. Certainly, a commitment to conversation<sup>16</sup> needs to be cultivated, as does a general agreement with the principles of equality, justice, freedom and democracy, however one defines those terms. Beyond this, however, given precisely the examples of the Soviet Union and of Maoist China, I think we should be wary of master narratives. At any rate, any narrative(s) that can serve a critical public sphere and a democracy will have to come from within the public sphere itself, a public sphere distinguished by heterogeneity and by conversation free from the distorting effects of state power and market forces.<sup>17</sup>

A different perspective on the problem of bad civil society and how to deal with it is put forward by Simone Chambers, who argues for the need to examine why it is that some people want to join associations that promote antidemocratic ideals. Following Seyla Benhabib, Chambers points to a pervasive discontent and sense of frustration stemming from a loss of control over one's life and the conditions that determine one's chances as being characteristic of modernity. When their frustrations are not addressed, some people retreat into apathy and others turn to groups that offer scapegoats that are easy to blame. "Powerlessness makes people susceptible to solutions that, at the very least, offer the satisfaction of venting one's anger and frustration onto a clearly identified villain" (Chambers 2002:104). The solution, Chambers suggests, is an "accessible and efficacious public sphere", one that is democratic and that can recognize and respond to citizens' demands (2002:103).

This is pertinent, not only to Madsen's concern about groups with "particularistic and divisive memories" but also to Chinese intellectual fears that mass political participation might result in a return of Cultural Revolution-style chaos and violence. These fears may not be unfounded, for over the last twenty years of reform violent and large-scale riots have become more and more frequent in the Chinese countryside. According to Jonathan Unger, for example, in the first half of 1998 alone, more than 3,200 collective protests occurred. Of these, more than 420 involved confrontations in which rural government buildings were surrounded, with casualties reaching 7,400, including more than 1,200 officials or police wounded (Unger 2002:197, discussed in O'Brien 2002:141). With Chambers, one might argue that the denial of efficacious mass political participation is itself resulting in a turn to violence, and that the best way of addressing this problem is to seek to include "the masses" into some form of civil society or public sphere.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that, in the short term, moves in this direction would reduce conflict *per se*. Indeed, empirical evidence from China and elsewhere suggests that protest *increases* when there is a relaxation of controls on political expression or participation, and when the state's capacity or will to repress dissent declines (O'Brien 2002:151).<sup>19</sup> It is likely, however, that as a public sphere develops and becomes more responsive, the expression of protest will become less violent and dangerous.

We return, once more, then, to the need for a civil society characterized by open access and diversity, comprised of associations representing a range of social groups, especially subaltern groups, that are active in promoting both the interests of those groups in the public sphere and the existence and enhancement of an open, critical and democratic public sphere. Let us turn now to a consideration of how and to what extent the Working Sisters Club might contribute to the furthering of such an ideal and also how this ideal looks in light of the example set by this particular association.

As I noted at the beginning of my paper, the Working Sisters Club was established in 1996 by the editorial office of the journal *Rural Women Knowing All*. Since its inception in 1993 the journal had run a number of columns publishing letters and stories sent in by rural women, most of them in their teens and twenties, who had left home to seek work in Beijing and other cities. Many of these women complained of the hardships, exploitation and discrimination they faced in the city and the loneliness

and alienation they felt.<sup>20</sup> The Migrant Women's Club was set up in response to these expressions of alienation. A letter aimed at recruiting members to the club said:

From today, you people who have come from far and wide at last have your own home in Beijing. ... Social development created a gulf between city and countryside, but the progress of time once more requires that urbanites and country people work together to bridge that gulf. In today's era of reform and opening up, you have bravely entered the city and have paid with your toil and sweat to build and develop the city. Your achievements must gain people's understanding and respect. The Migrant Women's Club is a place of warmth, where there is no discrimination, no cold indifference, no inequality. Everyone will be able to say what is on their minds without feeling inhibited, will encourage each other and will make many new friends. (Zhi dagongmeimen de yi feng gongkai xin 1996)<sup>21</sup>

The chief editor and founder of *Rural Women Knowing All* is Xie Lihua, who is a member of the All China Women's Federation and a deputy editor of *China Women's News*, a national daily published by the All China Women's Federation. Xie Lihua is in her mid-fifties and belongs to the generation of urbanites who were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution before they could complete their tertiary education. She is a very impressive woman, and a well-known figure on the social activism scene in China. She played an important role in the UN International Conference on Women in 1995 and has won a number of awards for her work, both in China and overseas. She also has made extremely useful connections, both in officialdom and amongst academics; for example, when she founded *Rural Women Knowing All*, she signed up Wu Qing, a professor at the Beijing Foreign Languages University, deputy to the Beijing People's Congress and daughter of the well-known female writer Xie Bingxin, as a co-initiator and adviser. Since then, Wu Qing has often participated in activities run by the journal and has provided them with a great deal of support.

Being affiliated with *China Women's News*, the editorial office of *Rural Women Knowing All* is able to draw on infrastructure and funding from the larger paper, but in addition, Xie Lihua has attracted large sums of money from private companies and individual donors in China and abroad, and from overseas development agencies, including The Global Fund for Women, The Asia Foundation, Oxfam Hongkong and the Ford Foundation.<sup>22</sup> With the money donated, *Rural Women Knowing All* has funded, not just the Migrant Women's Club and the Rural Women's Technical School, but also a variety of localized projects aimed at providing practical assistance to rural women, including literacy training and micro-loans for business ventures (*Rural Women Knowing All* 1997).

In her efforts with *Rural Women Knowing All* Xie Lihua has been pathbreaking. As I mentioned, this is the only national periodical devoted to rural women. It has a circulation of more than 230,000, in comparison to *Reading*, the intellectual journal mentioned above, which has a circulation of about 100,000. The journal provides some technical information, for example on innovative farming techniques, and publishes reports on successful rural women. One thing that sets it apart somewhat from other journals is that it also runs a large number of letters and stories sent in by rural women

and migrant women themselves. Another thing that makes it unusual is its coverage and discussion of controversial issues. Thus, not only does it investigate the difficult lives of rural migrant women, which, when it began, was rarely addressed in the rest of the press, but it also runs columns on topics like domestic violence and suicide that other periodicals don't touch. The Migrant Women's Club was also the first of its kind in the country, and remains one of only very few such organizations. In the context of a sharp rural/urban divide and a high level of intellectual elitism, these initiatives are extraordinary. As Wu Qing said about *Rural Women Knowing All*, "nobody would take on the task of creating a magazine for country bumpkins, as well as the double handicap of dealing with something concerning both *rural* and *women*. No one dared. People are afraid of losing money. ... Xie Lihua had the guts to do it. She has had opportunities to go to rural areas, so she knew the needs and demands and the market" (quoted in Milwertz 2000:176).

Let us turn now to the Working Sisters Club itself, to the people involved in it, and the activities they run. In the six years in which it has been running, the Club has gained a membership of more than 400 people. Most of these are young rural women, though there are also some male members. According to a survey conducted in April 1999, members ages ranged from 16 to 36, the average being 21.5 years old. Most (81 percent) came from the four provinces of Shandong, Sichuan, Hebei and Henan, but had been in Beijing for three years or more. Eighty-two percent were educated to the level of primary or junior high school. Seventy-two percent worked as either cleaners or nannies, with smaller numbers employed in other low-status manual jobs (Li Tao 1999:75).

The Club engages in three different kinds of activities. First of all, it holds a meeting every second Sunday, to which it often invites guest speakers. It also organizes social gatherings and outings, especially round National Day and Spring Festival, and on one occasion a few years ago it put on a joint wedding celebration for a number of migrant couples. In the past, the Club has also run classes, for example in literacy, basic computing skills and English.

Secondly, the Club provides some help to migrants looking for work and gives support to migrant women in difficulty. For example, while I was there last year members of the Club were trying to help two young women who had been badly abused in their jobs as nannies. One of the women, Chen Ailing,<sup>23</sup> had been beaten daily over a period of several months, and had no wages paid. Members of the Club visited her in hospital, made donations, helped find a lawyer who took her case to court and defended her for free, and went along to the court hearings. The other young woman, Liu Yu, was locked in a room by her employer and raped repeatedly. She jumped out of a window on the third storey and ended up in hospital with a broken pelvis. When members of the Migrant Women's Club heard what had happened in the press, they visited Liu Yu in hospital and from then on did their best to offer her support and to help her take her case to court. In part in response to their experiences trying to support Chen Ailing and Liu Yu, the Club and *Rural Women Knowing All* moved at the end of 2002 to establish a separate new group for the protection of migrant women's rights.

The third area in which the Club is involved is in the media and in lobbying the state. Thus, in addition to individual club members frequently contributing stories to

*Rural Women Knowing All*, the staff of the club put out a newsletter for migrants, and starting from last year they also worked with the *Rural Women Knowing All* editorial office to publish a journal specifically for migrant women, called *Dagongmei* (Working Sister), in which a large proportion of the articles and stories are written by Club members. The Club also invites journalists to the Club's activities and seeks publicity for its social events. In addition to this, members of *Rural Women Knowing All* and of the Migrant Women's Club have lobbied, with some success, for a simplification and reduction in cost of the procedures that rural people must go through in order to become legal residents in Beijing, and for the Women's Federation to pay more attention to the rights of rural migrant women. Finally, *Rural Women Knowing All* has organized two national forums on the rights of migrant women workers. These involved the participation of more than one hundred grass roots Women's Federation representatives, local government officials, journalists, academics and activists from across China and other parts of the world and several members of the Migrant Women's Club.<sup>24</sup> One of the central issues debated in these forums was the need to reform or abolish the Household Registration System, which is the policy most responsible for maintaining a rigid divide between rural and urban China and for making it enormously difficult for rural migrants to integrate into urban society.<sup>25</sup>

The person formally in charge of the Migrant Women's Club is Li Tao, a thirty-something male journalist with *Rural Women Knowing All*. Both Li Tao and his wife Li Zhen, who is also a journalist, were originally from poor rural areas in Shandong, but went to university in Beijing. Perhaps because of their personal histories, they have considerable sympathy for the members of the Migrant Women's Club and between them have probably written more articles exposing the difficult situation of migrant women in Beijing than anyone else. The members of the Migrant Women's Club do not see them as "one of them," though, nor do they see themselves as such.

The day-to-day business of the Club is run by two office staff. In 2001, when I visited the Club, a new person had just taken charge: Wang Laoshi. She was an elderly Beijing woman, who had taken on her position with the Club voluntarily after retiring from the editorial office of *Rural Women Knowing All*. With her working full-time in the office was a rural migrant woman in her twenties. She, however, left after just a few months, complaining that the work was too onerous and the pay too low. The young woman who replaced her likewise told me that she wanted to do the job as best she could, because so many migrants needed their help, but there was just too much to be done and she was not paid enough.

In previous years, the Club was a very lively place. During the week, there would be migrant women and men dropping in all the time to chat with the people in the office and with each other, and the Sunday activities were attended by upwards of a hundred people. In 2001, though, numbers dropped considerably. Usually, when I went in during the week, I'd meet maybe one or two other visitors in the office, and there were usually no more than thirty people at the Sunday gatherings. From what I could gather, much of this was to do with changes in personnel. Previously, the office had been staffed by Zhou Ling, a woman in her thirties, who had originally migrated to Beijing from a poor village in Anhui, twenty years ago. The members of the club were very fond of Zhou Ling and called her Older Sister and said that she really cared about

other migrants and was always very supportive. When she worked in the office, they said, everyone wanted to come in and talk to her, but now it just wasn't the same. However, there was friction between Zhou Ling and Xie Lihua, and to a lesser extent Li Tao. Zhou Ling complained bitterly to me that she had been told to organize a range of activities and get as many rural women involved as possible, but she was never given any authority. On one occasion she asked Xie Lihua to tell her who had donated money to the Club, because she thought it would be nice to write up the information and publicize it. But Xie Lihua was furious at her and told her she did not have the status to be party to that kind of information. In the end, Zhou Ling left the office, though she continued to be involved in many of the Club's activities.

In the second half of 2001, the Sunday sessions the Club ran generally lasted for three hours. During the first half of the session we usually started off singing a song together. Then there'd often be a period when we were meant to pair up with someone with whom we were not yet acquainted and get to know each other a little before reporting back to the whole group. In the second half of the session we'd have a specific topic to talk about. For some of these sessions one of the women had been assigned the task of organizing and chairing the discussion, and she would get us to respond to particular questions and sometimes perform small skits. At other sessions there'd be a specialist invited to talk. During the five-month period that I was there last year a counsellor came to talk about psychological issues, two lawyers came to talk about the Labour Law and the protection of migrant workers' rights, one session was about environmental protection, and on another occasion they invited someone to speak about AIDS.<sup>26</sup>

The most prominent theme running through these Sunday sessions, as indeed through the columns devoted to the situation of migrant women in *Rural Women Knowing All*, was that migrant women should overcome their sense of inferiority and that they can, and should, "stand on their own two feet"; that, in the language of the Women's Federation, they should cultivate the four 'self's: self-confidence, self-reliance, belief in one's self, and strength of self. These were principles that I approved of wholeheartedly, but I found that the manner in which they were expressed, especially in the formal talks given by guest speakers, made me very uncomfortable. To give you an example, I quote an entry I wrote in my diary about one of the sessions:

A woman from a psychological counselling service came to talk about protecting one's psychological health. I got really upset. ... It seemed to me that she was quite offensively patronizing and that what she was saying was quite inappropriate. For example, she said, "some people decide that their environment doesn't suit them. In fact, that is the wrong way of looking at things. You must look for a way to adapt to your environment, not the other way around." And she talked about the need to know oneself and to look for work that you were interested in and the need to bring your abilities into full play (*fahui ziji de nengli*). And she put a lot of emphasis on the need to be independent, rather than always turning to other people to solve one's problems. In a lot of ways, it all made sense and was quite sound advice. But I was sitting there, opposite Liu Yu, whose legs are still so smashed up she can't even sit properly, let alone walk any distance, and behind her was Chen Ailing's brother. The distance between their realities and her little speech, all carefully prepared and written down and said with such "expert, scientific" authority, quite

appalled me, and I kept thinking, I bet they've been through more than she would ever be able to come to terms with psychologically. But maybe it is I who is in the wrong. Is it better to tell someone that, with the right psychological attitude, they can be strong and can face any situation, or is it better to say up front that there are some things, some situations that destroy a human being psychologically? In reality, how much chance have these young women of preventing or stopping severe abuse and exploitation? And perhaps if that is beyond their means, it is better not to suggest to them that they should fight in that direction, but rather to try to boost their self-esteem, provide them with some psychological and other tools to cope with exploitation and horror just that little bit better, make them think that there are "experts" who can teach them how to deal with such things - perhaps that is a kind of comfort in itself?

It was hard for me to read how the other women felt about this talk, as about the other talks given by guest lecturers. At least outwardly, responses were neutral to this talk as to most others - not particularly negative, but not very enthusiastic either. Few people asked questions of the guest speakers or discussed at any length what they said either during the sessions or afterwards.

The sessions conducted by Wang Laoshi and the Club members themselves tended to be characterized by more discussion and debate and, as a result, were probably more useful than the guest speeches in terms of developing women's self-confidence and independence. Through these sessions members learned to introduce and talk about themselves in a semi-formal, semi-public forum and developed skills of presenting information and debating. For example, in one of the first meetings I attended the theme chosen for discussion by Wang Laoshi was "What is time? (*shijian shi shenme*)." Before the session started, Wang Laoshi wrote on a whiteboard, "Time is life (*shengming*), time is money (*jinqian*), time is a resource (*ziyuan*)." She then proceeded to argue, essentially, that it is important to manage one's time and not waste it, and to be on time, for example for meetings and when starting work. These themes were then taken up by the young woman who had been assigned the task of guiding the group discussion for the day. She gave each of the participants in the discussion a strip of paper with a literary quotation reiterating one or other of the themes that Wang Laoshi had outlined. She then asked us, each in turn, to discuss the significance of the quotation we had been given and to provide examples drawn from our own lives. Some did so, including one woman who tested the patience of everyone else by launching into an animated and very long story of how a friend stood her up. Others engaged in self-criticism about how bad they were at getting to meetings or work on time. However, several of us could not read our quotation or did not understand its import and had to ask our neighbours to explain it. Others expressed disagreement with the quotations they had been given or with the propositions that Wang Laoshi had made at the start of the session. One woman, in particular, said that having to wait for a friend for an hour or two was nothing; she felt that much of her life had been wasted, because as a young girl in a very poor village her wish to go to school had been thwarted and then as a migrant worker she had been continually exploited in dead-end jobs in which she could not develop her abilities. Wang Laoshi responded that one shouldn't think like that, that everyone, no matter what their situation, had the ability and the responsibility to make the most of their time. The first woman countered by saying that we can't always blame ourselves for things that happen to us, and another joined her saying, "We don't have

any choice (about wasting our lives), there's a whole generation of people for whom there's been no choice (*yi ge shidai de ren mei banfa*)."

Aside from the formal talks and discussions that I have described here, perhaps the most significant aspect of the Sunday sessions was the informal get-togethers that occurred at the beginning and end of the sessions. Most of the young women and men who came regularly to the Sunday meetings did so, in fact, to meet up with other migrants, more than to hear the formal talks. Some came early and chatted before the formal meeting got going, others came late, paid little attention during the meeting or chatted with their neighbours whilst the formal talk was going on and then hung around afterwards chatting, and often a group of us would go and have lunch together. These informal get-togethers were vitally important to the migrants, many of whom travelled up to two hours on the bus just to get to the Club. As the recruitment letter suggested it would be, the Club really had become like a home to migrants where they could make new friends and meet up with old ones and exchange gossip and news.

In a paper on the mission and prospects of the Migrant Women's Club Li Tao argued<sup>27</sup> that the cause of the social problems faced by rural women in the city – the frequent violations of their basic rights, their difficulties in finding a marriage partner, their sense of inferiority and their feelings of hopelessness about the future – all boiled down to one thing: In essence, their low quality meant that they were unable to manage the obstacles thrown up by a society in transition. Consequently, raising migrant women's quality was the most important means by which to address their problems.

For Li Tao, there were three aspects of club members' low quality that needed to be addressed: first of all, their "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*) needed improving. Through group discussions, excursions and holiday celebrations, he hoped that club members would feel like one big family and would be able to speak freely and give each other encouragement and thereby overcome their feelings of inferiority and loneliness; and through talks on issues relating to marriage and to adapting to city life, club members would overcome their bewilderment in the city and learn a greater degree of endurance and adaptability. Secondly, the quality of their thinking (*sixiang suzhi*) needed to be improved. He felt that by listening to the stories of rural women who were model achievers migrant women's fighting spirit and creativity would be kindled and they would be inspired to adopt a sense of historic responsibility for building the urban economy and lifting their home counties out of poverty. Finally, Li Tao felt that club members' educational or cultural quality (*wenhua suzhi*) needed raising, in other words they needed to improve their basic education and to develop technical skills. This, according to Li Tao, was the most basic need; the foundation from which the other kinds of quality could be developed.

"If striving for development through a focus on improving quality is the essence of the Migrant Women's Club's mission," Li Tao said, "then, in order to sustain this mission, the Club must do two things: It must devote everything to serving migrant women (*quanxin quanyi wei dagongmei fuwu*) and it must grow through collective participation (*zai gongtong canyu zhong chengzhang*). Only through serving them wholeheartedly would the club be able to raise migrant women's quality, and only by insisting on growing together through collective participation would they be able to

further the all-round progress of both the organization and its members” (Li Tao 1999:76).

It is important to be aware that this is a very public document. Li Tao spoke to this paper at the First National Forum on the Rights of Migrant Women Workers, which, as I mentioned, was organized by *Rural Women Knowing All* in 1999 and was attended by numerous Women’s Federation representatives and government officials, as well as academics, journalists and social activists. Neither Li Tao nor other members of *Rural Women Knowing All* use the rhetoric of “raising women’s quality” in ordinary conversation, but his conference paper was, like most of the other presentations, dominated by this rhetoric. In the case of many of the other speakers this seemed to be a more or less automatic and unconscious adoption of officialese, but Li Tao, I think, used this rhetoric quite deliberately in an effort to demonstrate the legitimacy and worthiness of the Migrant Women’s Club with respect to the state’s agenda of development and governance.

This is not to say that the Club’s aims and activities are not, in fact, in accordance with the state’s agenda. On the contrary, the Club’s activities can be seen to fit in quite neatly with the state’s aims of achieving “Socialist spiritual civilization.” The focus and goals of the Club are, however, somewhat different from those of the state. As I suggested earlier, for the state and for many intellectuals the “low quality” of the population is an obstacle to the modernization of the nation. Intellectuals, and indeed a large proportion of the urban population as a whole, deride the backwardness and low quality of rural residents and rural migrants in particular, and scapegoat them for a range of problems. And the state runs campaigns to improve the quality of the population, because the quality of the population is both a resource essential for the achievement of national modernity and a symbol of that modernity.

For Li Tao and Xie Lihua, achieving national modernity is also of enormous concern, but they stress the need to raise the quality of rural migrant women not simply as a means toward achieving that end. Rather, I believe that their primary aim is to enable rural women to join in the project of modernity alongside and on an equal footing with urbanites. Raising women’s quality, in the sense of educating them, both in literacy and technical skills and in new ways of thinking, is the means to enabling their full citizenship.

The discourse of raising people’s quality is in fact just one manifestation of a focus on educating people to be citizens that has a much longer and more continuous history. This focus on education or socialization, if you like, can be seen in the Confucian emphasis on the cultivation of virtue: in the early twentieth century focus on the need to drag China’s backward people into modernity; in the Maoist efforts to create the new socialist man and woman through speak bitterness sessions, small group political study sessions, large-scale political mobilization and socialist realist literature; and now in the Socialist Spiritual Civilization Campaign.

This is an approach to questions of citizenship and of how to create an ideal society that are somewhat different from both European Enlightenment ideas on the topic, and those of contemporary Western feminists and critical theorists. The Chinese ideal is not that already constituted citizens come together in rational, public debate to create a consensus about what constitutes the common good, which is the European

Enlightenment perspective. Nor is it the feminist and critical theorists' perspective according to which not just notions of what constitutes the common good but also citizens or the identity of citizens are constructed and contested through public discourse. It is, rather, that there is a correct path to the common good, already constituted, that we (i.e. intellectuals and leaders) must find. Citizens who can walk that path must then be created.

In terms of the ideal of equality and of promoting participatory parity as a prerequisite to achieving a democratic public sphere the Chinese focus on raising the people's quality is problematic in two ways. First of all, it accords with a "blame-the-victim" approach. It might be true, for example, that rural migrant women are in need of education, e.g. about their legal rights, but by far the greatest problems they face are social and structural. Putting the onus on migrant women themselves to improve their quality in order to successfully participate in a modernizing society accords very well with a capitalist ideology of entrepreneurship and freedom of opportunity, but it tends to obscure the structural inequalities preventing true freedom and absolves the state of the responsibility for addressing those inequalities.<sup>28</sup>

This was something that constantly bothered me about the Sunday sessions at the Migrant Women's Club. There was no talk of the social and structural inequalities and discrimination faced by migrant women, but, rather, all the emphasis was on teaching migrant women to adapt. Perhaps, as I reflected in my diary entry, the organizers of the Club and the visiting speakers didn't think that the women were in a position to be able to do anything about the inequalities they faced and so it was better for them that they learn to make the best of things instead. I also now think that the organizers thought it too politically dangerous to allow migrant women to talk openly and critically about fundamental inequalities – between men and women, and rural and urban citizens in particular – that are, at one and the same time, inherent to Chinese communism and also getting worse as a result of the current regime's turn to capitalism.

In other forums, however, Wang Laoshi, Li Tao, Xie Lihua and others at *Rural Women Knowing All* have tried to publicize basic social and systemic inequalities and to put pressure on the state to address them. As I mentioned, they have lobbied the Women's Federation to pay more attention to the rights of rural migrant women, they have organized forums to debate problems faced by migrant women, especially the Household Registration System, and they have promoted a critical debate on the failings of the legal system with respect to the protection of women's rights. Furthermore, through the journals *Rural Women Knowing All* and *Working Sisters* and by encouraging other media outlets to report on the activities of the Migrant Women's Club, they have played an instrumental role in changing dominant urban perceptions of rural residents and rural migrants. Members of the Migrant Women's Club were often not very appreciative of these efforts, though. They seemed not to realize how significant the efforts to change urban perceptions might be and complained that *Rural Women Knowing All* and the organizers of the Club didn't do enough to help migrants (cf. Milwertz 2000:186). Many of the women I talked with were quite resentful of the journalists and other one-time visitors that Xie Lihua sent along to observe the Sunday meetings of the Club. They felt that they were just objects of curiosity to such people, or else they were used for a good story and then forgotten. And whilst Xie Lihua saw Liu

Yu's rape case primarily as a model or test case that could garner urban sympathy for migrant women and help to change attitudes and policies toward rape, some members of the Club saw only the limitations of helping just one out of so many thousands of migrant women who had been abused and assaulted and felt that Xie Lihua and the others were just using this case for publicity for themselves.

The second problem with the "raising women's quality" discourse is that it is rooted in a mindset that is very elitist and matronizing. Zhou Ling and some other migrant women see this as a major failing of the Migrant Women's Club. According to Zhou Ling, Wu Qing, Xie Lihua and Li Tao, for all their rhetoric, look down on rural women. For them, helping rural migrants is a cause (*shiye*) for which they get a certain amount of kudos (and money). In the past, Zhou Ling told me bitterly, Xie Lihua and Wu Qing constantly emphasized that migrant women should go back to the countryside after a short period in the city, so as to contribute to rural development. "Why should I and other working sisters go back to the countryside?" Zhou Ling said. "If the countryside needs developing, why don't they go there themselves? Why don't they send their children to the countryside instead of to America?" Nowadays, according to Zhou Ling, they are changing their tune because they know how to bend with the wind, and they have been influenced by NGOs overseas and by the state's gradual shift toward a more positive view of migrants' contribution to urbanization. But in the end, Zhou Ling said, "Xie Lihua grew up in the city and she has urban registration, so it just isn't possible for her to understand the situation of migrant women the way we do ourselves."

The practices of the Migrant Women's Club are, then, far removed from Western critical theorists' and feminist ideals of participatory parity. In other ways, however, the distance between some of the Club's efforts at raising the quality of women, especially to enable them to overcome their sense of inferiority and to adopt new ways of thinking suitable for urban modernity, are not so very different from Western feminist notions of consciousness-raising and empowerment, and the importance that Nancy Fraser and others place on the need for publics and counterpublics in which subalterns can formulate and learn to voice their identities, interests and needs. This is no accident, for, as I've said, the same emphasis on educating people into citizenship that underlies the Migrant Women's Club also underwrote Maoist political study groups, and they, in turn, were an important inspiration for early second-wave feminist efforts at consciousness-raising.

The Migrant Women's Club, for all its problems, has done a great deal to raise the consciousness, or "quality" of rural migrant women, and it has thereby made an important contribution to the development of the kind of participatory parity that is necessary for a critical, democratic public sphere. According to both Xie Lihua and to the members of the club themselves, this has been the Club's greatest success. It has given rural women a feeling of self-confidence, taught them that the discrimination and abuse they face, both as young women and as rural outsiders, is neither legitimate nor inevitable, and provided them with the resources and the opportunity to participate in a lively, critical sphere that is not just urban but also national and international. As Zhou Ling told me, when she first came to Beijing, she felt very inferior and was always very self-effacing. "Beijingers thought that was great because it made them feel superior.

They thought I was so pitiable and they felt sorry for me. ... When I first came out I thought rural people had to stay in the countryside and then slowly, by meeting people at the Migrant Women's Club and taking part in meetings, I came to feel that I should fight for my rights. How could I not feel that after so many meetings and talking with people like you? So there needs to be someone to do these things, to talk. Even though as a single person my strength is limited, if I can influence one or two people, that's better than nothing. Working at the Migrant Women's Club is a kind of an offering. You probably won't see any positive results. It's the same as planting a tree. When you first plant a tree you know you won't see the final result, but still someone has to plant it, otherwise it'll never grow."

Last year, Xie Lihua nominated Zhou Ling for a grant from the International Association for Education to enable her to join a month-long study tour to the US to learn about NGOs there. She got the grant ahead of more than thirty other applicants from Beijing and was the only one of the four mainland Chinese participants on the tour who was not a university academic or a Women's Federation official. In the US, she told me, she learned that across the world poor women and labourers are exploited. And now capitalists were coming to China to exploit young migrant women. After coming back she took up legal studies, so as to put her in a better position to defend the rights of migrant women and to seek redress for those whose rights were abused. And she started talking about the possibilities of migrant women working together to further the efforts of the Migrant Women's Club. "I'll study law," she said, "and my friend will study psychological counselling and another will study management, and then we'll all work together and run things ourselves. It's no good just relying on a city person, it's no good relying on Xie Lihua. ... We have to organize to fight for our rights ourselves."

## Conclusion

As Richard Madsen has noted, "we do not have the luxury of remaining morally detached from our research agenda. Inevitably, we will have to at least speculate, with all due tentativeness, on the directions that the Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and, indeed, ourselves might have to take to create democratic public spheres and avoid falling into social chaos" (1993:195). More immediately, over the last few years, more and more international development agencies and donors have made civil society and governance a top priority for funding in China and elsewhere. Such agencies rely heavily on academic advice, so it matters a great deal what norms and concepts we employ in our discussions of such issues.

In this paper I have argued for a need to go beyond the limiting confines of an approach to civil society that views an association's democratic potential solely in terms of the degree to which it is independent of the state. If one was to judge the Migrant Women's Club from this perspective, one would probably conclude that it contributes little to the development of democracy, because in terms of structures and personnel it has close links with the state and because its rhetoric and aims appear quite congruent with the state's agenda. However, a more complicated picture is suggested by a closer look at the practices and internal politics of the Club, combined with a critical reflection on Western ideals of public sphere and democracy and an attempt to establish a

dialogue between those ideals and the Chinese ideals that underlie the Club's aims and practices.

The central aim of the Migrant Women's Club is to raise rural migrant women's quality or, to use terms more familiar to a Western audience, to raise their consciousness and improve their ability to function as citizens of a modern nation. In some respects their approach is far removed from any Western ideal of democratic practice. Of particular concern is that a lack of participatory parity, resulting from the gap in status between the Club's educated, middle-class urban organizers and its mostly poorly educated, lower-class rural members, is exacerbated by an arrogant assumption that educated urbanites are of higher "quality" than rural migrants and that they can and should help to bring them up to their level.

On the other hand, the Club's efforts to raise the quality and consciousness of rural migrant women suggest an understanding of the public sphere as a site for the construction of identities that is quite similar to Western feminist and critical theoretical positions. These efforts do not work towards a democracy that stands in opposition to the rule of the state, but they do make an important contribution to the creation of the kind of critical, egalitarian and heterogenous public sphere necessary for the achievement of democracy in any society.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, at the end of 1996 there were some 186,666 social organizations registered nationwide, of which 1,845 were national-level organizations. A broader definition that includes all kinds of citizen-run organizations and economic associations, not necessarily registered officially as social organizations, puts the figure closer to one million (Saich 2000:126). For a discussion of women's organizing in contemporary China, see Hsiung et al. (2001).

<sup>2</sup> I first met members of *Rural Women Knowing All*, the parent organization of the Migrant Women's Club, in the lead-up to the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. In 1998 I collaborated with the organizers of the Migrant Women's Club to run a story-writing competition for migrant women. We received approximately 300 manuscripts. Of these, 22 were published in Chinese in *Rural Women Knowing All* in 1999, and I published English translations of seven of the stories on the web (Jacka 2000c). In 1999 I participated in the First National Forum on the Rights of Rural Migrant Women organized by *Rural Women Knowing All*. In 2000, organizers and members of the Club helped me to design and implement a questionnaire survey of 100 Club members. In 2002 I spent five months in Beijing, during which time I interviewed approximately 30 Club members and was a regular participant in the Club's activities. Funding for this research was received from Murdoch University, the Australian National University, and the Australian Research Council.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s there was an outpouring of writing on civil society and public sphere in China by both Chinese and Western writers. See, in particular, the symposium on the topic published in *Modern China* 19(2), April 1993; White et al. (1996); He Baogang (1997). The latter includes a discussion of Chinese theories of civil society. It claims that 392 articles on civil society and related concepts were published between 1988 and 1992 in the following journals: *Jingji Yanjiu* (Economic Research), *Zhexue Yanjiu* (Philosophical Studies), *Zhengzhixue Yanjiu* (Political Science Studies), *Zhishifenzi* (Chinese Intellectuals) and *Ershiyi Shiji* (21st Century).

<sup>4</sup> An examination of the internal workings of groups in civil society, and the relationships they engage in, is relatively rare, not just in relation to China but in the literature more generally. See Eliasoph (1996:263).

<sup>5</sup> For further details on the regulations governing the registration of social organizations, see Saich (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, not all attempts to set up and run a social organization are successful. Some never get off the ground, some fold after a very brief period, and some, including independent trade unions and the Falungong, get into serious trouble.

<sup>7</sup> For further critiques of the corporatist model along similar lines, see Saich (2000) and Foster (2001).

<sup>8</sup> I do not, however, follow Madsen in focusing on collective memories.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Chambers writes, for example, that “the defining feature of critical theory has been and remains a unique melding of a Kantian critical method with a Marxist interest in the critique of ideology. Kantian critique involves investigation of the conditions of possibility for some given phenomenon. A Marxist critique of ideology involves investigating the ways in which ideas contribute to or hinder human emancipation” (2002:91). For a somewhat different definition of critical theory, see Fraser (1989:113).

<sup>10</sup> Here I refer to just one small corner of the map of critiques of rationalism and universalism. As Chantal Mouffe notes, all the innovative theoretical currents of the twentieth century have critiqued these Enlightenment ideals (1993:74).

<sup>11</sup> Critiques of the links drawn in Western culture, especially that of the Enlightenment, between the dualisms of masculine/feminine, public/private, rational/irrational, and also culture/nature, have been central to second-wave feminist theory. See, for example, Lloyd (1984); Young (1987); Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974).

<sup>12</sup> The following is only a brief sketch of the history of *suzhi* and *wenming* discourses. For a fuller treatment, see Jacka (2000a).

<sup>13</sup> Item no.1 refers to the need to provide services to enable rural women to get rich.

<sup>14</sup> See also Cohen and Arato (1992:531); Chambers (2002:98).

<sup>15</sup> For different arguments as to why diversity is important, see Chambers (2002:100); Mouffe (1993).

<sup>16</sup> By using the term “conversation” I hope to avoid the problems of characterizing an ideal public sphere as one involving “rational” debate. The parameters of “conversation” are broader than those of “rational debate” but narrower than “communication”; the last term not necessarily implying listening and responding to others in the way that “conversation” does. “A commitment to conversation” is by no means a trivial demand and is something that needs to be cultivated, rather than something that is “natural” or automatic in a society.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, for all his references to the role of states and statesmen in defining master narratives, Madsen’s final suggestion is that in looking for possibilities of leaders with new integrative public visions we turn to a public sphere, not one limited to the borders of the PRC itself, but amongst Chinese intellectuals in Hong Kong, Singapore, San Francisco and elsewhere, as well as in Beijing, who, he claims, are the most vital parts of a “cultural China,” the term coined by Tu Weiming to refer to the whole realm of consciousness of what it means to be “Chinese” (Madsen 1993:197).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it seems that some Chinese intellectuals are coming round to this view. See, for example, Xu Jilin et al. (2001:215-26). In a similar vein, in the late 1980s, the editor and journalist Hu Jiwei countered the official CCP position that freedom of the press would encourage social unrest with the argument that, on the contrary, press freedom would minimize unrest by providing an avenue through which people could express their dissatisfaction and seek redress (Polumbaum 2002:207).

<sup>19</sup> For a theoretical rejection of the possibility or, indeed, the desirability, of the achievement of harmony through the development of a democratic public sphere, see Mouffe (1993:1-6).

<sup>20</sup> For examples, see *Rural Women Knowing All*, February 1994, pp.26-28; May 1994, p.17; June 1994, pp.22-23; August 1995, pp.10-11. See also the seven stories written by migrant women and translated into English published in Jacka (2000c).

- <sup>21</sup> In addition to being published in *Rural Women Knowing All*, 2000 copies of this letter were sent to hospitals and factories employing rural migrant women and to labour introduction agencies (Milwertz 2000:177).
- <sup>22</sup> For example, Wu Qing donated 90,000 yuan RMB (A\$15,000) from the royalties of the Complete Works of Bing Xin as seeding money for a Rural Women's Development Fund set up by *Rural Women Knowing All*. In 2001, the Ford Foundation provided 500,000 yuan (A\$83,000) in funding for projects run by *Rural Women Knowing All*. There is, however, a decided lack of transparency in the financial dealings of the journal, and how much funding it and its subsidiary projects receive altogether appears to be a mystery to everyone but Xie Lihua. Certainly, the Ford Foundation, which is one of their major donors, is not party to this information, and neither are the women who staff the office of the Migrant Women's Club.
- <sup>23</sup> All of the rural migrant women mentioned in this paper have been given false names in order to protect their identities.
- <sup>24</sup> For a report on the first of these forums, see Jacka (2000b).
- <sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the origins and social consequences of the Household Registration System, see Cheng and Selden (1994).
- <sup>26</sup> These sessions had been arranged by Wang Laoshi in consultation with a small number of the members. Later sessions were decided upon through a somewhat more democratic process, involving members at one Sunday session nominating speakers and activities and then voting. The activities that received most votes were discussions on the themes of "How to Relate to Your Boss" and "All You Need is Love," a discussion on flaws in the Migrant Women's Club, a talk on modern social relations and etiquette, a forum on migrant women's rights, a session on women's health, lessons in photography, a writing group, a reading discussion group, a singing competition and a Mandarin speech competition, and a Spring Festival dumpling party. I do not know how many of these activities were actually held in subsequent months. Activities that were nominated but received very few votes included a discussion of women's worth and talks on the Labour Law and the new Marriage Law.
- <sup>27</sup> The following is a close paraphrasing of part of the paper. See Li Tao (1999:75-76).
- <sup>28</sup> Arianne Gaetano and I raised these points in our talk to the First National Forum on the Rights of Migrant Women Workers in Beijing in 1999 (see Jacka 2000b:135-36).

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