Abstract

This study starts with a call to rethink the representation of women carried out by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) globally and locally. In doing so, it poses three research questions: (1) What is the representative claim made by the ACWF? (2) How does the ACWF produce representation? (3) How good is the ACWF as a representative of women? To answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives, this study applies qualitative research methods, including constructivist grounded theory, case-centred case study, and critical frame analysis. The data
collection involves semi-structured interviews. The data collected comprises primary and secondary data, yet is sorted into two groups, key data and complementary data. First, this study has found that the representative claim made by the ACWF was based on its legacy of prolonged struggle on behalf of women and its institutionalised function linking the CCP and government with women, as well as its descriptive likeness and substantive competence to act for women. The Chinese women whom the ACWF claimed to represent were portrayed as victims of remnants of a feudal system, a collective group with gender-specific problems, and a crucial component of the CCP’s revitalisation. Meanwhile, the ACWF claimed that women’s interests were in a dialectical relationship with those of the state. This study has argued that the ACWF’s interpretation of women’s characteristics and interests embodied a materialist and historical understanding of patriarchy.

Second, the ACWF appeared as both women’s descriptive and substantive representative; Moreover, the process of ACWF representing women’s interests revealed the coexisting feature of gendering and de-gendering of women’s interests. At the cost of integrating women’s interests into state interests, the ACWF as a state feminist is seen as engaging with the state and has succeeded in exercising its institutional power and as such securing policy changes.

Third, the assessment of the quality of the ACWF as a representative of women has shown mixed results. From the perspective of its organisational capacity, the ACWF, compared to other women’s organisations, has enjoyed positional power. More importantly, it has succeeded in exercising its positional power, which illustrates its active power. It also appeared inclusive of different types of women. From the perspective of its representational actions, the ACWF appeared to be successful in
responding to women’s demands and being inclusive of the interests of disadvantaged women but failed in consistently voicing structural gender inequality.

This study has confirmed the crucial role of women’s organisations in representing women’s interests and achieving policy changes. At the same time, it has raised doubts over the importance of the autonomy in women’s organisations without denying that autonomy is important. Moreover, it has illuminated the complexity and ambiguousness of the process of representation in real-world politics. Further, it has shown how fluid the ACWF as a representative appeared to be, showing some combination of the types of ‘trustee’, ‘delegate’, ‘anticipatory’, and ‘promissory’. As such, this study rebuts the one-dimensional and unilinear interpretation of the Party-led Women’s Federation as either a submissive organ to the Party or a feminist group.