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**WOMEN AND CIVIL SOCIETY  
IN THE CHINESE DIASPORA.  
THE SPANISH CASE**

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# **Women and Civil Society in the Chinese Diaspora. The Spanish Case**

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## **Resumen**

El artículo propone una reflexión sobre el valor de las asociaciones de mujeres chinas para el conjunto de la sociedad española. Para ello revisa en primer lugar las características básicas de las personas originarias de Qingtian y Wenzhou y del significado del prestigio social canalizado a través de la representación simbólica en las diversas asociaciones presentes en España. Las asociaciones femeninas cumplen una doble función social tanto en la diáspora china como en la sociedad receptora, ambas inscritas en la lógica del sistema de género que permea esta relación intercultural en el Estado español.

## **Palabras clave**

Diáspora china, interculturalidad, sociedad civil, capital simbólico, sistema de género

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## **Abstract**

The article aims to analyze the value of Chinese women associations within the Spanish society. First it reviews the basic characteristics of the people from Qingtian and Wenzhou, and the meaning of social prestige channeled through the symbolic representation in different associations in Spain. Women's associations have a dual social function both in Chinese diapora and in the receiving society; and both inscribed in the logic of the gender system that permeates this intercultural relation in Spain.

## **Keywords**

Chinese diaspora, interculturality, civil society, symbolic capital, gender system



# **WOMEN AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CHINESE DIASPORA. THE SPANISH CASE<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Notes on the Chinese Presence in Spain**

Chinese migration to the South of Europe is a family affair with parents, children and members of the extended family among the emigrants, although it may happen too that the more elderly members of some families remain in the place of origin –men and women of retirement age– as their sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters scatter through several countries and even different cities of one and the same country. Transnationality is also inherent in the composition of families of Chinese origin now settled in Spain.

Most of these residents come from the South of Zhejiang Province, 浙江. The Qingtian district, 青田, and the Municipality of Wenzhou, 温州, are territories from which the men have been emigrating since the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the research project “R + D CICYT MINECO “El impacto de Asia Oriental en el contexto español” (FFI2011-29090)” and Grupo de Investigación Consolidado (GRC) de la Generalitat de Catalunya: “InterAsia y el nuevo sistema internacional: Sociedad, política y cultura” (2014SGR1402) of Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. The previous version was part of the framework “Red de Investigación sobre Comunidades Asiáticas en España” of CIDOB-Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, that has authorized its publication.

century, subsequently being joined by women migrants in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the flow –male and female– intensified as of the 1990s so that, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is a stable, consolidated presence of Chinese-born people now residing in Spain.<sup>2</sup>

Settlement patterns are consonant with two models arising from the work and economic opportunities of participating in the Spanish job market. The dispersion model correlates with small family businesses that fit into the service sector and require a minimum share of the market and a certain degree of client loyalty for their viability and even chances of expansion. The concentration model is a product of the job offer in the industrial sector, basically the textile industry, and in the sector of agrarian and stockbreeding transformation, as in the meat industry,<sup>3</sup> which is to say this is a question of wage labourers who need to satisfy their basic needs and who generate opportunities for the establishment of small businesses run by their compatriots. Again, businesses headed by locally-born people tend not to be handed on to the next generation –thanks to the ascending social mobility achieved by a large part of the Spanish population– this bringing into being an ample offer of venues available for men and women entrepreneurs born elsewhere. Thus, the distribution of the Chinese presence in Spain is characterised by being one of the most disperse communities of non-EU nationals, while at the same time

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<sup>2</sup> The most recent data available from the Permanent Immigration Observatory of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (31 december 2014), show that 191,078 people of Chinese origin hold Spanish residence permits. In the year 2000 they were 156.380.

<sup>3</sup> The development of a notable presence of Chinese-born construction labourers and contractors during a short period, does not require permanent residential concentration, as do the aforementioned sectors.

presenting small residential concentrations that have come to public attention, for example that in the centre-city neighbourhood of Lavapiés in Madrid, the Arc de Triomf area in Barcelona and the Fondo district in Santa Coloma de Gramanet (Catalonia), to mention just a few (Sáiz López, 2005).

The fact that the majority of people come from the same area of China has given rise to very dense, tight-woven social intermeshing of this group within the host society. On the one hand, most of the people from Qingtian and Wenzhou work with the expectation of setting up businesses. Depending on the availability of financial capital and their knowledge of the economic conditions and laws of the country, the entrepreneurial itinerary of a Chinese businessperson begins with a modest enterprise, small in both size and investment, for example dried fruit and nut shops in Madrid, or taking over fruit shops or bars in Barcelona, with the aspiration that, in time, the business will grow in size and turnover.

In family businesses, the family functions as a production, distribution, and consumption unit that maximises its available human resources. Hence, each member participates in the family-entrepreneurial activity in keeping with his or her abilities and skills: men, women and adolescents work together to accumulate the capital necessary to get the business underway, to consolidate it and, if possible, expand. The family and business cycles are intimately related and not all members participate with the same intensity in all the phases:

- 1) When small children are still being raised and the parents are giving all their time to the job –whether it is wage labour for Chinese or local employers, or working for themselves– they leave childcare to the family members back home or, in other words, they

transnationalise reproductive labour in order to intensify productive labour;

- 2) Once they reach school age, the children are reunited with their parents and begin their formal education in the national school system and in contact with classmates and teachers from the local population. The teachers are the local adult citizens with whom they have most interaction and, in some sense, constitute an autochthonous model for these boys and girls;
- 3) Adolescent sons and daughters contribute their skills to the family business, attending to clients or performing management tasks in the enterprise –filling in forms, contacting suppliers, presenting documents in the different branches of the public administration, and so on– as a result of their knowledge and mastery of the local languages, in which their parents tend to be less competent;
- 4) Offspring who go university incorporate the human capital thus acquired into the family business, thereby endowing it with added value in the national market and in the international market once it acquires a transnational dimension.

In this ideal scheme, contact with the place of origin is constant, although of varying intensity. Chinese entrepreneurs share values of social mobility –meaning the attainment of economic success in Europe– and the cultural norms that make reciprocity and trust the solid, steadfast pillars of the family business. These pillars are called upon to sustain the circulation of capital: credit and loans are made accessible for family and friends who may need them to set up or expand their business ventures, and they also represent a safety net in the case of any

failed initiative.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, family and co-ethnic networks offer human resources and information that facilitate the establishment of businesses and the consolidation of many more. Finally, these networks are also a reference that completes the socialisation of the young generation educated in European cities. The family and co-ethnic complex furnishes the values and cultural norms of the parents, including transmission of the mother tongue. Young adults, adolescents and children, submitted to this dual socialisation, develop a sense of belonging that is not clearly located in the land of their parents but rather in a symbolic transnational space that is shared by the descendants of entrepreneurial migrants, the space of the Chinese diaspora.

## **Images of Chinese People in Spanish Society**

The dispersion/concentration axis may be used in order to explain the social interaction among Chinese-born residents and the rest of the population.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, concentration is a phenomenon that has given rise to an awareness of the presence of Chinese people in Spain whereas, as long as they were not visible in the shape of groups they went unnoticed, apparently absent from Spain's multiethnic landscape at the end of the twentieth century. The new spaces of concentration have engendered overblown images of the magnitude of their residential volume, this coinciding with the short period of time over which this took place. At the end of the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, the word "invasion" was

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<sup>4</sup> In the story of the Chinese businessperson, failed ventures appear at the start of itineraries that, over time, are eventually successful.

<sup>5</sup> Spain has an estimated 46.600.499 inhabitants, of whom 4.718.854 are foreigners. These figures estimated by the Ongoing Census of the National Institute of Statistics, date from 1 January 2015.

a commonplace in residents' remarks concerning the zones where they settled.<sup>6</sup>

The word “invasion” has also been applied to the arrival of adolescents –sons and daughters reunited with their parents–<sup>7</sup> of school age whose enrolment in schools of these neighbourhoods has been complicated and has gone hand in hand with a casuistry that runs from success at school to dropping out. One of the consequences of this process has been to put paid to the previously idealised image of the “good Chinese student”, this contributing towards better, more personalised knowledge of the girls and boys who enter the Spanish educational system at secondary-school stage, and going beyond the ethnic tag that equates Chinese with good student. This image has been very widespread in places with a minimal or even anecdotal Chinese presence, which is to say in the zones of dispersion. In contrast, visibility turns into “invasion” when Chinese-owned businesses diversify and cover a wider range of local business concerns, from Chinese restaurants, to bazaars and clothing shops –referred to as “*los chinos*” (the Chinese) by the local population– through to travel

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<sup>6</sup> The more lyrical among local residents and journalists coined the image of the “silent invasion” to explain the previously unnoticed presence of people of Chinese origin. Again, it should be noted that the term “invasion” has certain connotations of rejection since it suggests an imposition, as happens in situations in which “invasion of privacy” occurs.

<sup>7</sup> In the most recent review of the Law on Aliens in Spain (Organic Law on Rights and Freedoms of Aliens in Spain and Their Social Integration of 11 January 2005), it was decreed that family reunification of sons and daughters was only possible for minors under the age of eighteen (Article 39, in Section 2, with regard to temporary Residence by virtue of family regrouping), and this legal stipulation doubtless accelerated the arrival of Chinese-born adolescents who, in other circumstances, might have spaced out their arrival in Spain.

agencies, bars, cafeterias, fruit shops, food stores, hairdressers, and warehouses dealing in imported Chinese products, *inter alia*.

Social evaluation of the presence of people of Chinese origin in Spain has an effect on their social and commercial relations with the host society. There are the typical stereotypes of a closed community, focused on its own collective interests –which seem strange and not shared by other citizens– and they are also seen as difficult to gain access to, prone to not frequenting certain institutions of public assistance as other ethnic and minority groups do, and even immortal because, “Where are the dead Chinese?” In brief, it is as if the Chinese residents had created their own parallel society. Moreover, to all this must be added the negative effects on the family economy caused by events that stigmatise people from China and that, on occasions have been blown up out of all proportion by the mass media. These phenomena occur both in China –avian influenza, SARS, labour exploitation, pirated products, and so on– and in Spain –mafia groups, fashion sweatshops, sales of fake copies, health inspections in restaurants, etcetera– and their profuse presence in the media, since the end of the twentieth century in particular, is reflected in the reduced numbers of local clientele in Chinese restaurants.

Chinese economic competition in the global capitalist market is also felt at the local level. In the twenty-first century, misunderstandings appear among Spanish citizens in the central neighbourhoods of the country’s biggest cities, where Chinese-owned shops are to be found. The greater visibility of their commercial and economic diversification temporarily gives rise to suspicion in the autochthonous population, which accuses them of not respecting the laws –not paying taxes, not having a business licence and “money laundering”– and of exploiting their own compatriots, *inter alia*. The different elements of this

configuration affect and reinforce the image of a closed group and one that resists being integrated into the host society.

The mass media and the politicisation of immigration, especially in electoral periods, are responsible for a great deal of the stigmatisation of the phenomenon of migration and immigrants in the collective imaginary. Nevertheless, in recent years, the messages about immigrants have been refined and, at present, a new picture is being promoted from administrative organisms, one that stresses the economic contribution and the cultural richness that people of foreign origins are bringing to Spanish territory.

## **Chinese Civil Society in Spain**

In the broad sense, civil society is understood as the set of activities that society engages in beyond the initiatives proposed by political parties and the state, and it is therefore considered that civil society mediates between the powers that be and the citizens as a sort of regulating mechanism that rectifies the drift of political life in democratic countries and defends the political interests of citizens in the undemocratic ones. Speaking of civil society within the Chinese diaspora complicates the matter since the latter is a concept that, from the theoretical point of view, evokes multilocality and supranationality and is thus not situated within a particular state. However, in practice, the activities of the diaspora in the civil sphere do have a specific and localised geography –in this case, Spain– which takes one back, in particular, to transnational activities between origin and destination.

Creating associations is one part of civil society since it represents the interests of groups of citizens distinguished by class, sex, religion and ethnic group. Their activities may foster

group cohesion, giving their members a feeling of belonging and, for some, of identity.

### *Typology of Chinese Associations Formed in Spain*

The first associations go back to the 1980s, a time in which the Chinese residents began to achieve stable settlement, which would keep on growing until the present day. This is a common and natural phenomenon both in China and in the Chinese migratory context. Formal and legal constitution of associations with statutes and management staff is not an inescapable requisite for their existence, which confers a certain complexity on the world of Chinese associations, but one also derives some bearings on the directionality of association's activities: origin, destination or intra-community.

The associations cover a wide range of Chinese social life within the Spanish state, and this is reflected in the kinds of associations that have been formed in the country. Those that identify residents with their birthplaces are of two main types, those that admit people of shared Chinese origin, for example the Asociación de Chinos en España (Association of Chinese in Spain) and the Organización General de Chinos en España (General Organisation of Chinese in Spain), and those formed by countrymen and countrywomen in a more limited geographic sense, these being motivated by the networks of solidarity and assistance they offer each other, for example the associations of people from Qingtian, Wencheng, Shanghai, Beijing, Fujian, etcetera, each with a base in a certain city and, sometimes, branches in others as well.<sup>8</sup> Both types of organisations aim to strengthen Chinese intra-ethnic ties in

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<sup>8</sup> Many of these associations shape the informal milieu of Chinese social organisations in Spain.

Spain, which is why they do not need to figure in the official registers of the Spanish public administration. Again, political citizenship is the most usual reason for the coming together of people from Taiwan in associations that are mainly financed by their government.

The economic dimension of Chinese social life is represented by the associations that try to maximise the resources available to them by making the most of a well-known law of the market: the greater the demand for a product the lower its cost prices will be. Sometimes several establishments will form an association so as to import jointly a great quantity of Chinese products –foodstuffs, fabrics, clothing, threads and yarns, et cetera–. Such associations bring immediate benefits to all their members. Other kinds of economic associations are constituted by those that are concerned with specific sectors of activity or engaged in investment and trade with China. They operate in a transnational domain, linking origin and destination in both commercial and economic terms.

Chinese cultural life is nourished by a considerable number of cultural associations that aspire to promote Chinese culture in the host society. There are also students' associations that set up contact between the sons and daughters of families that have settled in Spanish territory and those that come from China to do postgraduate degrees. Once they have completed their courses, some students remain in Spain while the rest go back to China and, although they do not always keep up the contact after their student days are over, there is a period in which

young Chinese people raised on “the two shores of the ocean”<sup>9</sup> share a language, culture and certain feelings of identity.

The associations formed with a view to teaching Chinese are especially geared to the younger members of the community, the primary- and secondary-school children who are being educated in Spain. The parents want to pass on to their progeny the cultural values of their country of origin and to help them to have fluid relations with Chinese people, whether they are on “the continent” (PRC, Zhongguo) or members of the diaspora and, for this project, literacy in Chinese is a key tool.

Religion is also present in Chinese community life and is particularly concentrated in Buddhism, as represented by the Asociación Internacional de la Luz de Buda en España (Buddha’s Light International Association in Spain) and Christianity, Asociación Misión Evangélica Chino-Española (Association of the Chinese-Spanish Evangelical Mission) and the Asociación Catalana de Iglesias Cristianas Chinas (Catalan Association of Chinese Christian Churches), among other religious groups.

The structure of the population is the basis for associations that are delimited by age and gender, thus giving rise to groups with women, young people, or senior citizens as their members, these normally being delimited by a specific geographic area. Although Chinese associations have male and female members, in practice the managerial positions tend to be occupied by men, except in those organisations that exclusively consist of women, for example the Asociación de Damas Chinas en España (Association of Chinese Ladies in Spain), Asociación

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<sup>9</sup> The ocean symbolises the physical and the cultural distance between China and the Rest.

de Mujeres Empresarias Chinas en España (Association of Chinese Businesswomen in Spain) and the Asociación de Mujeres Chinas en España (Association of Chinese Women in Spain), to name a few.

### *Associations, Leadership and Social Prestige*

Chinese migration in Spain is mostly of the economic type. Chinese migrants seek prosperity wherever they go and, to this end, create a dense community fabric based on the family unit and social capital, which are necessary instruments for the development of their economic activities and for achieving economic success. This, however, will be less if it is not endorsed by the community of reference, which means that social relations play an important part in the community life and the civil society of the Chinese diaspora.

Reciprocity is a basic mechanism in the Chinese social world, which gives the utmost value to harmony in family and social relations. Giving and receiving constitute the pillars of solidarity and prestige. A person who receives favours and does not return them once in the position to do so, will only undermine his or her social standing –loss of face–, occasioning great pressure, criticism and recriminations from relatives, parents and members of the community, who might go so far as isolating the offender and excluding him or her from the Chinese world. Yet trust can be restored if the person in question acts according to the unwritten rules of reciprocity. In families, those members with greater economic resources have to help others who lack means because the family constitutes a collective and corporate unit and, furthermore, unshared wealth is not deemed legitimate in itself. Alone, it is avarice. Hence one of the activities of the associations of Chinese people from different areas is to reinvest part of their economic gains achieved overseas in their communities of origin, for example

making financial donations towards the costs of projects aiming to improve the general conditions of the zone, for example infrastructure –roads, bridges, dams, and so on–, education –colleges, libraries, scholarships–, aid after natural disasters, et cetera. Local custom entails making public the names of those emigrants who have contributed economically and even the amount donated by each one, which is a highly effective method of showing off their generosity to their people and, consequently, enhancing their social prestige.

For the Chinese in the host society, the principle of reciprocity means responding to needs that the community has therein: Chinese language teaching for young people and Spanish for adults, diffusion of Chinese culture, organising New Year festivities, coming to the aid of compatriots in situations of crisis, and so on.

Prestige is associated with economic success and, in the migratory context in general, it is directly linked with time of residence: the more years one has spent in the host country, the greater are the possibilities of having attained success. Evidently not all immigrants triumph; the luck one has in business ventures is an important factor in succeeding sooner or later –and hard work and effort are taken for granted–. Again, years of residence have their effects with regard to knowledge of how the host society functions, of the Chinese community itself and also the popularity one achieves within it. People who bring together all these attributes are the ones who are asked to take up leadership positions in the associations so that, apart from the election by the members of an association of somebody for a managerial post, in the Chinese world of associations the basic idea is that such positions are reserved for those who are socially legitimated because of their demonstrated economic success, their prestige and their ability to manage the parameters and values of the host society. It is

therefore quite common for one and the same person to occupy several management posts in different associations. In all this process of legitimisation, whether the association is or is not formally constituted is not relevant when it comes the community's feeling more or less represented.

Many Chinese leaders are now Spanish citizens, since they are the members of the community who have resided longest in the host society, or they have married Spanish citizens and thus have better opportunities for acquiring a good command of the language.<sup>10</sup>

Competition over leadership and internal conflicts also appear. At times they take the form of suspicions and accusations of embezzlement or charges that someone has exploited members for his or her own benefit. One way of resolving such conflicts is the creation of new associations by the disgruntled people or factions. Again, many associations are composed by the addition of others, federations are created and annual meetings held, while they also join Europe-wide and even worldwide associations whose periodical meetings are attended. The associations finance publications, direct schools, hold cultural events besides defending their members' interests and they also organise a whole range of activities for their mutual benefit, and offer assistance to members in times of crisis.

## **Women in Chinese Civil Society**

Women's organisations, in other words all of those that have the common and core element of different aspects related with women and gender, are an important component of

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<sup>10</sup> The first news of Chinese associations in Europe concerned those founded by emigrants who had married European citizens.

contemporary civil societies. At present, they constitute one of the most dynamic sectors of civil society, this being understood as,

“an intermediate associational realm situated between the state on the one side and the basic building blocks of society –individuals, family and firms– populated by social organizations which are separate, and enjoy some degree of autonomy from the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interest or values” (Du, 2004: p. 172; from White *at al.*, 1996: p. 3).

In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the mass organisations in China, forerunners of the present-day non-governmental organisations, constituted a group functioning behind the official and administrative entities (*xingzheng hua* or *guan hua*) and also friendship associations and organisations promoting trade or cultural exchanges.

“The term ‘mass organization’ classifies special groups for workers, peasants, women, and youth and has a twofold political meaning. In the first place, it indicates the position of mass organizations in the CCP’s political system: the periphery of the Party and following its lead. Second, the CCP relies on mass organizations to reach out to those groups and provide a bridge between the CCP and the people. This was true during the revolutionary period and is still the case today. During the 1950s and 1960s, these three groups of organizations, with very different historical backgrounds, were transformed into governmental NGOs” (Ma, 2002: p. 120).

The degree of autonomy from the state achieved by organisations signals the change that has occurred in the constitution of civil society in China. If we focus on women’s

associations prior to the 1980s, the All-China Women's Federation<sup>11</sup> and the Women Workers' Department in the All-China Federation of Trade Unions were the only two that existed, and they were part of the party/state apparatus.

The history of the All-China Women's Federation is very much linked with that of the People's Republic of China. As a party organisation, it has been in charge of conveying political directives from the party to Chinese women and also responsible for defending their interests –at times contradictory (Sáiz López, 2001)– a task that has put it in delicate situations *vis-à-vis* both the party and women, especially female academics who, until the 1990s did not have a high regard for the work being done by the women in the Federation.

The main activity undertaken by the women in the Federation, until the period of economic reform, when it was not yet defining itself as a non-governmental organisation, covered the most emblematic areas of party policy: family, the world of

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<sup>11</sup> “The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is the largest NGO in China dedicated to promoting gender equality and women's development. It has an organizational system that covers women's federations and group members at various levels, and enjoys wide representation and mass involvement. The ACWF and local women's federations play a significant role in uniting and motivating women to participate in the country's economic construction and social development, encouraging them to take an active part in the democratic management and supervision of state and social affairs, and representing and safeguarding the rights and interests of women as a whole. In recent years, government departments have cooperated with women's federations and other NGOs to organize all kinds of activities to effectively utilize social resources for the promotion of gender equality and women's development”. See, the State Council Information Office white paper, *Gender Equality and Women's Development in China*, “State Mechanism to Promote Gender Equality and Development of Women” (<http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20050824/1.htm>), last accessed 5 February 2013.

work and women's involvement in politics. As far as the party was concerned, Chinese women were liberated women who had to continue to meet family responsibilities while at once working for the good of the country and the socialist revolution.

After 1978, the All-China Women's Federation underwent an internal restructuring process with a view to performing better in the activities deemed necessary for defending the interests of Chinese women, which meant that, "It gave an organized voice to women's demands for equality and provided a legitimate forum for pursuing them. This was the starting point of the contemporary women's movement" (Liu, 2006: 926). This development can be situated in the shift from the neighbourhood committee, the traditional working domain of the All-China Women's Federation in Maoist times, to the foundation of professional and occupational associations such as those of Women Entrepreneurs, of Women Judges and of Mayoresses (Qi, 2004). It was a move from economic dependence on the party to establishing businesses that provide the Federation with the material conditions for prioritising the interests of Chinese women. These were changes in structure, organisation and objectives that were destined to transform the Federation into a modern and dynamic association that was capable of representing and defending the interests of Chinese women today.

Moreover, the decentralisation of the party-state initiated at the time of the reforms has favoured the proliferation of new women's organisations in which the goals and organisation are the unique and exclusive terrain of their women members. These are the first non-governmental women's organisations in the strict sense of the term. A movement of urban women appeared after the mid-1980s with the aim of confronting their old and new problems in the period of economic reform, giving rise to the present-day current of the Chinese women's

movement featuring the formation of new women's organisations and the creation of new forms of activism in order to safeguard their rights and interests. This contemporary trend has been initiated and maintained essentially by women who do not occupy any political office and who therefore have no political or social power (Zhou, Zhang and Wang, 2004).

In many cases, these entities are concerned with providing social services that the state does not offer, so that many of the activities of the new organisations are oriented in this direction. Furthermore, the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995 had the state's blessing when it pushed for the development of Chinese women's NGOs. The Beijing meeting brought together women activists and academics from different parts of the planet and China itself. The Federation hosted the Conference as it was the country's biggest women's association. The Chinese women activists adopted the international agenda and reinterpreted it in order to highlight their differences with the government's position. Again, this encounter with their international colleagues "[...] offered unprecedented new directions and strategies for Chinese women's liberation" (Schaffer and Song, 2007:17), for example defining gender inequality in human rights terms.

In 1999, there were more than 7,300 women's organisations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, these mainly working in the spheres of social services, occupational activities and project planning and development (Du, 2004).

## **Women and the Associational Sphere in Spain**

Chinese women residing in Spain are, above all, working women. They participate in productive work as much as their male compatriots do, working in all the kinds of jobs in which workers of Chinese origin are engaged: Chinese family

companies, working for Chinese employers and for local employers. Family and work, then, comprise the basic axes of Chinese community life. The family-company logic requires full-time commitment in the phases of setting up and consolidating the family business. Once this is attained, however, there is a transformation in the quality and quantity of work to be done, and some of the effort is invested in representation and obtaining social prestige, and this is the beginning of public activity in civil society.

The Chinese gender system, which is based on a hierarchy of generation, age and gender, justifies the fact that men are the first to shift the focus of their work towards joining associations and their managerial structure. Women members of mixed associations tend to remain in the background, except when they have skills that the male members lack, for example linguistic ability. Being able to express oneself in the languages of the host country requires knowledge that brings about changes in the intergenerational and gender relations that are taking shape within the community, since the young women, the daughters who have been educated in the host society, have better knowledge not only of the local languages but also of this society's norms, functioning and social values.

Female participation in collective life does not contravene the gender system. Like their menfolk, Chinese women also have the right to represent the attributes of Chinese people in the host society. Like the men's associations, those of Chinese women in Spain are morally bound to respect the principle of reciprocity, although this principle is *genderised*, which is to say, for women's associations it is primarily geared to the structurally weakest members of the community: women and

children.<sup>12</sup> Women members of these associations are the mothers-wives of economically successful family businesses. Like the rest of the Chinese diaspora associations, the goals and activities of the women's ones mainly move along the bi-directional axis between the country of origin and the host country, although this does not exclude relationships with other Chinese communities in third countries, especially in Europe.

In general, the women's associations share the characteristics of other Chinese associations, scattered in different parts of Spanish territory but, unlike the majority, the former have shown greater ability in approaching and working with local institutions concerned with managing services such as education, health and well-being of young children and families. In this regard, for the host society, the work being undertaken by the women's associations is more useful in "managing diversity" than the concerns of the other associations, for example those of fellow countrymen or the more general kinds, which are focused on satisfying the needs of representation and social prestige of their members.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the work and activities of the All-China Women's Association is also aimed at women and children. In fact, since 1995 the year in which the National Working Committee on Children and Women was set up, its headquarters has been in the Federation building on Beijing. Since 2002, the Committee has consisted of 29 members, 24 of which belong to governmental departments while 5 are non-governmental organisations.

<sup>13</sup> Not just anyone can join these kinds of associations since certain requisites must be met, the most important of these being –apart from birthplace or country– a successful career, which is the clearest demonstration of being a person of quality and one who is worthy of representing the members in the Chinese community as a whole.

*The Association of Chinese Women in Catalonia*

The first associations of Chinese women were founded in Madrid in the 1990s and these include those of women from the People's Republic of China and Taiwan (Nieto, 2001). About a decade later, in 2002, the Association of Chinese Women in Catalonia was constituted. With Zheng Suimei as its president, it is described as “[...] a voluntary, non-profit-making organisation that aims to assist women and children resident in Catalonia with the real-life situations they must face”.<sup>14</sup>

Born in Qingtian, Zheng Suimei came to Spain in 1983 and she arrived alone. She established a small industrial empire consisting of a supermarket and several restaurants, which her children inherited some years ago. She was the daughter of a state official who worked as a mechanic after 1949. The Communist Party put her in charge of *funü gongzuo* (political work with women)<sup>15</sup> in her town, where she was commended as an “exemplary worker”. She married at the age of eighteen and had two children. Twenty years later she divorced and migrated to Spain, where she kept working hard to become the businesswoman she eventually managed to be. After 2002, she was the visible leader of Chinese women in Catalonia in the mass media<sup>16</sup> and in Catalan institutions.

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<sup>14</sup> Document of the Association, presented at a symposium on the Chinese presence in Catalonia, Barcelona, 13 June 2004.

<sup>15</sup> For further information on this concept, see Sáiz López (2001); Davin (1976).

<sup>16</sup> In spite of this, she was only known to “the initiated”, which is to say the Chinese population resident in Catalonia, workers in the different branches of the public administration concerned with migration and social services, researchers, et cetera.

Under her leadership, the Women's Association shared with other Chinese associations the two-way geographic orientation of its activities, In Catalonia, over the years and with economic and logistical support from such institutions as the Generalitat (Government), the Catalan Women's Institute, the Consulate of the People's Republic of China and associations of Chinese residents in the autonomous community of Catalonia, its members have focused their participation on public life with the aim of, "[...] promoting integration in Catalan society and improving the social image of Chinese people [...]" (Association Document, 2004) ,through a series of activities that aim to foster intra-community relations, on the one hand, and to establish contacts with the host society, thereby promoting inter-community relations, on the other. With regard to matters pertaining to their country of origin, both cultural and economic activities are considered important, these including:

- 1) Celebrating the festive events of the host society: carnivals, women's day, mother's day;
- 2) Celebrating the festive events of Chinese culture: moon festival, New Year, anniversary celebrations (for example the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of Spanish-Chinese diplomatic relations);
- 3) Working with institutions in the host society. "In the month of October (2003), the Generalitat (Government) awarded us a flag of recognition. In just over a year, the Association has participated in 16 meetings of the Emigration Office and 18 events held by the [Catalan] Women's Institute" (Association Document, 2004).
- 4) Encouraging Chinese-language teaching to the children of Chinese families;

- 5) Mediation in family conflicts;
- 6) Mediation in social conflicts in which children and minors of Chinese origin are involved;
- 7) Health and hygiene training;
- 8) Fund-raising for situations of emergency in China.

Notable among the intra-community activities are those concerned with transmitting Chinese culture and values through organising identity-boosting festivities and setting up schools for teaching the Chinese language to children who are enrolled in the Spanish educational system.

Chinese schools in Spain do not have their own infrastructure as they do not constitute entities in themselves. They use the schools of the public and private educational system since the school buildings belong to municipal government and private entities. The buildings of public schools are preferred as they don't charge rent and the associations therefore sign agreements with the local councils for use of the facilities at weekends and school holidays. The associations are in charge of managing their educational programmes: timetable, contracting teachers, relations with institutions in the host society, and so on. The teachers tend to be female, while the directors are usually men, although one increasingly sees women at the head of the Chinese schools. The offer has been expanding over the past decade and, with it, conflicts of interest.

The communication skills of the representatives are determinant for being seen as spokespersons with regard to the host society. It is in this sphere that the Association of Chinese Women in Catalonia has shown great finesse. In 2004, five

Chinese associations in Catalonia –including the women’s one– signed an agreement with the Catalan government on managing one of these schools. At the end of the academic year, the directors of the Catalan school expressed some reserve about continuing to share its facilities with the people attending the Chinese school. Moreover, there was a change of government in Catalonia that year, which meant that the new government changed the nature of its commitment to Chinese-language teaching, offering it as an extracurricular activity in several school centres rather than concentrating the project in only one school (Beltrán Antolín and Sáiz López, 2004). In this situation, the women’s association set about activities to ensure that the project was very visible among the local institutions involved in the matter and, although it did not achieve control of any Chinese school at the time, it did participate in the management of Chinese teaching within the “teaching mother tongues” programme, which was being carried out by the Department of Education of the Catalan Government.

Communication skills and relations with the host society are also put into practice with tasks of family and social mediation and the health and hygiene training that the association offers. These initiatives evoke the work that is traditionally performed by women within the family as part of their reproductive work and also that carried out by the women’s associations in China, including the All-China Women’s Federation.

If we hold that communication skills comprise a gender characteristic ascribed to women, we might point out that the intercultural relationship also taps gender systems that are intelligible, if not interchangeable, among themselves since they maintain the hierarchy as a substantial element of power. In the specific case that concerns us here, the power is in the hands of the authorities of the host society, those who are authorised to adjudicate to Chinese women – “the others” – the

power of the word, which is to say that of being the interlocutor or representative, to the detriment of their male compatriots who are designated as spokesmen for the Chinese community by virtue of the gender system that is still operating within it. The result is that the host society annuls the political role of Chinese associations in Catalan civil society thanks to the adoption of a modern, democratic image in favour of women's rights.

Adjudicating attributes to immigrant women of Chinese origin, thereby bringing them closer to their male compatriots is not exclusive to Catalan society. Sau-ling Wong has pointed out how gender has been ethnicised for Chinese immigrants in the United States context. Here, men and women of Chinese origin have a differential access to the processes of acculturation and assimilation. Women are allowed to become "white" more quickly than men. They are therefore deemed to be more assimilable and, as a result, are better and more readily accepted than their male compatriots in the host society. In the case of Chinese men, it would seem that, in white society, they are more visible for their ethnicity than for their gender so that they are assigned desexualised or feminised ethnic stereotypes, while Chinese women are sexualised as attractive rather than "strange" and "a long way" from the other culture or ethnic group. This cognitive process enables the autochthonous population to see them as being "less dangerous" (Shih, 2007).

The Chinese women's association complies with the different ends that characterise the realm of Chinese associations in Spain: representation, prestige and intercultural interlocation, with a marked gender character since economic and professional activities are not contemplated as comprising a substantial part of the association, while they are relevant and even determinant in the Chinese associations in which male members form the majority. Nevertheless, the economic

importance of Chinese women in family businesses (Sáiz López, 2007) and their professional skills are recognised to the extent that they occupy a space of community expression from the standpoint of symbolic representation through associative language. Hence, two years after the Association of Chinese Women in Catalonia was founded, the Association of Businesswomen was created, this time appealing to the professional side of things as the only criterion of membership and presentation in Chinese and Spanish society. This group's most important social event has been the international meeting of Chinese businesswomen in Europe, which was held in July 2007 in one of the towns of the metropolitan area of Barcelona.

### *The New Generations*

The Chinese social system still upholds the criteria of generation and age as principles of authority ranking. It is the adults, then, who backed up by the respect of the rest of the community, carry out the tasks of representation and speaking on behalf of the group. The sons and daughters of the prominent members of the collective learn from their seniors the forms and dynamics of social and political relations. Between parents and their sons and daughters a relationship of interdependence is established at the heart of the family-business and this extends into the public arena where the adults need the cultural and linguistic skills of their children, while the latter need the prestige of their parents in order to be recognised as members of the intercultural civil society.

Many of these sons and daughters, who are now adults, have undergone a dual process of socialisation in which family and school provide the frameworks of Chinese culture and that of the host society respectively. The combination of the two produces a generation much better prepared than that of their parents to incorporate social values of contemporary societies

such as rejection of domestic and gender violence and discrimination in the workplace, respect for human rights, et cetera. Some of these values are now present in contemporary Chinese society as well. In this regard, the young people of the Chinese diaspora and urban youth in China have more in common in their lifestyles and values than they do with their parents, partly as a result of the processes of globalisation.

If women's associations in China are orienting their activities towards complying with the UN gender agenda, young women university students of Chinese origin who are studying in Spain are trying hard to work out how to put into practice the ideas of the host society among their compatriots in matters pertaining to working conditions, family relations et cetera. And the leap from discursive elaboration to putting the ideas into practice is more viable if they adhere to the legitimising criteria of the host society rather than those of the Chinese community, which is to say professional qualifications and skills rather than ageism. Thus, the young university students of Chinese origin are more highly valued in civil-society terms by the Spanish society than by their older compatriots, for whom they represent competition. Nevertheless, conflicts of interests can still be countervailed thanks to the cultural values concerning good manners, including respect for one's elders and reciprocity, conveyed by the family.

## **Conclusions**

Associative activity is part of what is known as civil society. The aims of the associations of the Chinese community in Spain are defending the image of Chinese people, engaging in cultural and economic activity and keeping up relations with the country of origin. Their criteria of representation and social prestige are structured in accordance with Chinese cultural values.

If the achievements of women's organisations in China can be summed up in the degree of autonomy they have managed to acquire *vis-à-vis* the state, in Spain women of Chinese origin have emerged as community representatives on their own merits. In both territories, women's organisations share their ongoing concern with activities pertaining to the more vulnerable sectors of the population, these constituting an extension of the reproductive role of women. However, in both countries, too, Chinese women have extended their aims and activities into social spaces that were once out of bounds to them, for example the professional domain.

At present, Chinese-born women in Spain participate in all the spheres of social and economic life of the diaspora. Hence, productive work such as social representation must be added to their reproductive work. The criteria governing female social participation are the same as those that hold for the community as a whole. From the standpoint of the host society, the presence of Chinese women in social space takes on more significance than it does for their compatriots, especially as they move further away from the tasks usually assigned to Chinese women, for example the role of conveyors of culture. The public institutions of the host society, on the other hand, reinforce the function of interlocutor performed by the women's associations in order to minimise the presence of the Chinese community in civil society, a manoeuvre that might be ascribed to the gender system in Spanish society since it values the role of women as communicators and negotiators and avoids direct confrontation with competition from their menfolk. This no-confrontation strategy permits relatively "harmonious" intercultural relations in a society with scant intercultural experience. In this sense, Chinese women's associations in Spanish territory share with their international counterparts their particular abilities in dynamising and structuring contemporary civil societies.

Just as women's associations have evolved in China, they have also developed in parallel with the consolidation of the Chinese diaspora in Spanish territory and Europe. The increased visibility of women in Spanish society has made it easier for their Chinese counterparts to opt for a type of social projection that is markedly professional by nature, as the creation of the Association of Chinese Businesswomen shows. Furthermore, the young generations bring new values and viewpoints to social activity.

In contemporary multiethnic societies of the twenty-first century, the processes of intra- and inter-community social consolidation encourage the involvement of women in the public arena, strengthening thus their position as key agents of multicultural civil society.

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