

**Critical Issues Confronting China:
The Feminist Awakening in China**

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Leta Hong Fincher, journalist, scholar, and author of the book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (Verso 2018), considered the current broad-based feminist movement in China as the most transformative social movement since the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. She contextualized this popular movement in China's changing political environment, and explained how this seemingly innocuous cause is perceived as a threat to the authoritarian regime today.

The Chinese government is not always antagonistic to feminist movements. In 2012, the “Bloody Brides” and the “Occupy Men’s Toilets” demonstrations for gender equality were not perceived as confrontational to the state, and were readily reported in the official Xinhua News, because the purpose of these demonstrations was perceived to align with the official line of gender equality. But this perception has changed, as the state promotes more traditional gender norms, which prescribe women’s primary responsibility centers around the home, taking care of the elderly and raising children. A feminist movement for female emancipation and gender equality belies this state narrative.

How did the state change its attitude from jettisoning traditional Chinese cultural norms to espousing them? Hong Fincher identified a couple of reasons. First, as China’s economic growth slows down, the Communist Party (CCP) cannot guarantee a continuous rise of living standards, and has become more concerned with maintaining social stability and the regime’s security above all else. Even before Xi Jinping’s ascent to the helm of the Party, this state fragility makes the government fearful of feminist movements, which defy the traditional role of women. But under Xi’s rein, the CCP has intensified its promulgation of harmonious families, while suppressing its own history of feminist struggle. The Party’s logic is that when families are harmonious, the state, encompassing all families under heaven, will be harmonious. The official Chinese media disseminate pictures of Xi as a responsible and benevolent father and a filial son, intentionally setting up a paragon for every Chinese to play his/her prescribed role. Xi is also portrayed in public media as a masculine personality, inferring that China is strong enough to eschew the fate of the USSR’s demise.

Against this backdrop, it's not too difficult to understand the government's decision to detain five feminist activists on the eve of International Women's Day in 2015, simply for handing out stickers and posters at subway and bus stations to raise awareness of women's rights. Instead of quelling the incident, the detention elevated the profile of these women. Hillary Clinton spoke out on their behalf at an international conference, while Chinese activists inundated social media with photos and messages of support. Under these global and domestic pressures, the government eventually released the five women after 37 days. The women then became symbols of a much larger feminist movement of university students, civil rights lawyers, labor activists, performance artists, and online warriors. This movement now finds its expression through the "Me Too" movement.

The second reason for a widespread resonance with opposing patriarchal authoritarianism has to do with the dramatic decline of Chinese women's rights relative to men's rights since the beginning of the reform era. This trend was heightened by the housing reform of the late 1990s, when state-owned residences became privatized. These apartments, now easily worth millions of RMB in major Chinese cities, are usually deeded under husbands' names by patriarchal conventions, compounding the prevailing income gap between men and women. A 2011 marriage law prescribes the person on the deed as the owner of the residence, regardless of the financial contributions of the person's spouse. Thus, women are legally disadvantaged in divorce proceedings.

The third reason for the rising momentum of China's feminist movement has to do with China's demographic trend. Having abolished the one-child policy, China is trying not only to address its declining fertility rate, but also to improve the quality of its population, in order to enhance productivity growth and further economic development. In this context, women are deemed to play an important role. The All-China Women's Federation, an official body for women affairs, is actively engaged in "raising" the quality of young women according to traditional Chinese values. Mass matching-making activities are ubiquitous in China, as is public urging of educated women, even college students, to get married and have children early, preferably before age 30. The fourth reason has to do with the ethnic tensions within China between Han Chinese and minority groups. In view of the high birth rate of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province as posing risks to social stability, the government has ended the policy of allowing minorities to have one more child than their Han counterparts, while promoting birth rates of Han Chinese, especially of educated women. This is clearly a way to dilute the population numbers of the ethnic minorities.

Unlike other social movements, whose leaders are either jailed or compelled into exile abroad, the "Me Too" movement, resonating with a large swath of the Chinese population and

facilitated by social media, has become unstoppable, despite officials' attempt to censor and intimidate. The government resorts to its usual rhetoric that western hostile forces have infiltrated China, using Chinese activists as their tools to undermine the Chinese regime and social stability.

But this cannot prevent more Chinese women from speaking out against patriarchal oppression, since they all have experienced some form of gender injustice and personally identify with this cause. Under this mounting pressure of seeking dignity and fairness in China, the government has adapted to this new situation by adopting some of its suggestions in its labor laws. Thus Hong Fincher envisions the possibility that this uncontrollable feminist movement against patriarchy could reconfigure China and the world.