

Harvard on China, The Feminist Awakening in China, with Leta Hong Fincher

James Evans: On the eve of International Women's Day in 2015, the Chinese government arrested five feminist activists and jailed them for 37 days. The so-called Feminist Five became a global cause célèbre, with global social media campaigns calling on the Chinese government to #freethefive. I'm James Evans at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies and today's guest on the Harvard on China Podcast is Leta Hong Fincher, journalist, sociologist and author of the book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*. A graduate of Harvard College, Dr. Hong Fincher has the honor of being the first American to receive a PhD from Tsinghua University's Department of Sociology in Beijing and as a leading expert on gender in contemporary China. Dr. Hong Fincher, welcome to the Harvard on China Podcast.

Leta: Thank you so much.

James Evans: As well as being a graduate of Harvard College year of 1990, you also have strong links to the Fairbank Center through your parents. You mentioned during your talk that you took Roderick MacFarquhar course on the Cultural Revolution. How did that class manage to influence your time here or your interest in China?

Leta: Well, I was a major in East Asian languages and Civilizations, as they'd called it at the time. I'd spent my whole childhood actually going to China a lot. It was pretty natural for me to major in that area as well. At the time, I actually really didn't have any clue what I was going to do professionally, and I was really heavily involved in theater actually. But thinking back many, many years later, Professor MacFarquhar's course was very vivid and it's something that I actually do remember as opposed to a lot of other classes.

James Evans: You mentioned as well that you were a journalist for a long time before you went and did your PhD and got more into sociology. Did an interest in journalism stem out of your time at the college here?

Leta: Actually, I didn't become interested in journalism at all until I was doing my master's degree at Stanford in East Asian Studies. I started writing for the Stanford Daily when I was there. Then as I was searching around for a possible career that wasn't in show business, which was something that I was thinking about earlier, I got really interested in journalism there. Then after I graduated from Stanford, I did an internship at National Public Radio. My first job was as a researcher for ABC News in New York. But then after working in New York for just a year, I got the itch to go back to China again. Most of my professional career as a journalist has really been in and around China, so Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

James Evans: You talk about how this background in journalism very much influences how you write, how you construct the book, your new book, for example, *Betraying Big*

Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China. You say you have a lot of interviews and in particular interviews with the so-called Feminist Five in China. Perhaps you can start by explaining who these women are in the Feminist Five and what happened to them.

Leta:

Right. Well, in 2015 the government in China arrested these five young women. Actually they arrested many more feminist activists to begin with, but they did a sweeping round of arrests in multiple cities across China. These women had been planning to commemorate International Women's Day on March 8th by just gathering at subways and bus stations and handing out stickers about sexual harassment. But before they even engaged in this activity, the authorities in all these different cities just kind of swooped down and arrested a whole bunch of them and they wound up focusing on five young women who were then effectively jailed. They were brought to Beijing from different cities. Some of them were in Beijing, but there was also one in Guangzhou and one in Hangzhou.

They were all brought to Beijing. It looked like these women were going to be criminally prosecuted and sentenced to a major jail term of up to five years. The Chinese government apparently believed that in jailing these young women that it would quash the possibility of a large scale feminist movement. But in actual fact, the jailing of the women completely backfired and it ended up galvanizing the feminist community inside China. There was a massive global outcry. You had heads of state. You had famous people like Hillary Clinton shaming Xi Jinping and declaring their outrage. It was extensively covered in the international media. Globally there was a lot of diplomatic pressure. There was a lot of press coverage.

Social media also played a huge role and that there was this hashtag #freethefive and that's when the term Feminist Five was coined. These women became total heroes. Inside China, even though there was pretty much a news blackout on the jailing of the women and there was also a very, very heavy internet censorship, but in spite of all of that censorship, there were more and more young women who had previously not wanted to be called feminist or not wanting to get involved politically, more and more of them wanted to become involved. There were so outraged. Ever since then, it's certainly not just those five women. I interviewed quite a lot of activists involved in feminism. There's also a lot of overlap with the labor rights movement, with the LGBTQ rights movement.

I also talk about a much broader awakening among women in China where you have a real critical mass of women, particularly those in cities who've gone to college or maybe they have some kind of contact with other countries who are much more aware of the sexism and misogyny in Chinese society, and much more willing to stand up and demand equal treatment.

James Evans: I mean, it sounds like there is a lot of international influence. I know one of the points you raise is the Chinese government warning feminists that they're being influenced by outside forces. But for example, a lot of the pictures you showed were of people with the hashtag #MeToo in English.

Leta: I have to emphasize that what you see happening in China, this growing feminist consciousness, growing willingness to take part in activist actions about women's rights, that's very much homegrown. Women's Rights activists over the last few years, even before the jailing of the Feminist Five in 2015, these feminist activists were already doing a lot in different cities across China. They made the ground very fertile for the explosion of a Me Too movement in China today. The hashtag that women use is not just Me Too. There are so many different permutations, Mi Tu which is using emojis to try to get around the censorship. The sign for rice and rabbit, mi for rice and tu for rabbit, which also sounds like Me Too, or there's Me Too in China hashtag.

There are all these different kinds of ways to get around internet censorship, the censorship of the hashtag #MeToo. But that hashtag is really just borrowing one very small element of what's happening globally with Me Too and seizing on the global momentum of Me Too and adapting it and using it inside China. But that certainly doesn't mean that this movement is organized outside China. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

James Evans: As you mentioned, the Feminist Five movement very much builds off what's happened earlier in China. In particular in the book, you highlight some of the things that are happening around 2012. For example, the cover of your book are these three women protesting as bloody brides. The protestors in 2012 was sort of released by the government or it didn't face particularly severe punishment and yet in 2015 these five women are imprisoned. What changed between 2012 and 2015?

Leta: That has in part to do with the crackdown on NGOs or nongovernmental organizations as well because some of the women who are in the Feminist Five were working for an NGO. It looked like at first that may be the jailing of these women had something to do with the crackdown on NGOs in general, but not all of the Feminist Five worked for NGOs. But what was clear to me in all of the interviews that I did with dozens of people actually following the arrest of these five women, it became clear that the government did not see feminism as a threat in any way prior to 2015. Even though individual feminist activists may have been questioned by authorities for some of their actions, they were very quickly released. By and large, feminism was seen as a marginal thing.

They were just these quirky young women who would dress up and these wedding dresses or something and attract some attention, but they were pretty much harmless. But then in 2015 it was clear that the government for the first time thought, well, an organized feminist movement actually could become a possibility. Therefore, we should just try to nip it in the bud. I have no way,

nobody has any way of knowing exactly for sure what the thinking was in the communist party, the rationale for jailing these women. Clearly it wasn't thought through or they thought that, okay, let's just get rid of these few women and send a warning to any other young women who might be tempted to engage in feminist activism, but that just drastically backfired. It just outraged so many young women and politicized them.

Today, more and more women by the day really are engaging in some kind of women's rights activity, whether it's just individually writing, putting your story online about how somebody had sexually abused you in the past, or actually devoting your life to feminist activism. There's a growing momentum and it's becoming increasingly difficult for the government to handle because clearly the government can't just jail some activists because they'd already tried that and it failed. It's an incredibly powerful, complex and I think really quite unprecedented movement that mobilizes a large number of young women and also men all across China and also outside China. It's just extraordinary to see what is happening.

James Evans: The government attempts of quell this movement is also in the context of Xi Jinping's attempt to appear as a strong man. Listeners will be able to hear the recording of the panel we've just done on strong man politics where Valerie Sperling talks about this with Vladimir Putin and uses exactly some of the same images and same almost verbatim words that Xi Jinping is using. You call this China's patriarchal authoritarianism. Perhaps you could unpack for us what you mean by that.

Leta: I mean, there's been so much research on the longevity of the communist party in China. Why is it that communism has been able to survive for so many years? We're approaching 70 years. Pretty soon the Chinese Communist Party is going to actually outlast the Soviet Communist Party, which collapsed. I argue that really gender has been just terribly overlooked in the analysis of authoritarianism and stability maintenance in China overall, particularly under Xi Jinping. There's been our strong revival of strong man authoritarianism. The idea of this personality called around Xi Jinping is not just a personality cult, it's very much a hyper masculine personality cult.

I mean, for example, shortly after Xi became General Secretary of the Communist Party, this landmark speech he gave at the beginning of 2013 where he was talking about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party, and he said, "How could they allow that to happen?" He said, "No one was man enough to stand up to it." Very interesting that he used the words man enough. If you look at the propaganda today surrounding the cult of Xi Jinping, it's very male dominated, emphasizing his manliness. It draws on a lot of elements of sexist traditions in Confucianism where there are womanly virtues and that women must play their dutiful roles as wives and mothers in the home. There's been a real revival of that kind of Confucian ideology.

There's also this idea of the family state under heaven has also been very heavily pushed in propaganda where the nation state is seen as this big male dominated family where Xi Jinping is the head, the male head of the family, and he's presiding over an accretion of many millions of other male dominated families and that each family has to be "harmonious" and by harmonious that means the man is the head, the woman is the dutiful wife, and the woman is the good mother who raises the child or children. It's very hierarchical and women are very much submissive. All of this is supposed to be conducive to political stability that when you have these, so to speak, harmonious families that are male dominated, where everybody knows their proper place, then you have a stable state.

James Evans: What do you think the future of feminism is in China?

Leta: I think that you do have to put to the side the actual term feminist. Even though I use this as the subtitle for my book, *The Feminist Awakening in China*, the term feminist itself has deliberately been made politically sensitive by the Chinese government. Last year, for example, the *People's Daily* ran an article warning that Western feminism is infiltrating China's management of women's affairs and that officials in the Women's Federation in China, which is part of the government, have to be on guard against being used as tools of hostile foreign forces. That means that it's actually politically risky to identify yourself explicitly as a feminist. You always have to bear that in mind when you're talking to ordinary young women.

It's not particularly useful to ask most young women, are you a feminist, because most of them would probably say no in part out of fear of being seen as a troublemaker. If you put that term to the side, there's no question that there is a real burgeoning consciousness among young women about their rights as women. They are increasingly standing up and speaking out about sexism, about how unfair it is that they're not being treated equally to their male peers. It's so unfair that they can't take the subway or the bus or go to work or go to class without being sexually harassed. There's no recourse for them if somebody sexually harasses them or assaults them. Why are they paid less than their male peers? Why are they not getting jobs?

Why is it more difficult for women to get admitted to university? I mean, they're on so many levels. The gender discrimination in China today is really bad and in many ways actually getting a lot worse than it used to be, particularly with the onset of market reforms.

James Evans: Many of our listeners are either in graduate school themselves or research topics to do with China. If somebody listening out there is also researching feminism in China or the women's movement in China, from your own research, where do you see would be a good future direction for someone's research?

Leta: Oh my gosh. I mean, the field is entirely open and there's so much for researchers to do. I mean, I can't even begin to say. Do whatever you're interested in. The one thing that I would say that I do see, I think too many foreign scholars fall into the trap of relying too much on government officials to gain access to their research subjects. That's a real problem in my view, unless you're actually studying the government, which of course, is entirely different. But I mean, I come across a lot of researchers who feel that they have to be sponsored by somebody in the All-China Women's Federation. But of course, the Women's Federation is part of the Chinese government.

Even though they're supposed to be somewhat independent, in effect, they often serve as yet another layer of this overall communist party grand scheme of pushing traditional gender norms. I don't think that you're getting a fair or accurate picture of what's really happening in China if you're too dependent on a government agency for your research.

James Evans: Particularly if you're going at it seeing China as a homogenous mass as well, I imagine you get a very skewed sense of what is going in "China as a whole."

Leta: Yes. I mean, this applies particularly to qualitative research. If you're actually trying to interview real people or you're trying to do ethnographic research, I believe that the best research has to be done from a different angle, not filtered through a Chinese government agency because the picture you're going to get, it will be entirely skewed.

James Evans: To finish up, we have our quick fire round, which Elaine Chao calls the slowest quick fire round. Our first question is, what is your favorite Chinese food?

Leta: Oh my gosh, I can't answer that with one. I mean, I don't know, one is Beijing Kaoya, which is roast duck. I know a lot of people think it's too fatty, but there was this amazing Peking duck restaurant across the street from where I lived in Beijing for four years. We went there all the time, and I loved it and so do my kids. I have to say that it's not that easy finding good Peking duck around where we live now in New York since we moved there. But I mean I love all kinds of Chinese food. I really do.

James Evans: Your favorite place in China.

Leta: Even though I lived in Beijing for many years and I also lived in Shanghai, I think in general I have a real fondness for Beijing in spite of the incredible toxic pollution. I had a lot of problems living there related to, I don't know, my status as the only American at this PhD program at Tsinghua. It was a little bit alienating, but my spouse is a journalist and journalists don't have the best time in China either. But I have to say that a year and a half after moving away from Asia, I still really miss it there, and I haven't been back in a while. In spite of all of the problems of living there, I would have to say Beijing is still my favorite city.

James Evans: I think a lot of us feel very similarly. Your favorite Chinese Chengyu or saying that sort of encapsulate something about China.

Leta: Well, actually this relates to my work because one of the feminist activists I interviewed said to me, and it just sticks with me and maybe because it's, I don't know, kind of recent, and there are various permutations of it. Shui qing wu yu: A pond that is too clean has no fish. She was talking very specifically about how when you're a feminist activist you can't afford to be too ideologically pure, that you have to work with the reality to bring about change. There are so many ways in which you can use that. I don't know. Whether it's looking at political activism in China or even how you engage with, I don't know, the crisis that is America, the crisis in our democracy here, what kinds of activism do you want to engage in.

At its most extreme, maybe in the U.S. there are people, for example, who didn't vote in the 2016 election because they thought both presidential candidates were equally bad. I see myself as a pragmatist. After all the research I've done feminist activists in China as well, I feel like, okay, we have to get down and dirty in the real world and we can't just sit above everything and think that we don't need to engage and that we can cast judgment on everybody.

James Evans: A book that you've read recently on China that you would recommend to others?

Leta: I did only just recently read Carl Minzner book End of an Era. I thought that was a really very readable, really trenchant analysis of what is happening in contemporary China politically. It was very thought-provoking for me because in the past I did not want to think too much about the possibility of the communist party collapsing. But I have to say after reading that book, Minzner really grapples with that question very intelligently. There are a lot of people out there who say we're about to see the collapse of the communist party, the coming crash of China. But actually I feel that we're at a point in history where we really do need to contemplate that possibility and that there's so much happening now that has parallels in China's previous revolutionary history. It's a really interesting thought-provoking read.

James Evans: Finally, normally we ask people a class they've taken on China that changed their thinking about the country, but you've already answered Professor MacFarquhar's class. Was there perhaps another class that you took?

Leta: That changed my thinking about China? I'm kind of embarrassed to say that as an undergraduate, I really didn't focus on my classes that much. I was mainly involved in acting. I was a bit of a goof off, but that's why I said that Professor MacFarquhar's class was so entertaining. I actually remembered it pretty vividly. Sad to say, I don't remember a lot of my other classes. I'm sorry to disappoint.

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James Evans: I feel like I have a similar experience. That might've been influenced by alcohol in a way. Leta Hong Fincher, thank you so much for being with us here today.

Leta: It was a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

James Evans: Don't forget to subscribe to the Harvard on China Podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, Podbean, or wherever you get your RSS feed.