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Author(s): Wang Zheng

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WANG ZHENG

Detention of the Feminist Five in China

ON MARCH 6 THIS YEAR, just before International Women's Day, the Chinese police in Beijing arrested five young women who had engaged in activism to protest sexual harassment on public transportation. The month-long detention of these five young feminists has changed the landscape of Chinese feminism. The global feminist mobilization that emerged to appeal for their release also presents a fascinating example of a successful feminist response to authoritarianism. In this short piece, I open with a few personal snapshots to briefly illustrate the history of Chinese feminist engagement with sexist sexual norms. Next, I will situate the five young feminists' actions within this historical context in order to illustrate significant changes in Chinese feminist practices as well as in Chinese society. Finally, I will discuss the political implications of the detention of the so-called Feminist Five as well as the global mobilization for their release.

In 1985 I came from Shanghai to study US history at the University of California, Davis. I made quite a few American friends in the graduate program. They were very curious about my life in China, and I was very proud of being a liberated woman from socialist China. I acted like an ambassador, talking to different groups about the great accomplishments of women's liberation under socialism in China. As a young, urban woman I enjoyed equal education, equal employment, equal pay, and equal opportunity for promotion. I had never experienced gender

inequality, I thought. One day I was telling my friends about how I once confronted a thief who had just snatched my wallet on a crowded bus in Shanghai and how I forced him to drop my wallet. My friends were very impressed: "Wow! You were so brave," they said. A few days later, I happened to mention that on the same crowded Shanghai buses, men would frequently grope women, and my friend asked instantly, "How did you respond to them?" I replied without thinking, "What could I do? I just tried my best to move to another spot to avoid such rascals." My friend then raised a question that shattered my self-perception as a brave and liberated woman: "Why did you dare to confront a thief but not a sexual harasser?" I answered, "Oh, I would be so ashamed if people around me noticed." Immediately, I realized that my reply was highly problematic. That conversation set in motion a process of soul searching. Why would a liberated woman still continue to observe the patriarchal value of chastity? Why would women of my generation — the liberated Chinese women in socialist China — have no consciousness of the serious problems contained within these sexual norms? It was not only a personal reflection. From this point, I embarked on a long review and contemplation of women's liberation in socialist China. I realized that in the realm of sexuality, while state feminists were able to transform the sexual double standard to a single standard for the general public (although some top male leaders continue double standards and engage in extramarital sexual relationships without being punished), puritanical sexual morality did not shake deeply entrenched masculinist cultural values of women's chastity and virginity. As a result, a liberated woman such as myself could internalize such sexist values with no consciousness, let alone action, focused on changing such sexist culture.

In 1992, I attended a conference by the Shanghai Women's Federation. When a US feminist scholar asked if there were any cases of sexual harassment in China, the Chinese women participants all replied, "No, no, we don't have sexual harassment." I stood up and named things that happened to women every day on Shanghai buses as sexual harassment. By then I had long been empowered by my study of feminist history and theories.

In 1995, at the NGO forum at the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing, feminists from inside and outside China openly challenged pervasive sexist sexual norms. Sexual violence and sexual harassment were clearly defined as violations of women's human rights. Since



On February 14, 2012, three activists dressed in wedding gowns stained with simulated blood protested in central Beijing to raise awareness about domestic violence. (LEFT TO RIGHT: Li Tingting (Maizi), Xiao Meili, Wei Tingting). Photograph courtesy of Feminist Voices.

the conference, redefined feminist conceptions of gender and sexual norms have circulated widely among feminist NGOs in China, including NGOs that promote gender training in the women's federations and in the government. Since the UN Conference on Women, we have witnessed a continuous growth of feminist-organized activities nationwide, and I have been a participant in this process. Because the political environment in China is highly unstable and not congenial to NGO activism, the feminist-activist strategy has been to steer clear of politically sensitive issues and instead to concentrate efforts in the realm of promoting gender equality as guaranteed by China's constitution and Chinese laws protecting women's and children's rights.

As beneficiaries of socialist ideals and policies of gender equality in education and employment, quite a large number of women professionals emerged from my cohort, and by the 1990s, they had access to policy

making. Understandably, their feminist activities are often aimed at participation in the policy-making process, including drafting laws and promoting their passage. They are mostly located in the official system, either in government, in the women's federation, or in academic institutions. Enjoying the dividends of socialist gender equality, this generation of feminists has, or has access to, resources and power in the system. They prefer to work behind the scenes and not attract unwanted attention.

Young feminists in China have adopted strategies different from their predecessors in promoting gender equality. Growing up in an era of privatization, at a time when many socialist institutional mechanisms for gender equality (and indeed any equality) have been dismantled, the young generation of feminists, often the "princesses" of their one-child families with high aspirations, soon discover that this world is absolutely male dominated. They find that, at every corner, they encounter excessive gender discrimination and pervasive masculinist sexual norms that openly treat women as sex objects. In such a chauvinistic society, young women have few social resources to make their voices heard, let alone to participate in the policy-making process. In response to this widespread problem, we see the emergence of a cohort of very brave, creative, and smart young feminist activists who are good at staging public performances about gender discrimination that are designed to attract media attention and to engender social and cultural change in realms previously unnoticed by the public, or even by older feminists.

In this context, when I heard that young feminists were planning to launch a campaign to combat sexual harassment on public transportation as a means to celebrate International Women's Day this year, I was truly delighted. In their action, I saw significant progress in the history of Chinese feminism. I compared myself—a liberated socialist woman who, at their age, had tolerated sexual harassment on public transportation—with these young women taking action to address the same issue of sexual harassment, which had practically gone unnoticed in my generation. The pervasive sexist social environment had enabled the younger generation to acquire a gender consciousness beyond that of their foremothers. Although younger women do not have the same access to and resources in the official systems of governance, they have enjoyed tremendous intellectual resources from transnational feminisms in this age of globalization and Internet access.

But just as I was watching their preparations for March 8, International Women's Day, with tremendous joy, pride, and anticipation, they were each arrested on March 6 from different locations in China and detained in Beijing Haidian District detention center. A few historical facts highlight the gravity of this detention: Since 1913, when the Yuan Shikai authoritarian government suppressed the Chinese feminist suffrage movement, until these arrests in 2015, no Chinese government has openly suppressed feminists. In the past century, any political force that claimed to move China to modernity would treat equality between women and men as a badge of modernity. Since its inception in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party openly endorsed equality between women and men (*nannü pingdeng*, which translates as "sexual equality"), which is one of the major reasons that the party attracted so many women and committed feminists over the long course of the Chinese Revolution. Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, these strong socialist feminists in the party made a substantial difference in transforming a patriarchal culture, and women of my generation are deeply indebted to them. After the brutal suppression of the students' movement in 1989 in Tiananmen Square and the international condemnation that followed, the Chinese government proposed to host the Fourth UN Conference on Women as a way to return to the international community. At that point, it was not too far-fetched for the Chinese Communist Party to assume that in the realm of equality between women and men, China had something very positive to show to the world. The 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, with its accompanying NGO forum that was attended by close to 40,000 international feminists, allowed Chinese feminists to legitimately launch women's NGOs nationwide. Other Chinese NGOs followed suit thereafter.

Against this historical setting, the unprecedented detention of feminists in the People's Republic of China is an ominous signal in multiple respects. The attempt to criminalize legitimate feminist activism is, first of all, a mockery of the state's declared aspiration to the rule of law, revealing a huge gap between the words and deeds of the state. It also appears to be an attempt to turn back the clock twenty years to the pre-UN Conference on Women/post-Tiananmen Square political environment. The state has accelerated clamping down on NGOs in recent years, especially targeting those with a national reach and international funding, although feminist NGOs have so far been untouched by these

restrictions. The detention of the Feminist Five on the basis of their NGO affiliations, however, threatens to delegitimize feminist NGO activism.

Furthermore, the timing of the arrest and detention of the Feminist Five reveals the national security system's sheer ignorance about—or contempt for—global feminist movements. They arrested the feminists right before International Women's Day (March 8) and the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth UN Conference on Women (March 9) where the United Nation's fifty-ninth Commission on the Status of Women was to assess global progress for women twenty years after the Beijing Declaration (Beijing+20). As part of UN activities around Beijing+20, the United Nations and China will be cohosting the Global Summit of Women in September 2015, a great international forum for the Chinese state. Ironically, the detention of the Feminist Five reveals to the world that the Chinese state is afraid of its young women who reject sexual harassment. The combination of ignorance, contempt, and paranoia by a rising global power, fully displayed to the whole world through this detention, is a worrisome sign to the global community. The overwhelming global feminist protests against the detention reflect the shock and indignation felt by those concerned about justice and human rights in China. In the first two weeks after the arrests, over three thousand people from more than one hundred countries signed online petitions for the activists' release. By the time of their release, over two million people had signed petitions on multiple websites set up by various transnational organizations. Feminist organizations in South Korea, India, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Japan have organized demonstrations to protest the detention of the feminist activists.

On April 13, the police released the Feminist Five on bail. In the Chinese context, this is the first time that a group of detained social activists have been released all at once. The decision shows that the massive mobilization of global feminist NGOs and their allies' support was effective. The various grassroots-based petitions not only pushed their own respective state politicians to respond, they also demonstrated clearly to the Chinese government that petitions were not instigated by a nation-based political enemy, but by a global political force—feminist voices and grassroots organizations committed to social justice and equality. This global political force could not be suppressed by the Chinese state in this case, and it is instructive to other states as well: they treat this global political force as their enemy at their own peril.

The fight is not over yet. Feminists within and outside China insist that the police drop all charges against the Feminist Five and stop treating them as “suspects,” restricting their physical mobility and job opportunities and depriving them of their freedom and rights as citizens. The fight for their total freedom continues.

We have all noticed the United Nation’s awkward silence in the global uproar against the detention. Now global activists are shifting their gaze to the United Nations to see if it can do anything to set the Feminist Five totally free. So long as NGO activism for advocating and implementing gender equality laws is defined as criminal, Chinese feminists as well as activists working for social justice in other realms will continue to feel threatened. We need feminist communities to raise their voices at this time to make both the United Nations and the Chinese government understand: the test for whether China is qualified to host the September 2015 Global Summit for Women is whether the Feminist Five are completely freed or not.