

Also by Leta Hong Fincher

Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China

Betraying Big Brother

The Feminist Awakening in China

Leta Hong Fincher



VERSO
London • New York

First published by Verso 2018
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-364-4 (HB)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-534-6 (EXPORT)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-366-8 (UK EBK)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-367-5 (US EBK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hong Fincher, Leta, author.

Title: Betraying Big Brother : the feminist awakening in China / Leta Hong Fincher.

Description: London ; New York : Verso, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016225 (print) | LCCN 2018016960 (ebook) | ISBN 9781786633668 (United Kingdom) | ISBN 9781786633675 (United States) | ISBN 9781786633644

Subjects: LCSH: Feminism—China. | Women—Political activity—China. | Social media—Political aspects—China.

Classification: LCC HQ1767 (ebook) | LCC HQ1767 .H648 2018 (print) | DDC 305.420951—dc23

LC record available at lcn.loc.gov/2018016225

Typeset in Fournier by MJ & N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall
Printed in the US by Maple Press

For Aidan and Liam
And for my sisters resisting around the world

of the workforce (although, as noted, in line with Han Chinese-supremacist eugenics, only educated Han Chinese women are supposed to have more babies). Education is only necessary in order for women to play their proper role as mothers, so that they can build up a highly skilled workforce for China's future. Finally, women must care for the elderly, so the government does not have to spend money on a comprehensive welfare program, and women must nurture the "harmonious family" at the heart of the authoritarian state.

As feminist activists continue to disrupt the patriarchal, authoritarian order, the government will likely find new ways to persecute them. Yet growing numbers of Chinese women now recognize that they deserve to be treated with dignity and are pushing back against gender discrimination, sexual violence and misogyny. They are seizing control of their own reproduction, threatening the population-planning goals that are central to the Chinese Communist Party's strategy for surviving beyond the Soviet Union's seven-decade run. Even if all the feminist activists in China are arrested or otherwise silenced, the forces of resistance they have unleashed will be extremely difficult to stamp out.

Conclusion

A Song for All Women

I met Li Maizi and Teresa Xu for dinner in December 2015, eight months after the release of the Feminist Five, at a hipster café in Beijing's Wangjing neighborhood. They shared a motor scooter and wore industrial-grade pollution masks to screen out the toxic night air. Li had just painted her left-hand nails bright aqua and her right-hand nails bright pink; Teresa wore deep red lipstick. In July 2015—several days after the US Supreme Court's historic ruling legalizing same-sex marriage—Li and Teresa held a wedding ceremony in Beijing to celebrate their union and to protest the ban on same-sex marriage in China. They invited around twenty friends and almost as many journalists, sang "A Song for All Women," and posed for photos kissing in the private room of a Beijing restaurant, decorated with rainbow flags. (They broke up in 2017.)

Li had planned to bring to our meeting two of the red-stained wedding dresses she, Wei Tingting, and Xiao Meili had worn in their "Bloody Brides" protest against domestic violence in 2012. "It's best if I give the wedding gowns to you because I can't leave them in the mainland," she said, knowing that I was talking to Lü Pin of *Feminist Voices* about staging an exhibition in Hong Kong on Chinese feminist activism.

"Once the exhibition is over, will you please take good care of the wedding gowns?" Li said. "Maybe we can donate them to a feminist museum."

I asked her if she really thought she would no longer be able to find any use for the wedding gowns in the mainland. Li looked uncharacteristically dejected.

"There's no space for us to demonstrate in public anymore," she said.

Had she thought about studying abroad?

"Yes, but I'm very conflicted," said Li. "If I leave, what will happen to my work in China?"

These concerns about not wanting to leave the country oppressing them have been shared by famous dissidents, such as the imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo—who died of liver cancer in 2017 while still in custody—and famed Russian Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov, who was called the "voice of conscience" for his resistance to human rights abuses in the Soviet Union. It is extraordinary that Chinese feminists in their twenties would have to confront the same gut-wrenching existential questions and be threatened with charges of "subversion" when the Chinese government itself officially supports gender equality.

I did not end up taking the dresses. But just before New Year's Day, Li Maizi posted pictures of Teresa and another young woman wearing the faux blood-stained wedding gowns on Weibo and WeChat, their faces made up to look bruised and beaten, each carrying a doll also painted with black bruises. This was meant to highlight the problem of abusive ex-husbands kidnapping children from their mothers, as divorce cases in China continue to rise. Most of the children abducted by ex-husbands are sons, who are seen as more important for passing on the family line.

Teresa and the other feminist activist posed on a public street in Beijing, holding two large signs saying, "Marriage may end / Domestic violence does not cease" and "It's a crime to kidnap a

child." Li Maizi was not photographed on the scene, but she wrote captions to the photos, explaining that China's new anti-domestic violence legislation failed to protect divorced women and their children from violent ex-husbands. Li had found a way to make use of her wedding gowns after all. She was passing the torch to other activists, so the feminist movement stayed alive.

All of the Feminist Five suffered psychological and, in some cases, physical mistreatment during their detention. Yet despite their ordeals, the women became even more committed to feminist resistance. Even as they struggled with post-traumatic stress and state persecution in the months after their release, they were deeply aware of their critical importance in providing inspiration for other feminists.

Just weeks after authorities released them, Xiao Meili announced a playful competition on Weibo, calling for women to post photos of their unshaven armpits to challenge stereotypes about femininity and celebrate alternative forms of beauty. In June 2015, Xiao announced the winners of the contest. In first place was a graduate student in Hangzhou: none other than Zhu Xixi, who had herself been interrogated by state security agents about her feminist activism. Zhu's winning picture showed her arching her neck in a dancer's arabesque, blissfully smiling with her eyes closed, wearing a sleeveless dress, arms raised to lift up her long hair as she showed off her unshaven armpits. For this honor, Zhu Xixi won a hundred condoms. "I'm even prouder of my armpit hair now," Zhu told reporters.

Even before the contest ended, the photos attracted well over a million views on Weibo. The contest appeared innocuous and apolitical, but left unsaid was the fact that it functioned as an ingenious means of broadcasting images of the five feminist "criminal suspects" beyond China's strict internet censors to a larger audience on Weibo. It held up the Feminist Five as glitteringly appealing role models who loved their bodies and had an irreverent sense of humor.

The woman who tied for the second-place prize (a vibrator) was activist Li Maizi, who posed with her upper body completely nude, lips painted fire-engine red, arms stretched provocatively above her to show small tufts of hair in her armpits, with the Chinese characters for "Armpit Hair is Love / Domestic Violence is a Crime" written in black across her bare breasts.

Tied for third place was the Feminist Five's Wei Tingting. Wei's winning photograph showed her wearing nothing but a bra, smiling triumphantly as she raised her arm in a clenched power fist—the universal sign of resistance to oppression.

Even while Chinese authorities attempt to silence and restrict the movement of activists, China's feminist movement has begun to expand outside its borders, as Wu Rongrong described to me in December 2016. I met with her and Zheng Churan when they were visiting Hong Kong. It was the first time I had seen Wu since just after her release from detention and I was stunned by the marked improvement in her appearance. Her face had lost its puffiness and sallow color, and she exuded radiant energy. As we chatted over a Cantonese dinner, her five-year-old son played under the table.

Wu had resigned herself to being a constant target of state security surveillance, but she was relieved that the Hangzhou police now seemed to be treating her with more respect as they monitored her. She even developed a sense of humor about her surveillance. Just before Hangzhou's G20 summit in September 2016, she received a call from a security agent.

"Wu Rongrong, what are your plans for the G20?" he asked.

"I don't have any plans. Maybe I'll go sightseeing somewhere," Wu replied.

"That's a very good idea. Where would you like to go on vacation? We'll take you."

"Well, my son wants to see Disneyland in Shanghai."

"When would you like to go? The end of August and first week

of September are ideal," he said, as though he were a travel agent carrying out a customer's request.

In Shanghai, Wu did not want the agents constantly following her and her child around Disneyland. But she knew that if she complained about their surveillance, the agents would react harshly, so she tried another tactic: flattery.

"My son is such a handful, so I really appreciate having you here to help me take care of him!" she gushed. The agents promptly ran off and left them both alone for the rest of the trip.

Meanwhile, since I was about to move from Hong Kong to New York, Zheng Churan asked if I could bring something to her close friend Liang Xiaowen, the feminist activist who had left Guangzhou to pursue a master's degree in law at Fordham University in New York. Zheng pulled out one of the hairs on her head: a symbol of how much she missed her feminist sister. "There's a saying that one strand of hair contains a person's DNA, so this hair means that I will always be together with Xiaomen [Liang's nickname], even though we are far apart," she said.

By the time I gave Zheng's friendship token to Liang Xiaowen in New York, Liang was already heavily involved with Lü Pin's new US-based group, the Chinese Feminist Collective. She and dozens of other Chinese feminists in the United States converged on Washington, DC, for the January 21, 2017, Women's March, joining several million Americans who protested Donald Trump's inauguration in the largest single-day protest in US history. They posted pictures and videos on WeChat so that their feminist sisters in China could be inspired as well.

Liang led a feminist activism workshop for Chinese women in New York, together with Li Maizi (passing through town on one of her global speaking trips) and two US-based feminists, Liu Xintong and Di Wang. Afterward, Liang, Li, and some other women headed to Trump Tower for a bilingual protest against misogyny and sexual harassment.

Liang spoke at a Chinese women's leadership conference at Barnard College in April 2017, saying that she was "raised in China's feminist movement" and that Chinese women should use their privilege of studying or working in the United States to raise awareness of the government assault on women's rights in China. "Everyone should speak out bravely about feminism in public," she exhorted her mostly female audience, urging them to organize their own Chinese feminist groups at each university campus and send information back to their friends in China.

When Weibo announced a ban on the *Feminist Voices* social media account in February 2017, ostensibly for posting an article about the global women's strike on International Women's Day, Liang, Liu Xintong, and other feminists filmed themselves protesting the ban at Times Square, bandaging their mouths and wrapping themselves with plastic to demonstrate their anger at being silenced. The 2017 ban on *Feminist Voices* lasted only one month, but on the night of March 8, 2018—International Women's Day—Weibo imposed a new ban, which appeared to be permanent when *Betraying Big Brother* went to press. This time, feminist activists inside and outside China (including New York's Central Park) donned multi-colored, carnival-like outfits and masks reminiscent of Russia's Pussy Riot, posting pictures of themselves dancing in "funeral/rebirth ceremonies," waving banners that said, "Feminism will not die!" and "Feminism is immortal!"

"As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world," says Lü Pin, quoting Virginia Woolf. She believes that Chinese feminists—whether in China, the United States, or elsewhere—must form alliances that cross national boundaries, or the feminist movement will be unable to sustain itself through the years of uncertainty and peril that lie ahead. As Chinese authorities become increasingly belligerent about shutting down feminist social-media accounts or persecuting individual activists, she sees it as critically important

to globalize the feminist movement and "fight on several battle-grounds at the same time."

In addition to the United States, Chinese feminists are building a diaspora in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada and elsewhere. Wu Rongrong was accepted for a master's program in law at the University of Hong Kong in the spring of 2017, but Chinese authorities at first did not permit her to travel. The Public Security Bureau of her hometown in Shanxi Province rejected her application for a travel permit to Hong Kong, saying that she was banned from leaving China for ten years because of her involvement in "illegal cases yet to be handled." When Wu went to the Shanxi police station to appeal her travel ban, an officer told her, "Don't continue to go to school. What's the point? Go home and live well."

Wu hired a lawyer and filed lawsuits against two county offices of the Shanxi Public Security Bureau, then posted constant pictures and accounts of her arguments with public security officers on Weibo. Finally, just as her classes were beginning at the University of Hong Kong in September 2017, the authorities backed down and gave her a travel permit, allowing her to enroll as a student.

Wang Man pursued an MA in social work at the University of Hong Kong, and Xiao Meili and other feminist activists were planning to apply for overseas study programs. Meanwhile, Peking University was threatening one of its students for her #MeToo activism in April 2018, but many of her classmates and students at other universities continued to resist efforts to stop them from speaking out against sexual violence.

Although the antifeminist crackdown in China had driven some feminists to study or work abroad, very few of the persecuted activists I interviewed said they wanted to give up their activism. In 2017, Bai Fei moved from Shanghai to Beijing to try to set up a feminist bookstore/library there. A popular feminist bookstore/library in Shanghai, *Nüshu Kongjian*, founded by Ying Zhu and managed by Gloria Wang, had been pressured by police surveillance to close down in 2016.

Guangzhou emerged as a feminist epicenter: Wei Tingting moved there from Beijing to work on a new NGO, the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center. In September 2017, Wei released a documentary she directed, *Bi China*, about the lives of bisexuals in China. “Gina” moved from Hangzhou to Guangzhou in 2016 and is still deeply involved in feminist organizing.

Li Maizi, the most widely publicized member of the Feminist Five, began an MA program in the theory and practice of human rights at University of Essex in October 2017. She has traveled and given speeches internationally—often in English, which she diligently studied following her release from detention. Li was about to return to Beijing for several months when I had breakfast with her in New York in April 2017. I asked if she was ever nervous about getting arrested again, especially because of her continued, vocal criticism of the government. She said she believed the authorities would not dare arrest her while she was about to start an MA program at a British university, since the Chinese government was trying to project an image of itself as a world leader in higher education.

“Besides, there’s just no point in worrying about this—and I’m not going to censor myself,” said Li.

Her international speaking trips had taught Li to connect the concerns of Chinese women with those of other women around the world. “The worsening political environment in China is in line with global trends, like Russia inflaming its nationalist populists to strengthen Putin’s hold on power. There’s this backsliding of democracy around the world,” she said. “It’s the same in places like Egypt, India, and in the United States with Trump.”

Now that Li had received so much publicity, she saw her future role as communicating Chinese feminism to a global audience and helping to build international feminist solidarity. “Our global feminist sisters launched many campaigns—online and offline—to help us in the past, and if we build and sustain international

connections, then we can all help each other in the future,” she said. “There are so many similar problems facing women all around the world.”

Li warned that the Chinese government was becoming increasingly effective at using propaganda on social media to unleash extreme nationalistic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic sentiment among its young people—some of whom would do anything to defend China’s reputation from perceived humiliation. Witness the coordinated hostile reaction to Yang Shuping, a Chinese woman who gave a graduation speech at the University of Maryland in May 2017 in which she praised America’s clean air and democracy. “The moment I inhaled and exhaled outside the airport, I felt free. ... Democracy and freedom are the fresh air that is worth fighting for,” Yang told the crowd.

Yang’s speech was streamed online and watched by millions of Chinese, some of whom immediately inundated her with vicious online abuse. The *People’s Daily* fomented virulent nationalistic anger toward her, personally targeting her in an article with the headline, “Chinese Student at University of Maryland Slammed for Biased Commencement Speech.” The article accused her of “playing up the wrong stereotypes about China” and quoted outraged Chinese observers saying things like, “... the false contents (lies) in the speech hurt the feelings of a large group of people and damage the image of a nation.”

The *People’s Daily* attack opened the floodgates for Weibo users to post much more sexist and abusive comments, such as, “She has an incredible ability to lick feet. Don’t worry about coming back to China. Our motherland doesn’t need a bitch like you.” Yang called the hostile response “deeply disturbing” and posted an apology on Weibo. “I deeply apologize and sincerely hope everyone can understand, [I] have learned my lesson for the future,” she wrote.

Li Maizi said that government-orchestrated rabid nationalism online often takes the form of misogynistic abuse and singles out Chinese feminists as being “anti-China” traitors. “Feminists are

smear and slandered as 'foreign forces' to try to turn the people against us," said Li. "This kind of nationalism is likely to get even worse in the future, so our situation is critical." The government has managed to make the term "feminist" so politically sensitive and objectionable that any woman who publicly declares herself to be feminist is making herself vulnerable to a torrent of vicious and sexist online trolling.

Ironically, just as the government is intensifying its crackdown on feminist activism, large corporations are beginning to recognize the commercial power of consumer feminism and tap into China's potentially massive market for brands that represent women's empowerment—in an apolitical way, of course.

In 2016, for example, an emotional ad by the Japanese cosmetics firm SK-II about "leftover" women pushing back against marriage pressure went viral in China, attracting millions of views during its first few days alone. The video, "Marriage Market Takeover," featured real women celebrating their single lifestyles as an alternative to the norm of compulsory marriage. (In full disclosure, I was a consultant for Forsman & Bodenfors, the ad agency that made the video, although I was not told that SK-II was involved.) The online comic Papi Jiang also became a pop-culture feminist in 2016, winning more than 25 million Weibo followers and millions of dollars in company endorsements for her satirical "self-media" (*zi meiti*) videos, which made fun of sexist double standards in Chinese society.

The entertainment industry is beginning to see that it can profit from the enormous demand among young Chinese women for music and films that challenge traditional gender norms. One of China's biggest pop stars is a woman, Li Yuchun (also known as Chris Lee), who cultivates an androgynous image with extremely short hair and oversized trousers, saying that she likes to "go against the traditional," according to the *Guardian*. Her 2016 album *Growing Wild* sold more copies in the first sixteen days after

its release than Beyoncé's *Lemonade* during an entire year. She also signed deals with L'Oréal and Gucci and in 2017 became a brand ambassador for Diesel.

Following in Li Yuchun's footsteps, China's newest genderfluid band, Acrush—made up of five young women who present themselves like a "boy band"—attracted more than 750,000 adoring, mostly female fans on Weibo even before they unveiled their first single in April 2017. The name Acrush stands for Adonis, the Greek god, and was the result of a deliberate effort by the pop-music company Zhejiang Huati Culture Media to attract young urban women who reject the cloyingly feminine standards pushed by mainstream Chinese media, according to news reports written about the band's debut. Zhejiang Huati conducted a nationwide talent search for young women who would fit the nonconformist, genderfluid image of the band. "They just enjoy the male appearance, the carefree style, and want to sing like men," CEO Wang Tianhai told the *Guardian*, insisting that the band did not stand for anything political.

The band's hip-hop and rap-influenced debut single was even named "Activist" (*xingdong pai*) (although English translations later used "action" instead). The video features the five women in close-cropped hair, trousers, and leather jackets, one with a baseball cap on backward, dancing while grabbing their crotches. In more ways than one, the song, about smashing barriers imposed by society and the state, is clearly influenced by the language of Chinese feminist activists:

I refuse to lead an insignificant existence any longer ...
How do I tear off these labels?
So that I can control my own life? ...
I'm sick of enduring this weakness
Come back as an activist! ...

Lu Keran, a twenty-one-year-old band member who used to be chased out of women's bathrooms for looking like a boy, told the

Guardian, “An important message we want to convey to our fans is that it’s important to be true to who you are.” The five band members—whose ages range from eighteen to twenty-four—are affectionately called “handsome youths” by their female fans, who scream and shed tears of excitement at the band’s public appearances.

But in a reminder of China’s extremely restrictive political environment, the five women are reportedly prohibited from talking publicly about their sexual orientations. As Chinese feminist researcher Di Wang points out, although the thousands of people who took part in China’s Me Too campaign demonstrate that the general public is increasingly willing to call out sexual harassment, “it has not yet provided a supportive space in which survivors are comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.”

Still, China became the world’s second-largest movie market in 2012 and there are signs that films about women’s empowerment could make record-breaking profits there—if the Chinese government refrains from restricting them. A Bollywood film released in China in May 2017, *Dangal*, was based on the true story of two young Indian women trained by their father to be wrestling champions. One daughter, Geeta, beat up boys who bullied her as a girl, then grew up to become the first Indian woman ever to win a gold medal in wrestling at the Commonwealth Games. The film became a commercial sensation and by October had become one of China’s highest-grossing films ever, earning around \$200 million at the Chinese box office. The film, directed by Nitesh Tiwari, portrays the women wrestlers challenging the same kinds of gender stereotypes in India that hold women back in China, such as sexist double standards and pressure to marry young.

In June 2017, the Warner Brothers/DC superhero movie *Wonder Woman* opened in theaters around China and made more than \$90 million by October, almost one-quarter of its total international box-office earnings, making China by far the movie’s

biggest market outside the United States. *Wonder Woman*—Hollywood’s first blockbuster featuring a female superhero and directed by a woman director, Patty Jenkins—outperformed some other male-led superhero movies on their opening weekends in China, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Man of Steel*. Chinese film companies Tencent Pictures and Wanda Pictures also invested in the film, according to *China Daily*.

Zheng Churan wrote an interesting essay for *Feminist Voices* in June 2017 about her reaction to *Wonder Woman*. She critiques the film for not meeting her feminist expectations in many ways, such as overemphasizing the sexiness of the Wonder Woman character, Diana, and her romantic relationship with the male lead. But what fascinated me was the second part of her essay, which becomes a feminist manifesto. Despite having outlined what she sees as major flaws of the film, Zheng begins to identify with the demigod Diana. She weeps as Diana fights the boundless cruelty of “mankind” and experiences the same bitter disappointment when Diana’s naive hopes about saving humanity from destruction are dashed. “I, too, am a fervently idealistic feminist: I want the emancipation of women, I want gender equality and I want everyone to be able to live free from oppression and cruel mistreatment,” writes Zheng.

She sees parallels between Diana’s struggle with self-discovery and her own experiences as a persecuted feminist activist in China, realizing with horror that society is far more barbaric than she had initially thought and questioning whether it will ever be possible to rid the world of its ugly, misogynistic violence.

These last few years, so many people keep asking me, how, precisely, will we be able to realize our idealistic goals? Communism? Capitalist, liberal democracy? A feminist utopia? Diana is a demigod, but even she was unable to avoid making many mistakes in her search for an end to the brutality of war. We [feminist activists] are mere mortals, how can any one of us be expected to provide the one and only correct strategy for our long, slow movement?

Zheng writes that every woman has her own unique path to feminist awakening, which may be very slow, with devastating failures along the way. Perhaps we achieve insight through a new gender identity or sexual orientation; perhaps we are victims of traumatic sexual violence. "Our awakening may be accompanied by deep pain, excitement, or terror, until in that flash of enlightenment, the truth bursts forth with savage power," she writes.

Since her release from detention, Zheng has been reading about women's rights movements in other countries. In southern Russia in August 2017, five women who had gathered by the Black Sea to camp and discuss feminism were detained and interrogated by police. Russian police only released the women after they agreed to sign statements saying that they had been warned not to engage in "extremist" activities. In Mexico, dozens of feminist activists have been brutally murdered in retaliation for their advocacy. In Argentina, a series of vicious femicides sparked huge protests in 2015 and reinvigorated the women's movement. In Brazil, there were even more brutal femicides than in Argentina—witness the assassination of Black, lesbian feminist councilwoman Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro in March 2018. And, of course, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

When Zheng Churan visited New York for the first time, in December 2017, I went with her and activist Liang Xiaowen to a #MeToo protest outside Trump Tower for survivors of sexual violence. We also went out to dinner with several other Chinese feminists and the Egyptian-American feminist Mona Eltahawy, author of *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. During Egypt's 2011 revolution, Mona had been detained, beaten and sexually assaulted by Egyptian security forces, who broke her left arm and right hand. Later, Mona wanted to "celebrate her survival" by getting tattoos on both of her arms. She showed Zheng her tattoos, including the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet—the goddess of retribution and sex, "both of which I want," said Mona. After listening to Mona's story of assault and

healing, Zheng reached out and embraced her for a long time, tears streaming down her face.

"Feminists around the world all have their own battles, but whenever there's a crisis, we can stand together and support each other," Zheng said in another one of our conversations. "The forces of authoritarianism and crony capitalism are linking up around the world and getting stronger, so we feminists need to come together too, otherwise we're letting these forces split us apart."

But although Zheng often cracks jokes about the Communist Party, neither she nor any of the feminist activists I know ever calls for the overthrow of the government. "People often talk about what will happen if the Communist Party collapses, but even if the Party falls, we will still have to face these male chauvinist leaders and the patriarchy," says Zheng. "We have to preserve and sustain our strength over many years."

Some Chinese feminists—including Zheng, who believes that capitalism inherently exploits women—lament the fact that their originally radical message about fighting women's oppression is being co-opted by corporations selling an apolitical form of consumer feminism. Yet Lü Pin argues that the new corporate interest in feminism in China might, paradoxically, help keep the political movement alive. "It's not necessarily a bad thing if corporations want to capitalize on the huge market for feminism in China; they use us, but we can also use them," she says. "When the government wants to silence us, [corporate feminism] may help us to get our message out and expands the space for the discussion of women's rights." She cites a Chinese idiom: "The pond that is too clean has no fish" (*chi zhi qing ze wu yu*), which she takes to mean that a movement cannot survive if it is too ideologically pure. "No institution will ever be 100 percent feminist, and intellectuals who do nothing but criticize others can never bring about a revolution, because they are incapable of making compromises or cooperating with other people," she says. "As activists, we have to work in the real world and solve real problems."

Lü Pin describes the antifeminist crackdown as “loose on the outside, tight on the inside” (*wai song nei jin*), meaning that the authorities want to give the world the impression that they are not too repressive, but that their aim is to wipe out the feminist movement entirely. She foresees an extremely difficult battle in the years ahead, perhaps driving all feminist activists independent of the Communist Party entirely underground.

“We must out-survive our enemies,” says Lü Pin.

As I finish this book in April 2018, it is impossible to predict whether China’s nascent feminist movement will be able to survive. In the long run, feminism may eventually triumph and lead to a more open society. Years from now, the detention of the Feminist Five may be regarded as a critical turning point in the history of organized resistance to the patriarchal, authoritarian rule of the Communist Party.

China’s male rulers see gendered oppression as crucial for the future of their dictatorship, but feminism—which demands that women control their own bodies and reproduction—is in direct conflict with the eugenic, pro-natalist, population-planning goals of the Chinese state. As China’s demographic challenges become more acute and the battle for Communist Party survival more fraught in coming years, the crackdown on feminism is likely to intensify.

Indeed, the backlash against feminism might escalate not just in China, but around the world. According to the Freedom House, democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in 2017, as the United States ceded its global leadership role to a rising China, while misogynistic autocrats bent on rolling back women’s rights were emboldened in countries from Russia to Hungary and Turkey.

In this time of crisis, how should we respond to rising authoritarianism in China and around the world—including the United

States? By fighting the patriarchy. Supporting feminist activists and promoting women’s rights are the most effective way to stop the growing, misogynistic assault on democratic freedoms globally.

In the video for “A Song for All Women,” the song with which this book began, Zheng Churan stands barefoot on a beach in southern China, holding her sandals in her hands. The ocean waves crash beside her, leaving trails of white foam as she sings of her longing for freedom from abuse. The video moves between the five feminists in Beijing, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, singing of women rising up against their oppression.

We believe in a world with equality.

This is a song of freedom and dignity.

Will you join me

In the long fight for our rights?

I want to go out without fear.

I want to be beautiful without being harassed.

Under close surveillance by the security state, the Feminist Five sing of their innocence and of a menacing male predator:

Wake up from your sleep! Seize him.

I am not the one who committed a crime.

Wei Tingting and Wang Man, filmed in a lush bamboo grove in Beijing, defy sexist caricatures of feminists as ugly, humorless prudes:

I sing for myself

Not for your judgment.

Wu Rongrong sings from a green garden in Hangzhou:

I have brilliant dreams
And deep desires.

The song closes with Zheng Churan sitting beside Li Maizi, the two of them smiling and celebrating their spiritual liberation:

Faced with suspicion and ridicule
Hardship has made me grow stronger.

An anonymous interviewer asks the women about their lives after detention, with the rousing melody playing in the background as the young activists poke fun at themselves and the security state that persecutes them.

"Now that I've lost my job, I get kind of bored sitting around at home every day," says Wei.

Li jokes about the confiscation of her passport and the loss of her job. "Drop the charges already! When am I getting my passport back?"

Zheng quips, deadpan, "After my rights organization was closed down, I changed careers. Now I have become an unsuccessful businesswoman."

The video concludes with a slow-motion montage of all five women laughing, finding joy in solidarity, refusing to submit to their oppressors. Before it fades to black, the women flex their biceps and flash the V-for-victory sign. Li looks straight into the camera and announces with unalloyed confidence: "I believe that China's feminist movement will grow stronger and stronger."

Li Maizi, Zheng Churan, Wei Tingting, Wu Rongrong, and Wang Man are shown as opponents of patriarchy, singing to women across the country, "Wake up from your sleep!" Through song, they have transformed themselves from ordinary human beings—who can be crushed by the security state's brutal intrusion into their daily lives—into avenging angels calling on all women to resist oppression. They have faced the world's most

powerful authoritarian regime, yet they have persisted and, so far, prevailed. Despite the government's attempts to silence them, China's Feminist Five have become a kind of incandescent myth, soaring like the legendary bird Jingwei, determined—no matter how long it takes—to fill the sea.

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