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Women

Chinese Feminists Face Paradoxical State Policies

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"By stifling social movements while selectively appropriating their achievements, the Chinese party-state appears to be pursuing a dual objective: gaining control over civil society activists and taking credit for their hard work."

Gender politics in contemporary China comes across as a paradox. As Beijing further tightens its grip on civil society, crackdowns and backlashes have besieged feminist and LGBTQ rights movements. Yet the state has recently adopted a series of measures protecting women's rights, even while reinforcing patriarchal norms.

After women from all walks of life mounted a #MeToo campaign, and a few bravely came forward with allegations of sexual assault against some of the country's most powerful business tycoons and celebrities, the courts dismissed their cases. Student-run feminist and LGBTQ societies used to thrive on university campuses, but they now find that their online accounts get shut down overnight. Though extremely popular among youth, television dramas featuring "sissy men" and "boys' love" have been banned because the alternative masculinities and sexualities they exhibit do not conform with the image of manhood characterized by tough, strong, and patriotic "wolf warriors," featured in a blockbuster movie released in 2017. The central government's new Politburo, announced in October 2022, includes no women for the first time in two decades.

All of this has happened in just the past few years, suggesting a strong resurgence of patriarchy. The trend has extended into some areas of social policy. Notably, despite young women's growing rejection of marriage and motherhood, the national population policy has undergone an about-face: from allowing each family to have only one child to preaching that three is the ideal number.

In 2015, however, the National People's Congress passed the country's first law against domestic violence; previously, most violence against women had been treated as a "private matter." A Civil Code provision enacted in 2020 for the first time systemically addressed sexual harassment, holding individuals responsible for using "speech, words, images, or bodily actions to sexually harass a person against their wishes" and allowing victims to bring lawsuits.

In 2021, multiple branches of government jointly issued a new policy giving female researchers priority for talent recruitment and funding opportunities. Also that year, the State Council published the Outline for the Development of Women (2021–30), the fourth in a series of agenda-setting documents on women's issues published since 1995, when China hosted the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. This newest Outline addressed previously unmentioned issues, such as promoting women in STEM careers, closing the gender pay gap as well as the gender gap in doing domestic work, providing affordable child care and elder care services, and guaranteeing maternity leave and cash benefits for families with children.

Of course, Chinese state policy announcements must always be read with a grain of salt. Many proposals may just be lip service. Yet it seems that compared with its recent record, the government is making an effort to respond to women's needs and demands in employment, education, and reproductive welfare policy and legislation.

What should we make of this contradictory moment in Chinese gender politics? Why is the state ruthlessly suppressing feminist activists while also trying to show that it is accountable to the female masses? This is an authoritarian response to women's voices and actions in the civic sphere, which have gained momentum in recent years. By stifling feminist forces outside the state and appropriating their successes, the state is reclaiming its

monopoly over women's affairs.

Over the longer term, the changing of the gender order and shifting forms of women's struggles throughout the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be divided into three stages: socialist state feminism (1949–76), the post-socialist patriarchal resurgence (1978–2010), and made-in-China feminism (2010–present). The first two stages are not simply part of the historical background; they have decisively shaped today's gender dynamics.

Chinese women's massive participation in the country's development has made them the backbone of the economy, even while their rights have been systematically violated. Gaps between the state's commitment to gender equality in rhetoric and its patriarchal and sexist policies in practice have generated various forms of resistance and mobilization by Chinese women.

Socialist State Feminism

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its early years conceived of "women's liberation" as an integral part of its larger political agenda to create an egalitarian society. Upon seizing power in 1949, the party developed a comprehensive gender program that purported to empower women. Contrary to the conventional view that these gender-leveling measures were carried out under the auspices of a few top leaders, including Mao Zedong, they were in fact advanced primarily by feminists working within state institutions. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a de facto branch of government that oversaw women's affairs and connected top-down policies to the masses, served as a vehicle for these "state feminists."

Among the hard-fought achievements in gender-leveling in this period, one of the key reforms was the Marriage Law, enacted in 1950, which abolished the long-standing practices of arranged marriage, child marriage, and concubinage. It also promised women freedom to marry and divorce.

Meanwhile, under the banner of the popular slogan "Women can hold up half the sky," rapid state-led industrialization and agricultural development incorporated an unprecedented number of women into the labor force, resulting in a female employment rate above 90 percent. To accommodate women's employment, the Constitution of 1954 and national labor regulations dictated equal pay, paid maternity leave, and public child care services. An emphasis on the strength of laboring women, highlighting their independence and contributions to socialism, gave rise to the image of "iron girls"—female peasants and industrial workers with masculine features, thriving in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Yet these measures were significantly limited. China adopted an extremely austere approach to development in this period, prioritizing profit accumulation via industrialization over distribution, which prevented many welfare provisions from being implemented evenly across regions or sectors. Urban women (making up less than 20 percent of the total population), especially those working in state-owned enterprises, became the main beneficiaries of the socialist welfare regime; far fewer resources trickled down to nonstate sectors and rural areas. Moreover, under the party dictatorship, women's rights were always subjugated to the larger goal of class struggle, and state feminists were not allowed to pursue their own cause independent of the party's agenda.

Some of the limitations set on women's rights in this era would prove to be major sources of gender tension in later periods. High levels of female labor-force participation in combination with underdeveloped welfare provisions imposed a grave double burden on working women. Huge gaps between urban and rural areas would become the foundation for radically worsening inequalities among Chinese women in the post-socialist period. A gender ideology that celebrated one type of womanhood exclusively—the manly working-class woman—failed to appreciate individual

differences or accommodate women's physiological characteristics, and subsequently drew a strong backlash.

Post-Socialist Patriarchal Resurgence

The post-1978 period has been celebrated as the beginning of China's economic takeoff, but it came with huge social costs that were disproportionately absorbed by Chinese women. The CCP shifted toward modernization, systemically abandoning Maoist measures and ideology. The ACWF continued to oversee women's affairs, but it became further marginalized within the party. Reactions against earlier women's empowerment efforts were on the rise.

With the erosion of permanent state employment and welfare provisions in urban areas, many previously available services such as child care were curtailed. Those responsibilities were handed back to the family, or effectively to working women, jeopardizing their positions in an increasingly competitive labor market. During industrial restructuring in the 1990s, women in urban areas were disproportionately laid off from state enterprises. Many started working in the informal sector, especially in low-end services.

As a result, despite diminishing gender disparities in education, urban gender gaps dramatically widened over the past three decades in labor force participation, unemployment rates, and income. From 1990 to 2010, the average length of women's education nearly doubled from 4.7 to 8.8 years, gradually narrowing the gap with men, but the urban female labor force participation rate fell from 73 percent in 1990 to 60 percent in 2019.

With the relaxation of rural-urban segregation, millions of peasants came to work in the cities. Women peasants in particular took jobs in the service sector and labor-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing enterprises that mushroomed in special economic zones. International observers may be familiar with the Chinese "factory girls" whose nimble fingers supply products for the world. A less visible but equally crucial group are the servants taking care of rising Chinese middle-class families. There are now about 25 million paid domestic workers in China, making it the world's largest such market—and the majority are female rural migrants. But there are still no regulations or laws to protect service workers' rights. They have no formal contracts, protections, or benefits, and can be terminated from employment at any time.

Despite serving as the backbone of the workforce for three decades, rural migrant women did not enjoy gains commensurate with the scale of China's economic boom. They had to put up with hostile working conditions, send remittances back to their families, and fulfill their child-birthing and child-rearing duties after their shifts in the factories. Women who did not become migrant laborers served as the primary caretakers of the left-behind children and seniors in declining rural communities. Until recently, more women than men committed suicide in rural China; the reverse is true in the rest of the world.

Women's status also suffered in the social and cultural domains in this period. In their systemic denunciations of state socialism, reform-minded elites (especially males) demonized the "iron girls" as embodiments of a gender culture that had masculinized women and emasculated men. They started to emphasize "natural" differences between the two sexes and called for women to "return home" to fulfill their "long neglected" domestic duties. The infamous one-child policy, launched in 1979, was consistent with this message. Besides being a form of state violence against women who were subjected to forced sterilization and abortions, the policy also gave rise to the discourse of "nurturing the most intelligent child." This demanded intensive cognitive labor and material investment in child-rearing, and implied that a woman's primary role was in the family.

Around the same time, depictions of desire reemerged in public culture, and images of women's desire and agency quickly engulfed mass media, a stark contrast with the revolutionary ascetic culture of the Mao era. Although the

celebration of female sexuality can be seen as a way of challenging the state's control over individual bodily autonomy, this trend's one-sided emphasis on essential differences between men and women has ironically contributed to the objectification of women's bodies.

Starting in the 2000s, pressure on women to settle for marriage started to increase, leading to a discourse shaming unmarried "leftover women." Legal reforms designed to promote the rule of law raised expectations of gender equality, but instituted private property rights in ways that constrict women's entitlements to real estate and other assets upon divorce. This in turn reinforces biases in the marriage institution favoring men.

Despite this patriarchal resurgence, Chinese women have continued to fight for their rights. In response to the retreat of the state from the realm of domestic life and the widening of gender inequalities since market reforms were implemented, some urban women sought inspiration and resources from transnational feminist movements, giving birth to an era of "NGO feminism." Coming of age during the heyday of state socialism and feeling betrayed by the state in its turn to market reforms, these women were empowered by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. The conference approached gender justice from a new angle—centered not on "women's liberation," but on "combating gender-based violence." While the former was losing its legitimacy with the withering of state feminism, the focus on violence started to gain momentum in China with the burgeoning of civil society and individual awareness. Around the same time, China also saw the quick development of NGOs advocating for the rights of LGBTQ groups as well as people with HIV and other conditions.

Feminist NGOs leveraged different resources in bargaining with both the public and private sectors. They had to negotiate among the state-sponsored ACWF, increasingly subsumed to the central party authority; nonstate sectors allowing the amplification of gender discrimination and misogyny; and international funding agencies trying to promote a liberal feminist agenda. As with NGOs fighting for the human rights of other groups, this NGO feminism reached its limit about a decade ago, when the state drastically changed its overall approach to managing a burgeoning civil society in China.

Gender disparities have diminished in education and widened in the workplace.

'Made-in-China' Feminism

Although Chinese women have made indispensable contributions to the country's development and prosperity, they have faced widening discrepancies between the rights and benefits they expect and what the state and society can actually offer. These cleavages have led to the current formation of women's right's activism, which critical media scholar Angela Wu and I call "made-in-China feminism." We chose this term, instead of the generic term "feminism," to highlight the fact that home-grown Chinese feminism is not a single, fixed entity that can neatly fit into the standard notion of feminism as conventionally understood in Western academic contexts. Although our analysis recognizes a spectrum of feminist actions, from protesting online to taking to the streets—forms of struggle more "legible" to international observers—we also pay close attention to latent forms that are often underappreciated.

One of the earliest high-profile forms of this new struggle for women's rights emerged in the early 2010s. Calling their movement "Youth Feminist Activism" (YFA), an informal network of college students and young professionals from both urban and rural backgrounds set out to fight gender discrimination and violence in all sectors. The work of their predecessors in the NGO arena had made it possible to learn about concepts such as gender discrimination, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. But this new generation's activism appeared to be less institutionalized and more grounded in the grassroots. Despite lacking access to the political establishment, they protested, brought legal cases, and ran social media platforms, while also staging plays and sponsoring walkathons, calling on all

citizens to join their fight.

Five prominent figures of the YFA—dubbed the “Feminist Five”—were arrested in March 2015, on the eve of International Women’s Day. Since then, fellow activists have taken steps to circumvent state surveillance. They have become more decentralized, and their actions are more spontaneous. This does not mean the movement has become weaker.

The Chinese #MeToo movement, which is to a certain degree a legacy of the early YFA, started with a single complaint of sexual harassment posted online in 2018. Within two years, a group of volunteers compiled 2,500 pages of documentation containing all the ensuing online complaints—hundreds of allegations of sexual harassment and assault.

Also in 2018, prosecutors in Minneapolis charged Chinese tech billionaire Liu Qiangdong with rape, based on a complaint filed by Liu Jingyao, a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota who alleged that he had assaulted her after a business banquet. Despite the eventual dismissal of the criminal charges based on a perceived lack of “sufficient evidence,” Liu went on to file a civil suit that resulted in a court settlement. During the legal battle, she also had to deal with a smear campaign against her on the Chinese Internet. Meanwhile, she received unwavering support from the Chinese feminist community. Her courageous actions have inspired numerous other victims to speak out about their experiences.

Another significant case involved Zhou Xiaoxuan (known as Xuanzi), a 28-year-old who accused Zhu Jun, one of China’s most prominent TV anchors, of sexually harassing her when she was an intern. Zhou did not win her case either, losing an appeal of the original ruling of insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, she gathered overwhelming support from fellow feminists, who launched an online solidarity campaign and rallied outside the courthouse (the hearings were not open to the public), despite a heavy police presence.

In one of the latest Chinese #MeToo episodes, the prominent tennis player Peng Shuai came forward in November 2021 to accuse Zhang Gaoli, the retired Chinese vice premier, of sexual assault. He is the highest-ranking Chinese political figure accused to date. Although Peng has all but disappeared since making her claim, the issue of sexual harassment continues to capture the attention and mobilize the energy of the public thanks to these continuous fights.

As these activists courageously put themselves on the line, advocating for institutional accountability and legal reforms, a growing number of women from diverse backgrounds have begun expressing their discontent and criticism of prevailing gender expectations, which seek to reinstate women in traditional roles of childbearing, family caregiving, and domestic labor. But these women’s voices tend to offer an individual perspective and often lack structure or a clear political agenda. This makes it challenging to fit them neatly within the conventional definition of feminism. Nonetheless, their everyday disruptions of the system play a crucial role in keeping Chinese women’s activism alive and dynamic despite the stifling political environment.

Within this category, two distinct approaches can be observed. The first is entrepreneurial, characterized by women cultivating a hyper-feminine image in order to secure a higher social status through marriage. The second is more oppositional: women rejecting societal expectations of marriage and the reproductive role imposed on them. Instead, they prioritize individual achievement and career advancement.

The latter approach has become increasingly common, making it highly unlikely that the state will be able to compel all women to revert to traditional family roles and have more children in the near future. It is important to note, however, that both approaches are predominantly accessible to middle-class women who have more social and

knowledge capital to achieve their goals than their working-class counterparts.

Stifling and Co-opting Feminism

In response to the remarkable social energy generated by the made-in-China feminist movement, the Chinese state has taken a series of sometimes self-contradictory steps, trying to appeal to and at the same time control Chinese women. The state has both economic and political concerns related to gender.

On the economic front, as China's fertility rate reaches a historic low and the population is aging fast—two correlated issues that jeopardize the country's continuous economic growth—the state has abandoned its former stringent policies restricting childbirth, switching to a pro-natalist push to increase the population. It implemented a two-child policy in 2015, soon replacing it with a three-child policy in 2021. These measures failed to do much to boost fertility, prompting officials to consider rewarding births with tax credits and child allowances.

The state has already resorted to other family- and child-friendly policies in the hope that these will persuade more young women to marry and become mothers. Many of the new additions to the Outline for the Development of Women (2021–30) revolve around benefits and protections for working mothers. Men's duties with respect to parenting and housework are also mentioned, but the general tone still reinforces essentialist gender roles instead of challenging them.

The state has also been explicitly promoting "traditional Chinese family values" since 2013, stressing women's roles in birthing, rearing, and caring for children. Around the same time, the ACWF, once dedicated to advocating for women's rights and interests, redefined its core mission as "organizing women to build virtuous families." This represents a complete abandonment of the CCP's avowed commitment to women's liberation. To buttress this public campaign, the new civil code introduced in 2021 also makes divorce more difficult. It stipulates that before a divorce application can be approved, couples must wait 30 days—to "calm down" and reconsider their decision.

It is unlikely that any of these measures will increase the fertility rate and boost China's population, since they fail to address the underlying problem. As recent survey data show, people are not going to have more children when it costs so much to raise them—and when most social services have been privatized or are provided by already overburdened working-class women and families.

Another economic factor shaping the state's current gender policy is its changing development strategy. As China intensifies its push for industrial upgrading and global technological primacy, recruiting and retaining talented women is part of the plan. But there is a glaring discrepancy between social investment in women's education and outcomes. Females have long outnumbered males among college students, yet men still dominate jobs in the middle and upper echelons of social and economic prestige—in medicine, engineering, logistics, and other high-skilled, high value-added fields. China's female labor force participation rate has been progressively dropping, a pattern contrary to the global trend. If the decline continues, this brain waste will further impede the country's already slowing economic growth.

On the political front, having observed how vibrant feminist movements have won many hearts and minds among younger generations, the state has shifted from reluctantly responding to their demands to actively co-opting their grassroots energy. At the same time, the state is stifling civic activism to ensure total control of society. The result has been a bifurcation of gender politics.

Certain gender issues have been assimilated into mainstream discourse and co-opted by branches of the government and corporations. The voices of professional women are allowed to be heard, and are hailed as proof of "women's power" as long as they do not challenge the political status quo. A notable example of this is the popular reality TV show Sisters Who Make Waves, which has gained prominence since 2020. The show features women celebrities in their 30s to 50s, emphasizing their creativity and energy and asserting that they are still in their prime. Sisters Who Make Waves has garnered a substantial fan base and achieved commercial success. It can be interpreted as a market response to women's demand for entertainment content that challenges ageism while also celebrating female power, beauty, and agency.

The entertainment market is highly attuned to cultural shifts, but the scientific community has also made efforts to portray the country as an advocate for gender equality. For example, it has highlighted the career of Dr. Wang Yaping, who became China's first female astronaut to conduct a spacewalk in November 2021.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has taken strong measures to suppress feminist and LGBTQ organizations as well as individuals. The message is clear: after years of stepping back from promoting women's rights and gender equality, the state is reclaiming its authority in these domains—and other voices will not be tolerated. Over the past eight years, since the detention of the Feminist Five, numerous independent feminist media outlets and organizations have been forcibly closed, and prominent figures have fled the country.

Through orchestrated efforts by the state, made-in-China feminism has been unjustly accused of seeking privileges without fulfilling corresponding duties. The government has employed social media influencers to launch smear campaigns against feminist voices. Anyone who addresses gender inequality on social media risks being swiftly labeled as a "feminazi" or accused of "inciting hatred," and targeted for severe cyberbullying.

By stifling social movements while selectively appropriating their achievements, the Chinese party-state appears to be pursuing a dual objective: gaining control over civil society activists and taking credit for their hard work. Promoting gender equality in contemporary China can be seen as either legitimate or subversive, depending on whether the actors align with the state's agenda. Although the situation may appear discouraging, it is also characterized by a sense of unpredictability. Recent history has demonstrated that as long as discrepancies persist between the state's promises and their actual implementation, Chinese women will continue to identify points of leverage and take action.

Current History

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