Becoming Chinese Feminists: Power, Communities and Challenges

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On the evening of May 9, 2015, I walked out of my room in Waltham, Massachusetts with two large pieces of baggage, to travel to my summer internship site in Beijing, Media Monitor for Women Network (MMWN).

As I hadn’t been exposed to feminist theories until I came to Brandeis University, I had little knowledge of Chinese feminist theory or its history before I secured this internship in October 2014. Recognizing my ignorance, I decided to get involved in Chinese feminism as early as possible by becoming a liaison and translator for MMWN before my onsite internship began. From November to March of this year, I translated into English several reports and video scripts about Chinese feminist activities.

As I became exposed to Chinese feminism, I learned about the history and context of current Chinese feminist activities. In addition, I was privileged to witness various creative movements that feminists launched in China, such as the anti-discrimination protest against the China Central Television (CCTV) New Year’s Gala. Having been educated about feminist theories in the US and involved in feminist journalism in China, I became increasingly sensitive to gender and culture. May 2015 was a new stage on my journey into Chinese feminism and activism. With questions and curiosity, I walked out of my room that evening and headed to Beijing, the capital of China, which I had seen much of on television, and the neighbor city of Tianjin, the city of my origin.

Arrival

At the Airport

After an exhausting trip of almost 24 hours, I arrived at Beijing Capital International Airport on a cold, rainy May night. It had been nine months since I had been in China, and more than 10 years since I had last visited Beijing. I had seen the pictures of this airport in an anthropology course on global and transnational communities that highlighted its splendor. It was easy on the eyes, and the bright lights, the modern ceiling, and the marble floor all resembled the pictures I had seen.

However, tiny spots of mud now covered the marble floor. In the hallways, the opaque wallpapers in red, yellow, and blue were discordant with the style of the surroundings, but they distracted me from the architecture for another reason. On those wallpapers were Chinese socialist greetings and political slogans, such as “building harmonies” and “building a new ethos,” reminding me that this was indeed the capital of communist China. The smell of soil lingering around the airport made me wonder if they were doing some renovations. That was the smell I’d been

Chinese women are wombs, and they are other people’s wombs.

— a middle-school graduate writing to her friend, Ah Chen

My mother enlightened me, although she obeys my father sometimes. Her father sold her to another family, for she was the only daughter. After she married my father, my grandfather wouldn’t let her return home, because “a married daughter is like the water you poured.”

— Li Junyi, writing about her mother

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exposed to every day in Shanghai. I used to call it the smell of construction.

When I went to the airport restroom, I found broken locks on doors and suspicious messes around the toilets. It was not as messy as the toilets in shopping malls where people would stand and leave their footprints, but still dirtier than I expected. I knew that Chinese people often doubt the cleanliness of public facilities so they prefer to stand on or over the toilets to make sure their skin makes no contact with the seats—but that didn’t explain why there were broken locks.

The airport shuttle train was filled with tired people. Half of the station was open-air. At the gate to the airport subway station, there was a long line of people, shoulder to shoulder, waiting to get through the tiresome security inspections, requiring you to put all your belongings through the inspection machine. (Later on, I realized that the security inspections for the subways throughout Beijing were stricter than those in other cities, such as Shanghai. This is most likely to prevent attacks by violent criminals and terrorists.) The air was a mixture of the smell of soil, heat from the crowd, and cold wind from outside. A young student stamped her feet while waiting for the next subway, and rushed in with her parents when it arrived. Judging by their accent, they were from Anhui Province, a southeastern province. Luckily for them, they got two seats. The train filled up quite quickly, so when I finally got on with my luggage, no seats were left. My huge pieces of baggage were in the aisle, for they could not fit in the sitting area. Tired travelers tilted their heads. The feeling of standing among Chinese people felt odd yet familiar. I felt like I knew everyone on the train, though I didn’t of course.

As I leaned on my luggage for support, a comment from the subway announcements amused me. “Respecting elders and loving children² are the traditional virtues of Chinese people, so please leave your seats to those who need them…” In Shanghai, the announcement says nothing about traditional Chinese virtues but instead speaks more directly: “Please leave your seat to the elders, children, the infirm, and pregnant women.”

What is the significance of the reminder about “traditional Chinese virtue”? Why would the government put the part about virtue before anything? Or was it a political message sent to the citizens, to indicate that the Party was recreating the good old days of China? In this capital city, I assumed that the central government had scrutinized every slogan, every sign, and every public announcement. For Chinese people, but especially those in Beijing, government involvement in everything is the norm.

This propaganda about “traditional Chinese identity” seems to contradict Chinese communists’ previous attitudes toward traditional Chinese authoritarian culture. Mao hated the stagnated traditional culture so much that he encouraged repudiation and revolution against traditions and stagnated classes, which ultimately developed into the Cultural Revolution. Decades after this revolution, it seems that the government is promoting the traditions that were symbolically destroyed during the revolution. And yet simultaneously, the government wants to develop Beijing’s cosmopolitan image, by building skyscrapers so avant-garde that many people complain.

Standing idly in the subway car with my baggage, waiting for my stop, I started watching the subway’s television screen. It was playing a series of odes to filial piety. I listened to the songs all along the way and had a thought: Today, the government no longer mentions certain slogans it used to promote, such as “give birth to fewer children and the government will take care of you when you grow older.” Instead, it teaches children to take care of their parents.

There are interesting contradictions in Beijing. On the one hand, it is a metropolis that attracts millions of people from all over the country and indeed the world; on the other hand, it tries to regulate the behaviors of these people so that they fit the Beijing government’s goals. While the government wants to present a positive image of China in Beijing, it also sometimes neglects specific practical details, like daily maintenance of the restrooms. In addition, there is an interesting paradox in the government’s philosophy of management, for it both invites innovations and creative ideas, and tries to promote traditional ideals.

I couldn’t help relating this paradox to the current conditions of feminism in China. I recall what Chairman Xi said to the newly elected leaders of the All-China Women’s Federation in October 2013.³ Xi said:

You shall emphasize women’s unique advantages in promoting the traditional virtues of Chinese family, and building a good family ethos. It is crucial to family harmony, societal harmony and the healthy growth of the next generation. Women should voluntarily take responsibility for respecting elders, educating children and contributing to the construction of family virtues. They should help children form beautiful minds, enable children to healthily grow up and let the children grow up to be valuable people for the country and the public. Women should carry forward Chinese people’s great traditional virtues of endurance through hardship and toils as well as ceaseless self-
improvement. They should pursue active and civil lives and therefore help create a good ethos.⁴

Xi then outlined other jobs for the Women's Federation to promote their services for women, but his opening words had already set the tone. The goals were to make the family central instead of the individual, to emphasize tradition instead of innovation, and, most of all, to put the responsibilities for family and household harmony, and childhood education, solely on women.

Perhaps the current pressures from low fertility rates and the increasingly aging population have caused the government's backtracking on traditions. After more than 35 years of the One Child Policy⁵, young people have few incentives to have babies, and a large part of the population is elderly. The government is facing the potential end of booming economic growth and the lack of resources to meet social security requirements. The government intends to leave the burden of elderly care and child rearing to families, especially to women, but it does not want to lose women's productivity in the public sphere – thus, the calls for gender equality while also encouraging women to voluntarily take on more traditional family responsibilities. Utilizing women to fit the needs of the country is typically what a patriarchal state does, and we continue to see this tendency in the current Chinese state.

A Brief History of Modern Chinese Feminism⁶

Many scholars, writing in both English and Chinese, regard male intellectuals such as Jin Tianhe and Liang Qichao as the pioneers of Chinese feminism. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, these thinkers portrayed an imagined modern European way of living as the exemplar for China, and called for gender equality, freedom of marriage, and education for women, among other ideas. However, women's liberation movements in this context were regarded as part of the enlightenment movement and the nationalist movement, both of which were heavily male centered. In The Birth of Chinese Feminism, the editors present the critiques offered by He-Yin Zhen (a feminist female contemporary of Liang Qichao) toward this expression of male feminism⁷:

Chinese men worship power and authority. […] The men's original intention is not to liberate women but to treat them as private property. In the past, when traditional rituals prevailed, men tried to distinguish themselves by confining women to the boudoir; when the tides turned in favor of Europeanization, they attempted to achieve distinction by promoting women's liberation. This is what I call men's pursuit of self-distinction in the name of women's liberation.

The 1920s saw three kinds of feminist movements in China: first, the movement that called for equal political and legal rights; second, the Christian feminist movement, characterized by a focus on charity and social services; third, the female workers' movement that called for equal economic benefits. The participants in the first two types were mostly upper-class elite intellectual women. The participants in the third type were mostly working-class women. The Communist Party helped to organize female workers and publicize their presence in public spaces. Nevertheless, with the wave of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist nationalist movements, women's movements developed into social liberation movements of women but not specifically for women – with the aim of encouraging women to support men in rejecting traditional feudalism, instead of exploring their own issues as women.

In Mao's time, women's liberation movements sought gender equality in the political and social spheres. The All-China Women's Federation was established in 1949 to promote gender equality. In 1954, equality for men and women was written into the constitution. Chinese Marxists viewed the oppression of women as a part of capitalist class oppression. Therefore, supporting socialist and communist revolutions was deemed the only way for women to achieve complete liberation. The government attempted to minimize gender differences in the public sphere to eliminate power differences in the social status of different genders. The new China made laws and policies on gender equality, equal payment for equal work and freedom of marriage. However, equality in the social sphere did not extend to the private sphere, so patriarchy in the kinship system prevailed, which allowed continued and systematic gender oppression.

Liberal intellectuals were given more permission in the 1980s to "liberate minds" after a 10-year-long Cultural Revolution that had demonized intellectual culture and emphasized a class warfare that aimed to eliminate the capitalist classes. With Chinese economic reforms in place since 1979, newly emerged feminist thinkers such as Li Xiaojiang promoted the idea of the "sexed being"⁸ in contrast to the socialists' de-gendered view of women. In the 1980s, many Western European feminist works were introduced in China, such as Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) by French author Simone de Beauvoir. In 1995, the Fourth UN World Conference for Women brought the legalization of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China and galvanized the rapid growth of NGOs focusing on gender issues in China.⁹ Also, foreign funding, such as that from the Ford Foundation, became a leading resource in support of gender studies. More scholars of gender studies emerged along with
of the site worked in the office, where the decor seemed more business-like and professional. There were four business-style tables in the office. Two of them seemed not to be in use. White was the theme of the site: most walls and doors were white, though the walls of the office were light blue. On the wall next to the interns’ tables were colorful cartoon paintings by Meili, a graduate of a college of design and a renowned feminist activist in China.

Putting my belongings in the bedroom, I was both anxious and curious about my next two months here. Mahu slept on the couch in the living room, and I would sleep in the bedroom – where there were another three desks.

The next day I woke up at 5 a.m. and unexpectedly found that I had a sore throat. I wondered if it was because of the haze that permeated Beijing. The journalist Chai Jing had just publicized the haze problems in Beijing a few months ago, and people’s concerns were evident in the varied selections of masks available in convenience stores. Not knowing what to do, I walked out of the building to look around. I started to look for what might be familiar to me in Beijing. Having not seen Tianjin\texttrademark, my home city, for 10 years, I was desperate to seek the feeling of the city I had missed in the gentle breeze of that Beijing morning.

Before I left Tianjin for Shanghai, I had been to Beijing only a few times. Of those, I remember only one time. My father brought me to Beijing one weekend because I wanted to visit its science museum. We got up at 4:00 a.m. and took a two-hour train to Beijing. I had a great time because the science museum was exactly as I had seen it on TV. Now lost in the streets, in an early Beijing morning, I realized that this city was altogether unfamiliar to me. I couldn’t find any buildings or places I was nostalgic for. I thought I could compare it to Tianjin in my memory, but I couldn’t even remember Tianjin in its particularities. I was used to recalling details about Shanghai, and realized that I had been thinking about Shanghai in comparison to Beijing on my way there.

But to explore Beijing as a new city was exciting. Interestingly, there were many hospitals and dentists’ offices around the internship location. There were also residential neighborhoods, a heating company and many resources for residents such as grocery stores and markets. Elders walked around all the time. Their voices singing Beijing Opera came from a shallow garden by the street. I found a tennis court and a gym with a swimming pool. I found Northern China-style street snacks, which I hadn’t eaten since I left Tianjin 10 years ago.

After enjoying my Chinese breakfast, I went back to the MMWM office. Mahu had woken up and started to make her breakfast. (Mahu\textsuperscript{11} is not her real name, but we all call her this.) She is a college graduate, and comes from Jilin Province, which belongs to a geological area of China called Dongbei (Northeastern China). She is a lesbian.

Later, I realized that almost every feminist here has their own pseudonym (or nickname) used by their friends, and another for those who don’t know them, including the media, as they would rather keep their real names secret until they choose to reveal them.

**Life in a Social Worker’s Community**

**My Office, My Site**

My internship site, Media Monitor for Women Network (MMWN but more commonly known as Feminist Voices), is a Beijing-based Chinese independent
journalist organization. It was founded in 1996 as a volunteer journalist group, right after the 1995 UN World Women’s Conference in Beijing. MMWN aims to promote women’s presence and gender equality in the media and raise awareness about the difficulties women encounter in this context. Its target audience is journalists as well as the general population. MMWN established China’s most influential feminist social media platform, “Feminist Voices,” which has more than 100,000 followers. As an independent journalist organization, it shares articles, updates, and reports on gender-related issues. MMWN closely monitors and publicizes in a timely way gender-related events and activities, conducts research, holds events, publishes gender critiques, and provides training. Relative to its fame in the field, it is a rather small institution.


In recent years, the organization has addressed many topics it regards as relevant to women’s issues, such as continual domestic violence, inequality in education and employment, domestic servers’ rights, sexual harassment in public and in schools, and gender inequality in public infrastructures. (During my stay, it did much advocacy work for a law against domestic violence.)

The site had two staff members, Furi and Ermao, along with two interns, Mahu and me; other volunteers would come and go freely. Ermao is the Site Supervisor and Project Manager. Furi is a young, passionate feminist with long hair. She comes from Heilongjiang Province, which is another Province of Dongbei (Northeastern China). She finds the cold dishes Mahu makes to be extraordinarily delicious and authentic Dongbei style.

Lu Pin, the founder and advisor of the organization, was in America while I was doing my internship in Beijing. She would return sometime later. There had been other staff members before I arrived, but some had left MMWN. Silk, a former staff person, left the organization in March and had not been in contact with the rest of the staff members since; none of the local feminist activists knew where she was until she showed up one day during my internship. Xiao Ha also left, as she was leaving Beijing. Due to a March 2015 incident where five feminists were taken into custody,13 MMWN had cancelled many outside events, including those for May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia. Nevertheless, Feminist Voices didn’t stop its education workshops and feminist theater performances.

The official staff members usually start work around 9:30 a.m. and leave around 6:00 p.m. Ermao worked overtime from time to time to finish articles for Feminist Voices. MMWN members cook lunch every day, which reduces the cost of meals. The organization receives funding by projects, so as long as it is working on something it has financial support. Among the funding sources, many are Hong Kong-based or foreign foundations, including the Ford Foundation. As it has good connections with other global organizations, the official members of MMWN often received funding for various training opportunities abroad. For example, during my stay Ermao and Furi each had a one-week training trip to Thailand.

As an intern, I searched for news and articles about feminism and gender online, updated the website, contacted outside organizations when necessary, translated some articles and PowerPoint slides, and completed other errands. I expressed that I wanted to develop a middle and high school lecture or forum about feminism. Xiao Xing, an activist who came to our office for a visit, was very excited about my idea. According to her, “We should start early, because when they turn 30, there’s no way to save them.”

Xiao Xing is a feminist and a fortuneteller, which for me was a really strange combination. She is a lesbian from Shandong Province (a northern province just south of Dongbei), where she noticed gender inequalities from a young age. The reason for her visit was, in her words, “for the benefit of lunch.”

My initial idea to launch lectures by cooperating with school officials didn’t work. When I tried to contact high school administrators, it was either difficult to find their contact information or hard to get a

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response from them after sending them emails. I therefore failed in the attempt to start my original project, so I ended up doing most of my work in the office. This nevertheless turned out to be an interesting experience.

The Lively Social Worker’s Community
During the afternoon on my first day, Zishu, a member of the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (the NGO next door to MMWN), visited our office. After a while, I asked her if I could visit her office. She agreed and led me to the BGHE office. Their office looked much more professional than ours. They even had an editing room for video production. The BGHE produces online programs for queer people on a regular basis.

On Day Two, I finally met Meili, a feminist from Sichuan Province (in southwest China) who also came here “for lunch.” She was awarded the “Exemplar Woman of the Year” at the Women’s Media Award 2014 (issued by UN Women and Wangyi Lady’s Channel) for her long-distance hike against sexual harassment. In 2014, Meili walked through more than 20 provinces and more than 120 cities and towns to give local officials, along with local people, advice on sexual harassment prevention in primary and middle schools. She used the form of hiking because it was considered dangerous (physically and sexually) for women. It was her way of rejecting gender stereotypes, and encouraging women to explore the world rather than fear it as society had taught them. Before this, Meili had organized and participated in other activities against domestic violence, including the events “Occupy Men’s Toilets” and “Shave for Equality.”

In “Occupy Men’s Toilets,” she and other activists lined up outside men’s bathrooms to make people rethink about the inequality in toilet numbers and locations for women. At the time, they received much positive response and it led to change. In many cities, there were changes in the numbers and locations of women’s bathrooms in shopping malls and other public spaces. (Unfortunately, when some of the activists were detained, the police would humiliate them for occupying men’s toilets, which was merely the name of the campaign, not a physical description of what they did.)

In “Shave for Equality,” Meili and other activists shaved their heads to call attention to inequality in college admissions. At that time, some majors did not admit women at all, and others (e.g. foreign languages and media majors) lowered the admission scores for men to attract more male students. The Education Bureau responded rapidly by issuing bans on gender-based college admissions for all majors, except three related to the military.

For their ongoing activities, these feminist activists were occasionally “invited for tea” with the authorities, so when — on March 6 and 7, 2015 — about 10 feminists were taken in for interrogations, Meili did not take it seriously — until five of them were not released. After all, they had just been planning to distribute flyers to campaign against sexual harassment on buses and to run in strange clothes to raise awareness of it. They consulted officials before the events, and were warned that it was “better not to do them,” so they cancelled the run. But even before they did anything, the police came under different pretenses. The government charged them with “picking quarrels and provoking problems.” Like several other crimes, these have so much room for ambiguity that the authorities can interpret and apply them in many ways. Fearing she would be the next target, Meili hid in daily rental houses in undisclosed locations, changed her cell phone number, and did not contact anyone in feminist circles. She reappeared after the release of the five feminists in April.

Talking about her experiences in that period during our lunch, she said: “Well, the hardest part was my relatives, you know. They sent me messages like ‘come back, don’t do this stuff anymore’ and ‘we will always accept you,’ etc. Well, they are all living happily in Sichuan, and I’m the one that looked like the problem.”

“You can educate them,” Xiao Xing said.

“They don’t listen to what I say,” Meili said. “They still think that I’m a child. Well, considering that I sometimes still need their money...”

“Yeah, money is an issue. But you can still try to educate them,” said Xiao Xing. She had earned money as a fortuneteller. “You can tell them that you were in Time magazine.”

“Haha, like they know it,” Meili responded. “They want me to have a lucrative job, and they only value money for happiness. But that would have no meaning.”

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like.” On the back it has the same line in English. The design suits me well.

On Day Three, Meili and I went to The Affiliated High School of Peking University, one of the keys schools in the city. We were invited by the students to give a lecture about feminism and gender. I went with her to learn how to talk to high-school students about these issues. On that day, I still did not know if I would ever receive responses from high school officials. I brought various pamphlets MMWN had printed on the topic from the domestic violence resource handbook, as well as gender research fact sheets.

Meili had much experience educating college students, but it was also her first time teaching high school students. After a brief discussion, we decided that high school students were not that different from college students, so this lecture was very similar to the lecture program for college students. The outcome was good: Meili was both humorous and knowledgeable about gender, and she knows how to provoke the audience’s laughs and thoughts. Although there were only a dozen people there, there were no awkward silences. During the Q&A, one female student asked: “It has been proven from history that men are better leaders, and women can’t take the role of leaders because of their lack of physical power. How would you recognize that?”

During the Q&A, one female student asked: “It has been proven from history that men are better leaders, and women can’t take the role of leaders because of their lack of physical power. How would you recognize that?”

On the way back to the MMWN office, Meili told me that she actually liked the fact that someone could ask questions like the girl did, because it helped prompt discussion and helped the group think more deeply about the idea of feminism. “But for some people, it’s too late to change their minds,” Meili said, “so we would rather put our efforts into changing those who want to be changed.” She thought that all the people who come to our lectures had the potential to be changed.

That afternoon, Radio Television Suisse reporters interviewed Meili, who reflected on her decisions and activities. She said that March 7 had propelled Chinese feminism into a more political phase. In China, people often avoid being targeted by the authorities by depoliticizing their activities or avoiding using sensitive words. Although Chinese feminists had purposefully avoided emphasizing the political meaning of their activities, the fact that they called for equal rights made them political.

On Day Four, I began to learn that almost every member of the organization had participated in some public feminist action. Mahu was suing the Beijing Post Office for not hiring her as a courier solely because of her gender. Feminist Voices was supporting her case, but its process had been prolonged. Furi protested against sexual harassment in colleges, and she sent a questioning letter to the principal of her alma mater about a sex scandal. Both of these women are members of the feminist theater group “BCome” – a group of feminists who write and perform dramas about Chinese women in a form that resembles The Vagina Monologues. They were performing a piece in June in Yunan Province, Southwest China, and in July in Beijing, and on the evening of Day Four, a dozen BCome members came to the office for rehearsal. Zishu is a member of BCome, too. Trying not to disturb them or to ruin it for myself before I watched the show, I went to bed very early that day.

On the evening of Day Five, my colleagues and I went to a Zhajiang Noodle social event held by the Yi Yuan Commune, another NGO located on the same floor as MMWN. The Yi Yuan Commune was both a public space that offers other NGOs a space to hold events and an activists’ network. All the people there were doing some kind of grassroots work. I realized I was regretting not doing anything as great as they were.

Moreover, I found myself to be more conservative than I expected. For instance, I would not forward by email anything that would be politically sensitive to my friends. Acknowledging that I was also benefiting
from the current system, I pushed myself to see how these activists reflected on the flaws of the social system and advocated for marginalized groups.

As an intern editor, I got my first chance to publish some articles on feminism in Chinese. I was excited to see how people viewed the translations, graphics and articles I contributed to Feminist Voices, so I secretly logged in to my Weibo (Chinese Twitter) account with an unidentifiable username to look at reviews. While I was excited to see many reviews, positive feedback and critiques, it was hard to see some vicious insults. I was used to discussions without hatred in my family, in college and with other feminists. It was a shock that people would write reviews that contained nothing but insults, without trying to understand what the articles are really about. After a few days of exposure to such reviews, I gradually started to get used to them. I even learned to make fun of them, because people often use repetitive structures and vocabulary in these reviews. Sometimes, I even thought about whether they were purposefully writing these sentences to provoke more people into opposing the patriarchy. Sadly, though, when I looked at their Weibo accounts, it was clear that most of them believe what they wrote.

My major project was to research gender discrimination in college admissions among “Project 211” Universities in China for the year 2015. These 112 universities of Project 211 receive great support and funding from the government, which is a testimony to their exceptional education quality. As Chinese universities mainly admit students based on their admission exam scores (Gaokao scores) and the admission regulations (zhaozheng jianzhang) of respective universities, our research method was to scrutinize each college’s admissions regulations posted on the official platform of the Bureau of Education. I looked into gender ratio or quotas, if they had any, and found that 29% of the Project 211 universities I investigated either don’t mention gender at all, or mention in their Admission Regulations that they have no gender regulations. 71% of the universities I investigated have gender regulations.

The military tracks of schools often limit the number of women they admit. College admission for the military involves a special program. The Ministry of Defense cooperates with many prominent universities to enroll some students in the military and give them an education in science and technology in top-tier universities throughout China. The average admission scores for these military track students is significantly lower than the average for regular students. Military students also receive special scholarships along with the regular scholarships the universities offer. After graduation, these military track students will be assigned to PLA regiments.

Within the Project 211 universities that have military tracks, I noticed that gender quotas were prominent. Some universities clearly state that they only admit men in their military tracks. Others not only limit the number of women they admit (such as one or two among 20 military track students), but also have restrictions on their majors. Although military track students generally have major constraints, women experience more constraints than men because of the quotas limiting their admission.

Aside from majors related to national security, other majors that can involve hardship often give preference to men. These majors include: aeronautics, maritime transportation, and geology. Some majors that are especially in demand, such as broadcasting and minority language studies, often have quotas for women or limit the gender ratio to 1:1.

Such disadvantaged conditions in college admission are not the worst thing Chinese women experience; women face more
discrimination when they graduate from college. For instance, many jobs for language studies graduates are open only to men, or those who do the hiring prefer a man for the role, no matter how well-prepared a woman is from her studies, because the employers anticipate women will quit after a few years of working.

**Becoming Chinese Feminists: Their Stories, My Story and Her Story**

*Their Stories*

In June, MMNW held an essay competition with the topic “Why I became a feminist.” I helped edit and reply to essays from people all over the country. It was so touching to read about women’s experiences in China through their narratives. Despite the variation in authors’ ages, home regions, occupations and reasons for becoming feminists, these women all addressed their gender-related challenges and problematic experiences in China. Many of their experiences, although different from mine, resonated with me because of my similar frustrations.

Ah Chen is a high school student who took a half-year off school. She writes:

> My mother’s friend is a teacher. Her husband is famous for doing nothing to support their family, and he beats his wife a lot. When she demanded a divorce, he threatened to jump off the roof. He said it was because she had this coming.

I was saddened by these stories. What was these two women’s fault? They work hard to support their family, and their husbands just enjoy their fruits of labor, like they did with their beautiful body when they were young, and their fame and status when they age. Even so, people say they had this coming/they are too stubborn. […]

> What are women?

A writer friend of mine, a middle-school graduate, said to me in a conversation: “Chinese women are wombs, and they are other people’s wombs.”

I shivered when I read what Ah Chen’s friend thought about how women are viewed in China. Li Junyi, a young woman, writes:

> My mother enlightened me, although she obeys my father sometimes. Her father sold her to another family, because she was the only daughter. After she married my father, my grandfather wouldn’t let her return home, because “a married daughter is like the water you poured.”

In their marriage, my sexist father makes the decisions. No one in our house shall disobey. We shall not start eating before he starts. My mother wanted to go to women’s school when my siblings all went to school. My father rejected this from the outset, saying a wife should focus on housework. But my mother insisted and went to the school. My mother also wanted to learn how to drive. She fought with my father for weeks. My father thought that good women should not drive. But my mother insisted and learned how to drive.

> […] I didn’t know exactly in which moment I became a feminist.

Is that the moment my classmates humiliated me because I looked like a tomboy (due to my father’s dislike of girls)? Or is it the moment my brother’s friends urged me to go back home because I am a girl?

Is it when I saw my older relatives value obedience and giving birth to male babies for their husbands’ family as their missions?

Or is it when my friend’s husband cheated on her and other girl friends told her that women should learn to tolerate this? Or is it when I talked about the concepts of feminism with my friends and they told me I was naïve?

I was brainwashed to think I was as small as a particle of dust. I thought about death, for my closest family thought I was nothing. I feel happy for myself that today I can take my place and am proud of being a girl.

Among these essays are a few from men. Male feminists reflected on the experiences of their mothers, sisters, wives and other female relatives. They rethought their interactions with women,
From a very young age, I learned from historical stories, books and mainstream media that the only functions women have are to provide children, take care of households and to love somebody by giving up their whole lives. acknowledging their own confusion about growing up in a misogynist culture.

These authors are our subscribers. Many of them start to look closely at gender-related issues in their daily lives when they see MMWN publicize cases and publish gender critiques. This amazing feeling of attachment to a larger community whenever I read their works confirms my identity as a feminist and as a woman.

My Story

Born in Tianjin, China, I was privileged to study Mandarin Chinese, which had few accent differences from my native tongue because Mandarin Chinese is based on the Beijing-Chengde accent, and Tianjin was not far from the capital. Furthermore, I faced fewer obstacles in education than other children who were born in large provinces. Both of my parents are not native Tianjin people. My mother comes from Shanxi, a northern province famous for its coal production, rich coal bosses, corruption and bureaucracy. My father, in contrast, comes from a mountainous autonomous minority county in Chongqing, Southwestern China. Although my parents came from villages, they changed their lives by studying hard and becoming first generation college students in the 1980s. At that time, college graduates in China were guaranteed a job because the school, with placement permits from the state, would assign them to different regions where their expertise was in demand. My parents were both assigned to Tianjin, despite the distance between their origins, schools and majors. It was quite common, in China in the 1980s, for young college graduates to be assigned to big cities thousands of miles away from their hometowns.

As a child of a migrant family, part of me felt like I never had fixed roots. Even worse was when my parents’ friends teased me that I was picked up by my parents from a landfill. My parents comforted me and said I am of course their child. But they had another story about me: That the doctor said I was a boy when my mother was pregnant so the family prepared for a boy. But when I was born, it turned out that I was a girl. My father said he was struggling with my name before the day I was born, and he had a dream with people singing “Anni,” so when it turned out that I was a girl, Anni became my name. It is a feminine name that tells everyone about my gender. Luckily for me, I have never received any negativity for being a girl from my mother or father.

Nevertheless, growing up as a girl in China, I secretly resented women, girls and anything female. Before I learned how to read, I watched a lot of television, which made me speak to a boy like this when we played house: “I’m your wife and she [another friend who played with us] is your concubine.” Somehow this moment stuck in my memory and made me later develop resentment at being a girl. After hearing the story about how I was expected to be a boy, I further alienated myself from the girl/woman/female identity. From a very young age, I learned from historical stories, books and mainstream media that the only functions women have are to provide children, take care of households and to love somebody by giving up their whole lives. Moreover, in films and dramas, women are constantly portrayed as hindrances to heroes’ goals. Women must be perfect all the time for them to deserve and find love, while men can be imperfect yet still be attractive. For these reasons, I couldn’t identify with women.

I thought I must be a boy, since I believed I had nothing in common with what people call “women.” I wanted to do a lot of jobs in the future, but whenever I pictured myself, I could not picture myself as a woman. However, I am a woman. I realized this fact when I reached puberty, and I experienced the bodily developments of a woman, a female who I deemed the lesser species. I AM A WOMAN. It was a shock, a betrayal of my mind by my body, and a starting point for me to think about the range of things women can do.

I was trained not to express my frustrations regarding gender roles in front of people, especially to elders who have power and resources. “Don’t look like a feminist,” my mother taught me. “Don’t label yourself an extreme and angry woman. You should act elegantly and show your endurance. Only in this way can you gain respect and opportunities from people.” Endurance of what? I pondered.

When I was in high school and my father’s younger brother had a daughter, I watched as my father sighed and said: “The Long family has no heir.” So what am I? I liked my father’s surname, for it is rare and complex in Chinese. I wanted to let my children have Long as their surname. However, because I am a woman, they will most likely go by another person’s surname. I felt a little bit sorry for my mother in this way. She has one child who
has a different family name than her. Then again, she also has her family name from her father. Her mother also has her family name from her father.

It was not until my second year at Brandeis that I started to take courses about feminism and learn a gender critique. A moment of enlightenment crashed down on me, and many things I experienced started to make sense. I not only learned how my life experience is gendered, but also started to think about how to improve the lived experience of women. Suddenly, from then on, I had little trouble calling myself a feminist. I critiqued discrimination in many specific aspects of my life, and was no longer afraid of challenging conventions and being challenged by conventions.

Ermao's Story
I interviewed my site advisor, Ermao, to ask about her experiences and opinions regarding feminism.

Ermao has black short hair. She is always in sleeveless garments. When Ermao looks at people, her eyes resemble the eyes of cats. Maybe this comes from her affection for Ah Huang, the cat belonging to the head of our organization, Lu Pin.

When Lu Pin left China for America, she asked Ermao to look after Ah Huang. Since then, Ermao has become a “slave of the cat.” She couldn’t help but talk about Ah Huang during our lunchtime breaks. It was then that I discovered that all of my colleagues had at least one cat, as they share their experiences with their cats with passion and excitement. It became evident from these conversations that raising cats is popular among feminists in China. (Ermao insists that Ah Huang is the cutest of all the cats she has met, which, having seen pictures of her and later meeting her, I cannot deny. I am a fan.)

Ermao is from Hubei Province (the easternmost part of Central China). She graduated from a teachers’ college with a bachelor’s degree in Chinese literature, and almost all of her classmates ended up teaching. I asked her why she became interested in feminism. She says it was because of a course she took in her sophomore year on feminist literary criticism. In her senior year, Ermao’s roommate applied for the business program of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Influenced by her roommate, Ermao started to think about gaining a master’s degree in Hong Kong. However, she also had another thought in mind at that time: to start a business herself. But without encouragement from her family, she had to turn her attention back to study. It was one of the pivotal moments for her in terms of experiencing helplessness in decision-making. The thought struck her that she lacked control over her own life, mainly because of her age and gender. She researched graduate programs, and the Gender Studies program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong hooked her. “I was interested in things related to gender,” she said, “because at that point something in my life bothered me all the time. I thought it was gender. And I had no answers to my confusion. Now it’s clear that everything is about gender.” Ermao finished her application in three weeks and was admitted.

After her admission, Ermao went to Hong Kong to study, hoping that finishing this master’s program would enable her to somehow answer her questions about gender and life. Recognizing her identity as a feminist, she also looked for people with similar interests. However, her master’s program disappointed her in both realms. First, the program was interdisciplinary, but the courses were not as interesting as she expected. And with many part-time lecturers teaching, it was hard for her to find her courses on particular interests within the field of gender issues. Secondly, she figured out that people around her joined this program for many different reasons, but few of them resembled hers. She visited several NGOs in Hong Kong, and she met with other master’s and PhD candidates in the subjects in which she was interested. The result was not satisfactory for her.

Although Ermao had broadened her views in Hong Kong, she decided not to stay there. “Hong Kong NGOs focused too much on the issues of the city,” says Ermao, “and I wanted more.” She wanted something she could relate to. She wanted to come back to mainland China and do something in it and for it, whether related to gender or for her country’s development. At that point, she had not yet had contact with any mainland NGOs, and she had barely met any mainland feminists. When Ermao was graduating from CUHK, she noticed that the Media Monitor for Women Network (called “Women’s Voices Reports” at that time) was recruiting an intern. As she had no clear thoughts about what to do, she thought it was a good start for her career. “I never imagined being a white-collar worker or doing any office job. I wanted to get involved in grassroots development programs,” Ermao says. But after the internship, she decided to stay. It was 2011. The head of the organization, Lu Pin, had the wisdom to let her stay. It was through this organization that she finally found people of similar causes and beliefs. Supporting feminist activities through media became her job.

As a part of the job, Ermao manages social media updates. Naturally, she gets close exposure to many critiques. Sometimes she likes the critiques, because through arguments she can get clearer on what she thinks. At other times, she refuses to hear or read critiques, as some people just release their most vicious words to feminists. “You learn to ignore them.
It is a core part of Chinese communism that women and men are equal. Feminism should be a safe and correct subject no matter how much people politicize it. And yet, the police of a communist government detained five feminists for 39 days simply because of their plans to distribute anti-sexual-harassment flyers. This abuse of power says clearly to feminist activists that the country is backtracking on its promises, turning reactionary and conservative.

Hearing her experiences, I started to see the constant horror in my mind with a clearer view. It was the horror toward a strong dictatorial government I love that gave me the most anxious fears. The March 7 incident left me with much trauma, even though I was not even present at the event. I could barely imagine its impact on those who experienced it directly.

Ermao was affected by this shocking incident. In one of the lunch chats in our office, we talked about how the five feminists would rise as the leading icons of Chinese feminism, and Ermao spoke: “Well... I would still rather not be arrested...” We all looked at her, waiting for her next line.

“Because... I want to be... alive?” she said. After saying that, she laughed. “Well, hopefully. My grandfather is retiring. So I would fear no more.” She continued, “Because... I want to be... alive?” she said. After saying that, she laughed. “Well, hopefully. My grandfather is retiring. So I would fear no more.”

All of us laughed.

“Yeah, if I come back to Hubei to go to prison, it would be like coming back home. So I would fear no more.” She continued, “Well, hopefully. My grandfather is retiring. But then, he would still have connections to accommodate me, wouldn’t he?” This kind of humor circulates in the feminist community a lot. One of the “Feminist Five” even wrote a Gourmet Guide to the House of Detention about how to eat creatively in custody.

There are some losers who only dare to post these words online because they don’t have to pay a price for their virtual behaviors,” Ermao says. But those critiques have also changed her. She admits that she tends to argue more now with people offline. Sometimes she argues with her friends from childhood. Sometimes she argues with her family. “My father is ‘Wumao’ [those who praise China as the best of all realms] and he holds many traditional and male chauvinist opinions,” Ermao says. “With people like him, I am fed up with frustrations. So I decided not to contact those who couldn’t possibly understand feminism.”

The job also had positive effects on Ermao. She became more confident. “It’s like you have the truth in your hand,” she says. She changed from being confused to becoming clear-minded, and from wandering around to doing the things she could accomplish. Her views toward the government also changed, as she realized that the government can and should be changed by ordinary people. NGOs and other social organizations are the tools through which people unite their powers to influence policies, cultures, and the actual well-being of people on a larger scale.

Sometimes, the fruits of Ermao’s and her colleagues’ activism will be taken by the government without crediting them. For instance, in the 2012 “Shave for Equality” event Lu Pin, Meili and other activists shaved their hair to attract attention to inequality in college admissions. At that time, some majors did not admit women at all and others (e.g. foreign languages and media) lowered the admission scores for men to attract more male students. The Education Bureau responded rapidly to this action by issuing bans on gender-based admissions to college for all majors except three disciplines related to the military. Nevertheless, the influence of activism was played down. These incidents made Ermao more or less cynical toward the government, although she recognizes that if certain actions affect policies they are successes.

However, nothing affected her more than the March 7 incident in 2015. The peaceful life she lived, the confidence she had, and the security she once held in this land she loves was shattered by the government’s abuse of power. The trust she had in this government was greatly undermined.

During the 39 days that five feminists were detained (2 days for interrogation and 37 days for detention), Ermao and the whole office fled elsewhere, fearing the police would look for them as well. Ermao remembered saying earlier that, “Feminism is basically a safe subject in China,” and so she felt the institutional betrayal. It is a core part of Chinese communism that women and men are equal. Feminism should be a safe and correct subject no matter how much people politicize it. And yet, the police of a communist government detained five feminists for 39 days simply because of their plans to distribute anti-sexual-harassment flyers.

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In her recovery phase, Ermao found the cat Ah Huang to be comforting. When she touches Ah Huang’s fur and looks into Ah Huang’s eyes, she finds moments of peace. She could spend hours with Ah Huang to fill her mind with joy. I wonder if the popularity of cat-raising in feminist circles is for similar reasons.

Carrying the weight of the incident, Ermao decided to continue her career as a feminist advocate. However, admittedly, the organization stopped all outdoor activities and continued the indoor activities like lectures and theater. Chinese feminist activism had thus in part been thwarted. But what I witnessed was that many of the activists have helped each other to move on. Although some of them lost their institutions, their offices or their properties, or they chose to leave, they still respect each other. Personally, the same changes Ermao had experienced were also happening to me: I was becoming more confident and more likely to start taking part in activities than to wonder about the theoretical aftermath and doing nothing.

The Community in Transition

Changes and Challenges

As an intern in a journalistic organization, I had opportunities to interact with various people and observe the changes and challenges in the feminist and wider activist community. More interaction with people also brought me greater insights into the development of my own organization, in all its facets – from a rather traditional feminist media platform to a combination of feminist activism and broader feminist connection.

During my time at Media Monitor for Women Network, various media and artists visited the organization and were interested in the current circumstances of and difficulties experienced by Chinese feminists, and they sought feminists’ thoughts in the particularly difficult time after the March 7 incident. From listening to interviews, I gathered information that I would not have been aware of if I had worked only with my coworkers. For instance, in one interview Ermao talked about how this organization developed from a volunteer group of feminist journalists to the most influential advocacy organization for feminism in new media.

The purpose of the MMWN was originally to increase the presence of women in media. In the beginning, the head of the volunteer group, Lu Pin, thought that if more journalists were feminist, they would generate more reports about women. Therefore, the original function of the group was to hold workshops and to train journalists in the field to become gender-sensitive. Also, Lu Pin and her coworkers started to publish digital weekly reports called “The Women’s Voices Report.” In 2009, the organization became commercially registered under the name Beijing Gender Culture Communication Center. When Ermao started to work full time for the organization, it was still mainly for media-related training.

However, Lu Pin and Ermao realized that although journalist trainings helped the cause, they were not enough to raise the presence of women in the media. Women’s voices and women’s struggles still had to be newsworthy to be reported in influential media. Therefore, Lu Pin and Ermao thought they had to do something more to catch people’s and the media’s attention. Media Monitor for Women Network first appeared on social networks in 2010, and its official Sina Weibo (Chinese Twitter), account was renamed “Feminist Voices” in April 2011.16

An incident happened in late 2011, when Kim, the wife of the Chinese celebrity Li Yang, sent photos of her bruised body via Weibo asking for help. When other media were treating this case as a celebrity scandal (in this sense, his issue), Feminist Voices treated it as domestic violence (in that sense, her issue), and it publicized the case in this way. Moreover, the general media at the time sought reasons for Li Yang’s violence, but the blame was usually placed on Kim: “It must be her fault.” “She is a manipulative psycho.” People kept ignoring Kim’s voice in this case and turned to Li Yang for an explanation.

A circle of feminists, including Lu Pin and Ermao, was so concerned about the indifferent attitude toward domestic violence and women’s suffering in the mass media that they decided to do something to raise public awareness about it. They started their first feminist activity in 2012, which they called the “Bloody Bride.” Three of them were adorned with fake bruises and each wore a wedding dress with red spots, and they all walked along the busiest street in Beijing, carrying boards with various slogans: “Beating is not intimate; insulting is not love” (this relates to a Chinese proverb 打是亲骂是爱, which can be roughly translated to “Beating means intimate and insulting means love.”); “LOVE WITHOUT VIOLENCE”; “Violence is all around you, AND YOU ARE STILL SILENT?”; “LOVE, is not an excuse for
violence.” Several media reported this activity, and my organization publicized it. Moreover, more media started to see Kim’s case as a domestic violence case.

After enjoying this taste of being activists, these feminists decided to establish a loose organization that holds feminist activities. The members have planned and participated in many feminist activities, but there is no permanent member in the activism group and no permanent focus. Anyone who is interested can participate in any appropriate activity and say they are from this group. Originally, they called themselves “Young Feminist Activists Against Domestic Violence,” for that was their main focus. But later in the same year, some of the feminist activists shaved their hair off to raise awareness of gender inequality in college admissions, which has little to do with domestic violence. Later on, the activists started to introduce themselves as being from the “Feminist Activism” group. Since then, these people have been active not only in feminist activities, but also in the promotion of these activities. For instance, my organization started the “Feminist Television” program online, with each video featuring a heated topic and the feminists’ activities about it.

Although being part of feminist activism is a fulfilling experience for most people, it is not economically advantageous. As I wrote earlier, my organization gets funding for each specific project; so as long as it keeps running there is little problem with money. Many funders of my organization are abroad; other full-time feminist activist groups similarly have less domestic funding than foreign funding. The reason for a lack of domestic funding for such groups is that feminist advocacy organizations (or indeed other kinds of organization that seek changes to the system) remain politically sensitive in China. Domestic foundations tend to seek less sensitive projects to fund, such as disaster response, building schools, and student support. They also tend to fund projects that have more immediate results, such as creating opportunities for poor kids.

Compared to supporting these projects, funding feminist media promotion is considered neither politically safe nor efficient. Media promotion prompts people’s critical thinking about norms and authorities, while challenging the culture itself to help change the larger system. Cultural shifts do not usually occur suddenly. Therefore, funding a feminist advocacy group seems useless and dangerous. People of my parents’ generation now hold the bulk of the country’s resources, but they remain cautious about feminists.

I met with one of my mother’s friends, a woman who has a top executive position in a state-owned enterprise. We talked about feminism as she spotted me wearing the feminist T-shirt Meili designed. From the beginning, a certain antagonism was evident, as she thought feminists were promiscuous people who are just trying to get attention and have sex with every “sick” kind of person (LGBT people in her mind). She also thinks feminists are loud but not necessarily helping anything. I explained that feminism needs publicity, for it leads to subtle cultural changes. If no one hears them talking, there’s no way for them to change the culture. She insists that if it is really good for people, feminists should cooperate with the government. “Why don’t you cooperate with the Women’s Federation?” she questioned.

After all, as a socialist country, gender equality is written into the constitution of China. Our country has a huge women’s organization, the Women’s Federation, and it is perhaps the largest women’s organization in the world, for it has members in each government branch. I explained that the government as an office might not notice the grassroots facts like commoners do. Furthermore, even if they discover some inequality, they might not be as active as feminists and NGOs. The government is controlled by patriarchal powers, and the authorities in the system emphasize stability, not activism.

Later on, as I was also curious about why our organization does not frequently cooperate with the Women’s Federation, I asked Ermao about it; she added a new perspective: the Women’s Federation itself is a marginalized governmental organization, so it has little power or space to exercise power – but still, we do cooperate with it when they reach out to us for trainings, lectures, and pamphlets, or more.

When I talked about the fact that we accept foreign funding, my mother’s friend strongly disagreed. “You shouldn’t have taken foreign money. Because you will listen to whoever gives you money.” Many of my coworkers’ parents were also worried about this. There are so many opportunities for trainings from abroad offered to my colleagues that sometimes their parents wonder whether they are being trained by foreigners to sabotage the country. When my mother’s friend...
and I were talking about the five detained feminists, she said: “It is because you [feminists] took foreign money first, that the country would investigate you. You know, young people are easily instigated.”

I know what she was referring to: the Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989. At the time that it happened, my mother’s generation was comprised of young college graduates and young newbie employees. They witnessed the heat of the movement and the fall of many young people at the time. They heard one of the student leaders say, “I was expecting bloodshed.” They witnessed how the leaders of the movement fled to foreign lands, and how the “instigated” people left in China ended up discarded, ruined, and unhappy for the rest of their lives.

As my parents’ generation later climbed the heights of the corporate ladder in this country, they know better than anyone how important it is to cooperate with those who have power if you want to achieve a better future, and how dangerous it is to play with those who don’t have power but try to acquire power and unite people.

“If the government has to investigate you, then it must have reasons,” my mother’s friend strongly believes. Actually, patriotism in the form of trusting the government is well instilled in many Chinese people, including me, so it affects our instincts about many things. For instance, although feminist activists generally know each other and believe that most of their colleagues and peers are working for the best of the country and society, some of them still think (secretly) about the possibility of the detained ones taking money – and orders! – from foreigners to sabotage the country’s peace or something else. The power of doubt and fear is so strong that the authorities often use it to neutralize different voices.

Governmental powers have always kept society stable. Stability is a crucial aspect of a civil society, in which order and peace are maintained. However, stability is also used in some cases as an excuse for the stagnation of class, power, and the perpetuation of injustice. When individual officials and authorities are entitled to power and people have no way to object, they can use power to leverage the possibility of peaceful changes for their own benefit.

Power is a dual-edged sword. The current government uses its extreme power to eliminate corrupt officials. At the same time, the government uses its power to eliminate any threats to its rule (i.e. organized people who question the system). Xi is so adamant about eliminating corruption and limiting corrupt officials’ power that many people of power and influence have been arrested and convicted during his term. However, under this totalitarian reign, others must have the power to take over from the powerful. Xi is promoting legislation to regulate the corrupt ruling powers. Since corruption goes all the way down to local government branches, Xi must make sure he has the absolute ability to eliminate corruption while keeping society stable.

How can one establish people’s faith in the legal process if totalized power is still the most useful tool to solve problems? This is especially difficult when people find that the target is not only corrupt officials, but anyone who might stir up common people’s discontent toward the Party and the government. If the officials who promote peaceful changes in the government relinquished their power now, the Party would collapse while they worked on enacting punishments for that corruption. Therefore, I can logically understand why the government has started to limit foreign funds, as well as street demonstrations and other forms of activities that might affect their power and position in China right now. But understanding is not the same as accepting. If law enforcement does not respect the basic legal rights of Chinese citizens, how can one expect them to help promote the rule of law in China? Totalized power, however good its results can sometimes be, can turn against anyone when it detects a threat.

Similar violations of people’s rights happen in other “democratic” societies. In the name of “national interest” everything can be justified. In many countries, people are educated to value “the state” over their own lives. But whose rights do the states stand for? Shall we support the government and policies that might negatively affect our lives? There is never a simple answer. We all have opinions and identities, and we make choices about what to support and what to value most. Chinese government officials may choose to value the leadership position of the Communist Party more than some individuals’ lived experiences. From the officials’ perspective, the arrests and investigations they order serve their purpose of deterring those who plan to sabotage the Party’s rule in China; the unfortunate traumatizing experiences of
some “innocent” activists are merely the collateral damages.

Thus, being a full-time activist or NGO worker in China means that you are not only financially insecure, but also will probably be targeted by the Big Machine of the Chinese government. Organizing grassroots public action with funds from abroad becomes a dangerous activity for many feminist activists and other NGO workers. Many people get used to the police’s short-term interrogations. Even if activists and NGO members try hard to protect themselves from the authorities, they still live with insecurity. They and their families often experience long-term anxiety about their safety and security. This is especially true for those who are the authorities’ biggest targets.

“...and they said, ‘We are not that important.’ How much have I been circulating in Weixin for only a little while when my mother phoned, worried about me. For her, my safety is the most important thing. She couldn’t stand losing track of me without any knowledge of where I was. But then I comforted her: “I am not that important.” How much have I done in the eight weeks I have been involved with feminist organizations? Although I have attended many activities, they were never as sensitive as the street actions of the Feminist Five or the ongoing work of some NGO workers.

Aside from safety concerns, another fact bothers some feminists’ family members: There are many lesbians in feminist circles in China. I noticed this on Day One. Through this experience, I met more women who were openly lesbian than ever before.

I remember one time a reporter asked, “Do you think the situation for gays and lesbians is different in China?” Ermao answered, “Yes, of course. Gays are still men. Lesbians are still women.” It countered some of my thoughts. Before, I thought lesbians were more socially accepted than gay males, because for men being gay could be seen as a way of betraying their masculinity and male power. In fact, in China being lesbian actually invites more oppression, including within LGBT circles.

This fact is actually very pivotal to the lives of many lesbian feminists. T, one of the Feminist Five, once worked in an LGBT organization but found herself able to do very little. “Because it [the organization] is mainly for gays,” T explained. “And gays are men. Many of the gays, although being oppressed themselves, do not care about oppressed women. To them it seems that only gays can represent LGBT, and only men’s needs are crucial. It was an unpleasant working experience.” T found that only within feminist groups could she create attention for both women’s and lesbians’ needs. This is probably true for many lesbians participating in feminist activities: they feel that their voices would be silenced working primarily in LGBT organizations, even as the organizations have become more prominent.

A group of feminists formed from the tieba forum go even further: they claim that gay men are the most sexist people in China. The tieba feminists have certain views: On the one hand, gays don’t need women for love; on the other hand, they grow up in a misogynist culture where women are seen as son-bearers and baby-sitters. In China, men are the owners of the surnames. 

With the One-Child Policy, the young surname owners are often the only boys in their families. Many gay men know they have to have kids with women to continue their family line. Those gay men want to have children without having to pay much money and attention for a surrogate and childrearing, so they trick women into marrying them and having children with them while finding lovers elsewhere. These gays are probably the most misogynous men in China and are worse than many straight men. They look down on women and see them only as reproductive tools. They have neither love nor compassion toward women, yet they have men’s pride in families and the society and gays’ pride in marginalized communities. These views, as expressed by the tieba feminists, explain further why some feminists want to keep distant from an LGBT alliance. They believe that gay men are hindering lesbians and bisexual women from attaining women’s rights. This group of feminists is sometimes more anti-gay than non-feminists; some of them view gays as a cancer doing harm to the feminist cause.

However, I don’t think it is helpful to stigmatize any group. If we understand that the origin of certain gay men’s misogyny is the culture’s misogyny, we can do better in changing, for example, the culture of son-worship. That being said, women should never fulfill the wishes of those who hate women. It is important to be vigilant about the direction of one’s activism. It may cultivate compassion and inclusion on the one hand, but it also can cultivate exclusion and adversarial behavior on the other.
Reflections

In developing his theory of “panopticism,” Michel Foucault introduced Bentham’s imaginary prison, Panopticon. In Bentham’s concept, the prison’s omnipotent supervisor ensured that all prisoners were alert to their own improper behaviors. Even if there was no one watching, prisoners would keep behaving well. Foucault writes, “[The Panopticon] is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.” When the powerful and authoritarian image is established, the architectural idea of power functions on its own and through it people borrow and exercise power. Foucault continues, “Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants.”

Through my observations of how power and people interact, I found Foucault’s perspective to be both daunting and arguably applicable in contemporary China. Witnessing the struggles of people demanding power and equality was a significant experience for me. In China, the authority plays the role of the powerful entity, and activists fight for their rights to shape a new power balance while, without realizing it, consenting to the existing power. As one born in China, I acknowledge that there has been an omnipotent power in my life from a young age. There is no doubt that the government is monitoring and managing the development of our nation. We bear in mind the government when anything happens, good or bad, very much like the mechanism of the “Panopticon” as it develops into an automatized and disindividualized power. This summer, I was privileged to meet many active feminists and learn from them about their work and life; as I began to investigate Foucault’s insights into power, I couldn’t help but link it to their collective and individual experience as Chinese feminists.

Since the March 7 incidents, feminist activists cannot escape the idea that they are targeted and vulnerable. They always knew they were being scrutinized, for they were “invited for tea” by the authorities occasionally. They worked to avoid being targeted by depoliticizing their activities or avoiding sensitive words. But when they found themselves being punished and isolated in crisis situations (for example, with sudden arrests), their fear of state power grew bigger and started to affect their choices. Lu Pin, the head of the MMWN, is forced to stay in the US, and Meili decided to leave Beijing, the capital of China, for another city where she would feel safer, being further from the reach of government power in Beijing.

Many feminist activists felt isolated, and feared that they were spied on not only by the government but also by their own friends and family, since they, too, are supervised by the Great Machine. One example of this is when my mother’s friend insisted that feminists should not accept foreign funds and should cooperate with the government if they are really doing this for the mass population. As I elaborated in the previous section on community and challenges, many of my coworkers’ parents also worried about the legitimacy of their non-governmental work to address societal problems.

When the powerful entity grows as big as the government in China, surveilling each other’s behaviors becomes normalized. After all, the country is not so distant from the Cultural Revolution, throughout which many people got into trouble for even their inadvertent words. It is also not so far from the Tiananmen Incident, which is where many young people saw the negative consequences of participating in non-governmental movements. In this system, people alert others in all sorts of ways about their “misbehaviors.” The imaginary idea of power is exercised on people in each and every action they make to police their own bodies. Such voluntary surveillance has an effect on every aspect of activists’ lives, from raising funds to renting houses, for rich people and house owners do not like to get themselves into trouble, assuming they, too, are being surveilled by the Great Machine.

Being both the symbol and the entity of authority gives the government and its officials, and the relatives of officials, great power to determine the allocation of resources and discipline others’ behaviors. On the one hand, people support the government because they believe its authority prevails and contributes to (perhaps more accurately, controls) their future; on the other hand, people believe their behavior is constantly visible to the government and no one can help them when they confront the government and its agents. Through both respect and fear, people consent to the power’s actions and give up their own rights to officials.

It is important to be vigilant about the direction of one’s activism. It may cultivate compassion and inclusion on the one hand, but it also can cultivate exclusion and adversarial behavior on the other.
and the relatives of officials who operate this powerful entity. Many people neither care to know about how the government is run nor know how they could contribute to policy change. Then, when people face difficulties, they resent not only the individuals who exercise the power but the powerful entity as a whole.

Feelings of insecurity in the country they love pushes feminists to rethink the governmental system as a whole. Feminists who were traumatized by the state tend to question whether the government can and will voluntarily promote justice in the current bureaucratic system. Even if the Party in theory embraces the ideals of social justice and gender equality, it is hard to ensure that these ideas are implemented in real life situations. For instance, although the All-China Women’s Federation has branches in every village and every county in China, there have been many controversial cases about the actual functions of the Women’s Federation.

For example, one case was publicized this July: A woman was beaten by her husband and suffered a concussion five months after giving birth. She called the police, and the police had her ask the husband and suffered a concussion five months after giving birth. She called the police, and the police had her ask the

What does it mean when the Women’s Federation remains subordinate to the patriarchal government? What does it mean when women’s rights are not necessarily what the officials of the Women’s Federation care about?

As Audre Lorde puts it: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”

Moving Forward

As working in NGOs can be financially and physically insecure and often frustrating in various ways, mobility has become a constant feature for feminists and NGO workers in China, especially in 2015, as the government was using harsher means to deter social activists. During my stay, I witnessed a lot of people leaving. The Yi Yuan Commune, an institution I wrote about in the previous section, moved out of our building on June 4. Watching the apartment being emptied was emotional for many of us. “The Yi Yuan Commune has finished its mission. So it’s time for it to leave,” the head of the Yi Yuan Commune, Cao, said. I could not tell if she was sorry, or felt relief at the end of an era. The Yi Yuan Commune would not stop its activities, but it chose to leave its office.

Several feminist activists I knew were leaving to go to the South. “I cannot stay here,” one of them said. After all, Beijing is the place where the government has the most power. Meili also left on June
15. We split up some of the belongings she left behind. One feminist institution, Weizhiming, in Hangzhou, announced its shutdown. In its announcement, it wrote, “Today is the last working day in May. Our institution has been suspended for two months since the March 7 ‘Feminist Five’ incident. And we have to shut down.” Its three core members were all members of “the Feminist Five.” Two of its allies were the other two feminists. Owing to its inability to continue their projects and pay the rent, they had to shut down the institution. Feminist Voices is very lucky in this case, because one alleged target of the police in my organization, Lu Pin, happened to be in the United States in March. Therefore, the police were unable to locate her in China, so she narrowly missed the March 7 incident.

Lu Pin is a leader in many feminist activities. When she heard about the detainment of several young women, she said: “I shouldn’t have taken [one of them] into this stuff....” She expected to come back within two months. However, after hearing so much news about NGO people continually disappearing, she decided not to come back, at least this year. Since she’s not coming back any time soon, she decided to lease her apartment. My coworkers and I helped to move her stuff into our office. When we cleared 20 boxes of books out of her apartment, I kept wondering what kind of person she is. I love her selection of books, and I know the feeling of being apart from your most beloved books. If being a feminist in China means that I have to cut off my connections with my past in the form of leaving or throwing away my precious belongings to keep my mobility, I would have to think twice about it.

After the eight weeks of internship, I left Beijing and my site in July. I still did not get a chance to watch BCome’s theater performance. However, I was grateful to have become friends with so many passionate social justice workers and feminist activists. In eight weeks, it was not possible for me to understand every aspect of Chinese feminism. (For example, in Beijing, it was impossible for me to investigate grassroots feminist education in rural areas.) And in a relatively short reflection paper, it has been impossible for me to present everything that happened to me in China. Nonetheless, I have tried to present many dimensions of and contexts for feminism in China as I saw it. Although I have recorded many challenges feminists face in China, I still see hope for greater developments in Chinese feminism.

My internship experience encouraged me to take action and “be the change.” I plan to do more advocacy of feminism in China in more creative and less politically sensitive ways. Next summer, I will be organizing a series of lectures and forums in Beijing featuring women speakers from various backgrounds. I believe that communication and storytelling are powerful in feminist advocacy. I am still thinking about ways to get those who will not yet listen to any words that women say to actually listen to women’s stories. For peaceful change to happen from the grassroots, we first have to make more productive communication possible.

Although I have recorded many challenges feminists face in China, I still see hope for greater developments in Chinese feminism.

Bibliography


Notes

1. 嫁出去的女儿是泼出去的水 (Jia chuqu de nver shi po chuqu de shui), It is a common metaphor in China to say that a married daughter belongs to her husband’s family and can never come back.

2. 尊老爱幼 (zun lao ai you). Translated by Anni Long.
3. All-China Women’s Federation is a women’s organization founded in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party. It is responsible for promoting government policies on women and protecting women’s rights from the governmental level. It builds branches in every village, community and county along with Party branches. From 1995, it recognized itself as a nongovernmental organization. However, its members are government officials and it often locate its offices in government office buildings.


5. In October 2015, the Chinese government ended its One-Child Policy and thus now allows families to have two children. See more from the New York Times article at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/world/asia/china-end-one-child-policy.html?_r=0.


9. Ibid. 201.

10. Tianjin is a northern city next to Beijing and one of the four national municipalities directed by the Central Government. National municipalities directly under the Central Government are politically equal to provinces; the other national municipality cities are Beijing, the capital of China; Shanghai, the international metropolis in Southeastern China; and Chongqing, the mountainous capital of Southwestern China.

11. In later writings, I am referring to everyone’s pseudonyms (except the founder of my organization, Lu Pin) when I write their stories. Some of them have built fame using their pseudonyms. Owing to their activity, I can only make some changes to some of their pseudonyms presented. Still, it is hard to hide their identifiable features, as this essay mentions their public activism.


13. The five feminists were released in April because of lack of evidence, but were still under restrictions.


18. Ibid.