



Leta Hong Fincher

Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China

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reviewed by [Emily Dang](#)

1. *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*, by Leta Hong Fincher, is a provocative account of the burgeoning feminist movement in Communist China, and the risk it posed to the authoritarian regime. On the eve of International Women's Day in 2015, Chinese government officials arrested and detained five largely unknown women's rights activists. However, as their plight became publicised both across China and internationally, the so-called 'Feminist Five' became a 'powerful new symbol of dissent against the patriarchal, authoritarian state' (p.2). Fincher contends that as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) grapples with challenges including the economic downturn and demographic change, the regime is increasingly turning to its traditional patriarchal and Confucian underpinnings to legitimise its authority. Following the journey of the Feminist Five's political activism and their treatment by the Chinese government, Fincher suggests that it is in fact the groundswell of young, educated Chinese women turning to feminist ideologies that poses the greatest threat to the autocracy of the Chinese state.
2. Though the repression of various human rights under the CCP has been subject to various analyses, Fincher's work uniquely centres the voices of a demographic often sidelined in mainstream human rights narratives—those of young women. In an interview Fincher conducted with Lü Pin, the founding editor of *Feminist Voices*, Pin explains that 'the feminist movement is about women's everyday concerns and building a community, rather than just having one or two famous individuals who can enlighten everybody else' (p. 8). Perhaps it is for this reason that Fincher argues that these young feminist activists pose a 'larger, more complicated challenge to the Communist regime than the male activists who preceded them' (p. 7). Notably, she traces the historic lineage of the young women's activism through the ages; Chapter 5 provides a refreshing take on Chinese feminist resistance that defies both external and internal tendencies to characterise such activism as 'Western-influenced.'
3. Fincher's work expertly weaves the personal and the structural, the intimate and the global together using vivid and straightforward language. *Betraying Big Brother* is based on Fincher's personal interviews with the activists of the 'Feminist Five,' (Li Maizi (???), Wei Tingting (???), Zheng Churan (???), Wu Rongrong (???), and Wang Man (??)) as well as 'dozens of labor rights activists, university students, and women's rights lawyers' (p. 9), conducted between 2015 and 2018. Their accounts illustrate the intersections between multiple strands of activism—feminist, LGBTQI, health,

human rights and labour rights—both within China and internationally. Fincher's sources range broadly, including personal accounts of activists and their families, political sources, such as the writings of various activists and Party propaganda, data from human rights organisations, and historic and literary Chinese documents. She also references her previous work, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality*.^[1]

4. In Chapters 1 and 3 of *Betraying Big Brother*, Fincher focuses primarily on the Feminist Five's experiences of arrest and detention. She details the multiple arrests on the eve of International Women's Day 2015, before a seemingly innocuous planned action to distribute stickers against sexual harassment on public transport. Under charges of 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble,' (an intentionally vague charge used against critics of the government) the Feminist Five were subjected to inhumane and unlawful treatment. Li Maizi and her girlfriend Teresa recount plain clothes officers without identification prying open the lock to their apartment at night, and Wu Rugrong describes officers searching the Weizhiming Women's Centre with neither search warrants or permits for her arrest. Detained in below freezing conditions in isolation cells, the women were stripped of multiple layers of clothing and shoes, and their glasses, phones and other devices were confiscated. Wu Rugrong, who suffered chronic hepatitis, and Wang Man, who had a congenital heart condition, were denied water and medication. The activists faced constant psychological abuse over their thirty-seven days in detention, with threats of gang rape, and additional threats towards their family members—causing Zheng Churan deep anxiety. The effects of their imprisonment were ongoing, as Wang Man detailed to Fincher the loss of her job, apartment, regular circle of friends, and freedom of movement following her release. However, Fincher highlights the activists' incredible resilience and commitment to their cause, with poignant descriptions of the women singing in their individual cells to comfort and display solidarity with one another.
5. Chapter 4 also focuses primarily on the Feminist Five, as Fincher explores more of their personal lives, their motivations and 'feminist awakenings.' Her interviews with the activists reveal their how their early experiences with gendered violence often led to their involvement in women's rights activism. Li Maizi and Bai Fei both suffered from intergenerational family violence, as well as homophobic violence. Bai Fei describes how classmates would violently attack her, 'using sharp objects to stab me all over my body, spitting in face, holding me down and forcing me to drink urine' (p. 85). Li Maizi's experience of beatings from her uncle and father 'fuelled an intensely personal commitment to the emerging feminist movement' (p. 85). These sobering personal accounts of abuse are interspersed with Fincher's research on gendered violence in China. While she states there is 'no reliable way to measure the prevalence of sexual harassment in China,' official Chinese government reports state around 1 in 4 married women are beaten, and a 2013 study revealed that 70 per cent of women factory workers in Guangzhou had been sexually harassed. Weaving again between the personal and the political, in a deeply distressing passage, Fincher details her own childhood experiences of sexual assault and violence in Australia, and her resulting shame and silence. Her incredible vulnerability in this passage motivates the reader to consider 'how much greater the obstacles are for women attempting to report sexual violence in an opaque, authoritarian state like China?' (p. 94).
6. Chapter 5, entitled 'Jingwei Fills the Sea' after a traditional Chinese proverb, provides readers with the historical context of China's contemporary feminist movement. Fincher clearly delineates the important milestones of the movement from the turn of the twentieth century. In wry tones, she highlights the extreme irony of the Chinese government persecuting feminists today, when 'feminism played a key but often forgotten role in China's revolutionary history' (p. 111). Quoting Mao Zedong himself, who criticised the 'corrupt marriage system' that oppressed women (p. 115), and early Communist propaganda that portrayed women as 'the first workers in human history' (p. 117), Fincher makes evident the importance of women to the early days of the Communist Revolution.

Despite the transformative policies put in place following the Revolution, aimed at giving women more financial independence and improving literacy levels, Fincher questions the true motivation underlying these policies. She contends that the rhetoric of gender equality was simply used to mobilise hundreds of millions of women to participate in the public labour force, and to build up its ability to defend against foreign powers—'rather than out of a genuine concern for the lives of Chinese women' (p. 112). The Party's ambivalence towards women is illustrated as Fincher describes their fear of 'antagonising the heavily patriarchal male peasants' in rural China (p. 124), and the 'women return to the home' movement of the 1980s and 1990s, following widespread market reforms (p. 126). Given their heavy-handed response to contemporary feminist activists, Fincher suggests that 'the Party is no doubt haunted by its own historical success in mobilising millions of women to join the revolution' (p. 123).

7. Chapters 2 and 6 of *Betraying Big Brother* provide readers with a contemporary look at the Chinese feminist movement—focusing on the role of the internet in growing rights awareness amongst Chinese women, and the increasing interconnectedness of various social justice movements in China. Fincher tracks the rise of contemporary Chinese feminism as 'inextricably linked to the explosion of Weibo in 2010 and WeChat in 2011,' as masses of Chinese women went online to find greater freedoms and like-minded women with whom they could discuss social issues (p. 35). Notably, Fincher also emphasises the importance of online spaces for ethnic minority women, with young Tibetan and Uyghur women 'increasingly speaking out on WeChat about their unique burdens as an ethnic minority oppressed by the Han Chinese-dominated communist government and by men within their own communities' (p. 50). The ensuing backlash from the Chinese government, in the form of extreme digital censorship, interrogations and bans on account names containing the word 'feminist' are viewed by Fincher as evidence of 'just how successful the feminists had been in tapping into the urgent needs of women across China and striking a nerve with the mainstream public' (p. 51). The role of the internet is described by Fincher as critical to the burgeoning MeToo movement in China, and integral to the transnationalisation of Chinese feminism. In a similar vein, Chapter 6 focuses on how Chinese feminist activists have been able to bring together related social movements of labour rights and rights law in China. Fincher contends that this ability to unite different marginalised groups to create a 'mighty, intersectional force of opposition—is another reason that the Communist Party sees feminism as a threat' (p. 137).
8. *Betraying Big Brother* contributes greatly to the fields of gender studies and human rights in Asia. While Fincher's work spotlights Chinese feminists under Communist state rule, she clearly perceives parallels between their struggles, and the backlashes against feminism and democracy internationally. In Chapter 7, Fincher reveals her ultimate contention that while 'most analysts of China's authoritarianism regard gender as a marginal issue ... subordination of women is a fundamental element of the Communist Party's dictatorship' (p. 162). Analysing Xi Jinping's hypermasculine personality cult, Fincher asserts that like other 'strongman rulers' internationally (in Turkey, Russia, Hungary and America to name a few), Xi Jinping 'sees patriarchal authoritarianism as critical' for political survival. She argues that in response to a slowing economy, the CCP has tightened ideological controls and revived sexist elements of Confucianism. By allowing oppression of women to continue in the home, workplace and in public, Fincher suggests cynically that 'men are more likely to accept a one-party dictatorship' (p. 185). Fincher further explores how state-sanctioned reproductive coercion of women has continued despite the roll back of its 'one-child policy', as propaganda campaigns now target 'high quality' urban, educated Han Chinese women to drive up falling birth rates (p. 174). She quotes from activists such as Lu Pin, who ambivalently consider the role of consumer feminism, as corporations co-opt feminist messages for profit—'they can use us, but we can also use them' (p. 201). The conclusion of *Betraying Big Brother* leaves the reader with a sense of the scale of work yet to be done; the persecution of Chinese feminists seems unlikely to cease and the need for international solidarity in the face of creeping authoritarianism

worldwide is more crucial now than ever. Fincher closes her work with a simple message, 'Supporting feminist activists and promoting women's rights are the most effective ways to stop the growing, misogynistic assault on democratic freedoms globally' (p. 203).

9. *Betraying Big Brother* acts both as a historical record of the brutal tactics undertaken by the Chinese Communist regime against young feminist activists, but also as a broader call to action and sign of solidarity with women worldwide. While she weaves between the personal and the political level to great effect, Fincher demands the readers' concentration on the multiple personal accounts and the book's broader structure. Fincher has dedicated *Betraying Big Brother* to her 'sisters resisting around the world,' particularly those acting within mainland China. However, *Betraying Big Brother's* combination of wrenching personal accounts, intelligent political analysis and detailed historical research makes this text fundamental to students of gender studies, Chinese and international studies and global politics. Fincher's highly accessible, clear and earnest writing style will doubtless attract general readers interested in human rights and feminist activism more broadly.

Note

[1] Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, London: Zed Books, 2014

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