Half the Sky, But Not Yet Equal
China's Feminist Movement

The Chinese economic miracle has been one of the most publicized phenomena on the international stage. But what is often neglected in the news and in scholarship are China’s domestic and social changes that are inseparable from the country’s exponential economic growth. In particular, the Chinese women’s rights movement, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, has played a crucial role in China’s rapid development.

Unlike the Western feminism initiated by grassroots activists, modern Chinese feminism began as a state policy. Since the Communist Revolution of 1949, women’s rights have been driven by the party ideology that women’s equal participation in the economy and society was necessary to advance the nation. Despite numerous revolutions and China’s ensuing transition to a capitalist market economy, this ideology remained the underpinning of women’s rights in China.

In the past two decades, however, contemporary Chinese feminists have begun vocally challenging Marxist state feminism. The 2015 detention of five Chinese feminist protesters before International Women’s Day — and their subsequent release upon popular outcry — is emblematic of deeply seated public discontent toward state policy on women’s rights and the influence such discontent can have on the ever watchful Chinese regime. Given both the domestic and international pressure at stake, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cannot afford to silence the country’s feminist protest movement. It must treat women’s rights as a priority in itself and not simply a prerequisite for its own economic advancement.

Indeed, Chinese feminism has its own historic context different from that of the West, but an outdated vision on the issue will not only harm the citizens — it may destabilize the very balance the CCP has tried so hard to maintain.

Feminism and the Communist Revolution

While the Chinese Communist Revolution is known for its overhaul of the country’s economic and political structures, it also initiated the modern Chinese women’s rights movement. In fact, the first official act passed by the new government after the CCP won the revolution was the Marriage Reform Law. The government of the new People’s Republic of China (PRC) believed family to be the key institution in society, and to strengthen the family meant emancipating women. Though the role of women evolved continuously with thousands of years of history and is a product of many traditions, women had generally been viewed as inferior to men in the traditional gender dichotomy. Women were socially and physically bounded by norms of femininity — they were restricted to a domestic role in the home and suffered from foot-binding, a mutilatory practice that made movement difficult.

The Marriage Reform Law was symbolic of the CCP’s prioritizing of women’s rights. Officially promulgated on May 1, 1950, the national law sought to address the most prominent issues faced by women in regard to marriage and family life. It abolished forced marriage, brideprice (money given by the groom’s family for a bride), concubinage, and child betrothal (in which a young girl is raised by another family to become a designated bride). Besides protecting women and girls from feudal practices, the law also extended the representation of women by guaranteeing women equal rights in the ownership and management of family property, as well as the equal right to petition for divorce. The law even went as far as guaranteeing women the right to keep their own family names — an act that would have been considered not only progressive, but radical by Western standards at the time.

However, it would be misleading to discuss progressive policies such as the Marriage Reform Law without taking into account the government’s economic agenda. For one, the Marriage Reform Law was designated to create a “new democratic marriage,” relieve patriarchal oppression, and construct a new image of women — so that women can more easily enter the workforce and that families would become more productive. Other reforms, including laws that guaranteed equal pay and equal education opportunities for women, also functioned to help women integrate into the labor economy. Mao Zedong, who had long envisioned the female liberation, believed that women had been a wasted reservoir of labor. Until China could obtain mechanical means of production, he believed that the shortage of labor in cooperatives and communes would be alleviated by women. In essence, the post-Revolution women’s rights movement was not rooted in idealist beliefs of human rights but the realist considerations of economic development.

Nevertheless, the new state policies elevated the economic and social status of women in a scale previously unseen within and outside China. This translated into women having a greater voice in decision-making in both the private and the public spheres. Women exercised political authority in local governments and served in high-ranking offices. Many organizations championing women’s representation also formed, such as...
While the Communist Revolution initiated the women’s rights movement in China, there are still limitations to women’s progress. The National Women’s Federation. Most importantly, the women’s rights movement permanently altered the national psyche in regard to the role of women, and its legacy remains entrenched in society to this day. Women, Mao was famously quoted, began to hold up “half the sky.”

Conflicts with State-Sponsored Feminism

While emancipatory in many respects, state feminism functioned as a form of social control. Women’s organizations such as National Women’s Federation were dependent upon the government and exercised little actual authority. Additionally, any trend that in any way jeopardized the central government’s power was immediately quashed. For example, the women’s rights movement had led to increased sexual freedom, as “among the poor peasantry, triangular and multilateral relationships are almost universal.” The liberalization of female sexuality caused resentment among the more conservative peasants, mostly men. Concerned about backlash and about the image of the party, the government abandoned the Marriage Reform Law in 1953, three years after its introduction.

On a higher level, the party sought to override traditional patriarchal authority with its own authority. It sought to transform family life so that commitment to the party exceeded all other ties. Between the breakdown of the old commitments and the consolidation of new loyalty, however, there was an “intermediate stage of hedonism.” During this stage, the government made clear its intention was to solidify collective adherence to the party ideology rather than promote any individual thinking or decision. Women’s equality and full participation was promoted so long as it benefited the party and it strengthened its coercive apparatus.

The introduction of the market reforms by Deng Xiaoping, China’s de facto paramount leader from 1972 to 1992, complicated the role of women in Chinese society. Once guaranteed a job in the state-controlled economy, women now had to compete with their male counterparts and faced severe discrimination in the market. They were more likely to get laid off, be forced to retire at a younger age, or receive less social support after a lay-off, and were less likely to find re-employment. This regression in women’s economic position was accompanied by a worsening of social issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and sex trafficking. More so than ever, this Marxist state feminism seemed obsolete and insufficient to Chinese feminists.

Culmination of Contemporary Feminist Movement

The underlying feminist discontent that had simmered since the 1970s peaked at the 1995 Fourth United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing. The conference proved to be a crucial opportunity for feminist activists to access transnational networks as well as build “conceptual frameworks [...] to break away from or transform a Marxist theory of ‘equality between men and women.’” Chinese feminists had been in contact with feminist activists from other countries since the 1980s and had been working on developing independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for women’s rights. The UN Conference on Women came at an opportune time in which Chinese feminists were able to gather outside support for their causes as well as gain understanding of new concepts such as “women-centered sustainable development” and “mainstreaming gender.” These concepts helped explain the discontent that the Chinese feminists had lacked the language to describe and further encouraged them to imagine gender equality beyond the Marxist framework.

Despite the agreements made during the UN Conference in Beijing, which Hillary Clinton famously declared “women’s rights are human rights,” feminist activists in the country have continued to face police crackdowns and government threats. Yet the new Chinese feminist movement has not only remained alive, but has gained traction among much of the younger generation. The younger generation, born years after the Cultural Revolution, feels little allegiance to the Marxist state feminism that had dominated social discourse. The post-1980-ers are well-connected with the outside world, open to foreign ideas, and more willing than their predecessors to challenge the status quo.
The most recent notable case of state suppression involved the detention of five feminist activists who had planned a peaceful protest against domestic abuse on International Women’s Day on March 8, 2015. The police originally arrested nine activists who were involved in planning the protest in their respective cities — Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou — but later released four of them. The five women who remained in detention were Wu Rongrong, Zheng Churan, Li Tingting, Wang Man, and Wei Tingting.

The activists are core members of China’s Women’s Rights Action Group — a symbol of new Chinese feminism. They are known for their creative stunts and eye-catching costumes during protests, earning them the title “guerilla feminists.” Li Tingting, a better known as Li Maizi, has taken part in the protest campaign “Occupy the Men’s Toilets,” which sought to raise awareness about the inadequacy and indignities of public bathroom facilities for women. In one demonstration, Li Maizi and Wei Tingting donned bloody wedding gowns and fake bruises on their faces. They marched down one of the busiest streets in the nation’s capital holding signs with statements such as “Violence is next to you, yet you remain silent?” and “Love, not an excuse for violence.”

Their activism has not gone unnoticed. According to the government, the five women activists were detained for “picking quarrels” — what has become a catch-all justification for the suppression of any dissident. The group was reportedly planning to distribute materials critical of the police on International Women’s Day, including stickers that state “Police: go arrest those who committed sexual harassment.” However, unlike most cases involving protesters, the activists were criminally detained rather than informally held by the police. This meant that they could be charged and convicted, without a trial.

However, in the process of their detention, something remarkable occurred. Immediately after the arrests, flyers featuring the faces of the five activists with an image of Rosie the Riveter — a popular symbol of female empowerment in the West — spread across Chinese social media. Though the state-controlled news media made no mention of the arrests and detention, informal news channels rapidly publicized the news to the international community.

The response from outside the country was incredible. One Billion Rising, an international movement against rape and sexual violence against women, demanded the release of “our activist feminist sisters,” while its members in China provided on-the-ground updates of the conditions of the detainees. On Twitter, which is banned in China, “free the five” became a trending hashtag. Thousands of groups and individuals also spoke out against the government detention, including US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power and US Secretary of State John Kerry, who declared, “We strongly support the efforts of these activists to make progress on these challenging issues, and we believe that Chinese authorities should also support them, not silence them.”

On April 13, 2015, the detainees were released — undoubtedly a result of intense international pressure. Yet such an immediate and widespread response would have been unimaginable a decade ago. The growth of informal media and the increasing interconnectedness of the world have made suppressing information difficult. Whereas in the past Chinese activist groups were mostly cut off from the outside world, now, the women’s rights activists in China have close ties with supporters and feminist groups from around the world. The Chinese feminist activists themselves may not be able to speak freely on the streets of Shanghai or Guiyang, but their voices can now be heard in the streets of São Paulo and Greenwich. For the first time in history, the term “global feminism” may be close to a reality.

What does this mean for the leadership of China? It means continuous suppression of feminist activists, including the raiding of women’s rights NGOs and monitoring of the five released detainees, will not gain the government any supporters on a domestic or international level. On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the milestone UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the CCP had appeared to be making progress on women’s rights with the introduction of the long-awaited first anti-domestic violence law. Yet, given the arrest and detention of the peaceful feminist activists — and that being only one of the numerous cases of state suppression of women’s activism — any state reforms seem to be only words on paper. The anti-domestic violence law may be simply another Marriage Reform Law — convenient for the government, insufficient for the people.

The Future of Chinese Feminism

The Chinese government cannot afford to keep repeating incidents like the March 8 detentions. Not only will
GLOBAL NOTEBOOK

Celebrity Humanitarianism
Bridging the Gap

Eleven year old Jane returns from soccer practice on a Thursday night, sits down in front of the television, and turns on the CBS Evening News.

What is wrong with this picture?

The methods by which people of generations Y and Z — those born in the late 1990s, also known as millennials, and those born after 2000 — become informed about the world are different from those of earlier generations. As watching the news drifts out of style, people of more recent generations focus on what is immediately relevant to them: listening to music, following television series, watching movies, and paying attention to what the artists, actors, and celebrities they know are saying and doing beyond their roles as entertainers. With widespread visibility, celebrities have the potential to take on effective humanitarian roles, bettering the world while also bringing domestic and international issues to the attention of a generation Y and Z audience that might otherwise be unaware.

Celebrities like Jennifer Lawrence, Emma Watson, Angelina Jolie Pitt, and others have demonstrated — and continue to demonstrate — their commitments to humanitarian causes and international issues of inequality, and other celebrities follow their lead. Although the movement toward celebrity humanitarianism has grown most in the Global North, examples of celebrities in other parts of the world dedicating themselves to international issues include Uruguayan actor Osvaldo Laport and African singer Youssou N’Dour. If more celebrities were to use their fame, influence, and money to endorse non-profit and nongovernmental organizations, raise awareness for charities aiming to eradicate inequalities, and bring important international issues — political, economic, and social — to the attention of their generation Y and Z audiences, we would see much more awareness among the young people who will become world leaders.

The first step to developing an environment in which celebrities can inform and mobilize youth is to bridge the gap between celebrities and international, political, and humanitarian issues.

Bridging the Gap

As Andrew Cooper describes in his 2009 article for E-International Relations, “Taking Celebrity Diplomacy Seriously in International Relations,” there has been a massive shift in the last decade, from public views that entirely separate celebrities and international issues and criticize such partnerships, to views that now allow celebrities to play active roles in the global arena. The public needs to see celebrities as legitimate, educated, and aware individuals, not just superficial entertainers; this is an important step on the way to bridging the gap between celebrities and global...