

## Book Review: “Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China” by Leta Hong Fincher

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*Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*

By LETA HONG FINCHER

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“Let’s break free from our heavy shackles and reclaim our power as women!”—sang Wei Tingting, one of the Feminist Five, while in detention after the derailed campaign against sexual harassment in 2015. After her release, she created an online account called “Prison Notes,” where she posted about the “joy in betraying Big Brother.” This metaphor became the inspiration for the title of Leta Hong Fincher’s book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*.

*Betraying Big Brother* is written as a gesture of feminist protest and resistance against China’s authoritarian state. Published in 2018, this book by journalist and scholar Leta Hong Fincher explores the plight of women in China. It is her second book, following *Leftover Women*, which discusses gender inequality in the country, especially the parameters set by patriarchal norms on what an urban woman can be and do. *Betraying Big Brother* further reveals the conflict between China’s patriarchal government and feminist activists who challenge widespread sexism. Fincher shares the stories of the Feminist Five activists, enabling readers to trace the events of their arrest and subsequent release. The author also draws on interviews with other activists and human rights lawyers, as well as their works, to illustrate the scale and consequences of state policies aimed at making women a tool to achieve China’s developmental goals.

At the heart of the book is a set of stories about five women who rebelled against the Chinese Communist Party’s sexual harassment and misogyny. The interviews with the

Feminist Five activists allowed Fincher to recount the events of the day of their arrest on March 8, 2015, conveying the emotions and feelings of each detainee. She delves into the personal stories of these five women and traces their paths from becoming involved in activism to their release and eventual flight from the country. At the same time, the Feminist Five's detention is only one aspect of the fight against misogyny and patriarchy in China. Fincher claims that feminist issues have penetrated almost all resistance activities in China, including labor rights with activists demanding gender equality and fair treatment. Family life is another aspect in which women must defend themselves and fight for their rights. For example, Fincher says that if a woman decides to report domestic violence, she could face retaliation involving even more violence, as perpetrators are rarely held accountable. In addition, the author provides UN data on men and violence in China, showing that half of men have used sexual violence against their partners (there are no governmental statistics on domestic violence). This shocking statistic reveals that women's bodies have become a battleground, and even in family life, not all women feel safe. Consequently, it has become crucial for activists to pressure the government to provide adequate support for survivors and ensure effective law enforcement. However, Fincher concludes that it will not be possible if the topics of sexual harassment and sexual violence remain politically sensitive.

A significant part of the book is devoted to the history and events of the May 4th Movement in 1919 and the Mao Era of 1949 to 1976. These events influenced the emergence of "new women," who were urban, educated, and eager for change. For example, after 1919, feminist activists organized secret meetings and published journals advocating for equal rights for men and women in society and fairer sharing of family responsibilities. The Mao Era was controversial in terms of women's rights. On the one hand, gender equality was officially enshrined in the Constitution (1954), and women were granted new freedoms, such as the right to divorce and remarry. Moreover, women became a normal part of the social economy and were no longer required to seek permission from fathers and husbands, which was a clear signal of women's emancipation. On the other hand, as Fincher points out, this liberation was largely symbolic, and many women's voices remained marginalized by the Party. These historical events laid the groundwork for today's women who are not afraid to rebel, employing methods of protest that fall outside of the traditional paradigm of the All-China Women's Federation (a party-led organization). These methods include online campaigns, provocative demonstrations, and the feminist movement outside China—a so-called "new front," free from state intervention and led by activists who have fled the country. Inside today's China, educated and urban women are the driving force in the

feminist movement, initiating the *#MeToo* Movement in China, which has led to accusations of sexual harassment against over 30 high-profile Chinese men. By comparing past and present, the book aims to draw parallels between political events in different historical periods of women's activism. It demonstrates that the current conflict between the authoritarian Chinese state and the new generation of feminist activists compels women to find new ways to oppose patriarchy and fight for their rights, much as they did a century ago.

The book analyzes the ambiguity of the state's position on domestic violence and sexual harassment by examining the law against domestic violence enacted in 2016. Fincher claims that the law itself is deficient because it does not consider marital rape a crime. Moreover, poor implementation of the law prevents women from obtaining restraining orders or accessing help in domestic violence shelters. The biggest contradiction is that, while the state is willing to pass legislation on domestic violence and sexual harassment, it still suppresses feminist activism and excludes activists from participating in the legislative process. As a result, even with the law in force, the problems of domestic violence and sexual harassment remain acute, and it is no surprise that activists continue to struggle for more effective laws. From Fincher's viewpoint, this situation persists because the state "views patriarchal authoritarianism as critical for the survival of the Communist Party." Feminist activism, in turn, is considered a threat to China's regime.

The book's laudable activist orientation could have been further sharpened if the author had engaged more deeply with the arguments of establishment feminism in China. The book would benefit from including the perspectives of government officials and representatives of the All-China Women's Federation. Such insights could shed additional light on the arrests and law enforcement processes, as well as provide a contrasting viewpoint to the author's stance that feminist activists pose a threat to China's political regime.

*Betraying Big Brother* not only offers an insider perspective from the author, who has lived in China, but also makes a substantial contribution to the understanding of feminism in China, its development, and its two sides: state feminism, represented by the ACWF, and activist resistance. A comparative analysis of China's past and present provides readers with an opportunity to grasp the uniqueness of China's paths. Readers are able to answer why, despite the years of promoting gender equality and government's claims of taking gender discrimination seriously, issues such as "leftover women," a lack of gender-specific laws, and poor implementation of existing laws persist. This account of the rise of the feminist movement in China allows readers to hear the voices of feminist activists on all these issues unfolding in the shadow of Big Brother.