6月

7月

8月

9月

10月

11月

12月

5

GIRL POWER

Jane Golley

2018年1月

2月

3月

4月

5月

6月

7月

8月

9月

10月

Girl power in Xi's 'New Era'

Source: Pxhere.com

FOR ANYONE WITH EVEN the slightest inclination towards feminism — that is, a belief in equal opportunity and rights for women and men — 2018 was a year in which good news was very hard to find.

**Gender discrimination:
only men need apply**
Photo: EenBergBarbera,
Flickr

In April, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report entitled *Only Men Need Apply: Gender Discrimination in Job Advertisements in China*,¹ which analysed over 36,000 job advertisements posted in China between 2013 and 2018. Among their findings, nineteen per cent of national civil service jobs advertised in 2018 specified ‘men only’, ‘men preferred’ or ‘suitable for men’, compared with just one that preferred women applicants, at the National Bureau of Statistics, for a job requiring ‘long-term communication with villagers’. A whopping fifty-five per cent of jobs at the Ministry of Public Security in 2017 were for ‘men only’. Many advertisements in both the state and private sectors required female applicants to be married with children, or to satisfy requirements for height, weight, and other ‘pleasing’ attributes that had nothing to do with the job itself. A case study of e-commerce giant Alibaba revealed a post on the company’s official Weibo account aimed at prospective (presumably male) employees touting all the ‘beautiful girls’ and ‘goddesses’ who, as co-workers, would be: ‘smart and competent at work and charming and alluring in life. They are independent but not proud, sensitive but not melodramatic’.

The HRW report concluded that: ‘These job ads reflect traditional and deeply discriminatory views: that women are less physically, intellectually and psychologically capable than men; that women are their families’ primary sources of child care and thus unable to be fully committed to their jobs or will eventually leave full-time paid employment to have a family; and that accommodating maternity leave is unacceptably inconvenient or costly for the company or agency’. Its key recommendations to the Chinese government included ending gender-specific job advertisements for civil servants, strengthening anti-discrimination laws in hiring, and proactively enforcing company compliance with those laws.

It is likely these recommendations fell on deaf ears. Throughout 2018, the Chinese government continued to tighten its censorship of feminist ideas and activism — including its attempt to crush China’s #MeToo movement, and the permanent closure of Weibo’s most prominent feminist account, Feminist Voices, on International Women’s Day (8 March). The media reported on the opening of several New Era Women’s Schools, designed to help women prepare for domestic roles, by learning ‘how to dress, pour tea, and sit *just so*’ (with bellies held in and legs together!).² And then came revelations that the government was contemplating taxing childless couples and rewarding those that have two children³ — moves that would bring China’s population control into a new era indeed.

Taking on all of these issues and more, Leta Hong Fincher’s second book on gender inequality in China, *Betraying Big Brother: the Feminist Awakening in China*, was released in September.⁴ While the subtitle suggests some cause for optimism, the content reveals a pessimistic state of affairs resonant with the book’s Orwellian title. Hong Fincher’s depiction of a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that ‘aggressively perpetuates gender norms and reduces women to their roles as dutiful wives, mothers and baby breeders in the home, in order to minimise social unrest and give birth to future generations of skilled workers’ leads her to conclude that: ‘China’s all-male rulers have decided that the systematic subjugation of women is essential to maintaining Communist Party survival. As this

battle for party survival becomes even more intense, the crackdown on feminism and women's rights — indeed, on all of civil society — is likely to intensify.' Not exactly music to any feminist's ears.

Holding up Half the Sky?

There have been marked improvements in the socioeconomic status of Chinese women since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, compared with a millennia-long history and culture that awarded economic and political power and social authority to males. During the Maoist era (1949–1976), agricultural collectivisation, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution brought millions of Chinese women into the productive sphere, where their labour was considered essential for socialist construction; the Party required them, quoting the slogan of the day, to 'hold up half the sky'. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) 中华全国妇女联合会 was established in 1949 to protect women's rights and represent their interests. The Marriage Law, introduced in 1950, abolished arranged marriages, concubinage, and the purchasing of child brides, while the principle of gender equality was written into China's Constitution in 1954, entitling women to 'equal pay for equal work'. The Communist revolution didn't work entirely in women's favour during this period — they tended to suffer the double burden of working hard for the state while maintaining their traditional domestic duties. But there were steps in the right direction.

In the post-Mao era, successive leaders, including Xi Jinping, have affirmed China's commitment to 'the basic national policy of equality between men and women'. Yet in 2018, China ranked as the most gender-imbalanced country in the world, underpinned by a rising male sex ratio at birth from the mid-1980s onwards, when (illegal) pre-natal gender tests and sex-selective abortion became widespread. The ratio peaked at 121.4 boys per hundred girls in 2004, compared with a global norm

of 106:100. As a result, China's working-age population in 2018 (defined as 15–60 years for men, and 15–55 for women) comprised 480 million men and just 411 million women.⁵

It's pretty hard to hold up half the sky when you account for

Women are more likely to work in low-wage export-orientated manufacturing sectors

Source: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Flickr

significantly less than half the working population. It's even harder when gender discrimination in the workforce is as pervasive as it is in China today. Many economists expected that market-oriented reforms would prompt a reduction in gender discrimination — because discriminating against anyone is not an efficient thing to do — but that has not been the case. In urban China, despite a narrowing of the gender gap in education in recent years, to the point where young urban Chinese women now 'out-educate' their male contemporaries,⁶ there has been no narrowing of the gender gap in pay: instead, it has increased since the mid 1990s. Studies show that this is largely because of discrimination rather than differences in skills, talent, or occupational choices.⁷ In rural China, girls do not get as much education as boys, and the gap in earnings is even greater.⁸

China's integration into global markets has also reinforced gender inequality in the workplace. Women are more likely to work in low-wage export-oriented manufacturing sectors than in high-wage foreign firms and joint ventures. In the late 1990s, when a state-owned enterprise laid off workers in a bid to become more efficient, women were disproportionately affected. Those who became self-employed tended to find work in the least financially rewarding sectors, including as cleaners, cooks, nannies, or street peddlers — some of which have taken on gendered

titles such as ‘cleaning aunty’ 保洁阿姨 and ‘cooking aunty’ 做饭阿姨 . These factors have exacerbated the earnings gap among low-income men and women in particular.⁹

Compounding these factors, female participation in the labour market has fallen due to the growing pressure on women to look after the home and family.¹⁰ One study claims that the gender pay gap in urban China comes down to the fact that working women put in an average of thirty-six hours of housework a week versus eighteen for men.¹¹ Married women and mothers face the most significant disadvantages in the labour market as a result (and having two children will only increase their burden).

My own recent research, with Zhou Yixiao from Curtin University and Wang Meiyang from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, confirms just how problematic gender inequality in income has become.¹² Using the Survey of Women’s Social Status (2010) — a survey jointly sponsored by the ACWF and China’s National Bureau of Statistics — we examine the factors that determine the annual earnings of around 16,000 individuals across the country. We find that gender is *the most important contributor* to inequality in earnings — above one’s father’s occupation and education, *hukou* (urban residency) status at birth, and region of birth. Simply put, this means that being born a boy gives someone greater advantage than, for example, being the child of an educated professional, or being born with residency in the country’s richest cities. This suggests that gender inequality is an even more intransigent a problem than the urban–rural, regional, and socioeconomic divides that characterise China today.

Gender inequities are just as striking in the political realm. During the 1980s and 1990s, women accounted for one third of Communist Party members; by 2017 only one in four Party members was female.¹³ Not only are Party members more likely to be promoted and paid more: according to one team of economists, income-related rewards for Party members have risen over time — contradicting their expectations (again) that the reverse would be true because of market-oriented reforms.¹⁴ At the top, it is even worse: the Politburo of the Central Committee of the

CCP, the twenty-five most powerful members of the Party, includes just one woman — Sun Chunlan 孙春兰 — and has not had more than two at the same time since 1977.¹⁵ The Politburo Standing Committee, which comprises the country's seven most powerful people, has always been male only. According to Li Cheng of the Brookings Institution, on the eve of the Nineteenth

Party Congress in 2017 there was not a single woman serving as a provincial or municipal Party secretary — considered a pre-requisite for gaining a Politburo seat in the future. Li does not anticipate a more gender-balanced power structure emerging in Chinese politics any time soon.

The circumstances described above help explain the deterioration in China's global rankings for gender equality over the last decade. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index measures country-level gender gaps based on a range of indicators summarised in four sub-indexes: Economic Participation and Opportunity (including female-to-male ratios in labour force participation and earnings); Educational Attainment (including ratios in literacy and school enrolment rates); Health and Survival (sex ratios at birth and female-to-male life expectancy); and Political Empowerment (including ratios of women to men in parliament and at ministerial level). Out of 144 countries in 2016, China ranked at 99 overall — down from 63 a decade earlier. This placed it well below the Philippines (at number 7), as well as Mongolia (58), Vietnam (65), and Thailand, Bangladesh, and India, although notably above its neighbours Japan (111) and Korea (116). Given the fact that China has been moving up on so many other measures, including GDP, GDP per capita, and educational attainments overall, these gender trends are all the more worrying.

The Politburo Standing Committee: the definition of an unbalanced gender power structure
Source: YouTube

Women in Xi's 'New Era'

In his address to the Global Leaders Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in September 2015, Xi Jinping put forward four propositions for promoting global gender equality: 'ensuring that women share equally in the achievements of development' 确保妇女平等分享发展成果, actively protecting women's rights and interests, eliminating violence and 'out-dated mentalities and customs' 落后观念和陈规旧俗 inhibiting women's development, and fostering a favourable international environment for gender equality.¹⁶

But, there is little to suggest that Xi Jinping is pursuing his own propositions seriously within China, let alone globally. It was also in 2015 that at least ten Chinese women — including five now known as the Feminist Five¹⁷ — spent International Women's Day in police custody for planning to protest against sexual harassment on public transport. The Feminist Five spent thirty-seven days in detention before being released on bail to await trial — meaning that they were subjected to surveillance, restrictions, and investigations for up to one year (and, it turns out, well beyond that). They had made global headlines in 2012 with their 'Bald Sisters' head-shaving campaign protesting against gender discrimination in university admissions; their Occupy Men's Toilets movement advocating for more female public toilets; and their protests against domestic violence, for which they dressed in wedding gowns splashed with red paint. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2015: Pollution*, Chapter 2 'The Fog of Law', p.79 and Information Window 'Feminist Five', p.81.)

In a more recent example, in January 2018, Luo Xixi 罗茜茜, a Beihang University alumna now resident in the US, posted on Weibo about the sexual harassment she had suffered years earlier from her PhD supervisor Chen Xiaowu 陈小武.¹⁸ The post, which explicitly referenced the #MeToo movement, attracted more than four million views and tens of thousands of 'likes' and, by mid-January, the university had removed Chen

'Rice bunny' (米兔), pronounced 'mi tu', is the homophonous nonsense phrase given to the #MeToo campaign by Chinese social media users to avoid censorship
Source: Johnnie Chen, Flickr

from his teaching posts and placed him under investigation. Hundreds of other women quickly followed suit with their own grievances, calling for investigations into allegations of sexual abuse in spheres including academia and the media. Rather than responding with promises to crack down on sexual harassment, the Chinese authorities instead blocked the terms 'sexual harassment' and '#MeToo' on Chinese online media platforms — a ban that some got around by using the homophonous non-

sense phrase *mitu* 米兔, literally 'rice bunny' or its emoticon equivalent.

Throughout 2018, China's 'rice bunny' movement continued to mobilise support in the face of ongoing efforts to suppress discussion of sexual harassment issues, suggesting that men far more powerful than university professors feared they could be next in the firing line. For millions of women in China, according to the *Financial Times*, the movement 'represents a defiant response to sexual harassment, gender inequality and the Chinese authorities'.¹⁹ Leta Hong Fincher, likewise, gives some cause for hope for the 'emergence of a broader feminist awakening that is beginning to transform women in cities across China'.²⁰

However, the state has increased surveillance of feminist activists and continues to crackdown on activism, as *Betraying Big Brother* covers in excruciating detail. At the same time, President Xi has stepped up his campaign to 'reinforce traditional family values', urging 'the people to integrate their personal family dreams with the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation'. Among the 'Twelve Extracts from Xi's speeches on Family, Family Education and Family Tradition' 习总书记谈注重家庭、家教、家风, published

on the All China Women's Federation website in 2016 were calls for the 'creation of conditions for the healthy growth of the next generation' and for people (presumably not men) to be 'encouraged to fulfil their familial responsibilities and cultivate their conduct in the home to enhance the status of family-based old age care' 引导人们自觉承担家庭责任、树立良好家风，巩固家庭养老基础地位。²¹

The ACWF had already propagated a similar message through its Most Beautiful Family Campaign 最美家庭, launched in 2015.²² One of the 'model families' honoured by Xi Jinping under this campaign was that of Liu Ying — a woman celebrated for the fact that all six of her in-laws were happy with how she had treated them over the past three decades. (Her husband had been raised by foster parents after his birth parents divorced; both remarried).²³ The Federation's promotion of the ideal woman being one who pleases her in-laws has much stronger echoes of Confucian patriarchal values than of the female militia fighters and 'iron women' of Cultural Revolution propaganda — even if the reality of the Mao era never quite matched the image.

The ACWF defined and propagated the disparaging term 'leftover women' 剩女 in 2007, for women who are still unmarried and childless in their late twenties. Hong Fincher has commented that: '... the peculiarity of a *Women's* Federation that contributes to bolstering male supremacy is matched only by the ways that the country's official *Labor* Federation often serves more to control than empower workers'.²⁴

Universities are also incorporating Xi's New Era values for women into their teaching agendas.²⁵ One example of this is the New Era Women's School at Zhenjiang College in Jiangsu province, established in March 2018 in partnership with the ACWF. According to its head, the school is designed to help women compete in the job market, but also to prepare them for domestic roles because 'Women's family role is more important now'. A number of similar schools have appeared since, including the Kunyu Women's School — a partnership between Hebei University and the local ACWF branch. Human Rights Watch China Director Sophie Richardson is emphatic that 'China's state-run organisation on gender

| If You are the One host, Meng Fei
Source: Marshall.NJG, Flickr

equality [ACWF] is promoting a damaging narrative about women's subservience in an attempt to fix social issues'.²⁶

One of the 'social issues' that supposedly needs fixing is that of the declining population, and the apparent failing of young couples to respond to the Two-Child Policy introduced on 1 January 2016, by having a second child. The number of births actually declined from 17.86 million births in 2016 and is projected to fall below 15.23 million in 2018. In the *China Story Yearbook 2016: Control*, I explained why having more babies is not the best solution to China's population challenges (including the rapidly ageing population that Xi Jinping seems to want Chinese women to stay at home and care for), nor its economic ones (including slowing GDP and labour force growth). Well-educated, ambitious women — no matter how many babies they choose to have — coupled with better child- and elderly-care facilities to free up women for productive employment would make far more sense.

But neither Xi Jinping nor many young Chinese women appear to see it this way. *If You are the One* is a Chinese dating show that provides (heavily scripted but still fascinating) insights into the machinations of modern-day matchmaking in China. In one particularly memorable episode from 2018, the one girl who still had her light on for the final male contestant was given an opportunity to ask one last question before deciding whether to leave with him and win a romantic holiday to the Aegean

Sea, and possibly life happily ever after. She asked: ‘Once your wife has had her first baby, will you be able to support her so that she never has to return to work?’ He nervously pondered before replying: ‘I don’t think my earnings will be sufficient for that’. She abruptly turned off her light, and the young man was left alone.

Pushing Boundaries

Still from Tu Youqin's music video 'Scumbag Men of the Celestial Empire'
Source: Sina Weibo

In 2017, Li Maizi 李麦子 (real name Li Tingting 李婷婷), one of the Feminist Five, wrote an International Women’s Day piece for *The Guardian*, in which she reflected on whether there was any hope for the Chinese feminist movement. She cited some signs of progress, including the ACWF newspaper *China Women’s News* urging Chinese media to

stop using the term ‘leftover women’ in 2017, which Li called ‘a remarkable shift that I believe can be credited to feminist activism’. Li concluded by stating that ‘The Beijing government continues to push back the boundaries of acceptable resistance to the point where there is little room left, but at least women’s issues are being discussed. That’s why there is hope for feminism in China.’²⁷

In July 2018, Li posted a lengthy essay on WeChat, explaining how the #MeToo movement ‘illustrates the power of feminism’s challenge to the patriarchy’.²⁸ On 31 October, Tu Youqin 徒有琴 a female student at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, posted a song titled ‘Scumbag Men of the Celestial Empire’ on Sina Weibo. In this Chinese rendition of

the famous 'Cell Block Tango' from the musical *Chicago*, Tu recounts the experiences of six (fictitious) women from across China, including one who is beaten by her husband with his saxophone, and another whose husband suffocates their third daughter for 2,000 yuan, paid by neighbours who want a wife in the afterlife for their dead baby son. It doesn't end well for any of the men, as those familiar with 'Cell Block Tango' will know — which may explain why the Weibo post lasted only one day before being removed. But at least these stories are being heard elsewhere in the world, including by more than 55,000 viewers on YouTube within the first week of the song's release. China's powerful men are clearly worried by such activism; the rest of the world is watching. And that is a sign of 'girl power', right there.

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