

This book provides a thick description from over two decades of detailed fieldwork observing China's great transformation. Wu does this through a variety of sources, including a life history of a Taiwanese company in China from its rise to fall, interviews with migrant labourers, and government statistics that establish the relevance of the Guangdong model. This mixed-methods approach and the rich data connect the micro foundation with the meso-level theory with which the author engages. The result is a book full of insights that will provoke debates on various fronts. It is a must read for those interested in China and East Asian development.

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Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China

LETA HONG FINCHER

London and New York: Verso Press, 2018

xix + 226 pp. \$34.95; £25.00

ISBN 978-1-78663-364-4 doi:10.1017/S0305741020000338

It took me time to figure out how to understand this book because betrayal is such a charged word, and so is the “the” in this title. Leta Hong Fincher is a talented journalist. Her blow-by-blow account of the activism of a cohort of young, determined feminist activists, the so-called 2015 “Feminist Five Event,” against the predictably ludicrous, predictably insufferable apparatus of state control lays out what the new political theatre looks like. It includes pop-up performance art, posting “solidarity” images of women in everyday life, jail house poetry, playing with icons to fool censors, liberating men's urinals, floating inside a tight community of comrades to spread information and strategy, and online outreach to international media. I had to wonder if this creativity is singular to feminist action or more widespread because PRC online pushback has only accelerated during the COVID-19 era. As journalism, this book's account is exciting and extremely colourful. The activists take on vivid *noms de guerre* like Big Rabbit. There are out lesbians agitating for legitimation and Big Brother's recognition that a girl friend is not a *girl friend* but an intimate. Hong Fincher is also a participant observer, so she fills the reader in about her previous book, *Leftover Women* and its thesis that the state has cheated women out of property, and she relays her own experience with the movement at the grassroots.

Chapter one, “China's Feminist Five” provides a “you are there” narrative account of the Feminist Five (Zhang Churan aka Giant Rabbit, Li Maizi, Wang Man, Witing and Wu Rongrong) being arrested and jailed. It leads into a sober discussion of government harassment, women's networks, netizen activism, the long and uneasy relationship of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement and European- or US-financed NGOs, along with a narrative about singing anthems in prison. Chapter two expands discussion about the online political work that womanist and feminist agitators and their supporters organize. Hong Fincher describes in fascinating detail the collaboration of lawyers, the arrestees, workers' rights advocates, as well as online celebrities or “Big V” (verified account) influencers. For those not clear about the history and use of Weibo (the book seems aimed at undergraduate students in contemporary China and other classes), the chapter lays out what censorship looks like and how people interact with it to tease or undermine or just plain subvert the algorithms. This chapter introduces

the opaque issue of sexuality, as well, and how polysexual and bi-sexual women taunt the orthodox expectation that they are sexless “little girls.”

Chapter three begins on 8 March 2015 and includes a description of shackles being removed from Wu Rongrong’s ankles. I have been reading descriptions of people incarcerated, sent into *laogai*, subject to torture, unjustly detained and so on for decades. There are people in my own marital family who suffered before, during and after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution; one thing that strikes me has always been the way that political prisoners invoke frailty. Through this chapter we learn about congenital heart problems, missed medications, Stockholm syndrome, glasses gone missing, drugging, post-traumatic stress disorder, dehydration, “lasting health effects,” and these are young women in their twenties. The physicality of suffering leads, in this narrative, to renewed vows of fidelity to feminist solidarity because “it can literally save our lives” (p. 72). Chapter four begins with invocations of the power of performance art. Li Maizi’s performative replication of her cell, her prison goods, her bedding, her meticulous drawings of her cell and her physical surroundings gave me an uneasy feeling that I was not going to be able to distinguish between political performance on the street such as wearing a bloody wedding gown and a political performance of suffering, unjust suffering and humiliation exposed into a zone of performativity beyond imagination. Not one prison guard allayed the stress; every last one seems to make sexually explicit threats against the incarcerated women or reveals deep-rooted systemic misogyny that, as Hong Fincher argues, “has no political boundaries” because “supposedly progressive, male activists have throughout history revealed deep-rooted sexism by silencing, belittling, and even abusing women within their own civil rights movements” (p. 77). The remainder of the chapter reminds readers that feminist activists often have a history of abusive relations with male family members. Discussion floats above actual evidence here and it was a place where the “you are there” narrative could have used social science grounding, but the book is a polemic generically which gives Hong Fincher more latitude.

Chapter five narrates the history of Chinese feminist thought from Hong Fincher’s point of view; because she is a polemicist and her forte is direct action, her perspective feels narrow relative to the historical experience of the feminist icon, Ding Ling (1904–1986), invoked in the polemic. I had to wonder what Ding Ling, herself a great polemicist, would say about this. Difficult to say because of her long life in politics and resolute denial that she was ever a “feminist.” Chapter six summarizes the court proceedings and judgements for the plaintiffs. Chapter seven was difficult for me because of the term “betrayal.” In Hong Fincher’s understanding, betraying Big Brother is what happens when you are interpolated into an authoritarian regime but repudiate or disavow it. But betrayal requires you to hate something so much that it remains embedded in your heart. The chapter also reads like a sedative against that vast, complex government that is the Chinese state. Nominalizing Xi Jinping and making him into the Big Brother who is going to be repeatedly betrayed gives this chapter an emotional dimension that other chapters only hint at, because previous chapters focus on small people, lively, funny, sexually nonconforming, creative women who dress up in costumes and take cute names and form communities of solidarity and resistance. It seems unlikely that “as feminist activists continue to disrupt the patriarchal, authoritarian order, the government will likely find new ways to persecute them” (p. 186). The persecution is well documented. The disruption not so much.

Also, disruption and betrayal are not synonyms. Betrayal belongs with disavowal in a more psychoanalytically shaped discussion about human motivation. Interestingly, Hong Fincher notes that even when she advises her friend to seek psychological counsel for the lasting PTSD, the emotions get dismissed; the friend denies need for help and so the emotions making her sick will remain in her body. These are familiar and ritualized

emotions that are documented, even celebrated in this study: rage at the machine, suffering as performance of indignation, violations celebrated in gory detail. Chai Ling sticks in my memory as a great performer of similar rituals. That is why I approached this book with hesitation and continue to wonder why we have to “betray” authority in order to “resist” it.

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The Politics of Chinese Media: Consensus and Contestation

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New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

xi + 225 pp. \$62.50

ISBN 978-1-137-46213-8 doi:10.1017/S0305741020000673

Students of the media in China, not least those of us who are concerned with the political dimensions and implications of the media’s position in the authoritarian information order, are increasingly well served by theoretically driven, richly empirical studies. This book should be added to the list.

Despite the circumscriptions that have been brought to bear on all sections of the public sphere under Xi Jinping’s rule, the media and cognate areas of activity (the entertainment and celebrity industries, digital platforms, etc.) are experiencing a dynamic expansion, complicating how we understand media production, reception and governance – and the politics that condition them.

The first standout feature of this book is its recognition of the diverse sources and multidimensionality of “the politics.” It encompasses the power politics of the Party (for example invoking Wang Hui’s idea of “depoliticized politics”), the institutionalized politics of bureaucracy, the political economy of the media industries, the cultural politics of individual and societal meaning-making, and the politics of media itself in the form of the logics that determine what media do, how media interact with society (refracted by class and subject to Marxist ideology) and the allocation of financial and symbolic capital. An underlying premise is that media and politics are mutually constitutive in a dialectical relationship where “the media do not simply reflect or act as the tool of real-life political struggles: they are part of those struggles” (p. 15).

The second standout feature of the book is how seriously it takes history. Not in a teleological sense or in a chronological telling of the commercialization–conglomeration–convergence trajectory of media in the reform era (although it is covered), but rather as a foundation and incubator of the theorizing. I have seldom read a study of the contemporary landscape that is so clearly informed by the resonances, continuities and trajectories of the past – specifically the socialist past – delivering compellingly on the truism that China’s past reveals a lot about its present.

You would be right to intuit from this snapshot that this is a dense and deeply theorized study (not the kind of book you can dip into with the TV on in the background). Indeed, it is one of the more ambitious and sophisticated attempts to conceptualize and situate the role of the media in contemporary China since Zhao Yuezhi’s *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).