

Statement before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China hearing

“The Future of Women in China: #MeToo, Censorship, and Gender Inequality”

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Chairman Merkley, Chairman McGovern and distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this important hearing and inviting me to testify. My testimony draws from the research I conducted for my two books on women’s rights in China.

While the entire world watches Russia’s horrifying invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese government so far refuses to call Russia’s actions an invasion.¹ President Xi Jinping appears to be aligning himself with the strongman Vladimir Putin, further undermining the rules-based international order.²

There are many reasons that China’s Communist regime has survived for over seventy years, in spite of the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But it is impossible to understand the longevity of China’s

¹ Edward Wong. “US officials repeatedly urged China to help avert war in Ukraine.” New York Times, Feb. 25, 2022.

² Edward Wong. “Bond between China and Russia alarms US and Europe amid Ukraine crisis.” New York Times, Feb. 20, 2022.

Communist Party without recognizing the patriarchal underpinnings of its authoritarianism. In short, Xi Jinping views *patriarchal* authoritarianism and the subjugation of women as critical for the survival of the Communist Party.³

China's economy has entered a protracted slowdown just as the country is beginning to face the demographic crisis of an aging population, falling birth rates and a shrinking workforce.⁴ In response, the government has revived sexist elements of Confucianism, upholding the male-dominated family as the basic foundation of a strong nation⁵. State propaganda praises Mr. Xi's traditional "family values" (*jia feng*) and presents him as the father of the Chinese nation in a "family-state under heaven" (*jia guo tian xia*), in which obedient wives and mothers in the home are key to solving China's most pressing social problems.⁶

China's propaganda apparatus began a crass campaign in 2007 to stigmatize single, educated, Han Chinese women in their late twenties, mocking them as "leftover" women

³ More details in Chapter 7 "China's Patriarchal Authoritarianism" from my book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (Verso 2018). Some other authors who have written about China's patriarchal authoritarianism include Edward Friedman, *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China* (Oxon, ME: Sharpe/Routledge, 1995) and Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). See also Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: Funü, Guojia, Jiating," *Genders 10* (Spring 1991): 132-60.

⁴ Keith Bradsher. "China's economy is slowing, a worrying sign for the world." *New York Times*. January 16, 2022.

⁵ See Fangqin Du and Susan Mann, "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China", in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea and Japan* (eds) Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2. In chapter 7 "China's Patriarchal Authoritarianism" of my book *Betraying Big Brother*, I refer to Du and Mann's excerpt from the Qing Dynasty text, *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*). They write that this text says a stable government is formed through the accretion of "harmonious" families – based on marriage between a man and a woman: "The daughter obeys her parents; the daughter-in-law reverently serves her parents-in-law; the wife assists her husband; the mother guides her sons and daughters; sisters and sisters-in-law fulfill their appropriate [duties]. When every member behaves this way, a family achieves harmony; when every family is harmonious, the state is well governed."

⁶ Eg. *Ting Xi Jinping de jiafeng gushi*. "Listen to Xi Jinping's family values story." February 2, 2022. www.cpcnews.cn. Also see my Washington Post op-ed, Xi Jinping's authoritarian rise in China has been powered by sexism, March 1, 2018.

(*sheng nü*) to push them into marrying and having babies for the good of the nation.⁷ This pro-marriage, pro-natalist propaganda has only become more intense with the adoption of a two-child policy in 2016, and the three-child policy last summer. China's population-planning policies also have a strong undertone of eugenics.⁸

Even as officials urge Han Chinese women to marry and get pregnant in order to “upgrade population quality” (*tigao renkou suzhi* - a goal highlighted again in the three-child policy announcement)⁹, they are slashing birth rates among ethnic minority women, in particular Uyghur and other Turkic women in Xinjiang, with forced sterilizations and abortions¹⁰.

The government is carrying out a sweeping crackdown on feminist activists, who pose a unique challenge to China's all-male rulers. As a result, the #MeToo movement against sexual violence has been the target of aggressive censorship. Take the heavy-handed reaction to Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai's Weibo post last November 2, accusing China's former vice premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual

⁷ Detailed examples from my book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (Zed 2014). Also my New York Times op-ed “China's Leftover Women”, October 11, 2012 and my Ms. Magazine op-ed “China's ‘Leftover’ Women”, November 22, 2011.

⁸ More details from my two books, my New York Times op-ed “China dropped its one-child policy. So why aren't Chinese women having more babies?” February 20, 2018. My Washington Post op-ed “China's government wants families to have more children. China's women don't.” June 7, 2021. My Ms. Magazine op-ed “China's ‘Leftover’ Women”, November 22, 2011. On China's previously named “Draft Eugenics Law”, now Law on Maternal and Infant Health Care, see Harriet Evans, “Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife,” in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (eds), *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 348, 358. Also see Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin W. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003: “The eugenics campaign – *yousheng youyu*, literally superior birth and child rearing – incorporated genetic engineering, but it was much more than that, reflecting the view that humans are shaped by a broad array of genetic, environmental and educational factors, most of which can be nurtured so that human potential can be molded to meet the nation's needs.” p. 30.

⁹ Xinhua, “为实施三孩生育政策及配套支持措施提供有力法治保障——全国人大常委会法工委有关部门负责人就修改人口计生法答记者问”, August 21, 2021.

¹⁰ Adrian Zenz. “Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang.” *Jamestown Foundation*, June, 2020.

assault. Peng Shuai's post was deleted within half an hour and she herself disappeared for weeks, only to reemerge in a series of undoubtedly coerced appearances coinciding with Beijing's Winter Olympics¹¹.

We are about to mark the seventh anniversary of the Chinese government's jailing of five women's rights activists in March 2015, for planning to commemorate International Women's Day by handing out stickers against sexual harassment on subways and buses. Since then, feminist activists have tapped into the broad discontent felt by Chinese women and developed a level of influence that is highly unusual for any social movement in China since 1989.¹²

Even though the government persecutes activists, shuts down women's rights and LGBTQ rights centers¹³, and censors feminist social media content, China's feminist networks have actually grown in recent years instead of being wiped out¹⁴.

The shrinking space for civil society in China makes it even more extraordinary that a feminist movement is able to survive at all. While prominent male human-rights activists have emerged over the years, very few Chinese citizens knew about them or could relate to their abstract goals. By contrast, feminist activists today take up causes that have broad resonance with young women and LGBTQ people across China: issues such as sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and gender discrimination.

¹¹ Eg. See Lü Pin, "The Irrepressible Strength of Peng Shuai", *Dissent Magazine*, Feb. 2, 2022. And my *New York Times* op-ed, "Why Peng Shuai has China's Leaders Spooked," Dec. 2, 2021.

¹² In addition to my books, see my *Dissent Magazine* Fall 2016 article, *China's Feminist Five*.

¹³ China team, "Red Vs are After China's Queer Community," *Protocol*, July 13, 2021.

¹⁴ Eg. See Lü Pin, "Finding a Voice: How feminist voices were silenced on the Chinese internet", *Logic*, Issue 7, May 1, 2019.

China is an autocracy with no press freedom, no internet freedom or freedom of assembly, and effectively no rule of law. Yet when feminist activists organize around issues that affect the personal lives of millions of ordinary women, even the all-powerful, male-dominated Chinese Communist Party struggles to quash the movement.

Excerpt from my most recent article: “Why Peng Shuai has China’s Leaders Spooked.” New York Times, Dec. 2, 2021

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/opinion/peng-shuai-china-leaders.html>

“Things have only worsened under President Xi Jinping, architect of a state-run masculinity campaign.

Women are severely underrepresented in national politics: There is one woman on the 25-member Politburo. Female representation on the 204-member Central Committee, the largest of the party’s political bodies, has *declined* over the past decade, to 10 currently from 13 in 2012.

Broader gender inequality also has worsened. Women’s labor-force participation has fallen to 60.5 percent in 2019 from 73 percent in 1990, according to the World Bank. China is in the bottom third of all countries evaluated for their gender disparities, according to the World Economic Forum.

The grim prospects for Chinese women are particularly jarring given the prominent role of feminism in China’s revolutionary history. Women’s emancipation was a central goal not just for activists in the May Fourth movement of 1919 but throughout the Communist revolution, culminating in the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

China's ruler Mao Zedong famously proclaimed that "women hold up half the sky." Propaganda images in the 1950s and '60s showed smiling, muscular female welders and factory workers laboring to boost industrial production.

But today's Communist Party appears to want women to be obedient wives and mothers. In his International Women's Day address this year, Mr. Xi barely mentioned working women's contributions to economic development.