

What the Brett Kavanaugh controversy can teach China about feminism and social change

Tom Plate says despite the official communist legacy of promoting gender equality, the Chinese authorities see feminist activism as a destabilising Western force. Instead, they must realise that gender justice is an idea whose time has come globally

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[Tom Plate](#)

Chinese authorities who fret about a cold war with the US might also want to analyse – unemotionally – another possible threat to domestic tranquility: a kind of brewing “cold” war between the genders – at home, upfront and personal. One vista of future shock was available to Beijing last week if it bothered to watch the [televised US Senate hearing](#) on the nomination of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court – a lifetime appointment no less.

Opponents as well as supporters almost came apart emotionally; the national psyche was revealed to be more than mildly disturbed. The stormy vetting process of the seemingly blue-chip Kavanaugh with his Yale Law School background was triggered, initially, by a sexual assault allegation, and [testimony by the alleged victim](#) was taken by liberal opponents of the politically conservative Kavanaugh as positively probative – and by conservative supporters as positively partisan.

Even so, Kavanaugh squeezed through and has been [sworn into office](#). But around half the country feels squeezed out – and yearns for revenge. Call it a sequel to the infamous 1991 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Senate Judiciary Committee hearing drama that still haunts the US today. A showdown could come next month, when biennial midterm elections will determine whether the Trumpian Republican Party is to retain its reign on America's powerful bicameral national legislature.

The mistreatment of women by men – or, in the elevated terminology of modern feminist sociology, the ethical structure of patriarchal society – was the emotional doppelgänger, as it were, for the ambushed Kavanaugh. It's simple: just as Marx insisted that capitalism was a toothpick house of inherent contradictions that would eventually collapse, so today's feminists view patriarchy as a doll's house of inherent injustices and unsustainable normative conformities that no longer make sense. Patriarchy inevitably metastasises into misogyny, then hardens into sexist authoritarianism.

China is feeling feminist pressure, too. If feminism is viewed in the US as combative – for its advocacy of dismantling male-dominated hierarchies for a more gender-inclusive approach that offers escape from the prison of official or cultural oppression – China has so far appeared to stamp it as a plain old counterrevolutionary sin.

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Even the All-China Women's Federation, founded in 1949 in comity with the Communist Party's endorsement of gender equality, views the current feminist flutter as part of the problem, not the solution. Like the Republican-controlled Senate's partisan bias toward Kavanaugh, the federation serves far more as an echo of the political establishment than a critical women's voice.

But if China's feminist movement is able to reach the hearts and minds of the country's labour-rights movement, for example, a large-scale collaboration with working-class women could be viewed as a threat to stability.

Pioneering journalist Leta Hong Fincher, author of the 2014 groundbreaking *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, has some interesting conclusions in her just-published second book, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*.

"Most analysts of China's authoritarianism regard gender as a marginal issue, but I believe the subordination of women is a fundamental element of the Communist Party's dictatorship and its 'stability maintenance' system (*weiwen*)," she states, adding that "Xi Jinping ... sees *patriarchal* authoritarianism as critical for the survival of the Communist Party."

But how can this be? Feminist concepts are hardly new to China. The young Mao Zedong, in 1919, blasted China's traditional arranged marriage system as a feudal relic, as a relationship of rape. But that was then, and this is now. The loyalist All-China Women's Federation tends towards the view that Chinese feminists have so broadened the women's rights definition as to play into the hands of foreign elements that wish to destabilise the country any way they can.

This is to misunderstand the power of an idea. The feminist instinct has spread to many countries, where calls for change are getting louder. Think, for example, of women being [allowed to drive](#) in Saudi Arabia. Large ideas in history are bigger than any one nation state; feminist anger travels with or without a visa across our borderless world with relative impunity.

In China, the conveyor of subversive feminism is not the US Central Intelligence Agency but the internet. Without it, feminists could not link up and connect. Even with the government's [prodigious oversight](#), content communication, often coded, is not that hard to pull off, especially in a nation that has more internet users than the US has people. Instead of gathering on street corners in protest for all to see, Chinese women exchange ideas and make plans behind blockchain curtains, as it were.



The Chinese government should not feel that it is being targeted in the cross hairs of foreign feminist hit squads. The feeling of being repressed or sidelined on the basis of gender comes from deep inside, not from far way. What is unfolding is an international cultural revolution, not a Chinese one.

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If anything, America's dual-party politics seem no more fitting or subtle a system in the face of a gender revolution than a one-party system. The latter may rely on political repression, the former on political division, but over the long term neither seems destined to prevail.

Consenting to the controversial elevation of Kavanaugh to America's highest court may have been a just decision purely on the merits of the jurist's resume, but it may also have been precisely the wrong move for the country. Sometimes, the cause transcends the individual: "If we want things to stay as they are," declared a character in Giuseppe di Lampedusa's great historical novel *The Leopard*, "things will have to change." Neither country's systems are supple enough change agents when it comes to gender justice.

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