

***Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist  
Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964***  
Zheng Wang. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.  
400 pages

Bin Wang  
*The University of Sydney, Australia*

*Nüquanzhuyi*, which literally means “women’s rights” or “women’s power-ism,” is the most prevalent phrase for “feminism” in contemporary China. In fact, this was already a popular translation of the word feminism in the 1920s, but in later years, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rose to prominence, it disparaged *nüquanzhuyi* as a bourgeois and Western concern and began to formulate instead its own vision of “women’s liberation” (*funü jiefang*). After the CCP came to power in 1949, the political significance of *nüquanzhuyi* further declined during the Mao era of the People’s Republic of China (1949–1976). From today’s perspective this gives rise to a still intriguing question—how to identify Chinese feminism and who should be seen as feminist in any research on this subject?

In this new book, Wang Zheng directly addresses this question by conceptualizing the CCP-led women’s liberation as a form of *socialist state feminism*. By socialist feminism, she means that Chinese Marxists/communists inherited some ideas from May Fourth feminism in terms of critiquing Confucian gender norms, while advocating socialism as the way to achieve women’s thorough emancipation. The phrase “state feminism” indicates that, after 1949, many Chinese women (and a few men) worked within, or in close relation to, the state to ensure that certain feminist agendas would be institutionalized and implemented. Accordingly, what the CCP calls the pioneers of women’s liberation are described by the author as socialist state feminists. This includes women cadres who took up official posts, especially in the Women’s Federation, and those state-affiliated cultural workers such as film directors and playwrights. The main chapters of the book are thus premised on Wang Zheng’s crucial contention, which is to do away with the opposition between *feminism* and *women’s liberation* in order to re-build a continuous genealogy of Chinese feminism.

Chapter 1 introduces the achievements by feminists of the Shanghai branch of the Women's Federation in the early 1950s. Staff there successfully set up women's congresses in local areas and mobilized housewives to step outside the family home and manage neighborhood communities. While doing impressive work, local feminists had to strike a balance between the CCP's paramount agenda, for example identifying counter-revolutionaries, and their own mission of serving women's interests, for example by providing them with "literacy education" and "vocational training" (p. 40). Chapter 2 focuses on the activities of those women cadres in the top echelon of the Federation, including the strategies they adopted in seeking male leaders' support for their work. In particular, during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-1959) that targeted intellectuals whose censure of the Party was viewed as excessive, socialist state feminists refrained from criticizing the CCP's gender policies and stressed women's diligence in both building the socialist nation and managing the family. By making such political compromises, like their subordinates at the local level, they ensured the survival of the Federation and its activities in the late 1950s.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the author explores feminists working at the "cultural front" of the socialist state, here specifically referring to the editorial office of *Women of China*, the official publication of the Federation (p. 79). Far from being a mere mouth-piece of the male-dominated Party, *Women of China*, under the leadership of Dong Bian, often adroitly employed Party discourses to challenge male privilege and bias within political organs. For example, in several issues of the magazine they utilized the rhetoric of "communist morality" to expose those married male CCP cadres who attempted to divorce their rural wives to pursue younger urban women (p. 96). This editorial orientation later made Dong vulnerable to political attacks in the mid-1960s. Dong and the magazine were accused, particularly by Party ideologue Chen Boda, of deviating from the proletarian line, despite the fact that *Women of China* placed working women on the cover for most issues of its publication.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 continue to unravel the history of Chinese feminist politics by focusing on three key figures in the realm of socialist cultural production. Chen Bo'er, a pioneer of the Chinese film industry, directed a new form of feminist cinema that elevated women workers, peasants, and soldiers as sublime heroines on the screen. Xia Yan, a male playwright, was artistically a follower of Chen Bo'er. His drama and film scripts con-

solidated “the paradigm of revolutionary heroines” (p. 194), with a twist that highlighted ordinary women’s struggles against oppressive “feudal” (meaning backward) culture before they came to embody socialist womanhood. However, the third figure, Jiang Qing, wife of Chairman Mao, accused this narrative of being “backward-looking” and “politically retrograde” (p. 218). Her ideal female characters are instead empowered women barely constrained by a gender hierarchy, which, according to Wang Zheng, is merely “a theatrical fantasy” (p. 216), since Jiang Qing avoided openly confronting institutional sexism within the CCP.

In Chapter 8, despite the title of the book, Wang Zheng extends her discussion beyond 1964 to engage with the representational politics of a group of ordinary women known as *Iron Girls*. This is an ambiguous category, referring to both country women and to female youth who were sent down to work in rural areas before or during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). These young women were motivated by slogans such as “women hold up half the sky” and took up jobs usually perceived as men’s work. From the 1980s, however, Iron Girls came to indicate a major shortcoming of Chinese women’s liberation in arguments that women might have been deprived of their femininity. Many women intellectuals started to reassert their sexual difference at this time and to search for a specific female identity. Wang Zheng positions such efforts as part of “a political assault against socialist women’s liberation launched by urban elites to further their gender, class, and urban interests” (p. 221). Furthering this point, the author also accuses 1980s’ Chinese feminists of being the handmaids of consumerism and capitalist modernity—a pungent criticism that arguably falls short of acknowledging the achievements of post-Mao feminists who engendered a new form of feminist scholarship and activism at that historical juncture.

Overall, the book has achieved multiple laudable aims. Despite the word “feminism” being dismissed by the CCP, a struggle for equality between men and women was clearly alive during the period from 1949 to 1976. The stories of socialist state feminists, which have been doubly marginalized by socialist and post-socialist gender and cultural politics, has now been written back into the historical picture. This book also demonstrates that liberation was not bestowed upon women by the state, but rather that many Chinese feminists continuously strived for discursive and institutional space that accorded with their changing circumstances, since neither rights

nor power was granted and guaranteed to them. In the end, whether or not one shares the author's sympathy with socialist feminism, we are invited to seriously consider the political and cultural legacies of Chinese women's liberation—legacies that might also enlighten contemporary feminist politics in China and in other parts of the world.

*Biographical Note:* **Bin Wang** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. His research interests include gender studies, youth studies, media and popular culture, and small towns. He recently completed his doctoral thesis that examined the development of academic feminism and feminist activism in contemporary China. E-mail: [bwan4020@uni.sydney.edu.au](mailto:bwan4020@uni.sydney.edu.au)