WORLD FEATURE

'China's in a mess and it's all because of men'

Leading feminist languishes in prison for her role in Beijing pro-democracy demonstrations last year

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

A month before student demonstrators filled Beijing's Tiananmen Square last June, journalist Dai Qing spoke at a meeting called to discuss the problems facing women under Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's reforms. As usual, she was blunt:

"China is in a mess and it's all because of men."

The adopted daughter of Marshal Ye Jianying, one of communist China's founding fathers, Dai was a leading activist in the emerging feminist and environmental movements that were crushed along with last spring's pro-democracy protests.

Shortly after the June 4 massacre, in which hundreds, perhaps thousands, were killed, Dai was thrown into Beijing's Qincheng prison, where she languishes to this day.

Dai had been a thorn in the government's side for some time, and in the roundup after the massacre, hard-line leaders saw their chance to silence an effective critic.

Dai first came to national prominence through her many interviews with Chinese intellectuals that were published between 1985 and 1987 in Guangming Daily.

Through her popular newspaper series, she became the first to publicize the views of dissidents such as astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, who fled with his wife to the U.S. embassy in Beijing after the massacre, and Yan Jiaqi, who last September was elected chairman of the Federation for a Democratic China, a group aiming to rekindle the pro-democracy campaign in China.

Then, in early 1989, she undertook the first environmental protest in China when she compiled a collection of articles opposing construction of a proposed hydroelectric dam. In the book, she gathered scientific evidence that outlined how the huge Yangtze River project, whose construction is on hold, would have a devastating impact on the environment.

Dai, 45, went down to Tiananmen Square on several occasions last spring to show support for the student protesters. On May 20, she led a demonstration march to the square by hundreds of intellectuals to protest the government's imposition of martial law.

Because of the courage she displayed in her life and her work — and since she had turned her back on the world of privilege in which she was raised — Dai was a powerful inspiration to many of the young activists in the square. The extent of her influence may not have been known to Western reporters.

Apart from student leader Chai Ling, who fled China last month, the names that became known in the West during last year's protests were those of men: Wuer Kaixi, Wang Dan, Fang and Yan.

Traditional notions linger

In fact, Chinese women played as important a part in last year's pro-reform protests as men, but their role was largely passed over by the Western media. Was this just one example among many of inaccuracies that crept into foreign coverage of last year's protests in China? Or did it reflect the endemic bias of a male-dominated industry?

Dai might favor the latter view, because perhaps the most significant aspect of her story is not her family background or fearless activism, but the fact that she is a feminist.

One of the favorite boasts of the Chinese Communist Party has always been that by overthrowing feudalism, it liberated women. Four decades after the 1949 revolution, the material conditions of women's lives are undeniably better. And yet traditional notions about the subordinate position of women are still deeply rooted in Communist leaders' thinking.

After 1979, it was mostly women who bore the brunt of Deng's market-oriented economic reforms. When state factories were given the right to trim their workforce, women were the first to be fired. Hundreds of Chinese women committed suicide after being laid off and then suffering ill-treatment from husbands and mothers-in-law.

China's domestic media have run articles in the past decade that blame women for the country's low economic productivity. These articles have put forward the Japanese model — in which wives stay at home and out of the workforce — as a solution to the economic plight facing an overpopulated China.

When, under Deng's reforms, China stopped assigning jobs to college graduates, women had a hard time finding work because companies opted for male employees. Responding to this demand, high schools and colleges raised entrance requirements for women to produce a greater proportion of male graduates.

The situation is worse in the countryside, where 70 per cent of an estimated 200 million illiterate peasants are women. The education of boys is given priority in rural areas; girls are often forced to leave school at an early age to help support the family.

But the abuses go beyond the spheres of employment and education. In rich coastal areas such as Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces, the traditional practice of concubinage has recently made a comeback, with some well-off peasants and private entrepreneurs keeping two and three wives.

In less prosperous areas, the traffic in women has become a profitable business. Women in remote mountain areas are kidnapped or lured with the promise of a good job to other regions, where they are sold as wives.

As the outlook for women worsened in the 1980s, even women who wholeheartedly supported the reforms were startled at the indifference of male economic theorists toward the social costs women were paying.

The high level of unemployment among women was explained as being the result of their incompetence in the workplace. Restricting the number of places for women in higher education was called a necessary channelling of limited educational funds toward more talented male students.

Even the traffic in women was shrugged off by one economist as nothing more than a commercial matchmaking enterprise that was promoting social stability in regions where there was a shortage of women. Other male scholars advocated legalizing prostitution so the revenue could be funnelled into the state treasury.

Against this backdrop, in 1986, Western feminist literature — including Simone de Beauvoir's classic, *The Second Sex* — was greeted with great interest as it began appearing for the first time in Chinese translation.

'Come and get me'

In 1988, several dozen Beijing professors and journalists joined with foreign women teaching in the capital to start a weekly discussion group on women's issues. The open forum became so popular that it soon led to a women's studies course being offered at one Beijing college.

The full story remains to be told about the first stirrings of feminism and environmental activism in China. For the time being, however, the person best equipped to write it is behind bars.

"My door is wide open. Let the police come and get me," Dai Qing said defiantly to a friend who had expressed concern about her safety after the massacre.

It was the last we heard from her. She was arrested a few days later, in early July. □

Mo Li is the pseudonym of a Chinese journalist who came to Canada after the massacre.

WANG GANGFENG PHOTO

Jobless peasant arrives in eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou to look for work. Unemployment among women grew in the '80s under Deng.