

The Challenge of Reporting on Women in China, Where Men Control the Narrative



Workers during a lunch break in an office tower in Beijing, China. As the rest of the world seems to be making progress toward greater gender equality, however incremental, China has been backsliding.

Gilles Sabrié for The New York Times

By **Amy Qin**

- July 18, 2019

[阅读简体中文版](#) [閱讀繁體中文版](#)

[Times Insider](#) explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

There are dozens of them on display at the Museum of Shoes for Bound Feet, not far from the town in China where my mother grew up: colorful, intricately embroidered cloth shoes that fit perfectly in the palm of your hand.

When I visited the museum in the southern Chinese province of Sichuan several years ago, I looked down at my big size 9 feet and felt a wave of gratitude that I had been spared the fate that had befallen my great-grandmother and generations of Chinese women before her. Because behind each pair of shoes was a lifetime of unimaginable pain, all in the name of shaping perfect little bound feet — or “golden lotuses” as they were often called.

I thought back to that moment several months ago when I began reporting my [recent article](#) on how Chinese women have been losing ground. Living in Beijing, it is easy to see the progress that China has made in gender equality over the past century. Foot-binding has long been outlawed. Women in China are living longer than ever before. They excel in school, and now outnumber men at universities.

And in a society that for centuries held that a woman’s place remained in the home, women now have a major presence in the work force — one of the few positive legacies of China’s repressive Mao era. While the number has been declining, [61 percent](#) of working-age Chinese women participated in the labor force last year — higher still than many countries, including the United States (56 percent) and Germany (55 percent.)

But in recent years, as the rest of the world seems to be making progress toward greater gender equality, however incremental, China has been backsliding.

As China correspondent for The New York Times, I write about the intersection of politics, culture and society in China. Together with my colleague, Zoe Mou, we began reaching out to Chinese women to hear their stories. I took the bullet train from Beijing to Tianjin to meet with Bella Wang. Over coffee, and then spicy roast fish, Ms. Wang talked excitedly about her love of Marvel movies and Michael B. Jordan. But her mood darkened as she told me about a “special agreement” her employer made her sign promising that she would not get pregnant in her first two years on the job.



Bella Wang told The Times about a “special agreement” her employer made her sign promising that she would not get pregnant in her first two years on the job.

Credit...

Giulia Marchi for The New York Times

When we spoke, Ms. Wang was counting down the days until her two years were up.

“I’ve been wanting to have a baby all along,” she said. “But I haven’t dared.”

We traveled to a town outside of Shanghai to meet Sharon Shao, who graduated with a computer engineering degree from one of China’s top universities. As is only befitting a math whiz, she picked us up at the train station in a white car with an “ $E = mc^2$ ” sticker plastered on the side. We found a private room in a teahouse where Ms. Shao, over several hours, alternated between anger and tears as she told us about her tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband. When she finally worked up the courage to divorce her husband, she said, she walked away with no claim to the apartment that she had helped pay for because, as is the case for millions of other Chinese women, her name was not on the deed.

“My friends always tell me to just keep quiet and move on,” said Ms. Shao. “But I want to share my story so other women can learn from my mistakes.”

By the end of our reporting, we had talked to dozens of women. I was stunned to find that nearly every woman we spoke with had a personal story to tell about egregious discrimination at the workplace or in the home.

One woman told me about how she dreamed every night of going back to work after she was forced out of a prestigious job when she had a child. Another woman said she wanted to leave her husband but was afraid because her name was not on the deed.

“If I divorce, I will lose everything,” she said.

“The more I think about it,” she added, “the more difficult it feels to escape this dead end.”

But as is increasingly the case in China these days, very few were willing to go on the record. This has become the reality of reporting in an increasingly authoritarian country whose — mostly male — leaders are so obsessed with controlling the narrative that even videos depicting extramarital affairs are [subject to government censorship](#).

I understood why many women didn’t want to take the risk. Since China’s leader, Xi Jinping, took power in 2012, we have seen the [detention of feminist activists](#), a [crackdown](#) on the burgeoning #MeToo movement and the emergence of “[female morality schools](#)” in which women are made to scrub floors and are taught how to apologize to their husbands.

Despite the overwhelming pressures, Chinese women are finding ways to push back.

We saw a glimpse of their growing anger earlier this year on March 8, known as International Women’s Day. In recent years, what is supposed to be a celebration of the women’s rights movement has been co-opted by online retailers and transformed into a Black Friday-esque shopping holiday in China known as “Goddess Day.”

That day, as women across China browsed online sales on cosmetics and sportswear, one female university student in Beijing walked up to two red Women’s Day banners that had been dedicated to the “little fairy” women, channeling the [infantilizing tone](#) so often used in advertising aimed at women in China.

She lit the banners on fire.

Photos of the blaze quickly spread on social media before internet censors took them down. We tried reaching out to the student but she declined to talk to us. Later, after she was reprimanded by school administrators, she posted a message on her social media account to clarify her actions.

“Damn it, this day is not meant for consuming gender stereotypes,” she wrote.

In a show of the simmering defiance that has quietly spread among women in China today, she concluded with the best non-apology apology that I have seen in a while:

“There was indeed a lack of concern for safety when I set the fires so I apologize to my fellow students,” she wrote. “I should have used scissors.”

Amy Qin is a China correspondent based in Beijing, covering the intersection of culture, politics and society. @amyyqin.