

'Our Bodies, Ourselves' hits shelves in China

By Ted Plafker
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Patient becomes her own advocate

BELJING — When He Xiaopei's doctor told her she needed a hysterectomy to treat benign fibroid tumors in her uterus, she decided to rely on a second opinion. Rare as it is in China for any patient to question a physician's authority, He's attitude was even more remarkable because that second opinion was her own.

"A very famous Chinese gynecologist told me that she usually just does a hysterectomy to treat fibroids, and so I told her in that case she is usually wrong," He said.

He got her information, and the confidence to challenge her doctor with it, from the new Chinese translation of "Our Bodies, Ourselves," the classic self-help medical text originally published in the 1970s by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.

"I checked the Chinese version of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' and found out that a hysterectomy was absolutely not necessary for this. After seeing that, I was so sure that I bargained very hard with my doctors about my treatment," she said.

Her persistence paid off. Now, less than a year after convincing doctors to leave her uterus intact, He said her health is excellent.

Bringing "Our Bodies, Ourselves" to its potentially huge Chinese readership likewise required persistence. It was published in June, but according to Liu Bohong, cofounder of the Chinese Women's Health Network and the lead coordi-

inator of the translation project, it was delayed for years because of both cultural and political sensitivities.

Liu found publishers unwilling to accept the book's no-nonsense discussion of sexual health and behavior. Publishers were especially concerned about topics like lesbianism, prostitution, and safe sex practices, saying they were "pornographic" or "obscene" under Chinese law. When the translation finally did appear, that material was omitted.

Many senior Chinese health officials meanwhile bristled at the notion of importing a foreign text.

"A lot of the older leaders are just not used to so much discussion of foreign experiences," Liu said.

Politically, the book's emphasis on women's rights to control their own bodies is difficult to square with China's strict one-child policy.

"Women's health, including reproductive rights, is a very basic part of human rights, but in the Chinese environment this is quite a sensitive issue," said Liu.

She is careful to say her group does not oppose China's family planning policy, but rather wants to make it more patient-centered and more compatible with women's needs.

Liu's group began work on "Our Bodies, Ourselves" in 1993, two years before Beijing played host to the United Nations Fourth World Women's Conference. Liu expected the event to spark interest in the project, and she initially hoped to have the work done in time to introduce at the conference.

But six months prior to the conference, China appeared to take a sudden fright at the large number and diverse kinds of women's groups that planned to attend. As the Chinese government tensed to deal with the perceived threat, official support for the book evaporated.

When it was finally published, its first print run of 5,000 copies sold out within 20 days, surprisingly fast for a book which, at 70 yuan (\$8.50), is quite expensive by Chinese standards.

Norma Swenson, founder of the collective and coauthor of "Our Bodies, Ourselves" has been involved with nearly all of the 19 editions and adaptations of the book published outside of the United States.

The Chinese edition, like the others, got its start when the women's collective was approached by "bilingual women who had read some edition of our English book and immediately felt it was very important for a book like ours to exist in their native languages," Swenson said.

But translation is only the first step.

"Readers still say that while the book is very good, they would like to see a version that is more specifically adapted to the Chinese situation," said Liu.

She and her group are now at work writing it for them. Liu said the next version will need to account for some practical differences, such as how Chinese and American health-care services are structured and funded.

There are also profound social differences that will require different treatments. Liu said she plans to include one chapter especially for adolescent Chinese girls.

"They now see so much foreign material mixed up with so much traditional material and it is hard for them to process all this information in ways that allow them to protect their health. This was something the Boston book did not have that we think we need," she said.

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Chinese patient