

AU community hears about Chinese struggle for rights

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Wu Qing, a Chinese congresswoman who spoke Tuesday at Alfred University, has a reputation for being "difficult to deal with" because she works to protect the rights of her constituents. "But if I do not raise my voice, who is going to speak for the people?" she asked. Congresswoman Wu Qing's visit was a result of her friendship with Dr. Robyn Goodman, assistant professor of communication studies at Alfred University. "I first met Wu Qing when I was teaching at a University in Beijing (1988-90)," said Goodman. "She's a remarkable woman who works according to Chinese law and policies to change the system from within. She's respected worldwide for her creative activities and ... grassroots efforts to improve Chinese lives." The 16-year congresswoman has a family tradition. "We come here (to the US) to learn, and we go back to China to serve," she said. After she was first elected and began to study China's constitution, she realized that citizens "have all the rights in black and white." But there is a gap between what is written and what is practiced. She now uses the constitution to protect the rights of her constituents. During congressional meetings, all legislators have traditionally been expected to vote yes on each proposal. Wu Qing was the first ever to cast a "no vote," although at the time she didn't know she was the first. The reaction was mixed, she said. Some people thanked her; others called her anti-government. Unlike American legislators, members of the Chinese congress are not expected to do anything except attend meetings and vote yes. But, she said, "I want to get things done." Wu Qing believes she has done a lot for her constituents, including educating them of their rights. She said she has learned to take risks and "to cope with adversity." She has office hours and holds town meetings so that her constituents can voice their concerns. She has also promoted women's rights in China. Lots of "women's rights have been violated," she said. They have to know their rights. If you can "teach one woman, you teach whole families for generations," she said. Many people think Wu Qing is successful. But it is not enough to see a few women be successful, she said. "So much more work needs to be done." Many women in China, especially rural women, "do not have an identity," she said. They do not even have a proper name, and instead are referred to as this person's wife, mother or sister. More women need to fight for justice, she said. Men do not always know the needs of women and therefore, "women's voices are not heard." "I should represent everybody," she said, but privately she believes that "if there were more women ... presidents the world would be better." Currently on a round-the-world tour to promote women's rights, Wu Qing just came from Geneva, Switzerland and is on her way to Stanford University. Her presentation is sponsored by the Alfred University Women's Studies and Communications Studies programs, and the University's National Endowment for the Humanities Committee. It is funded, in part, by a gift to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences from the Seth Sprague Educational and Charitable Foundation. (Christa Nyman, who wrote this article, is a senior at AU, majoring in environmental studies.)###