

**Collective Struggle:
A Case Study of Chinese Grassroots Feminism
in the Digital Age**

**by
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Abstract

Contemporary China has witnessed the transformation of Chinese feminism from state feminism to grassroots feminism. Weibo hashtag #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere is a typical grassroots feminist movement in China which triggered by a sexual violence case “Bao Yuming Case” since April 2020. To carry forward such movement, Chinese cyberfeminists have employed localized tactics to build up online counterpublics and expand social influence while under the rules of Weibo algorithm and government censorship.

Keywords: Counterpublics; cyberfeminism; algorithm; discourse analysis; Weibo

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

In April 2020, a news article from South Reviews (南风窗) under the title of “CEO father suspected of sexual assaulting his underage adopted daughter for three years” caused a mighty uproar in China. Inhumane behaviors of the “sugar daddy” , 3-year struggle of the teenage girl... such a sexual violence case named by the perpetrator Yuming Bao gained huge public attention (Hernández, 2020). Triggered by the distressing case, Chinese female netizens initiated a hashtag movement “#DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere (妹妹别怕姐姐来了)” on microblogging platform Weibo to advocate for girl protection and women’ s rights, gaining millions of views and thousands of posts. This online movement is run by women volunteers who show support in various ways and its core demand is gender equality and social justice.

Digital feminist movement in China is not new since #MeToo movement, while it has faced more challenges since the hashtag #MeToo was banned on Weibo from July 2018 because of the Communist Party’s strict limits on activism. #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere can be seen as a successor of #MeToo with new features; leading and participants in the movements try to make the best use of social media and they are more strategic. Now in China, online feminist activities become increasingly influential, more than offline ones in terms of scale and diversity. That’s because “both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance in China has changed significantly” (Wang, 2018, p. 261) since the new millennium began, which is defined by Qi Wang (2018) as a “paradigm shift” from governmental organizing to bottom-up movements. The Chinese government has over the years tightened the grip on social organizations, making it both difficult and risky to organize and to engage in organized activities (Chen, 2016; Shi, 2016; Yuen, 2015 as cited in Wang, 2018). This has restrained the possibility of organizational building and led to a mutation of the mode of organizing in feminism (Wang, 2018). Many of the existing non-governmental women’s organizations have become somehow specialized and institutionalized after decades of operation, whether academic Women’s Studies or project-based NGOs (Wang, 2018). While in Chinese society, there are still intensified gender discrimination

and patriarchal backlash, with the growing power of the new generation, who —“care little about being part of the state work- place/payroll system and the formal labour market” (Wang, 2018, p. 265) but care more about individual rights, new generation women of different social classes, occupations, age groups and sexual orientations have stood up to fight back, often with greater degree of spontaneity and without a long, formal organizing process and formally organized structures. Another factor is the new technological development, especially ICT, which realizes virtual mobilization and cyber communication and facilitates the alternative channels for feminist expression (Wang, 2018). However, Chinese feminists haven’t developed a localized systematic theory framework which could meet basic national conditions to guide feminist activities. Therefore, it’s of great significance in digital feminist activism study in China.

In this paper, I focus on the #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere movement as a case study to examine the tactics deployed by Chinese feminists on Weibo, in order to define and analyze present characteristics of digital feminist activism. Under the theoretical lens of cyberfeminism, this study looks at online discourses of feminist activists in the Chinese context—to be specific, 320 Weibo posts and reposts from feminists involved in this hashtag movement, posted from April 9th to June 30th. Among the collected posts, four categories are defined in terms of purpose, to demonstrate the works of digital feminists. Posters 1) try to provide valid information to the followers; 2) call for more participation of people in the counterpublic sphere and public sphere; 3) expand social influence and; 4) take actions to make social changes. And this study reveals tactics employed by cyberfeminists in this movement: build an online counterpublics, sympathetically narrate a sisterhood, and strive for visibility by visualizing their core thoughts and working with the Weibo algorithm. I argue that Chinese digital feminist activism is seeking a local path under government restriction, while it has already developed tactics in align with the rules of social media platforms. In this paper, I begin with an overview of Chinese women’s movement and feminist studies in the Chinese context and conclude that those employed tactics accord with the Chinese context.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. Chinese Context

Like women in most cultures, women in China have suffered from extremely low social status since the feudal society in BC 221, and the deep-rooted patriarchal structure in Chinese culture formed since then. Only till the end of 19th century have such circumstance changed along with the perishing of the Qing Dynasty and liberation and democracy introduced by Chinese intellectuals into China from the West. However, it was only until the revolution of 1949 that dramatic changes took place which had a strong impact on the lives of Chinese women. From the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the women' movement in China has been closely related to government policies and evolves with Chinese characteristics (Leung, 2003); based on transitions of culture and ideology, Leung (2003) identifies four phrases of the development of the women's movement in China from 1949 to the millennium as the Mao Era (1949-1966), Cultural Revolution period (1967-1977), Deng's reform era (1978-1994) and the post-reform era (1995-now). During the first phase of the development, 1949–1966, Chinese communist policies towards women were based on the classical Marxist assumption that society is a struggle for power and dominance, which occurs among social classes competing for control over the means of production and distribution of resources, along with social liberation. Mao put forward that women were expected to put production first and the needs of their families second, acknowledged women's social status as equal to men's, and promoted law-making of marriage. During the second phase 1966 to 1976, the years of the Cultural Revolution, state policy shifted to an emphasis on class differences and women were called into all productive workforce—to work as men, to wear as men and to be judged by male standards. The Cultural Revolution is a time in which the result of state feminism was not only the negation of gender differences but also the overall desexualization of both men and women. In the first and second phase, the state only addressed the struggle of the working class while oppressed women's initiative—women were “liberated” by the state in an up-to-bottom approach but not by themselves (Barlow, 1994).

The “Four Modernisations” and the “Openness and Reform Policy” advanced by Deng accelerated the modernizing process and economic growth since the end of the 1970s, which has brought about tremendous changes and success to China’s economy. It is evident that China has entered a post-socialist phase of development, along with a growing new middle class and rising female educational opportunities. The development of women’s studies programs and academic scholarship on women was the most significant progress in the women’s movement during the economic reform. Scholars and research institutions on women were established and engaged in the intellectual analysis and discourse of women without government surveillance, which was unprecedented in the history of the PRC (Wang, 1997). As Xiaojiang Li (1983) criticized the desexualization of women in the Cultural Revolution and proposed the idea “persons with gender”, female intellectuals began to rethink of the women’s liberalization in the past and transited from liberalization to feminism. The impact of the reform on women’s status, however, does not seem all that positive. Unequal employment opportunities and the increasingly unequal income distribution between men and women have become such serious problems that the Chinese government and international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program have allocated funds and established projects to help laid-off women (Rosenthal, 1998).

The end of 1990s witnessed a booming of Chinese economy with further opening-up policy and a mature market economy in the socialist country. With the rapid development of Internet, Chinese people began to have more access to the globe as well as open-minded thoughts. Western notions of “gender equality”, “women empowerment” and “social gender” provided the Chinese feminists more discourse and pushed forward the awakening of self-consciousness of women. Under the flourishing market economy, further liberation in mind, and being the one-child generation, Chinese women transformed from collectivists to individualists. Since then NGOs and feminist study institutions has gradually been institutionalized and controlled by the government.

In these four periods, feminism in China has transited from state feminism taking a lead to grassroots feminism becoming the majority since the reform era. State feminism refers to the government or state plays a central role to adopt policies to protect women’s right while grassroots feminism relies on the common people’s strength (Mazur & McBride, 2008). The recent decades witnessed great improvement of women’s rights as well as social status in China (Shen, 2016). Meanwhile, the notion of feminism

has appeared in the online and offline world much more frequently while more and more feminist activists throw themselves into social activities, such as the “#Metoo” movement and anti-domestic violence campaigns. However, though grassroots feminism has become the trend, it's facing more severe challenges relating to the uncompleted liberation of women and embedded patriarchy system in the society; intense clashes between feminists and the public, and heated discussion about feminism are notable in the society (Wang, 2018). Mass and independent feminist movements have never got a chance to develop in China (Shen, 2016); feminist movements in China are relatively in a primary stage as they lack of systematic guidance and have achieved limited social impact as well as social change. In China, generally feminist movements and arguments are still linked to the nation's development and government's attitude towards feminism.

2.2. Cyberfeminism, Counterpublics and Panopticism

Cyberfeminism is not a single theory or movement; it refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan and Booth 2002, as cited in Daniels, 2009). Susan Plant (1997) is regarded as a leading role who coined Cyberfeminism in her ground-breaking work *Zeros and Ones* and she conceptualized cyberspace as a realm in which women have the capacity to gain power and overthrow the patriarchy (Consalvo, 2012, as cited in Lopez et al., 2019). However, she was criticized being too optimistic by Wajcman who pointed out the inherently masculine within technologies (Daniels, 2009) and she left little room for females to intersect with other social identities because of the binary division of zeros (females) and ones (males) (1997). But still it's of great significance that Cyberfeminism has brought in discussion of the relationship between women and technology, the development of feminisms when making use of technology and the role women play in the digital age (Sze, 2003). Through studying Cyberfeminism I found out the subversive potential of digital technologies and also the significance to examine the ways feminists use the Internet to challenge norms and inequalities from their actual experience and practice, and to understand the relationship between women and digital technologies.

Applying “Cyberfeminism” as the theoretical lens of my study to look at the relationship between “Cyber” and “feminism”, the conception “subaltern counterpublics” proposed by Nancy Fraser (1990) provides me with a more specific perspective to

analyze feminist activism. Fraser (1990) contends that in a stratified society, subordinate groups are ignored, social inequalities are bracketed, and the so-called public sphere only works to the advantage of the dominant group. Then, the subordinate groups find it's helpful to build up "subaltern counterpublics" to promote participation parity as they are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p.67) and the participants can decide the common concern to themselves. Alternative spaces, particular languages and discursive interactions all contribute to the expansion of the discursive space. Moreover, subaltern counterpublics not only function as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" (Fraser, 1990, p68), but also aim to challenge and change the dominant public discourse (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990, as cited in Holm, 2019). Based on Fraser's theory, Warner (2002) focused on the circulated discourse in publics, and defines counterpublic discourse is not only about the subaltern culture but also "expansive estrangement of public speech as the condition of their own common world" which challenge modernity's social hierarchy (p.87), and he emphasizes the formation and transformation of participants' social identities during addressing in a counterpublic way. Besides, Warner (2002) highlights the nature of counterpublic is stranger-circulation with particular sociality and reflexivity; such circulation is "not just strategic, but also constitutive of membership and its affects" (p.88).

In this digital age, counterpublics can also be built up in the digital world. According to Travers (2003), "cyberspace provides feminists with unique opportunities for establishing visible feminist publics" (p. 231); counterpublics online may confront new challenge. Counterpublics has become a central domain in feminist studies, especially related to digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Since digital platforms are run by algorithm, being visible or invisible are defined by the algorithm to a certain extent. Visibility is exactly what the cyberfeminists require in digital spaces because they are marginalized enough in the real word so they fight for visibility online so as to gain chances being seen/heard. However, algorithm functions as sorting and distributing information in this era of big data and it can largely determine visibility online, thus, it can largely determine the fate of a digital community. Imagine that if the posts can not reach out to the followers, how would the movement move forward? To study algorithmic visibility on Facebook, Bucher (2012) introduces panopticon (Foucault, 1977)

as a prison where the central tower can see all other cells around the tower. People in the cells do not know when they will be seen but they all know that they are under the watch. Foucault demonstrates that spaces are designed to make things seeable, and seeable in a specific way (1977), so being visible or not is designed by the architectural structure. It's also called surveillance. Bucher compares and combines the concept panopticon with digital platforms as they are both architectures and "technical organization of power" which can help "visualize power" (Rajchman, 1988, as cited in Bucher, 2012). This helps us better understand the nature of social media platforms and then the activism on such platforms. Bucher (2012) provides a perspective to study how visibility is technologically structured in the algorithmic architecture and the algorithm practices social power in the digital world. Comparingly, when we look at digital feminist activism, we should be aware that cyberfeminists are still fighting within a patriarchy structure which is ruled by an algorithm designed by the dominant group. Because visibility is determined by the structure—the platform, and being visible means the platform lets the audience see your posts among numerous posts.

With such knowledge I looked into academic articles about feminism in China, especially those associated with digital technologies from home and abroad in recent years. Generally I see a lack of localized feminist theories to lead Chinese feminist activities, while there are insightful studies on contemporary Chinese feminism, such as a new gendered structure of power under the post-socialist transition (Wu & Dong, 2019), feminist resistance in post-2000 China and cyberfeminism circulation (Wang, 2018) and building online space for feminists while fighting towards online misogyny (Han, 2018). In their studies, they not only present outlooks on the context of Chinese feminism, but also apply various methods to analyze feminist activities on digital platforms, especially on Weibo. Han (2018) examines the changing approaches towards online misogyny of a Chinese feminist group GWWV on Weibo and studies online communities; Wang (2018) demonstrates the shifted frontier of Chinese feminism and defines its features as performance act and philanthropic volunteerism under the theoretical framework of cyberfeminism; Yin (2020) discussed the data-ization of fandom in China, which inspires my insights on the digital relationship between feminism and the Internet and provides examples of discourse analysis on Weibo as well.

Chapter 3.

Discourse Analysis of Feminist Posts on Weibo

3.1. Methodology

This is a case study on #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere movement which employs discourse analysis to analyze the tactics of Chinese feminist activists. Discourse analysis can explore the significance beyond data as “it’s in the bridging of quantitative data with humanities approaches” to reveal the power relations and its contextualizing helps understand the ways members use hashtags to share experience in counterpublic and public spheres (Jackson et al., 2018, p.6). Thus, I choose to employ discourse analysis because it can contextualize the hashtags and narratives circulated in this online public sphere regarding to “Bao Yuming Case” and #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere.

During the observation process before data collection, I clicked at the hashtag and found that it’s a super topic page for the hashtag movement, it functions like a Facebook page where netizens can post, check in or follow. On this page—created by volunteers, two sticky posts introduce posting rules and officially indicate four moderators, one psychological guidance and one publicity role for this super topic page. Besides them, there is also a spokeswoman always speaking for Xingxing and communicating with news medias as well as the public. These seven female netizens are regarded as leading roles in this online movement. To examine the tactics of Chinese feminist activists in this online campaign, I collect data under the super topic, process the data, and use discourse analysis to look at circulated discourse on Weibo in the Chinese context. The data processing consists of five parts: collection, organization, description (and translation), categorization and interpretation.

In the data collection process, I manually collect texts, images, videos from relevant 320 post and reposts of 7 Weibo accounts which are leading roles in the movement from April 9th (when the case was exposed) to June 30th. Posts and reposts tagged with the super topic hashtag #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere or other hashtags about “Bao Yuming Case” are considered relevant. In addition, as the nature of the movement is a feminist movement, so the ones concerning women and equal rights

are also considered as relevant posts. Then, I classify the data into files according to its form (text, image or video) and describe the given information (types, contents and narratives) in each piece. After that, I define their functions and purposes of the posts and then categorize the data accordingly. Finally, I look at the data in a broader framework to interpret messages beyond the data itself in the Chinese social context in consideration of government regulation, Chinese culture and social norms, and then try to capture the characteristics and tactics in this feminist movement.

3.2. Data Overview and Findings

Among the 320 pieces of data I collected, 66 of them are in the format of text, 247 of them are texts with images, 7 are videos with texts. A large use of visual communication in online movements has become a trend as visual materials can attract more attention and many social media platforms are designed for picture/video sharing in this decade. A detailed analysis of visual communication in #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere movement can be seen in a later section.

From my observation, there are mainly four categories of the posts in terms of purposes: provide information, call for participation, expand influence and change the future. The first one refers to the posts contain “facts (unproved but with high credibility)” about the case and updates on the movement/organization itself from the leaders. “Facts” are provided by the leaders because they are closer to the victim and have more chances to know the truth. While news media is usually missing during the police investigation as the government requires them to wait for the final official result. Therefore, Weibo posts become the main source of information. The leaders also update their progress of organizing the movement on Weibo to show responsibility and transparency. As for “call for participation”, there are direct ones and indirect ones. Posts of volunteer recruitment, experience sharing and support videos collection are direct calling for participation as they directly require your actions. While posts in a sympathetic narrative telling stories of the victim or moving words to unite women which can cause emotional resonance are also defined as “call for participation”, because they function as attracting attention and indirectly encouraging involvement. People see such posts are likely to be touched by the story, so they may repost, comment or follow up. The third category is “expand influence”, which refers to the posts and reposts with tagging other feminists and feminist organizations as more feminists will pay attention to this case;

they can also be concern and discussion on other women issues/cases such as domestic violence, divorce law and girl murder because people who concern about these issues/cases can be united together when they see the common concern of women's rights. The fourth one "change the future" includes the posts about child sexual knowledge and suggestions for law amendment. These are both about how to make a better future for girls and women, however, the results may take years. But such efforts show a progress in digital feminist movement in China as it has started to call for social and lawful change, which is becoming one of the main appeals in this movement while in the former #Metoo movement in China the main point is usually experience sharing or criminal punishment. Therefore, I would argue this feminist movement finds a pointcut of children protection as it doesn't directly oppose patriarchy but it can be a step to protect the marginalized. But it has a very feminist core as the participants care about equal rights of not only women but also all marginalized groups. Also, feminists are seeking for lawful support in terms of amendment of the women and children protection law and suggestions to People's Congress on women's rights. They are doing practical things in consistent with the state will, which is significant in China.

Chapter 4.

Localized Cyberfeminist Tactics in China

4.1. Online Community Building

From my observation, there are mainly four categories of the posts in terms of purposes: provide information, call for participation, expand influence and change the future. The first one refers to the posts contain “facts (unproved but with high credibility)” about the case and updates on the movement/organization itself from the leaders. “Facts” are provided by the leaders because they are closer to the victim and have more chances to know the truth. While news media is usually missing during the police investigation as the government requires them to wait for the final official result. Therefore, Weibo posts become the main source of information. The leaders also update their progress of organizing the movement on Weibo to show responsibility and transparency. As for “call for participation”, there are direct ones and indirect ones. Posts of volunteer recruitment, experience sharing and support videos collection are direct calling for participation as they directly require your actions. While posts in a sympathetic narrative telling stories of the victim or moving words to unite women which can cause emotional resonance are also defined as “call for participation”, because they function as attracting attention and indirectly encouraging involvement. People see such posts are likely to be touched by the story, so they may repost, comment or follow up. The third category is “expand influence”, which refers to the posts and reposts with tagging other feminists and feminist organizations as more feminists will pay attention to this case; they can also be concern and discussion on other women issues/cases such as domestic violence, divorce law and girl murder because people who concern about these issues/cases can be united together when they see the common concern of women’s rights. The fourth one “change the future” includes the posts about child sexual knowledge and suggestions for law amendment. These are both about how to make a better future for girls and women, however, the results may take years. But such efforts show a progress in digital feminist movement in China as it has started to call for social and lawful change, which is becoming one of the main appeals in this movement while in the former #Metoo movement in China the main point is usually experience sharing or criminal punishment. Therefore, I would argue this feminist movement finds a pointcut of

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Weibo user “Elder Sister of Victim in Yantai Lawyer B Sexual Assault Case” (烟台 B 律师性侵案受害人姐姐) (in short: “Sister of Victim”) has been speaking up for Xingxing since the Weibo account registration in December, 2019. With her efforts connecting with news medias, *South Reviews* published an exclusive report on Bao Yuming Case on April 9th, 2020, telling a detailed and painful story of Xingxing being raped by a predominant “adoptive father” for 3 years. The report has gained 1.4 million views on Weibo, the hashtag #BaoyumingCase reached the Weibo top search list, and the case itself has gained huge attention and discussion in the Chinese public, but to “Sister of Victim”, the fight just began. It's unknown whether she is a relative of Xingxing or just a women volunteer, but without doubt she can directly get in touch with Xingxing and it's revealed in her Weibo that another “sister” and Xingxing can also log in this account. However, in order to protect the victim from cyber violence, she is the one who mainly manages this account and keeps speaking out on the internet. “Sister of Victim” delivers important information about the case, points out the criminal facts and tricks of Bao Yuming, and expresses emotions and feelings of Xingxing as well as herself. She wrote: “the girl victim called the police once and once again, but every time she was brought back to the villain, and then she resisted once more. More than two weeks has past, hopefully the result of judgment will come out soon. Do not let the girl die once again.” She also posted Xingxing's words: “I was raped, I was threatened, I called the police but it was helpless, because of the power of the villain. Nobody knows how hard it is for me to live till now; I would rather die.” Their words are emotional and powerful, which drew more attention to the victim and the case on Weibo as the audience are empathetic, and systematic inequality to a female victim of sexual violence was disclosed.

On April 11th, “Sister of Victim” began to use the hashtag #YourSistersAreHere in her posts, which not only showed her identity and attitude, but also initiated a feminist movement in China in the name of sisters. Actually “your sisters are here” is a feminist

slogan originated from Korea, which was widely used in the feminist movement in support of a Korean female star Koo Hara in 2018. She was assaulted and threatened by sex video blackmail from her ex-boyfriend. Such experience stirred public outrage and Korean women marched on streets to urge for punishment on sexual crimes. It was a women-support-women activism—so is this one. According to a big-data report by *Shujikeshihuabiji* (数据可视化笔记), 79% of original posts discussing Bao Yuming Case on Weibo are from women users. And with the purpose of supporting Xingxing and appealing for social justice, several female netizens voluntarily got together, got in touch with “Sister of Victim” and created a super topic page on Weibo under the hashtag #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere.



Figure 1. Super topic homepage of #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere on Weibo

A super topic page, as I mentioned before, is like a combination of Facebook page and Twitter topic—an open-access cyber space where you can post, follow and check in. All posts with the hashtag #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere will also be shown on this page. In the super topic introduction, it writes: “Speak for women, unite women, and fight for women’s rights. A single spark can start a prairie fire.” It’s their slogan, but also the main theme of this movement: fight for the rights of women and girls. More than 30,000 netizens follow this page and more than 12,000 posts are published here to follow up the case, question the suspected criminal, encourage Xingxing or discuss anything related to women’s rights. They are mostly strangers to each other, but the Weibo topic connects them together, and they are bounded due to a common concern—all girl/women victims of sexual violence and their own human rights. With the shared concern, a counterpublic was established right basing on the #DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere page. It’s a counterpublic space because the participants are marginalized in the society and excluded from the dominant public

sphere, but on the Internet, they regroup together and construct their own public sphere to circulate public discourse in the community (Warner, 2002). It's a feminist space which is semi-public and semi-private (Fraser, 1990): it has an open access to every user on Weibo without boundaries, and you just need to find the gate to enter this space—the super topic hashtag; it's semi-private as community members share their own experiences here and it's a relatively safe and supportive community as they are encouraged to do so.

Though the movement initiators are gathered out of “philanthropic volunteerism” (Wang, 2018) in a loose relationship, they quickly build up a team which is quite organized with clearly divided responsibilities. Founders of this community are anonymous users who are recognized as moderators of the super topic page in one of the sticky posts (announcements) on it. In the sticky post published on April 21st, four users are listed as moderators who preserve order in the community and organize online campaigns, one publicity account who takes charge of dissemination and one specialist for psychological guidance. They along with the spokeswoman of Xingxing “Sister of Victim” are regarded by the author as the leading roles in this movement.

“Don'tYouBeAfriadYourSistersAreHere” (妹妹别怕姐姐来了) is one of the initiators to recruit moderators. She posted a recruitment on April 10th, highlighted requirements of abilities in copywriting and psychological guidance, knowledge of laws, passion and persistence. The recruitment was done several hours later, and “Don'tYouBeAfriadYourSistersAreHere” introduced members in their volunteer team as “sisters” from various professions: legal counsels, psychologists, civil servants, company staffs and college students. Besides leaders, they have a large demand of volunteers to run for the movement. “DandanzhuSmile” (丹丹猪 Smile) posted a volunteer recruitment on April 16th, asking for help from other “sisters” to join the team. In her post, there are six groups respectively being in charge of Weibo data, Douban (a Chinese social media platform) data, copywriting, publicity, organization and graphic design. I can tell that the team has a relatively clear and practical division of work, which is important to the success of an activism. It's the participants' power and volunteers' devotion that keep the grassroots movement ongoing. “A single spark can start a prairie fire (星星之火，可以燎原)” is widely used in this counterpublic not only because 星星 is the anonym Xingxing of the victim in the news article but also it demonstrates the collective strength of women as a community. The participants believe that with joint efforts they will expand the

discursive space and help more women suffering from sexual violence, like one of the moderators “LouiStyles” wrote in her post: “We are not born to suffer, and the super topic page is not only a gathering space for experience sharing. We are soft, we ought to be loved, no more insomnia at night due to dark memories; we are strong, we can protect each other, we can be empowered as long as we unite, though thousands of miles away. We speak out, we supervise, we popularize education, we respect every human and his/her human rights.” She points out the mission of feminists and the significance of the counterpublic sphere. Moreover, her narrative is so touching that female audience can easily share the same feeling and feel like standing right beside them.

4.2. Narrate a Sisterhood

It’s obvious that the narratives of feminists in this movement are likely to have emotional resonance, which is also a strategy to attract more audience. Take the just-mentioned post from “LouiStyles” as an example, she used “we” as the pronoun to indicate that she is on the side of the audience or she wants the audience to be on the same side with her, then as long as the audience is with her, it’s easier to gain empathy and feeling of being part of the community. Besides, negative words like “suffer” and “dark memories” will also trigger resonance of sadness among the audience so that they may begin to care about the victims. Also, words with emotions can encourage more followers to participate in the movement either because of having the feeling that you can do things for the injured or you can share your own experience if you are an injured. As in a post calling for contribution from “moon of the stars” (星星团的月亮), it’s saying that “we are here to listen to your story, we are here to wipe away your tears—sisters in need of pouring out or help are welcome to contact with us, and we are always with you.” But it should be noted that this kind of narrative can cause problem by emphasizing too much on emotion but not evidence, sometime even portraying a “perfect victim” and ignoring the complexity of the case and humanity in storytelling of Xingxing’s experience.

In addition to such emotional and comforting discourses, there are narratives delivered in a contrary style: extremely rational and rigorous. This style of narrative can usually be seen in statements of facts, query to the suspected criminal and updates on

the progress of the case. They have to be very careful about the wording and manner as they need to deliver the truth without emotion to convince all caring netizens, and it's a serious speech as communication on Weibo can also be the evidence on the court. They have to bear the legal liability if any word violates the rights of the suspected criminal. However, in such fewer narratives there are still unproved facts, which may not be critical and convincing enough to discuss about the case.

The digital feminists make the best use of social media as they understand the core of social media—connection, interaction and influence. Connection is made through the counterpublic as a network, while interaction need to be done in person. Moderators try to maintain a close relationship with followers of themselves or the super topic, so they encourage the followers to like, comment or repost their posts. They interact with the followers in comment or by reposting so that members belonging to this community could have more sense of connection and intimacy. They also try to reach out to other marginalized groups like women in rural areas, women suffering from domestic violence or queer people to show support and understanding by using hashtag about such issues or repost relevant cases when they see any on Weibo. On the one hand feminists can expand influence (gain more audience or followers) and share the same feelings; on the other hand, it's advantageous to unite as many nondominant groups as they can to challenge the dominant group, especially to challenge the patriarchy in the society. It could be a helpful strategy, but also a result of identity formation. Warner(2002) points out that through the process of participating in a counterpublic, one's identity can be formed or reformed as he/she are delivering message in a counterpublic way with fully awareness of being subordinate. Myself is a great example as since the beginning of studying on this project and looking closely at the sexual violence case, I have been more aware of my feminist stance and once I had the emotional resonance and better understanding the inequalities embedded for thousands of years, I has started to concern about all relevant cases and inspired to speak up for the vulnerable on the Internet.

4.3. Visualized and Empowered

In addition to texts, visual communication is also strategically employed in this digital movement. Posters are the most widely used and effective materials for publicity and circulation as they are “hot” media according to Marshall McLuhan (1964, as cited in

Morrison, 2012). McLuhan distinguishes communication medium as “hot” media and “cool” media. “A hot medium is one in relatively high definition, which provides information in sharply defined packages that demand relatively little participation on the part of observer for completion (Morrison, 2012).” That means images can transmit information in a direct and easily understandable way because the target audience do need to interpret nor imagine; they can just take it. “Hot” media targets one of people’s sensations so that people can immediately get the message or arise a feeling in a straightforward way, which is align with the features of social media—short time, no thinking, direct reaction.

“Sisters” use poster to convey their common concern and attract more audience and they even visualize texts for better communication on digital platforms. Take some of the posters in #Don’tYouBeAfriadYourSistersAreHere as examples. Figure 2 draws an eye-closed girl with painful facial expression whose mouth is sealed by tapes, “she is my daughter”. This poster demonstrates the struggle of the girl victim, being tortured, threatened and controlled in an abnormal adaptive relationship. And figure 3 is about a slogan “girls support girls” shows supports to all girls and suggesting a supportive community. Followers are encouraged to circulate the images and create new ones for the movement, which not only attract more public attention from the public sphere but also increase participation such as reposting, commenting and sending to others.



Figure 2 "She Is My Daughter". Image credit: @桃子味烧酒和她们 via Weibo



Figure 3. Girls Support Girls. Image credit: @三班大姐 via Weibo

There is also much use of symbolism in their posters. As Xingxing means star in mandarin, volunteer designers bring stars into their works and make stars the typical symbol of the movement. Stars in the super topic logo, stars in posters as the protection object and are also written into poems as sparks fighting against darkness. They also asked for supportive videos from the followers to tell the victim that she's not alone, please go on living and do not lose hope. After collecting the clips, volunteers edited them into a video and posted it on the super topic page. This is a good way to encourage members to participant and circulate themselves, and there is more chance to be seen when using various mediums.



Figure 4. Logo of #Don'tYouBeAfriadYourSistersAreHere. Image credit: @LouiStyles

Visual communication is heavily employed in this digital feminist movement because the feminists require visibility. According to Bucher (2012), visibility in the ear of Web 2.0 is connected to the notion of empowerment because visibility can be regarded

as voiced being heard among all kinds voice, and a heard voice is empowered to speak for its identity. Being visible online, you may gain public attention to your case. But if you are not visible, you are marginalized again in the online world. So visibility can be seen as empowerment to some extent. However, on digital platforms, visibility is not determined by image using but by algorithm.

4.4. Fight with Algorithm

Panopticon is an ideal architecture and a system of control designed by Jeremy Bentham, having a central tower with all-round windows and the surrounding building is composed by small cells filled with people—one in the central is able to see anyone in a cell immediately without notice ahead (Foucault, 1977). It's a model designed for institutions like hospital or prisons where need guard and surveillance, however, Foucault (1977) metaphors this model as a surveillance mechanism to discuss about social control and individual discipline. He defines three functions of Panopticon: “to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide (p. 200)”, and the surveillant can see “constantly and recognize immediately (p.200)”. Foucault further addresses the architectural apparatus as “a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation (p.201)”, “a mechanism automatizes and disindividualizes power (p.202)”. In my point of view, this mechanism is pretty much alike algorithm of platforms, which can enclose or hide posts automatically or manually, keep watch on data and data source all the time, and exercises a non-transparent and unfair power upon users—you have no choice but to obey the rules set by algorithm. Weibo is designed in a panopticon structure in terms of its algorithm because the content on the are produced by users but distributed by algorithm. The contents are like prisoners in cell—the data are already on the platform and being surveilled all the time, but the possibility of the contents to be seen on the platform is unknown to the users. Algorithm determines which can be seen and which can not be seen on the platform. Also, algorithm is a practice of power in online spaces as they are written by the dominant group, which may not be friendly to feminists nor other marginalized groups. Posts with hashtag or words which offense the dominant group will likely be concealed or even deleted. Taiduhezi (态度盒子) posted on June 8th that her post was automatically deleted without any notice, and she met problems of limited visibility (限流) for several times, which means her posts with super topic hashtag can not be seen on the super topic page.

Because of the black-box nature of algorithm, “sisters” never know why some of their posts cannot reach all followers. They have to carefully fight for themselves in the restrictions provided by algorithm. It’s unknown about how algorithm make some posts visible and some invisible, it’s known that it is “weight (权重)” that matters for visibility. Weight is an algorithmic term in the Weibo system. Generally, it means how important the algorithm thinks this post is; it’s the possibility of being visible on this digital platform. A high weight will not only allow your posts being seen by your followers, but also by other netizens. The regime of visibility associated with Web 2.0 connects to the notion of empowerment. More visibility may bring more attention to the sexual violence case, more help from others and it’s more likely to use the force of public opinion to implement social justice. However, visibility can also cause risk and vulnerability in digital spaces. Feminists usually suffer from online misogyny and attack, and some of them even face threat and cyber man hunt. On May 14th, a blogger against patriarchy claimed being cyber man hunted by a male computer professor and her personal information was posted online, which is dangerous and threatening. Therefore, visibility is a coin of two sides; feminists need to learn how to well protect their privacy while being a public figure in the digital world.

In order to figure out how “weight” Netizens and scholars researched and make experiments on that, and according to Shen (2020), the criteria are in three categories: user, user’s action and post content. They are all in positive correlation to weight except self-similarity. That’s why the moderators usually use emojis, several hashtags and URL links in their original post. Publicity account also provides hashtags and visual materials like posters, pictures and timeline image for leaders and followers to attach in their own posts. Interactions, following and following back, engagement...are strategies to hold together an online community, but also tactics to win the favor of algorithm. Take the post from Taiduhezi (see figure 5) as an example, the content is enriched by hashtags, emojis, URL and images. The blogger even applied 7 hashtags and two URL linked to two newspaper reports within one post. The hashtags are
#DontYouBeAfraidYourSistersAreHere,
#YumingBaoResponsesToSexuallyAssaultingHisAdoptedDaughter,
#NanjingPoliceSpeakToYantaiPolice, #SexualViolence, #BaoYuming,
#CommentsFromPeople’sDailyOnInvestigationOfYumingBao,

#YumingBaoFireBySWUPL. Though hashtag can also be a way of storytelling, having so many elements in one post can surely increase its weight.

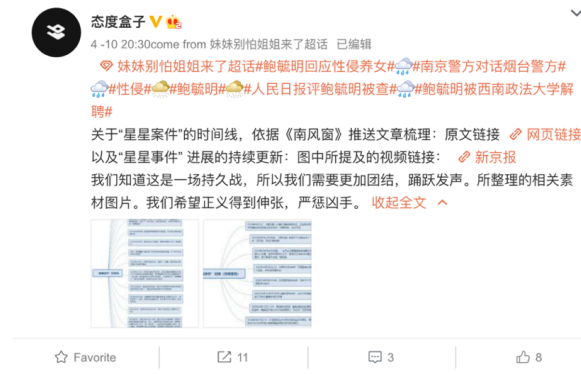


Figure 5. Post: Timeline of Xingxing's case. Credit: @态度盒子 via Weibo.

The leaders also well inform their followers about the algorithm rule and organize them to contribute to the visibility of the super topic community by posting high-weight posts. In the comment space of one sticky post, LouiStyles provides hashtags like “#ResponseofBaoYuming”, “#SustainedAttentionToBaoYumingCase” and copywriting words that can be easily copied and pasted in one’s own posts and she updates them irregularly. She highlights that one tag can be used for at most 30 times, reposts should be longer than 15 characters and it’s important to like and comment others’ posts. Such instructions are designed especially for gaining more weight so that the posts can be algorithmically visible.

There is another factor determining weight: censorship. It refers to the use of banned words and sensitive words in post, comments and even group chat. In the sticky post, they are listed to remind followers do not use, because it not only effects the weight of one’s own account, but also the whole super topic. The banned words are Raise funds (jz), money, Renminbi (RMB), card; sensitive words are alternative account, WeChat, deposit, pay, Alipay, account, password, part-time job, flight tickets, money lending, money transfer, VPN, scalper...mostly related to money because Weibo do not want to see finance fraud on its platform, but there are some other sensitive words which are not detailed listed, they are about pornography, violence, Chinese politics and leaders’ name.

Participants in digital campaigns have many similarities with digital fangirls, or to say, they learn from fangirls to produce data (做数据), becoming free labors of the

platform. Then a question come up in my mind: what' s the difference between digital feminism and digital fandom? Is it pure feminism when it obey the rules of capitalism or the society? Looking at the efforts feminists have made, instruction for posting and their agency, I realize that feminists always have to obey the existing rules because it's not made by them, nor made for them. That's why women have fought for countries to amend the laws, to call for social changing—they can't subvert all, but they are trying step by step. It's not women who write the algorithm of Weibo (if so #MeToo wouldn't get banned), it's not women who ask for data production on capitalist platforms, as a subordinate group, they have to compromise, but it's women who intend to challenge and change them all. When we study power relations, we should be aware that it may embedded in things we already get used to. From algorithm on Weibo, I see a masculine and capitalist ruling.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Digitalization changed the way feminists fight against the existing patriarchy structure. Digital platform empowers women as they can reach to other women all over the nation, while its algorithmic architecture constrains their power in some ways. Through analysis of categories of the posts in # Don'tYouBeAfriadYourSistersAreHere movement, I can see that Chinese cyberfeminists aim at leading the movement by providing information, calling for nationwide participation, expanding their influence and making social change step by step. I shall argue that feminist activism in China is in transformation and seeking for more local road. To carry out and carry on the movement, cyberfeminists employ various tactics; they build online counterpublic community, use sympathetic narrative to form the sense of sisterhood and gain visibility online by employing visual communication and fighting within algorithm under censorship. Such tactics are employed in Chinese context and achieved great progress like several deputies to the National People's Congress have proposed to raise the age of consent.

It's of great significance of counterpublic sphere set up by Chinese feminists as it's a progress of enlightenment and discursive space expansion. As a subordinate group, women are less likely to be heard or seen, but with united power from women and girls, the sound is loud enough to wake up more sisters, the change is yet to come. It's a grassroots feminist movement in part of #Metoo movement, lack of supports and foundation, but the vitalness and courage are inspiring. It has to be acknowledged that feminists have to face real struggle all along and feminist movement may take decades to make social changes, to build up an equal society which may be utopian. The title of this paper is "collective struggle", because feminists are united and have the collective power; they are collected because of the same struggle they are facing, and they will still be challenged by the real-world struggles in this patriarchy society. Also, feminists need to reflect on themselves and the movement itself. For example, the use of "perfect victim" narrative which portrays Xingxing as a fully innocent girl is an unconscious practice of male gaze, suggesting that girls should be pure and honest but ignoring the complexity of humanity as well as the case. Feminists need to be aware of the existing patriarchy structure and its deep root in the society; there is no perfect feminist as well, even feminists themselves may have wrong judgment or action. Reflecting on my

research, I find that collecting data from only leaders of the movement cannot draw the whole picture of it. Only looking at moderators who are organizers causes ignorance of various discourse among common participants. And I may fail to interpret some discourses or not contextualize them well enough. I will continue this research in the following study if I have the chance.

In the end I would like to discuss about the relation between “cyber” and feminist. I do not see male and female in binary positions, nor zeros and ones. The relation between them are similarly complicated as the relation between cyberspace and feminist. But if I need to explicit, I suggest that view cyberspace as a tool that is helpful for feminists to speak up and exert influence, while feminists should be fully aware of that hierarchy, masculinity and inequalities are also embedded in the virtual world, and it's so real. Feminists choose to compromise on part of data-ization of themselves to obtain human rights.

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