

The Promotion of Digital Feminism on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract. Since fourth-wave feminism rose in the early 2010s, digital feminist activism has attracted increasing scholarly attention, bringing a new perspective to feminist research and practices. Drawing on the analytic framework of digital feminist activism, this paper primarily investigates how Chinese feminists use social media platforms, especially Weibo, to speak up, facilitate feminist awareness, and resist patriarchal oppression. Through analysis of two online activities in China since 2018, namely the #MeToo movement and the protest the Korean deepfake crisis, this paper closely studies media discourses of Chinese Internet users in support of feminism. The main objective is to highlight how Chinese feminists challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal values and contribute to the development of feminism under China's online censorship and restrictions. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the role of Chinese feminists in online activities and their efforts to promote the values of feminism.

Keywords: Feminism, digital feminist activism, #MeToo movement, deepfake crisis.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, a type of feminism known as grassroots feminism, or down-top feminism, began to emerge, opposing the classic state-led feminism. With the rise of Chinese social media platforms in the 2010s, more and more grassroots feminists have made the Internet a stage to change the traditional way of promoting feminism and making feminist activities more visible to the public. As the most accessible public arena for public engagement, social media platforms provide women with spaces to uphold their rights, fostering digital feminism as a new form of grassroots activism.

Based on reviews of previous studies, multiple papers have analysed digital feminist activism on Chinese social media, mainly focusing on the role of platforms like Weibo. In Chinese Internet culture, feminist discourses remain heavily restricted or silenced due to the state government's control and the deep-rooted patriarchal values within Chinese culture [1]. Nevertheless, Chinese feminists from nongovernmental organisations or academia have used new media to enact their subjectivity and support grassroots feminist movements by establishing a new form of body politics to break the taboos about women's bodies [2]. However, few studies have explored how Chinese feminists make full use of the unique functions of these platforms under the constraints of state surveillance and online censorship. What role do these social media platforms play in promoting feminism? How do women effectively express their voices in this highly regulated online environment, and how do they circumvent state restrictions to raise awareness of gender-based issues? Based on these questions, this paper aims to reveal how Chinese feminist activists use social media to alter the conventional approach to feminism promotion, increase public awareness of feminist activities, and promote gender equality and women's rights.

The study examines two significant online activities in China: the #MeToo movement and speaking out for Korean women against the deepfake crisis. Both are considered influential digital feminist movements in recent years that have attracted significant attention from the public and the mass media despite the patriarchal and repressive political environment in the country. The study reviews the development of Chinese feminism since the Mao era and analyses the current situation of Chinese feminism promoted by social media platforms, which differs from the past.

2. Development of Chinese Feminism since the Revolutionary Era

2.1. The Traditional Pattern of “Top-down” Feminism in Mao, Post-Mao, and Modern Eras

Research on Chinese women has examined the evolution of feminism in China and highlights the key milestones and difficulties encountered in advancing gender equality.

The development of Chinese feminism has been bumpy since the Revolutionary era when the central government upheld patriarchal values in its governance. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, the patriarchal frameworks underpinned by Confucianism and Feudalism continued to influence the country’s approach to women’s rights and social status, creating complex obstacles for feminist movements [1]. In Mao’s socialist era, slogans like “Women hold up half the sky” were accompanied by posters portraying masculine women lifting heavy boxes, significantly erasing female subjectivity [2]. The state-led feminism, or “top-down” feminism, has been criticized for overemphasizing the class struggle and overlooking gender differences [3].

Since the later reform period in the 1980s, under market-oriented social and cultural conditions, China’s economic liberation and globalization have deepened, leading to a shift in gender politics. Simultaneously, as women’s participation in the workplace increased, discrimination against women was reinforced by the mistaken belief that gender equality was no longer a significant issue [3]. Against this backlash, feminists in the 1980s and ‘90s thrived on establishing women-focused nongovernmental organisations and networks to advocate for women’s rights and challenge the perpetrated inequalities [4]. The World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 marked a new wave of feminism. Women’s rights took center stage, which resulted in the foundation of women-centred organisations [5]. However, feminist organisations have faced a backlash from the government and are, to some extent, portrayed as a threat to the country’s stability [5]. Given this ideological constraint of gender inequality, modern feminist activists in China have struggled to fight for systemic reforms and defend gender issues to the broader public.

2.2. The Rising of Digital Feminist Activism in Chinese Social Media since 2010

As digital technology advances, activists and netizens have more chances to advocate for social, cultural, and legislative reforms. As essential resources for social movements, digital media plays a critical role in shaping public awareness and setting policy discussion agendas [6]. For instance, waves of grassroots protests child abuse have resulted in mass attention on Chinese social media since May 2013.

Since 2010, the so-called “fourth-wave feminism” has gradually emerged, using advanced digital technologies to defend women’s rights, promote gender equality and change the unequal social power structures [7]. In contrast to traditional feminism, which emphasizes personal politics, digital feminism is defined as feminist activism and protest made possible by digital media in the form of networked collective actions towards transformations of unequal power systems.

However, its evolution and dissemination also made it more difficult for the Chinese government to regulate and manipulate the discourse, resulting in more creative and innovative ways they respond to circumvent such censorship by using techniques like hashtags and coded language [8]. Most of the “mass incidents” that occur annually in mainland China are silenced mainly, marginalized, or criminalized by the party-state [9], including the feminist movements. Since 2014, as the central government intensified media control, feminist issues have been forbidden from public discussion on Chinese social media. Due to China’s state-controlled socio-political context, early feminist activism sought to mobilise resources within the establishment, which limited their ability to address real public concerns. Since Xi assumed leadership of the Communist Party, the state’s censorship over social activism has significantly tightened [10], which also impacted feminism. Feminist voices are silenced, while feminist activists are often regarded as agents of toxic Western ideologies that the government perceives as detrimental to social stability and potentially threatening to the existing political order.

In addition to the oppression from the state, strict censorship on Chinese social media also suffocates the spread of feminism. Topics and discussions deemed sensitive or politically incorrect are often “harmonized”—a euphemism for censorship in the Chinese context—on platforms like Weibo. At the same time, elated accounts are blocked due to violations of online community rules.

Despite the silencing from both the state and online censorship, the new era of feminist activism witnesses several significant online movements, with digital platforms being crucial spaces for feminist activities to voice their concerns. New Chinese media channels, particularly Weibo, have become a pivotal arena for the feminist movement in recent years. Given multiple layers of state control and censorship in both physical and virtual spaces, grassroots feminist activists addressing the issues of sexual abuse are increasingly depending on online campaigns as well as other creative means to protect women’s rights in China. Online feminist movements have demonstrated that digital activism can foster feminist solidarity and raise awareness and social change.

However, the relationship between feminist movements and Chinese digital media platforms is less well-studied. As has been pointed out, in Western countries like Germany and the United States, current discussions on online feminist activities mainly centre on white, middle-class, heterosexual women’s experiences while excluding marginalized groups like LGBTQ and women of colour [11]. As for China, the state government seeks to maintain strict control to uphold one-party rule within the framework of the country’s socialist system [12]. In contrast to Western media platforms, Chinese social media operates within this socio-political context, which shapes its distinctive characteristics that facilitate the dissemination of online discourses. This unique media landscape makes China’s online feminist movements ideal cases for studying digital feminist activism in non-Western contexts.

3. Features of Digital Feminist Activism

3.1. The Nature of Cyberspace as the Most Accessible Arena for Public Engagement

Cyberspace, mainly through platforms like Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and Weibo in China’s domestic context, is the most easily accessible platform for public participation. These platforms enable feminists to share their voices through various means, and the most common ones are posting articles and short videos. By 2023, Weibo had amassed over 500 million users, establishing itself as a central hub for online conversations and community-building. This broad reach, aligned with the platform’s interactive features, allows feminist activists to amplify their discourses in previously impossible ways in their offline lives. As China’s most widely used multimedia microblogging platform, Weibo possesses several core features like Twitter, including hashtags, instant reposting, and @username mentions, which allow large-scale public discussions. Most of the content on Weibo is organised by hashtags, making it easier for users to search for content, engage in conversations, and form communities around specific topics. In addition, socially established hashtags may benefit bottom-up activities and extend the campaign’s impact on digital feminist activism. By allowing activists to organise content under a unified label, hashtags make revisiting and reviving discussions easier, ensuring that crucial messages continue circulating even after the initial campaign subsides [5].

As suggested, social networking sites like Weibo transform public space by shaping transnational political movements [13]. This socio-technical transformation highlights how these digital platforms are not only communication tools but also power-dynamic spaces that influence the practices of political activism. As the most accessible arena for public engagement, cyberspace allows grass-roots feminists to mobilise more women to participate through the Internet [2]. In this context, cyberspace not only creates a platform for real-time interaction but also provides a fertile ground for social movements, offering feminists new ways to challenge the status quo and mobilise others on a massive scale.

3.2. Feminists Being Able to Build Their Communities

Online communities are a prevalent aspect of modern Internet culture globally. With their easy access and use, many women view the Internet as a space where they can resist the gender oppression

they face in their daily offline lives [14]. This demonstrates ways digital technology may promote learning environments and feminist awareness in the efforts to fight against oppression [15].

The Internet allows individuals with shared beliefs to connect remotely. Netizens coming together with friends and engaging on social media platforms highlights the social media networks' interactive features, attracting users who share certain social perceptions, relationships, and behaviours [9]. The Internet allows netizens to engage in an emotionally interactive process, including absorbing protest information, building social connections for collective action, initiating more robust reactions to negative government actions, etc. This interactive system accelerates and diversifies social reactions to protest in a unified force. In the case of digital feminism, this is exemplified using hashtags, discussion groups, and debates in the comment section of influential accounts, such as the feminist account *Feminist Voices* on Chinese Weibo [16].

In this sense, the nature of online spaces enables users, especially minority groups, including women who suffer from repression, to view it as a space where they can not only survive but even challenge sex and gender norms [17]. It can be a way to solidify social identities like gender and sexuality [18]. In this specific context, where women perceive themselves as the vulnerable or potential victims of gender-based violence, connectivity and solidarity can be seen as shared duty founded on the group's sense of intimacy and care [19]. Reading other women's experiences of sexual abuse, injustice, and prejudice across time and space has become a significant aspect of digital feminist action, expressing a lived and networked impact. This connectivity has been interpreted as "digital sisterhood" [20], which refers to the shared emotions of intimacy and dependency among feminist supports. This affective connection is one core feature of digital spaces, as it may not exist in physical spaces.

The Internet allows women, feminist groups, and women's organisations to unite, express their voices, circulate feminist ideas, and raise awareness about gender and sexism. In this regard, the Internet fosters a sense of collective agency among victims.

4. Analysis of Two Online Feminist Activities

4.1. Voicing for the #MeToo Movement

Social media provided vital opportunities that enabled the #MeToo movement in China to grow and thrive as one of the most influential digital feminist movements in recent years despite the patriarchal and repressive political environment in the country. Though the #MeToo movement has been severely restrained by Internet censorship and the state government, a large part of its related discussions about sexual harassment cases in universities attracted considerable public attention towards the sexual violence and gender discrimination faced by Chinese women nowadays. The popularization of the topic integrated knowledge of sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement to reduce tolerance of abusive behaviours and increase victim support.

In January 2018, Luo Xixi accused Beihang University professor Chen Xiaowu of sexually harassing her and other graduate students when she was a PhD candidate in 2007. The post immediately went viral on Chinese social media, marking the start of the #MeToo movement in mainland China. By December 2018, Luo's article had been reposted more than 15,000 times, and around 4,000 comments had been received on Weibo [8]. Beforehand, Luo contacted several former students who also suffered from Chen's sexual assault, collected pieces of evidence, and reported Chen publicly. Following an investigation on January 11, 2018, Beihang University officially responded by dismissing Chen and revoking all his administrative and academic positions, and his honorary title of "Changjiang Scholar" was withdrawn by the Ministry of Education.

Since Luo and other students' posts, #MeToo hashtags have continued to provoke heated discussions about sexual violence against women on Chinese social media. According to China Digital Times, in 2018, the debate with the original #MeToo hashtag totalled over 4.5 million views on Weibo before it was censored. With tagged posts, more victims began to share details of their stories about being sexually harassed and the lasting trauma left on their bodies and feelings. By using

#MeToo hashtags to call out high-profile perpetrators and show solidarity with survivors and activists, these women resist and challenge the patriarchal system. In addition to hashtags, #MeToo supporters created a Weibo supergroup named “MeToo”, where women are encouraged to share their experiences of sexual assault and pre-warn others of the potential dangers.

In this regard, in the high-profile #MeToo case, accusers initiated digital feminism. They increasingly turned to online platforms to expose their predators and demand justice that China’s current legal or administrative systems fail to provide. This form of digital exposure is critical in drawing attention to issues related to sexual violence and misconduct, bringing about justice that victims may struggle to achieve through traditional channels.

Despite the initial triumph of the Chinese #MeToo movement, it faced significant challenges due to the government’s strict control over domestic media. China’s Sensitive issues must overcome censorship and secure approval for public discussions on related policies [10]. In this regard, the central government’s strict censorship and surveillance circumvent the development of digital feminist activism, and the #MeToo movement is no exception.

When searching hashtags like #MeToo, #RiceBunny, and #RiceBunnyinChina on Weibo, users will notice, “According to relevant laws, regulations, and policies, the content of this topic has not been displayed.” This message indicates China’s strict internet censorship policies, particularly regarding the so-called “sensitive” social and political issues. Weibo accounts posting open blogs about the #MeToo movement were also shut down due to violations of the regulations on Internet information and management services of public accounts. For young feminists seeking media coverage, “political correctness” becomes a primary concern. They must ensure their narratives align with state-approved discourse to gain visibility, or their voices will be muted or banned. In 2021, state officials jailed freelance journalist Huang Xueqin, a prominent figure in the Chinese #MeToo movement who spoke for victims of sexual harassment and promoted women’s rights in her reports, on the charge of “inciting to subvert state authority” [8]. Moreover, because Weibo has enforced a real-name registration rule since 2017, most women choose to remain anonymous when exposing predators due to pressure and fear. Though the #MeToo movement did make significant strides in bringing issues of sexual harassment to the forefront in China and promoting legal justice, it failed to challenge the intertwined inequalities of patriarchy from a structural level under the resilience of China’s digital authoritarianism.

4.2. Protest against the Korean Deepfake Crisis

Compared with that of China, South Korea has a more dominant misogynistic culture, where the authorities often overlook women’s voices, and sexual violence against women is more prevalent. A string of deepfake crimes that began in August 2024 has shocked South Korean society, leaving many women frightened and nervous. Deepfake, or artificial intelligence technology, was used in several cases to produce and disseminate fake explicit photographs and videos in which the faces of victims were substituted with those of celebrities or other people without their consent. Numerous women and girls were forced to quickly delete recordings and images from their Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and other social media accounts.

As the epidemic of online sex crimes spread, thousands of young Korean women have staged protests demanding more decisive actions against deepfakes. Earlier in August, Korean women sent posts on other international social media platforms like Twitter to express their concerns and fear. For instance, @f_c_1050 tweeted: “Almost every school in Korea has a secret Telegram chatroom for boys, where they use AI to photoshop schoolgirls’ faces into porn. However, the South Korean police remain indifferent to sexual crimes against women, and efforts from the authorities are far from enough, so we are trying to make this known overseas.”

With despair and disappointment, numerous young Korean women, often high school and university students, turned to Chinese social media platforms to seek help for the rampant use of deepfake technology in disseminating explicit content. They express their intense suffering and frustrations on Weibo. @nosunae_520 posted a microblog on Weibo saying: “It is currently

impossible to predict how many women have fallen victim to deepfake technology. During the Nth Room incident in Korea, very few perpetrators were arrested or punished, and the offenders list was never made public.” Another victim, @yeon0829, also wrote on Weibo:

“...the (Korean) government seems reluctant to address the deepfake issue, and there is little news coverage about the incidents. Walking down the streets, I constantly need to look around, and I no longer trust even the men I know. Yet the government and schools only teach victims to be cautious when uploading photos. Korean men often mock vulnerable women, using degrading language about female genitals. The perpetrators of the Nth Room case weren’t properly punished, so similar incidents keep happening. Korean women are fighting hard, but the government simply disregards the issue. Our society needs urgent attention.”

On August 30, 2024, these two posts went trending on Weibo, gaining immediate attention from netizens. By October 16, the hashtag #SouthKoreanWomenThankChineseNetizens had amassed 160 million views and sparked 69,000 discussions, while #SouthKoreanWomenAngrilyDenounceLackOfNation received 90.28 million views and 48,000 discussions. Under these hashtags, @Tu Yuan, a famous we-media blogger, posted, “I can’t imagine how desperate they must be to seek help on foreign platforms. This isn’t just a crisis for Korean women—it concerns all women.” Such online activity also attracted attention from mainstream media. On August 31, the official account of The Paper shared a tagged post sharing the transcript of an interview with one of the Korean victims; she also posted a tagged blog to share a brief transcript of an interview, detailing how she used Chinese platforms to express her concerns and warn Chinese students and tourists in Korea to stay cautious. In the comment sections of both posts, numerous netizens, primarily women, also voiced their concern and support for the victims. For instance, @Visionsvisions noted that women are a collective, and if the Korean deepfake issue is not taken seriously, it is hard to predict who might be the next victim.

Despite the supporting discourses, some comments pose malicious doubt about the original motives of the bloggers. These misogynistic and sexist opinions are seldom blocked by the platforms, which tend to regulate content in alignment with government ideological control [16]. It is worth mentioning that most of these gender-biased views were rebutted by users who supported Korean victims, reinforcing the sense of solidarity among women. Though coming from different countries, many of them face similar dilemmas, including sexual violence, misogyny, and inadequate protection from authority, which reflects the transnational connectivity shared by women within online communities.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper first provides a primary exploration of the development of feminism in China’s domestic context, which is deemed bumpy under the state’s socialist operating system and censorship on public discourses.

Then, it introduces digital feminist activism and the unique functional dimensions of social media platforms. As the most accessible arena for the public, feminists can establish online communities in which they share a sense of connectivity and compassion. Activities like the #MeToo movement and the protest againsts the Korean deepfake crisis are examples of significant digital feminist events that expose the public to feminist discussions of sexual violence and rape culture. Internet technologies can be a powerful tool for disseminating feminist discourses and opinions, gathering public support, transcending international boundaries, promoting gender justice, and increasing women’s media visibility.

The paper explores how feminism in China’s domestic context has evolved since the early twentieth century and how its new digital form developed in the 2010s. It can also be used as a case study to study the relationship between digital feminism and China’s social and political environment.

Although the paper concludes that social media platforms provide women with new spaces to express their voices, some limitations remain.

Since the study employs qualitative content analysis, it mainly gathers information from existing papers and recorded discourses rather than engaging directly with the events' active participants or agencies. Besides, the scope of analysis is somewhat limited due to the impact of online censorship. Many posts, comments, and reports related to the movement and protest had been deleted when the study was conducted, reducing the available sample size. This is just a tentative case study, and the small sample size may limit the generalization of the study's findings. There is more space for ongoing discussions around digital feminist activism in China. Further studies could explore the evolving digital landscape across multiple media platforms and the political context in China for feminist activism. In addition, future studies could gather data from a more diverse range of personal experiences affected by platform censorship to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital feminist activism.

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