

An Auto-ethnographic Observation: Hashtag Activism in Chinese Post-Feminist Age

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This paper provides an auto-ethnographic observation of hashtag feminist activism on Weibo, setting in a context of post-feminism age in China. Two subjects, the Hot Search List and its Public Discussion Forum, were chosen to examine the complexity of the current situation of this hashtag activism. An auto-ethnographic methodology was used to interrogate the status quo of Chinese online feminist movement, revealing gender-centric discussions reinforcing stereotypes under the guise of equality. Misogynistic narratives, algorithmic constraints, censorship, and official opposition pose significant barriers to feminist discourse. Nonetheless, the study identifies a potential for hashtag activism within Weibo's discourse, offering a space for resistance. By acknowledging these challenges, this paper seeks to empower Chinese feminists to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for their rights.

Keywords: Chinese feminist movement, hashtag activism, gender discourse

Introduction

Weibo is a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter, which offers a source of daily domestic news and a place to engage in public discussion. Weibo users can discuss politics and social issues relatively subversively, thus could potentially enable open and critical discussions that are not viable within traditional media frameworks in authoritarian nations (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015).

Thereby, Weibo gives opportunity to the development of online feminist movement in China. Since 2018, the year *#MeToo* movement took off on Chinese social media, Chinese feminist movement started engaged in this transnational hashtag activism (Huang & Sun, 2021). Because there cannot exist a stable feminist online community in China, the hashtag acts as a fluid and temporary online community, and gathers peers for speaking out and gaining voice and attention for gender issues. It can be an open discursive space for people to share their stories and views in expose, criticise, and inform the public about sexism, and present counter-discourses to popular misogyny (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). Therefore, Weibo, with the hashtag as its key function, has become a significant social media platform for this wave of Chinese feminist movement.

In recent years, however, the situation of Chinese feminist hashtag activism is not as optimistic as previously thought but increasingly become disappointed and even depressed. Chinese society is moving towards a post-feminist era as conservative thinking about gender has increased and the public opinion environment has deteriorated. Here, the post-feminism era is a superficial prosperity age and many people believe that the feminist

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movement is unnecessary because gender equality has advanced much in previous decades (Kristin, 2014). The media currently carries contradictory gender discourses. On the one hand, feminist ideas appear to be a form of common knowledge everywhere, and on the other hand, feminism has never been more aggressively opposed (Gill & Scharff, 2013). For Chinese hashtag feminism, while gender issues has gained increasing visibility, it has faced censorship, harassment from the Chinese government and conservative social forces, and being oppressed by tangible (e.g. censorship policy) and intangible (e.g. algorithm manipulation, traditional idea discipline) forces. In this context, the *#Metoo* movement is suppressed, and hashtag feminism is unlikely to explicitly happen on Chinese social media.

However, this does not mean that there is no hope. From the author's observation, as both a feminist and a long-standing user of Weibo, it appears that instead of setting explicit feminist hashtag, feminist activists can promote hashtag activism by engaging with other gender issues hashtag from a feminist perspective. Therefore, this paper basing on an auto-ethnography perspective, wants to figure out what happened in nowadays gender issues hashtag, and what kind of compression in there that influence online feminist movement in China.

The Auto-ethnography of Two Subjects

This auto-ethnography focuses on two subjects: the Hot Search List and its Public Discussion Forum. A Weibo Hot Search List can provide a comprehensive representation of everyday social hotspots in China (like the trending on Twitter). Based on a one-month following observation experience, of these hot search lists, gender issues are heavily weighted and generate a lot of discussion. The number of reads and discussions ranges from a few hundred thousand to a few million. However, there are two problems arise. First, the high frequency keywords of these gender issues are heterosexual marriage or relationships, sex, consumption and motherhood. This reflects a characteristic of localised feminism in China—related to the country's economic development goals. These topics reinforce stereotypes of women while flying under the banner of supporting gender equality, and the pointers behind these topics are all geared towards increasing fertility and marriage rates. The list thus creates a framework that frames the gender topic that you are aware of every day. Public opinions and ideas of feminism are solely governed by the government. This constitutes cultural hegemony and social media becomes a tool for maintaining hegemonic domination (Gramsci, 1992). Thus completing the discipline of women. Additionally, there is a discursive strategy for negative news in gender topics, which can be seen as a form of symbolic annihilation (Gaye, 1978; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The female gender is often used as the subject in negative news headlines, with the male perpetrator invisible (e.g. female university student was murdered; wife domestically was abused) and deliberately emphasised in reports (e.g. female driver involved in a traffic accident; woman corrupt official arrested).

Public opinion under the gender issues presents a clear picture of misogyny. Female users encounter the same hostility, threat and abuse that they do offline when they exercise their rights and use their voices (Ging & Siapera, 2019). Feminists are called out for inciting confrontation between men and women, and even suffered by slut-shaming. Positive words to describe women like fairy and beauty are stigmatised. The stigmatisation of radical feminism as a new tactic appears these years. Radical feminism is described as a striking form of the feminist movement, or a place where no sane person would choose to go (Mackay, 2015). This is in contrast to the traditional Chinese thought of Confucianism, especially the Doctrine of the Mean, which is used by

anti-feminists as an ideological standpoint to turn more people minds rooted in traditional Chinese culture against feminist thoughts. Radical feminism also becomes an umbrella term making it possible for views that do not fall within the framework of traditional gender concepts to be included in this stigmatised discursive field. This both destroys the atmosphere of the gender issue and deprives radical feminism of its own critical power in Chinese context.

Furthermore, the discussion of gender issues is subject to the triple oppression of algorithm, censorship and the resistance from official discourse, which is particularly evident in the author's role as a participant in the public discourse. Firstly, the algorithm monitors sensitive terms, like content with feminist word will be restricted. Secondly, the algorithm segments negative messages, neutral messages and positive messages. Messages with negative connotations are also restricted by the censorship policy. The official attitude towards feminism also has changed from not supporting but not opposing at the beginning of the *#Metoo* movement to opposing and suppressing it. For example, the author's Weibo account was banned for a week last year for reposting a tweet about Zhu Jun's sexual assault case¹ to support *#Metoo*. Also, the *Central Committee of the Communist Youth League* official Weibo account constructed hashtag *#Radical/Extreme Feminism Has Become a Tumor* last year to slam feminists on the Chinese internet and call for a boycott².

Conclusion

In conclusion, hashtag activism in China is faced with various obstacles. This auto-ethnographic study on Weibo's Hot Search List and Discussion Forum highlights gender-centric debates, often reinforcing stereotypes under the guise of gender equality promotion, perpetuating cultural hegemony. News framing neglects male accountability, exacerbating biases. Female users face online hostility akin to offline experiences, impeding feminist discourse. Algorithmic curbs, censorship, and evolving official opposition further restrict gender discussions on Weibo, presenting formidable obstacles to feminist expression. But this does not mean there is no hope. The margin can be a space for resistance, and a site of radical possibility (Hook, 2015). Observations suggest the potential for hashtag activism within Weibo's existing discourse, allowing public engagement with gender issues from a feminist perspective. This paper aims to basing on the understanding of these obstacles, help feminists in China can use their position to challenge and transform the dominant narratives and power structures that perpetuate their marginalisation, by rejecting mainstream cultural values, creating alternative ways of knowing and being, and advocating for their own rights and interests.

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¹ BBC News: *#MeToo*: China court dismisses landmark sex harassment case. Published 15 September, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-58567142>

² South China Morning Post: China Communist Youth League lashes out at 'extreme feminists' after being criticised for lack of representation. Published 15 April, 2022. Retrieved from https://sc.mp/yla7?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=share_widget&utm_campaign=3174419

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