

The Evolution of Feminism and Social Media Activism in China

In the digital age, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for advocacy and social change, offering unprecedented opportunities for global movements to share their messages and mobilize support (Kim, 2023). Among these movements, modern feminism has utilized digital spaces to challenge gender norms, advocate for women's rights, and address issues of systemic injustice. However, the relationship between social media and feminism is not uniform across all contexts: in China, for example, the intersection of social media and feminist activism is influenced by strict censorship measures, which pose challenges to the freedom of expression. This unique context gives rise to an interesting question: In the face of such restrictions, how did feminism evolve in China, and how do feminist movements in the country navigate and contest the boundaries of state-imposed restrictions?

The Historical Context

The evolution of feminism in China can be traced back to the early 20th century, a time marked by a significant rise in social reform and intellectual awakenig. Sun Yat-sen, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China, openly acknowledged the crucial role of women in the revolutionary cause (Yu-Ning, 1988, p. 58). One of his groundbreaking steps was the establishment of schools for girls, a radical departure from the traditional Confucian education system that primarily served men (Yifei, 2016). However, after this initial period of reform and optimism, China faced internal divisions, warlordism, and later, the rise of the Nationalist Government (Kuomintang), which had varying priorities and views on social reforms (Lai, 2022). Advocacy for women's participation in politics was rejected, replaced in the press by an emphasis on women's roles as understanding wives and loving mothers (Lai, 2022).

Yet, despite the challenges, intellectual and social movements in China have continued to advocate for women's rights up to contemporary times. The pace of advancement of women's rights experienced a gradual progression following the Communist revolution in 1949 and persisted through the transformative periods of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s (Gao, 2017). One of the first major reforms by the newly established People's Republic of China was the enactment of the New Marriage Law in 1950 (Diamant, 2000, p. 171). This legislative initiative was revolutionary in that it abolished arranged and forced marriages, granted women the right to divorce, and promoted monogamy (Diamant, 2000, p. 172). The law was a direct challenge to the patriarchal and feudal family structures, aiming to elevate women's status in society.

The Contemporary Feminist Movement

As China stepped into the digital age, the landscape of feminist advocacy transformed dramatically. Platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin dominate the digital sphere in China (Zhang & Negahban, 2018, pp. 34-36), and some of these are extensively used for online activism: Weibo, often referred to as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, has been pivotal in raising awareness on gender issues (Zhang & Nagahban, 2018, p. 36). Its structure allows for rapid dissemination of information, enabling activists to raise awareness about women's rights and share news stories that might not receive attention in state-controlled media (Gu and Ye, 2022, pp. 430-431). Notable examples include campaigns against sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and the sharing of personal stories that highlight systemic inequalities (Gu & Ye, 2022, p. 432). The hashtag functionality of Weibo has been particularly useful, allowing for the creation of visible and accessible discussions around specific topics for its 605 million monthly active users (Dixon, 2024).

Nonetheless, the movement is not unopposed. The ruling Chinese Communist Party perceives feminism as a potential challenge to social harmony and traditional values that form the foundation of its rule (Li & Lee, 2022); the Party prioritizes maintaining its grip on power and views any form of organized civil society as a threat to its centralized authority. Thus, the aforementioned feminist developments in cyberspace led the Chinese government to employ rigorous methods of suppression. The "Great Firewall", which refers to China's comprehensive internet censorship system, serves as a great example (Zhang, 2006, p. 272). This system employs a range of technologies and legislative actions designed to control the flow of information that can be accessed, published, or shared online (Zhang, 2006, p. 273). Moreover, cyberbullying, sponsored by the government or carried out by nationalist trolls and anti-feminists, is another tactic used to silence activists (Li & Lee, 2022). Victims of such suppression have faced online harassment, threats, and even "human-flesh search" attacks, in which private information like addresses and ID details is exposed (deLisle, 2016, p. 2). In one reported case, Li Yuan, a former editor of the Wall Street Journal Chinese language website, experienced severe online harassment for being "opinionated" and single (Li & Lee, 2022). This incident is a stark example of how cyberbullying is employed to intimidate and silence feminist voices in China.

In response to such severe restrictions imposed by the Chinese government's censorship, feminist activists have adopted a variety of innovative strategies to continue their advocacy on social media: they often use code words or symbols to discuss sensitive topics. A notable instance was the #MeToo movement, which focuses on raising awareness about sexual harassment and abuse, particularly in the workplace (Amnesty International, 2023). Chinese women participating in the movement strategically used hashtags like #MeToo to share personal

stories of sexual harassment and assault, creating a powerful wave of solidarity and visibility (Amnesty International, 2023). A particularly inventive strategy to evade censorship on Chinese social media platforms was the transformation of the #MeToo movement into #RiceBunny (#米兔), which phonetically mimics "Me Too" in Mandarin (Meg Jing Zeng, 2018). This approach fostered a global conversation, bringing to light the prevalence of gender-based violence and pressuring institutions to implement changes.

Conclusions

Overall, the resilience of feminist activists in China stands as a beacon of hope and defiance in an era marked by digital surveillance. Navigating the intricacies of censorship in China, women have ingeniously leveraged social media to continue their advocacy, illustrating admirable adaptability in the face of restrictive measures. Despite facing government crackdowns and cyberbullying, activists have managed to keep the conversation on gender equality alive. This enduring struggle underscores the transformative power of feminist advocacy in the digital age, highlighting its crucial role in pushing the boundaries of freedom and equality.

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