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Feminist Uses of Social Media in China:

Self-Presentation, Strategies, and Obstacles

Master thesis

Author: Zijin Wang

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Supervisor: PhDr. Lenka Vochocová, Ph.D

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Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.

3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

In Prague on Jan 4, 2022   Zijin Wang

Abstract: In recent years, feminism has got a more comprehensive range of supporters in China. But feminists on Chinese social media are usually stereotyped as radical, hysterical, and irrational. However, through semi-structured interviews with 15 feminists who actively use social media, their confusion of identity self-presentation and the compromise in the face of many online scenarios are presented. This study reveals the main obstacles feminists encounter when using social media to pursuit women's rights and the flexible and individualized strategies they adopted in the Chinese context. Finally, this thesis argues that feminism has a limited transformative effect on social media. The interplay between feminists' situations and their uses of social media is gradually deepening feminists' dilemmas in the public sphere. This study aims to describe the online experiences and difficulties of young Chinese feminists, thus contributing to a more critical understanding of hashtag feminism in China.

Keywords: Chinese feminism; social media; hashtag feminism; online strategy; semi-structured interviews; feminist identity

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Contents

1. Introduction

1.1Research Background

In contemporary democracies, content that Banet-Weiser (2018) calls popular feminism has been presented in the mass media, especially the Internet. This argument also holds in present-day China (Wu and Dong, 2019). Feminist new media's coverage of " Women's Moral Code Courses[1] (女德班, nvdeban) " has provoked heated debates about the identity of modern women, and its emphasis on the superiority of men over women has been fiercely criticized on social media (Wang, 2020); the misogyny content of the Spring Festival Gala on CCTV was widely criticized by female netizens on Weibo (Denyer and Xu, 2015); several waves of the #MeToo# movement, which exposed the experiences of sexual harrasment on Weibo, swept through social media and spread to institutional media and mainstream media, making opposition to sexism and violence a strong voice on Weibo that could not be ignored (Zeng, 2019); the neglect and stigmatization of female workers in the mainstream media during the Covid-19 sparked the #ToSeeFemaleWorkers# hashtag campaign (Yang, 2019).

The wide usage of social media had spurred the emergence of a form of hashtag feminism, in an era when feminism and neoliberalism were deeply intertwined, producing a popular individualized discourse and politics (Gill, 2007). By means of hashtag feminism, feminists can set their own agenda in a pattern by politicizing their personal issues (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Indeed, hashtag on social media has been widely

used by the Chinese people to fight for limited democracy and express their protest to the party-state (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015). And with the joining of several well-known international feminist hashtag campaigns and a series of widespread Internet incidents that happened in China, hashtag feminism in China has gained increasing public influence with increasing participants (Yang, 2021).

But does this mean that Chinese feminists' online participation practices have been successful? Of course, in a sense, many researchers approved that the Chinese feminist practices in digital feminism or hashtag feminism have brought a lot of feminist issues to the public sphere, setting the feminist agenda and showing collective protest on social media (Yang, 2019; Wallis, 2015; Tan, 2017). But when we look through hashtag feminism in a broader historical context, has the gender essentialism and patriarchal social orders in China that cause women's oppression and conceal this inequality been shaken?

Specifically, the instability of digital feminism deserves attention (Baer, 2016). The related studies discussed the potential pitfalls of Chinese online feminist activism. Through a case study of Chinese feminist groups' online strategies on social media, Han (2018) claims that in current China, the digital feminist movement has not brought about social change but growing online misogyny and backlash against feminism. Similarly, Yin and Sun (2020) pointed out the limitation of hashtag feminism: there is no way for gender structural inequality to be changed via technology itself.

Why are feminists not entirely successful in changing the gender system, and what are the significant obstacles in their social media practices? A number of relevant previous studies, including those mentioned above, have been done both theoretically and empirically, and can be used here to illustrate the complexity of hashtag feminism.

Actually, social media is not a feminists' utopia, which we should notice. Feminist researchers have found that the technology itself is a patriarchal technology that follows masculine rules (Han, 2018). For example, van Zoonen (1992) discussed as early as the 1990s that the designed core of the Internet is a kind of masculine technology, and the processes by which men still exert influence over women online. Even that the Internet has been continuously produced and used in patriarchal societies is based on the fact that men dominated the technological development of the Internet (Wajcman, 2000; van Zoonen, 1992, 2002). Even now, the fact is that women are far less likely to work in major social media companies, such as Google, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, especially in core technology departments (Khazan, 2015). According to Herring (2002), men often control communicative practices. These researches show that misogyny and the binary gender system are embedded in the core of social media.

Feminism is popular on the Internet partly because the issue of feminism has a considerable number of views and is already "an economy of visibility" (Clark-parsons, 2021). Take Weibo as an illustration, and there is a wide variety of female users on

Weibo who are discontented with the status quo of the Chinese gender system. Therefore, they desire to receive "feminist-oriented" cultural products on social media, "which has been gradually realized by cultural industry practitioners and social media content producers since 2015" (Li, 2020). They deliberately create topics and content of interest to feminists, attracting them and the general public to participate and debate, and gaining massive numbers of hits for profit.

Overall, most of the research on the relationship between feminism and social media has taken place in western countries. In the limited researches in Chinese context, the previous researches always viewed and criticized the situation of hashtag feminism by a case study of feminist groups at the collective level, by examining their online experiences and strategies (Wang and Driscoll, 2019; Han, 2018; Li and Li, 2017). However, from the perspective of the study subjects, there are still few scholars who study young women's hashtag feminism from a perspective based on individuals' experiences.

What is the situation of each individual who participates in hashtag feminism? In this challenging and complex context, what specific obstacles do feminists encounter, and what strategies do they use when using hashtag to pursue women's rights, especially in China? To answer thesis questions and fill the research gap, in this study, I selected ordinary feminist individuals to be interviewed in the qualitative study, to explore the common experiences of feminists.

1.2 Research Objectives

In this thesis, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews was employed to obtain interview data on the obstacles, and strategies of feminist individualized online participation, for studying the opportunities and challenges of hashtag feminism in China. Furthermore, the interview data are used to discuss whether feminists' online strategies can influence the online situation of feminists and whether they can contribute to changes in the constructed gender system. This research focuses more on ordinary feminists' blogging and online debates from a perspective of "media as practice" (Couldry, 2010).

Through this research, we can further reflect on the potential of China's hashtag feminism, summarize the dilemmas of hashtag feminism in China's social media development, and discuss feasible ways to improve it. At the present time, gender equality in China is far from being achieve in many ways (Wang, 2020). We hope that this research outcome should help promote the development of feminism in reality in China.

The aims of this study are to explore the specific strategies of feminists on the social media platforms in Chinese context at the individual level. In order to solve the research gap mentioned above, three questions about feminists' engagement with hashtag

feminism are considered: (1) What obstacles do the feminists encounter when using Weibo to participate hashtag feminism? (2) What strategies do they use to respond to the obstacles? And (3) What are their own motivations?

1.3 Research Structure

This section will introduce the whole structure and main content of this thesis. The first chapter is the introduction to the topic of this research and why it is interesting. This study was conducted to examine the development of and barriers to hashtag feminism in China, examine the individualized strategies used by feminists, and address the research gap of the lack of individualized qualitative research in previous related studies.

The second chapter is dedicated to the literature review. The content presents the historical background of feminism in China, including the "state-feminism" in Maoist era and post-socialist China. The research of Chinese and international feminists' online strategies especially when they are in face of online sexual harassment will also be presented.

The third chapter is dedicated to the methodology used in the research. This research chose feminist Weibo users as the sample. Finally, 15 active feminist Weibo users provided interview data for this qualitative research. The entire interview revolved around their social media practices when participating in hashtag feminism.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the results of the research. By processing the interview data through the combination of open and axial coding, four themes emerged in feminists' use of social media: addressing obstacles to the three areas of (1) identity presentation, (2) political censorship, and (3) online sexual harassment, as well as (4) alliance-building, online efforts and support-seeking as purposes. For each obstacle, the participants offer their own flexible coping strategies. Some overlapping and representative strategies are documented in this chapter for later discussion.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to discussion. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the study results. A critical perspective is provided to look at the two-way interaction between feminists' strategies and the online environment, including censorship, stigmatization and political opportunities.

The final chapter presents the conclusion, designed to summarize the main points of the research and point out the known limitations of the research. This thesis argues that feminists made their voices heard through their flexible strategies, but a majority of feminists' online strategies are disciplined by the patriarchal environment on the web, and therefore cannot determine the most desirable effect of a real change to the gender system. Besides, as backlash intensifies, their situation on the web becomes more difficult. Regarding this, some reflections on the development of hashtag feminism are

offered here, in order to promote the development of feminism in China and change the gender inequality.

2. Literature Review

This chapter was divided into two sections. The first section provides the historical overview of the development of Chinese feminism before the Internet era. In the second section, the strategies of feminist networked media practices both in international and Chinese context is introduced.

2.1 The History of Chinese Feminism

2.1.1 State Feminism of China

As is known to all, women have always been the most oppressed group in feudal China. The principle of gender equality has figured in the Constitution immediately since 1950 after founding the People's Republic of China. Many researchers have researched on the condition of Chinese feminism of this specific period.

Precisely, in the Maoist era (1949-1976), the measures that aim to improve women's social status and promote gender equality ideology are often referred to as a form of "state feminism" (Zheng, 2005; Dongchao, 2005; Angeloff and Lieber, 2012). The state-feminism is a top-down paradigm of Chinese feminism led by the state, political parties and elites when feminist ideology came from the West from the 20th century

(Yang, 2021). One of the most important manifestations of this was the policy that guaranteed women's smooth access to the productive and labor spheres, which led to that the status of women in the socio-economic structure has thus been elevated and gender equality promoted (Evans, 2008; Yang, 2021). It mirrors Mao's famous quote, "women hold up half the world", which was used as an important statement to promote gender equality.

However, the criticism of this period's state feminism has also pervaded the scholarship. Obviously, women were not the agents of the social change, although they can (Howell, 2001). This state feminism was mobilized through the organizational channels of All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) [2] with the inspire from the authorities (Barlow, 1994). On this basis, the ACWF has been accused of being the embodiment of the "male protector" as a representative of socialist patriarchy rather than women (Zheng, 2005). Although the awareness of gender equality in public institutions has been largely raised, this equality was based on standards set by men and based on male behavioural standards, and femininity was not visible (women are encouraged to keep their hair short and wear clothes similar to men's) usually because it was seen as something that was not progressive (Liu, 1994; Hooper, 1998; Evans, 2008). In this context, female self-awareness was still kept low and gender hierarchy inequality was maintained (Yang, 1999). To sum up, the communist regime succeeded in transforming gender politics into class politics through state feminism, further strengthening women's

political dependence on the state, but the principle of equality between men and women was far from being realized (Lin, 1997; Qi, 1999).

2.1.2 Feminism in Post-Socialist China

When China came to the post-socialist era after embracing the open-market economy in the 1980s, feminism has suffered a severe backlash. With intense competition in the labor market, the government and gender essentialist intellectuals reemphasized femininity and domestic responsibilities, calling for women to "return to" the home to maintain social stability. Women's equal access to productive spaces was withdrawn, thus turning to heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood for satisfaction (Rofel, 1999; Song and Hird, 2013). Regarding this, feminists gradually lost faith in state institutions and turned to NGOs or expressed their protest. Therefore, the researcher's eyes were placed on the feminist NGOs and civil activists (Milwertz and Bu, 2009).

In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women and a parallel NGO conference were held together in China. In response to this conference, China released its first action program for the promotion and protection of women's rights, which covers the political, economic, and cultural spheres (Angeloff and Lieber, 2012). Since then, the Chinese government has found that the NGO forum did not lead to international censure of China's human rights issues, but rather served as a platform to oppose Western hegemony. Thus, the development of feminism and NGOs was a peacemaking between the state and the international community (Zheng, 1996). Since then, Chinese NGOs

have mainly used the framework of the United Nations to gradually expand their space of activity. But these NGOs have a strong and close relationship with the state, as they usually depend on the state for funding and political support. Therefore, they are found to avoid politicization or to avoid confronting the will of the state (Ip and Lam, 2013).

Due to the challenging political environment in China, the strategy of feminist activists has been to promote a Chinese constitution on the protection of women's and children's rights, avoiding politically sensitive issues (Zheng, 2015). Even this, feminist collective action may still be stopped by the party-state. Over the past two decades, feminist activists have tried to protest to challenge the pervasive sexism in society. One of the most international events was the detention of the Feminist Five in China, five feminists who were arrested by police for spreading awareness and protesting sexual harassment on public transportation. The incident drew the attention of feminists in China and around the world, and after their mobilization, the Feminist Five were eventually released on bail. This incident was the first time China had detained feminists, and the "attempt to criminalize legitimate feminist activism (Zheng, 2015)" inevitably put pressure on feminist activists.

2.2 Networked Feminist Media Practices

2.2.1 Repertoire of Digital Feminist Strategies

The "media practice" referred to here is the media sociological approach proposed by Couldry (2012), giving researchers a theoretical framework that focuses on the "specific regularities in our media-related actions and the contexts and resources that make certain types of media actions possible or impossible regularities. Whether media-related actions are possible or impossible, likely or unlikely " (p.33) to examine how people use media consciously and for what contexts. In fact, from the beginning of the popularity of digital media, many researchers have looked at the patterns of feminists' media practices on social media, including their online identity, hashtag activism, political engagement, and other attempts. Regarding the relevance of research on feminist media practices, here I would like to borrow Clark-Parsons' (2017) concept that there is a broad repertoire of feminist digital media strategies, a collection of strategies specific to all feminist media practices in each country that can coexist and link together.

Eckert and Steiner (2016) highly acknowledge the usefulness of social media for feminists in undertaking feminist movements, fighting gender inequality policies, anti-feminist and misogynist ideologies, and other uses. On social media, the use of hashtag activism has become a powerful and popular strategy for feminists to protest gender-

related issues (Clark, 2016; Jim, 2017; Brantner, Lobinger and Stehling, 2020). Hashtag allows users who do not follow each other to form a community to communicate and share information. This helps to improve the efficiency of information dissemination by bringing users together under the specific topic. Women's voices are brought together into a "collective voice" through hashtag, which emphasizes common needs and strengthens the narrator's authority, creating a useful space for victims to reveal themselves. (Dixon, 2014). Some researchers have confirmed this view by analyzing empirical evidence through case study of hashtag activism. For example, Hamzehei (2014) presents a qualitative case study of Iranian women's experiences of the hashtag protest: #MyStealthyFreedom, which was launched by Iranian women on Facebook to protest against the mandatory wearing of the veil. The empirical results suggest that some of the characteristics of Facebook as a social media, such as anonymity and minimal censorship, helped the campaign.

In addition to verifying the effectiveness of hashtag feminism as a strategy used by feminists, other researchers have focused their research on feminists' strategies which are more individualist. "the personal is political" is one of the most important strategies, building possibilities for collective action through personalized online statements (Rogan and Budgeon, 2018). Clark (2016) refers to hashtag activism as "discursive activism." Through a case study of the popular hashtag protest #WhyIStayed on Twitter, she claims that hashtag feminism on social media starts from individual online

expression by victims of domestic violence to large-scale collective action, has the power to cause offline sociopolitical change. Similarly, in Asia, Jim (2017) argues that in the process of the spread of the #IAmAFeminist in Korea, sharing personal stories and motivations through social media in the context of Korean misogyny can reduce the barriers to identifying as a feminist and linking offline protests to counter the mainstream media discourse of misogyny.

In recent two decades, much has been written in feminist media scholarship about the phenomenon that feminists have received endless cyber violence on social media in the practices of digital feminism. (Shaw, 2014; Powell and Henry, 2015; Jane, 2016b, 2017; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018). Many of these scholars have used generalized terms to refer to the phenomenon in order to study it at the structural level, such as "e-bile" (Jane, 2014), "online sexual harassment" (Megarry, 2014), or "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (Henry and Powell, 2015). More specifically, this cyber violence is highly gendered, often directed at women, feminism, or feminists themselves disproportionately (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler and Barab, 2002). And it usually takes many forms, such as "online trolling, hate speech, rape and death threats, and image-based sexual abuse" (p.1) (Andreasen, 2020). Besides, the empirical research shows the cyber violence mostly points to women's appearance or is evaluated just based on their sexual appeal or sexual value to men (Vochocová, 2018; Megarry, 2020).

Feminists have adopted corresponding strategies to cope with this tough problem in a complicated networked public sphere which has been noticed by feminist scholars. A strategy called "digilante (digital vigilante)" has been adopted by some feminists, it is a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to directly "name or shame" the opponents, because of lacking adequate responses to online sexual harassment from institutions (Jane, 2016a). For example, finding an antagonist is an employee of one company, then reporting the employee's online sexual harassment of women directly to the antagonist's company and request a response.

In addition, researchers have found that feminists turn to humorous strategies in an effort to feminist hashtag meme-protest in the male-controlled technological spaces (Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018). #DistractinglySexy# is a highly visual and popular Twitter hashtag used by female scientists to post humorous selfies and self-statements that satirize gendered stereotypes of women in science, which attracted a lot of attention from public and other media, and has a function of building an online community. Interestingly, the scholars also comparatively studied the differences between this online event's British and German media coverage. The fact is that the British media concentrated more on the discussion of sexism, while the German media was more concerned with the humorous nature of the protest rather than the political implications. (Brantner, Lobinger and Stehling, 2020).

2.2.2 Chinese Feminist Digital Strategies

The networked practices using social media by Chinese citizens to confront and satirize authoritarianism s has been a common topic in scholarship, but studies that feminist using the similar strategy are relatively rare (Yang, 2020). In the limited surveys of feminist online media practices in the Chinese context, the strategy of how feminists action in a tough political environment is undoubtedly a popular topic. Indeed, considering the censorship and surveillance on social media, topics in the cultural sphere are more visible than political topics, sexism, misogyny, sexual violence in everyday life has become the main content of online protest (Wu and Dong, 2019). Feminists also noticed the online popularity of feminist topics, taking advantage of the high economic visibility of feminist topics, using the great number of clicks as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the Weibo platform to coordinate a partnership for maximum exposure under government surveillance (Feng, 2020). Tan (2017) is one of the few scholars who has studied the online physical representations of Chinese feminists from a visual effects perspective. The use of bodily performances in the digital practices of young feminist activists, such as images of protest, portraits, performance art, are among their elaborate and powerful strategies of against domestic violence. As Tan said, it is the newborn feminist aesthetics under the strict surveillance of the web.

Feminists in China have similar experiences to the other regions of the world in that they suffer from severe online backlash and misogyny (Han, 2018). Another hot research field is the stigmatization of feminism in China and the corresponding tactics of feminists. Through the digital ethnography method, Feng (2020) found that a feminist group's Weibo account @CatchUpGenderEquality (@CatchUp 性别平权) in the face of online misogyny takes a strategy of embracing stigma and reclaiming their own definition, such as defining the stigmatized "Chinese country feminism" (zhonghuatianyuan nüquanzhuyi[3]) as Chinese, local, and grounded feminism. Wang and Driscoll (2019) refer to the labour of feminists in their study, that young feminist volunteers join feminist groups for developing activist organizations as a job and spreading feminist information. They need patience and caution to deal with cyber violence on social media and must maintain an awareness of focus in order to avoid being distracted by the annoying debates on the internet.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, this research was designed to recruit active Weibo users who self-identified as feminists to participate in a qualitative research format, with semi-structured interviews to obtain feminists' experiences of using Weibo to engage in hashtag feminism. An interview outline was developed based on relevant

literature. The agenda of the interviews was based on the outline but mainly following the direction of the participants for exploring their discourse in depth.

The participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire including age, gender, occupation, education, and location prior to the interview. Interview data were used to present the practices of individual feminists, and the common obstacles, individualized strategies, in their online participation with particular context.

3.2 Why I chose Weibo

As the popular international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been blocked in China, Weibo is one of the most important social media absolutely, having a huge number of audiences with over 500 million daily active users. The public express their opinion on Weibo and requirements on the government to solve some issues. Weibo can be seen as a "counter-hegemonic practice in everyday life ”(Yang, 2013).

Weibo is also widely used by feminists as a tool of communication. The design of Weibo is based on the possibility to form a community around each hashtag, and users can post in the community after following the hashtag they are interested in. As of today, there are more than 15,000 followers and 4,115 posts in the virtual community formed by the hashtag: #feminism (#女权主义). Most of the domestic feminist hashtag movements are all conducted on Weibo, like #MeToo#. In particular, Weibo, the social

platform with political function, the has become the "main battlefield" for feminists and anti-feminists at the social platform level.

But Weibo stands out from the crowd of domestic social applications and has naturally become a platform for online activism not just because of the big number of users. The most used social networking application in China is Wechat, which only allow users to socialize between friends and is much more private, while Weibo users can easily see everyone's posts and comments at any time (You, 2013). These unique features of Weibo make it to be a powerful tool for online engagement (Wang and Shi, 2018).

3.3 Participants

This study used a criteria-based purposive sampling method to recruit, screen, and include Weibo users who self-identified as feminists in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The targeted participants were recruited by a combination of the authors posting information about this research in a virtual community of #Feminism(# 女权主义) to recruit volunteers and snowball sampling, which resulted in 17 users responsed. However, fifteen female users ultimately participated in the study, and 2 users gave up participating due to inconvenient timing and other reasons. When the 12th and 13th participants were interviewed, the content of the research became saturated.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

Code Number	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Location
A	20	Female	Na	Na	Mainland China
B	27	Female	Master	Company Employee	Mainland China
C	25	Female	Master	Apprentice Lawyer	Mainland China
D	15	Female	High School	Student	Mainland China
E	26	Female	High School	Company Employee	Mainland China
F	21	Female	Undergraduate	Student	Mainland China
G	Na	Female	Na	Na	Mainland China
H	25	Female	Under Postgraduate	Student	Edinburgh(UK)
I	24	Female	Under Postgraduate	Student	Mainland China
J	23	Female	Under Postgraduate	Student	Hong Kong
K	Na	Female	Bachelor	Company Employee	Mainland China
L	32	Female	Bachelor	Teacher	Mainland China
M	19	Female	Undergraduate	Student	Mainland China
N	20	Female	Undergraduate	Student	Mainland China
O	26	Female	High School	Shopkeeper	Mainland China

Some of the demographic data of these 15 participates was inaccessible because they wanted to protect their privacy. All participants are women. The participants' age distribution ranged from 15 to 32 years old, with an average age of 23 years. Seven of the participants were students, with the lowest education being high school and the highest education being postgraduate. Most of the participants were living in mainland China, and two of them were studying abroad.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

In this research, I used semi-structured interviews and a demographic questionnaire to collect data. The semi-structured interview outline was developed based on the relevant literature. Participants are required to fill out a demographic questionnaire before the interview begins.

Semi-structured interviews allow for coverage of important topics while allowing for flexibility (Mertens, 1997). Two interviews were completed to test the interviews, and based on feedback and suggestions from the participants on the questions, the author modified them accordingly. The timeline of interviews was from July 2021 to October 2021, which ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, and the researcher in charge of the interviews was born and raised in China. Besides, all the interviews are conducted online due to the Covid-19.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

The combination of open and axial coding was used to code the textual materials and analyze the intrinsic connections of viewpoints (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Using the software Nvivo, the open coding was used to decompose the interview material into categories, and axial coding was used to discover the connections between these categories. All verbatim transcripts are in Chinese and were encoded in Chinese.

3.6 Research Ethics

I did not interact with all participants in this study except for interviews. The privacy of the whole interview process was guaranteed to all participants. To ensure that no other factors interfere with the participants' performance, all participants were not recorded with their real Weibo IDs and real names; the whole process is based on respecting the anonymity of participants and keeping their comments confidential. I also explained the study design to the participants, and asked permission for each setting in the study before starting my research.

I also paid attention to the experience and emotions of participants throughout the study. I avoided any questions that participants may have difficulty speaking about or do not want to mention according to their willing. I also respect feminism, the participants and their gender, race, occupation, and education level.

4. Results

Through interviews on feminists' obstacles and strategies of online participation using personal social media accounts, four themes emerged: (a) self-presentation regarding feminist identity, (b) mixed strategies in response to online censorship and political pressure, (c) self-protection strategies in face of cyber violence, (d) motivations of online participation.

4.1 The Self-presentation of Feminist Identity

The feminists are working at creating discursive spaces in mainstream commercial pop culture to publicly represent feminism in online sphere (Keller, 2018). As for each individual feminist blogger, how do they understand their own identity, and how do they deal with the representations of their feminist identity on social media?

Since my study consisted of participants who self-identified as feminists, feminist identity was evidently an important part in their perceptions. And they claim there is a direct link between feminist identity and their presentation on Weibo, with feminist identity somehow influencing their self-presentation on Weibo directly.

> Becoming a feminist gives me a different perspective on topics that are discussed in public sphere. I can see that it's not a problem of women, it's a problem of the society, so I can't help but make a voice for women at that moment (Interview with O, 10 October 2021.)[4]

The author noticed that a small percentage of participants embrace the feminist label visually: they got a sentence like "I'm a feminist" directly on their profile along with their sexual orientation, and one have a profile which is "Gender is the worst work of man". This shows that some of the participants dare to acknowledge and label their feminist identity in an online environment where feminism is widely stigmatized, even they realized the likely bad reactions from others:

> It's an easy thing to think of yourself as a feminist, but telling everyone that I'm a feminist requires more consideration, or, courage" (Interview with C, 13 July 2021.)

> When you decide to go public with your feminist identity, you have to be prepared for all kinds of reactions (Interview with H, 20 August 2021.)

These feminists all agree that present feminist identity on social media needs to be considered, but it is a very personal process, they don't think someone are fake feminist if she (or he) doesn't show her (or his) identity in public. They don't seem to care as much about other feminists presenting their feminist identity or not:

> Girls don't have to deny their identity as a feminist because they can't do some feminist acts. It's their own business how they want to practice in their life, and I, as an individual woman like them, don't and can't interfere. (Interview with H, 20 August 2021.)

They claim that they sometimes get "good" feelings from that feminist identity. This feeling comes from a sense of pride for oneself and the female community, when they realize every step forward for women but rarely from outside reactions. This good feeling also encourages the presentation of their identity on social media.

Interestingly in the interview scenario, one detail was of preference to the participants: The translation of Feminism is " 女权主义 (nüquanzhuyi)" in Chinese, it is a compound word for both "women 女)" and " rights 权)". When discussing their identity, they preferred to get rid of the "rights(权)" of "女权主义", replace "女权主义 (nüquanzhuyi)" with "女性主义 (nüxingzhuyi)[5]," which is another translation of feminism in Chinese. They are all well-educated young girls who are familiar with Chinese history, and the word "women's rights" conjures up images of fierce political movements that usually end in bitter defeat, and they said they don't want to politicize the feminist agenda too much.

Some participants decided not to present themselves as feminists on their personal pages, mainly because they were unsure of their friends' attitudes toward feminists, in addition to avoiding online trolling. Not presenting themselves as feminists is just a formality; it does not mean that these participants will not engage in women's issues. They will also show solidarity with gender affirmative action online, they just won't explicitly label themselves as feminists on their personal pages.

There are a few experienced participants that chose to set misleading profiles. For example, they set their gender to male, and their avatar and homepage appear masculine. They chose to hide their identity to the audience to protect themselves in an online environment:

> To make men think I'm a man too, so at least they will discuss firstly when talking about an issue, instead of starting with a motherly curse word. (Interview with D, 16 July 2021.)

These feminist participants appeared to waver in labeling themselves as feminists, for reasons largely caused by the online environment. Being a feminist is not a feeling of shame for them, instead, it is a good feeling. The main reason for not labeling themselves was to save themselves the trouble of dealing with online harassment, or mind others' opinions towards feminists. As Yang (2021) argues, the stigmatization of feminists and Internet ad hominem prevents people from identifying themselves as feminists when they are fighting for women's rights.

Unfortunately, according to the participants, there is no challenge strategy that has proven effective in relation to the public stereotype of feminists. They have tried strategies such as promoting feminist views to the public, praising feminist role models, and even drawing distinctions with "radical feminists" to break the public's tinted glasses on feminists, only to receive minimal feedback.

Similarly, Feng (2020) claims that feminists found nothing useful to challenge the stigmatization of feminist identity, so they adopt a humor strategy of receiving it and embracing it, seeing the gender stereotype as a meme. But in my opinion, in this battle of identity, the anti-feminists obviously dominated the discourse.

4.2 Textual Presentation When They Meet Censorship

A diversity of statements including the government criticism but "without calling for collective action" can be tolerated on social media in China (Tan, 2017). Feminists are increasingly self-consciously using media practices to set a media feminist agenda, gain public attention. But there is an elusive scale here that needs to be kept carefully in order to avoid crossing the red line, which also exemplifies the general discourse obstacles to political participation among Chinese public. Essentialist gender discourses, which obviously devalue women or promote femininity that conforms to masculine standards, are ubiquitous in Chinese popular culture (Jiang, 2014). When the public tactically confront state power as well as unfair gender power relations, the online protest culture may challenge "the ideological and technological dominance" of the state (Wallis, 2015). Specifically, one of the participants shared her experience with auto censorship on Weibo once:

Once I just posted my dissatisfaction with the authorities, and then my account was automatically cancelled on the same day and I couldn't appeal. You know, it

was the ID that just disappeared, including all the content I had posted on this account that was not visible anymore. Now this account I use is a new one that I applied for. I'm tired of this kind of thing and resisting, so I'll try to avoid the sensitive areas of censorship because I don't want to lose this current account again. (Interview with B, 9 July 2021.)

Almost all participants are familiar about online censorship and remain accepting and uncontested. Many of the participants mentioned their need to use media intelligently, to constantly monitor their language to ensure that it is not censored, and to be highly self-aware of the possible consequences. Six participants mentioned a common language strategy of using abbreviations for sensitive words to avoid censorship. As an example of this:

I replace 'China' with 'ZG' (中国，Zhong Guo), 'Government' with 'ZF' (政府，zheng fu), and so on. These abbreviations are quite easy for native speakers to understand smoothly. (Interview with B, 9 July 2021.)

Similarly, they can also use memes to express their dissatisfaction with the current state of patriarchal culture in society, converting sarcastic text into humorous pictures, which is a "softer" textual expression strategy for them. Using memes is "a kind of popular means of satirical collective resistance in Chinese digital sphere" (Yang, 2021). It is a common feminist strategy also used by other countries' feminists (Brantner, Lobinger

and Stehling, 2020). Some of the sexualized nature of the meme is thought to have arisen in sociopolitical environments where it is safer to make social issue satires than to directly express political views in China (Jackson, 2013).

> Once I posted a satire on the newly launched three-child policy [6] using a meme I made, the blog post received over 300 retweets. Instead, people would think I am very humorous and it is not easily monitored by censorship techniques. (Interview with M, 29 September 2021.)

现在的女孩子如果不努力
是会被抓去结婚的
不仅得学做饭还得做家务
还要生三胎

Figure 1. The Weibo post released by a participant, 2021.

"Nowadays, if girls do not work hard, it will be compulsory for them to get married: not only must learn to cook and do housework, but also to give birth to three children."

Due to political pressure, they claim that they sometimes deliberately do not cover too many political topics, and they usually only criticize the phenomenon, and do not put forward institutional needs and suggestions. This can be confirmed in the previous

practice of feminists. Most hashtag activism has a complete sentence structure and a clear call to action, including "petition, demand, appeal, and protest" (Yang, 2016). But according to the recent feminist hashtags on Weibo, such as #GirlsHelpGirls#, #ThisIsMyPeriodBlood#, and #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#, which originated in China, have been censored along the way, only expressing a fragmented satire of the government, yet without a clear collective goal.

4.3 Self-protection When They Meet Cyber-violence

In addition to censorship being an obvious form of repression for feminists, other implied linguistic and cultural barriers can limit feminists' online actions (Wang & Driscoll, 2019).

The results of van Zoonen's (2002) study show a general stereotypical assumption about femininity and masculinity which has been widely received: in terms of language style, polite social language styles are often feminine, while "argumentative, assertive and aggressive speech patterns" are masculine. The epitome of patriarchal hierarchy of power is also present in the language of the online sphere. Feminism is often mistaken for a movement that wants to take away male's power or claims that women are better than men (Keller, 2015). There are certainly feminist supporters on Chinese social media, there are also many who express their discontent or accusations against feminism, such as the familiar "feminist hates men" online vitriol. The prevalence of anti-feminist insults on social media platforms has become a byproduct of widespread

feminism (Han, 2018). The participants express that they often receive the hostility of people sticking to patriarchal values to feminism, or simply to women themselves.

Sometimes, participants mentioned their concerns about privacy issues. They needed to hide their private self, including their names, relationships, occupations, encounters, portraits, and other information in real life. Weibo and main social media platforms in China are not real-name applications, and real identities cannot be tracked by regular users if deliberately concealed. The bottom line for protecting yourself online is not to be physically harmed in reality. Some of my participants reported that they consciously disclose as little personal information as possible on Weibo to minimize the harm of cyber-violence.

> Although the original purpose of Weibo was to share my life, I now use it entirely as a tool to get information and post comments in the community. I don't post information or photos of myself on it, so that being an "invisible person" will reduce the harm I get in reality, when I am abused. (Interview with E, 20 July 2021.)

> When I became a feminist, my Weibo was not a personal thing, it was a platform I used to fight for gender affirmation. (Interview with G, 19 August 2021.)

Another case is that, similar to the cases given by previous literature (Vochocová, 2018; Megarry, 2020), the most major harm of women who actively protest against a patriarchal society on social media comes from the verbal attacks on their appearance. Such insults are not directed at any of the feminist topics discussed, but are directed at women's appearance and body image for no reason. My participants mentioned that they often witnessed this phenomenon occurring and tended to avoid it, even though many times it did not happen to themselves. Although most of the time they face online vitriol with a strategy of dealing with it head-on, the women in the survey appear more sensitive when faced with attacks on their appearance. A few participants even emptied their photo albums, after being subjected to an ad hominem attack.

Appearance attacks seem like a natural weapon to use against women. We've been tough but we still get hurt because of it. (Interview with G, 19 August 2021.)

When the participants were consulted about their coping strategies in most cases when faced with anti-feminist trolls, the solution they gave was to use similar words to "fight back" and they had to use the same vulgar words. Actually, there seemed to be an established notion in their minds, that arguing with these anti-feminist trolls against feminist issues seriously was fruitless. Some never even try to discuss the topic seriously with them, and the victim mentality makes them adopt a strategy to fight back.

What's more, this behavior is collective, which means many feminists tried this strategy, and when a woman is caught in a debate war with anti-feminist trolls, other feminists see that, they too will get involved and form an alliance to help them, evolving into a multi-person name-calling war. The participants used a Chinese proverb, "以其人之道还治其人之身 (deal with a man as he deals with you)", to describe this strategy:

> I didn't think about whether it was ethical or not, because it was the only thing that worked. It's just a matter of dealing with a man as he deals with you, by making them feel what misogyny is like in their own skin. (Interview with J, 2 September 2021.)

4.4 Motivation: Build Alliance, Online Efforts and Seek for Support

One of the motivations of feminists' self-presentation on social media is to find other feminists and make connections to form the alliance to get support, expand feminism and expand the group influence. Research on feminist online activism has shown that digital mediation can enable female victims to make new connections that were previously unavailable, and that working together can be an important strategy in their resistance to awareness and behaviors of violations against women (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose, 2016). The openness of the internet also facilitates the accommodation of different viewpoints and thus makes it easier to form alliances and construct collective identities.

Sisterhood is the basis for maintaining political solidarity between women, summarized from the Western feminist practices, especially when women are divided by sexism, racism, class privilege, etc., it can evoke the inner feelings of women's "common oppression" (Hooks, 1986). However, my study found that the current "sisterhood" in the Chinese digital sphere is a kind of an affective bond rather than a political unity. The mutual assistance and solidarity of women based on "empathy". It is by empathizing with other women when they hear or witness other women's experiences, then positioning themselves and other women as "victims", that a sense of them as an "alliance" emerged.

In my participants' experiences, relationships with other Chinese feminists are like "comrades in arms" which has the awareness of helping others, the alliance that is overwhelmingly female, as if it were the "maiden army" of feminism:

> All the sisters in this hashtag are like an alliance naturally, and typically you don't have to fear isolation when you speak here. (Interview with J, 2 September 2021.)

> I can feel another woman 's need and pain when she tells about her oppressed experiences, and I feel like their experiences are related to me. (Interview with M, 29 September 2021.)

Others say they prefer to speak out on feminist issues in feminist online communities, encourage more gender awareness, and celebrate female representations to counter gender stereotypes than to speak out on public hot topics. This is because there are relatively fewer cultural and discourse obstacles in a homogenous environment.

The feminist bloggers who participated in my study were definitely young girls, who showed a lot of interest in the international feminist movement and gained a lot of information about it, which they then shared on Chinese social media. Specifically, they are involved in the widely spread #Me Too movement, and some have even started to understand and reflect on online collective action from this movement. They follow the latest developments in lawsuit on sexual assault in the workplace of Japanese journalist Shiori It, and encourage women in China to protect their rights. They have been following the movements of international feminist activists and have been involved in international fights against sexism, sexual harassment, sexual violence and other issues, and have spoken out for foreign women who have been treated unequally.

Like the feminists in Western democracies, the participants create and use hashtags to express dissenting opinions on gender issues to pressure the government into changing its mind. By following the corresponding hashtag, relevant information is immediately available, which makes it easy for people to gain attention to the relevant issues and participate in the discussion. Likewise, through instantaneous information updates, dispersed individuals are present to build a common perception close to the "truth", and

to render dissatisfaction with the mass media's intentional obscuring of the "truth". This dissatisfaction can spread instantly like a plague throughout the network through social media, coordinating the concerted actions of many individuals (Howard,2011). However, in my research sample, there is no participants used social media as a communication tool of feminism offline protest. They mainly raise awareness about gender equality in their own networks involved in gender-specific issues, and rarely participate in or organize offline protests, the main reason is fear of being arrested by the police for endangering the society.

Surprisingly, they will seek the help of mainstream media and try to build connections with them. When it comes to social support, participants highlight a desire for pro-feminist mass media and more gender-conscious reporting. They share the information in the feminist hashtag community about which media they can pitch to when women's rights are being hurt and how to connect with the editors of mainstream media. Although some questioned whether it was useful or not in the comments, the blog received many responses. They have various critical opinions about the mainstream media, but they hope to get a harmonious relationship with the mainstream media.

"This is despite the fact that mainstream media are often criticized by feminists. For example, publishing only portraits of female victims in case reports and blurring the faces of male perpetrators; or, using words like female in headlines to

attract attention; but we still have expectations for them." (Interview with E, 20 July 2021.)

In China, feminists with the help of social media to set agendas and to promote and influence public attention, but their role is limited unless they are with the help of mainstream media (Chase 2012; Jiang 2014). In China, mainstream media can be generally divided into "state-owned official media and market-oriented commercial media" (still regulated by the state). For young feminist activists who use social media, "a core political resource" comes from building connections with market-oriented media (Li and Li, 2017). But what feminists worry about is that the market-oriented media primarily cover the news of domestic feminists just for news value, for attention, not to support an issue. It is additionally hazy for them to what degree the editors and journalists associated with All-China Women's Federations (ACWF) or other government organizations are willing to cover feminist issues.

5. Discussion

"When I realized that I was an independent individual, when I started to fight against gender discrimination, when I started to express the ideas of gender equality, I was honored to be a feminist. Why are some people afraid of feminism? Feminism is just fighting for women to have the same rights as men. I can't understand the people who are covering our mouth while saying we are fighting'

(打拳, DaQuan, the popular stigmatizing name of feminist activism), okay then who I 'fight' is you."

(Quote from a blog by a feminist who participated in this study.)

5.1 Unwelcome Network Identities

Feminist media scholar Banet-Weiser (2018) claims that what she calls popular feminism has increased significantly in popularity in the media in recent years. Like other Western countries, popular feminism also exists in China (Han, 2018). Feminism has been widely discussed on Weibo, with related issues frequently making the "most researched hashtags". It is spread across social media platform with a large number of users, and is therefore highly visible and accessible. In this context, with the prevalence of international feminist movements such as the #EverydaySexism project, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement, many feminist followers are brought. Feminist influencers have posted countless encouragements for women to pursuit self-confidence, autonomy, self-esteem, and rights, and the widespread discussion of gender inequality in the social media sphere. It appears that feminism is clearly becoming a hot topic of public discourse.

However, against the context of widespread feminism, my participants often felt helpless and stressed when using social media, seemingly "on the offensive" while employing various "retreat" strategies in their own online sphere. This is confusing, why do they need to adopt various protection and retreat strategies when most of them

are highly educated young girls who are widely exposed to contemporary discourses of girls' empowerment?

In addition to these young girls, influential feminists are in a similar situation. In October 2021, the Mercedes-Benz brand was attacked by a large number of male users online after posting a video advertisement on its official Weibo account with a feminist talk show comedian Li Yang. These opponents claimed that Mercedes-Benz, as a brand with more male consumers, should not have used a feminist endorser, Yang Li, once made a sarcastic joke aimed at men in a talk show. The influential debate made official Mercedes-Benz brand account eventually withdraw the endorsement. Over 100,000 people retweeted the hashtag #IamAWoman,ISupportYangLi# to show their support for Yang Li and to protest against the Mercedes-Benz brand. Surprisingly, the feminist had no relevant response to this event, all the feminists who spoke for her received nothing in the end.

Fincher (2018) claims that the dilemma of the Chinese feminist movement lies in the context of "patriarchal authoritarianism", a combination of a millennia-old patriarchal culture heavily influenced by Confucianism and authoritarian institutions. Considering the experiences of these feminists, I think we need to first explore some of the structural factors specific to China that the interviews revealed.

5.2 The Cat and Mouse Game: Lack of Political Opportunities

Firstly, feminists are constantly under digital surveillance in their pursuit of women's rights on social media. Endeshaw (2004) uses "the never-ending cat and mouse game" to describe the tensions between activists and authorities. Zeng (2019) claims that "the Communist Party's policy of building a harmonious society" hinders the feminist agenda setting online. However, for whatever reason, feminists are under enormous pressure from the government. The purpose of the censorship is to limit collective action, by means of "suppressing comments that represent, reinforce, or stimulate mobilization, regardless of the content of those comments" (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). For this reason, they have had to resort to alternative textual expressions to release the most out of their messages and to protect their accounts from being censored. This can be seen as a flexible presentation strategy by feminists towards the authorities, but in general it is a compromise.

The international feminist movement has given a huge boost to the feminist movement in China. For example, the #MeToo# movement has helped feminist activists with normal Chinese women to raise awareness of feminism and intensify the challenge of sexual harassment in China (Zeng, 2019). On the contrary, what about the impact of the feminist movement in China on the international scene? Perhaps it will spread less because of alternative language expressions? This alternative textual strategy is quite

popular in the Chinese Internet sphere, but it is not clear how much impact these "self-censored" texts have had on the interconnectedness of international feminists.

The digital media platforms that have emerged from the Internet are not only a useful tool for online protests, but also a facilitative communication channel for offline protests (Earl and Kimport, 2011; Rane and Salem 2012; Vasi and Suh, 2013). However, online protest is about as far as most participants can be engaged in this research, i.e. simply spreading feminist-related information online, commenting on relevant issues, satirizing government policies or offering criticism. They rarely extend from social media to offline protests. This is of course related to the government's intent, where censorship is intended to try to stop collective activities that are happening or may happen in the future (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013).

Virtual communities that express support for feminist issues are not the whole story of the movement either. While keyboard retweets are important, bringing about policy consequences also requires offline action and actual interpersonal efforts. For example, the volunteers who supported each of the #MeToo# clients, the mutual support networks of sexual assault survivors (such as Xianzi's network), the women's organizations (such as #MeToo#'s first successful sexual harassment case against Liu Meng), and the legislative advocates who led the Supreme Judicial Court to add sexual harassment to the trial docket are more important links. Without such a network of

interlocking actors, and without connected actions offline, mere retweets do not necessarily lead to change.

Online hashtags have been replaced by what should have been clear appeals and dissent by ambiguity, due to the experience of previous hashtags being heavily suppressed on the web (Yang, 2021). Despite the authority is promoting "gender equality" as a basic state policy, Chinese women are still at a disadvantage compared to men in the field of employment, marriage, political participation in real life. It proves that what Chinese women are experiencing is the structural political inequality. Lack of critique of the gender binary hierarchy as an institutional and ideological set, which makes feminists appear to be challenging hegemonic authoritarianism, but in reality, it is like a punch to the cotton that fails to fundamentally address the endless problems.

5.3 Who's Afraid of Feminism: The Discipline of Patriarchy

Beyond digital surveillance, feminists are also subject to severe stigma and online harassment. This is probably common in other Eastern and Western countries. The high exposure and dissemination of feminist hashtags inevitably brings backlash, in the form of harassment through the internet (Cole, 2015). Weibo as a commercial media platform, where likes, views, and advertising revenue are the main goals, a complex experience like sexual violence can easily be simplified and commercialized. And with hashtag feminism's emphasis on viral performance mechanisms rather than ongoing

organization, hashtag feminism is ill-equipped to address harassment in China, where misogyny is deeply rooted (Clark-Parsons, 2021).

My research shows that the heavy verbal attacks often directed at feminists themselves make them cautious about the identities they present through social media, or make their feminist identity invisible, even though they identify themselves as feminists definitely in their mind. Specifically, feminists present three presentation strategies: the first is to give up the right to socialize that their Weibo accounts originally possessed, not to do any self-presentation on their accounts, not to interact with real and virtual friends, and simply to use Weibo as a tool for their own defense of women's rights, as a way to protect their privacy. The second is to explicitly label oneself as a feminist, criticize the social construction of gender, and face any public reactions head-on. The third is to deliberately present a fake self, such as setting one's account gender as male, or constructing oneself as something else.

According to self-presentation theories, people tend to choose and change their identity based on what they think is best in a specific context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). In China, feminists are often seen as an unpopular and stigmatized woman, and the self-presentation of feminist identity in the public sphere has largely challenged "the core views of sexual morality, norms, and values in Confucian culture" (Han, 2018). The silence or masking of feminists here is more likely to have a consequence that they do not realize, namely that this behavior and attitude itself will end up in the system of

gender hegemony again. Women fear that they will be constructed as a "biting feminist" and thus again be victimized and exploited by the gender system. Isn't this what the dominant gender ideology and system desires?

The translation of Feminism in Chinese is " 女权主义(nüquanzhuyi)", a compound word for both "women(女)" and "rights（权）". Which has a literally meaning of "an ideology for promoting" rights of women (Wu and Dong, 2019). Both men and women have lingering fears of feminism due to their pursuit of rights. In reality, they both seem to be based on a misconception. What leads to this perception is the gender hegemony that feminists want to reflect on, criticize and overthrow. It creates a dichotomy by stigmatizing feminist ideas, movements and feminists, so that men subconsciously feel that they will be robbed of their rights and lose the gender dividends of vested interests.

It is in this complex background and stigmatized environment that many feminists hope to get rid of the " 权 (rights)" of " 女权主义 (feminism)", replace with " 女性主义". On the one hand, this may be a retreat strategy, but on the other hand, this behavior also subtly disciplined the main purpose and ambition of feminism. Which is to employ the most critical feminist theory to detect in the history of all the knowledge and common sense and a variety of traditional and daily habits constructed in history, and to criticize and destroy the gender hegemonic system constructed in politics, society and economic

and cultural fields through the feminist movement, so as to rebuild a more pluralistic and open gender system.

Jane (2016) found that the most common strategy for coping with misogyny was an individualized DIY approach on the web, but she also highlighted the need for organizing in the process of feminist activism on social media. However, my research shows that feminists' collective actions are weakly organized in online sphere. They are a loose coalition, and most of their strategies for dealing with misogyny come from their own practical experiences and those of other feminists around them. According to the participants' feedback, in such personalized online participation, self-protection is the first priority. When a series of stigmas and online harassment arrive, the feminists become angry and fight back; and when women become angry, the dominant essentialist gender ideology immediately regulates women's anger by using the historical stereotypical images of women as sensitive, irrational, and hysterical "crazy women". This is the "double trap" of patriarchy culture, which reduces the critical nature of their feminist theories and the potential for social change.

In a country with a history of a thousand years of collective female oppression, essentialist gender concept is deeply entrenched, the spread of feminism in China naturally has many opponents. The social problems the feminists exposed made the authorities uneasy about the goal of maintaining social stability. And Weibo, forced by censorship and political pressure, continues to suppress feminist issues and their

political demands, gradually promoting the formation of a state-sanctioned misogyny[7] (Han, 2018）. In the debates between feminists and anti-feminists, due to state-sanctioned misogyny, feminists have evolved into the "unjust" side and lose original advantages, worsening the online environment for debates.

6. Conclusion

As the feminist movement has come under intense scrutiny in China, comment and retweet sections on social media platforms like Weibo have provided the opportunity for women to make their own voices and actually spread (Mao, 2020). However, Weibo does not exist in a high visibility political environment according to the interviews, and strict censorship still exists. What's more, with the popularity of online feminism, misogyny and backlash against feminism has also become popular (Han, 2018). Gradually，social stigma, and state-sanctioned misogyny makes it more difficult for feminists to hold their ground. Their efforts contributed to the existence of popular feminism on the Internet because of the viral performance mechanism of hashtag feminism, but the gender structural system of male domination remains unshaken.

I look through the lens of feminists' personal media practices to see how feminists use media. For each individual feminist, there is often unpleasant treatment online. The participants' diverse and flexible personal strategies responded to the study's preconceived aim and objectives, and the online environment and the reactions of

others continued to shape and influence feminists' online strategies, as they are struggling to cope with online censorship and online harassment, and fight against social stigma in patriarchal authoritarian society. However, their strategies are often unconsciously disciplined by the patriarchal gender system and authoritarianism. Feminists are bound in a double trap constructed by the patriarchal authoritarianism structure from which it is difficult to escape, and end up both obscuring the problem of the deficiencies of the gender system and successfully deflecting the critique of patriarchy in the position of the oppressor in the gender system.

These obstacles and stigma are born in response to specific gender systems and political contexts, and are difficult to completely address using social media itself. For those people who are looking to bring about change, in order to break down these interconnected obstacles and oppressions, various mobilization strategies should be attempted within the hashtag feminist movement, and political opportunities should be strategically navigated, to promote greater participation and understanding.

Limitations

A questionnaire survey targeted at feminist users on Weibo conducted by Chinese researcher Li (2017), found that 75% of the participants were young girls whose age is from 18 to 30, and lived in more economically developed regions. Compared to the Weibo user data in the same period, they are more concentrated in college and early career stages, and more concentrated in economically developed regions. Gender digital

divide isolates the most marginalized underclass women in China from online feminist forums (Yang, 2021), such as poor and rural women, elderly women.

It can be seen from the demographic information of my study's participants that they are mostly well-educated and young. The sample was unable to present the experiences of the most socially oppressed women using social media in pursuit of women's rights. In the feminist media studies in the future, I hope to pay more attention to those women who are most oppressed and eager for gender equality.   These women suffer from the most severe gender inequality and yet have a harder time speaking up for their feminist rights. While smart phones and the Internet are becoming cheaper and more accessible to disadvantaged women, participation in relevant online feminist debates through the use of digital technologies is limited by their economic, educational and personal condition.

Notes

1. The courses teach women to observe the traditional standards of female behaviors required by Confucianism in the ancient China, which is typical patriarchy culture. Such as, women should obey their father before marriage and obey their husband after they are married.

2. The All-China Women Federation (ACWF) is the largest official organization representing and defending women's rights in China, established in 1949, with

executive bodies in all provinces and cities, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (http://www.women.org.cn/).

3. The term "Chinese country feminism" (中 华 田 园 女 权 主 义, zhonghuatianyuannüquanzhuyi) is a stigamatized name of "feminism". It comes from a term which often used to describe a mongrel cat or mongrel dog from poor rural area, it has an insulting implication when used here as a prefix (Wu and Dong, 2019).

4. All interview contents are translated from Chinese to English by the author.

5. "女权主义 (nüquanzhuyi)" and "女性主义 (nüxingzhuyi)" are both the common translations of "feminism" in China and Chinese scholarship. But literally, 'nüquanzhuyi' emphasizes the pursuit of women's rights, it indicates a social change or political movement; and 'nüxingzhuyi' emphasizes the relationship between this ideology and women (Han, 2018).

6. In order to control China's population size, the policy of family planning was introduced in 1982, after that each family was strictly controlled to have a maximum of one child. It was not until the early 21st century that the strong-arm tactics were relaxed to some extent. In August 2021, the three-child policy was passed, a couple is permitted to have three children. However, today's young people have long adapted to the life of a one-child and find the cost and effort of raising three children unaffordable (Liu, 2021).

7. The term "state-sanctioned misogyny" was proposed by Han (2018). She argues that 'women's rights' is one of the topics most likely to be censored and surveilled on internet, and that any content involving 'feminist struggles' is likely to be censored because Weibo is being pressured by the government to classify it as a sensitive topic that undermine social stability. A feminist NGO, the subject of her study, whose ability of survival has become more and more worse due to the constant threat of censorship. In these terms, she argues that misogyny is a practice which the state approved in China.

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Appendix1. Interview Outline

1) Let's talk about your using preferences about Weibo.

- Why do you use Weibo?

- What do you use Weibo for?

- What do you like about Weibo?

- What do you dislike about Weibo?

2) What obstacles did you encounter when you participated in hashtag feminism? Please describe it in detail.

3) What are your strategies for dealing with these obstacles?

- How are these strategies being used?

- Where did the inspiration for these strategies come from?

- Do these strategies work?

- Do other feminists you know use such strategies?

4) What kind of content do you think is most likely to receive negative feedback when poste?

- Have you ever experienced negative feedback when posting feminist content?

- What content you post in that context?

- Have problems on the Weibo caused problems in your real life?

- How do you deal with it at that moment?

5) How do you interact with other domestic/international feminists?

6) Let's talk about privacy issue and identity self-presentation.

- Are your tweets public or only to your friends? Why?
- Do you disclose your real personal information on Weibo? About which areas?
- Would you claim that you are a feminist on Weibo? In which form?
- Do you mind if your friends or acquaintances in real life know your Weibo account and feminist identity? Why?

7) Have you ever been censored on Weibo?

- What content you post in that context?
- Has that experience on the Weibo caused problems in your real life?
- How does it influence your practices on Weibo?

Appendix2. Demographic Questionnaire

1) Age:
2) Gender:
3) Occupation:
4) Education:
5) Location: