

Feminists without Feminism: Women's Online Movement in Contemporary China

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Critical Asian Humanities in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

With the widespread stigmatization of “women’s rights” in China, I observed that young women increasingly reject the identification of “feminists.” In comparison, some of them voice their opinions on social media advocate for “feminist” agenda, such as demands for equal employment opportunities and an end to sexual harassment. This thesis focuses on a cultural phenomenon, which I call “feminist without feminism.”

I argue that “feminism without feminists” is symptomatic of the failure of both state feminism and Western neoliberal feminism to address daily issues confronting Chinese women today. Social media allows them to challenge patriarchy on a micro-level, sometimes by strategically avoiding being targeted by censorship or vilified by misogynist netizens. Moreover, I believe this feminism-from-below constitutes a postmodernist/postsocialist rejection of any singular feminist metanarrative. With guerilla-like decentralized tactics, “feminism without feminists” is a creative and strategic form of online activism

Dedication

To the three strongest women in my life, my grandmother Yanhui, my mother Xiling, and my aunt Li.

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1. Introduction

In 2016, when I came to the U.S. for my bachelor's degree, I casually shared an article on my WeChat Moments by "Giant Rabbit," one of the so-called "Feminist Five." She criticized reports by Chinese mainstream media praising 'military girlfriends' in encouraging single women into marriage to become housewives of husbands who defend the nation. I recall my pithy comment: "in the era of Mulan, women already felt tired of staying home for male heroes!" This moment was likely my "coming-out" as a feminist. In 2018, after reading about the Wage for Housework Campaign inspired by Federici, I wrote an article for my friend's feminist WeChat official account, analyzing the hit J-Drama *The Full-Time Wife Escapist*. I argued the romance between the housekeeper and her employer inspired the audience to reflect on housework as exploitation in the name of love. Once it is recognized as employment, housework is established as a work choice one can refuse, instead of a gendered division of labor from which women cannot escape. Reading these posts, I realized that during my growth from a consumer to a producer of non-academic feminist writing, social media constitutes a digital archive for reflection and a platform for active participation.

As I grew into a feminist, more and more doubts and dismissals about feminism began to circulate on Chinese social media. Under several posts on gender-related issues, I started my year-long debate with online antifeminists. Some 'corrected' me that

gender equality has long been achieved; Others suggested that I have been corrupted by anti-Chinese westerners. My indignation gradually became a curiosity and inspired me to read more about gendertrolling.

1.1 Gendertrolling: Cyber Misogyny and Men's Space

Although it is a unique internet phenomenon, gendertrolling continues a long patriarchal tradition of suppressing or invalidating women's expression. It prevents gender issues from entering public discussion via social media. Specifically, in postsocialist China, the national brotherhood is threatened by increased inequality. Thus, gendertrolling represents an attempt to restore the patriarchal nation by forming an online community unified under hatred towards women's demand for equal rights and complaints regarding harassment. Moreover, gendertrolling disproves the cybertopian perspective expressed by Nicholas Negroponte in his 1995 book, *Being Digital*, which conflated technological changes with social changes. In hindsight, this idealism mirrors the failure of technological determinism.¹

¹ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10-12.

By definition, gendertrolling refers to online attacks targeting women simply because of their gender asides from their opinions.² We need to avoid merely categorizing gendertrolling as generic trolling, which risks understating the misogynist features of gendertrolling. As Phillips writes, generic trolls are motivated by their amusement.³ In contrast, gender trolls firmly believe they have a justified cause of protecting justice in gender issues or “men’s rights” and take pride in this cause.⁴

Attempting to contextualize gendertrolling historically and socially, Mantilla analyzes “Manosphere,” a type of website that serves as an online battlefield of the Men’s Right Movement. Men frame themselves as the victims and attribute difficulties in their lives to their advantage challenged by feminism.⁵ This monograph further ascribes gendertrolling to cultural defensive mechanisms nurtured by ubiquitous misogyny in the mainstream culture. Gendertrolling harbors the anger towards and

² Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach, *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 13.

³ Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 26.

⁴ Karla Mantilla, *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral*, 2015, 94.

⁵ Karla Mantilla, 92

reaction against the progress made by feminist movements, which weaken privileges enjoyed by men and reshape the social norm.⁶

Gender trolling is reactive to women who share their opinions online publicly.⁷ Although it is a unique internet phenomenon, gender trolling continues a long patriarchal tradition of suppressing or invalidating women's expression. It prevents gender issues from entering public discussion via social media. In "This Isn't New: Gender, Publics, and the Internet," Vickery regards gender trolling and misogyny as the repression to prevent feminist issues from being brought from the private realm to the public domain. They intend to confine women in private space and thus consolidate traditional patriarchal orders that render women subservient to men.⁸ It can be interpreted as an attempt of regulation to reverse the achievement of previous progress feminist movements to restore the old order of patriarchy.

In "Misogyny for Male Solidarity," Kim reminds us that online misogyny is not only seen among speeches of the most radical conservative netizens.⁹ Instead of viewing

⁶ Karla Mantilla, 95; David Futrelle, interviewed by Chris Kover, "Do We Have to Worry about Someone Actually Killing or Raping a Feminist Activist? Vice, September 8, 2014, <http://www.vice.com/read/do-we-have-to-worry-about-someone-actuallykilling-or-raping-a-feminist-activist-887>, accessed March 27, 2021.

⁷ Karla Mantilla, *Gender trolling: How Misogyny Went Viral*, (2015), 18.

⁸ Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, Tracy Everbach, (eds.) *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, (2018), 37

⁹ Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, Tracy Everbach, (eds.), 152.

it as exceptional extremist speech, “[t]he increase in online misogynistic discourse reflects crises in hegemonic masculinity and anxiety over changing gender relations in [the society], and this increase thus serves to reestablish male solidarity through hate discourse against [women].”¹⁰ Specifically, in postsocialist China, the national brotherhood is threatened by increased inequality. Thus, gendertrolling represents an attempt to restore the patriarchal nation by forming an online community unified under hatred towards women’s demand for equal rights and complaints regarding harassment.

[transit] In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Banet-Weiser points out that “public shaming is used to recuperate masculine identity, to realize the capacity of masculinity.”¹¹ Similarly, in *Misogyny*, utilizing violence on females to deepen male bonding, this mechanism of gendertrolling reflects one of the cores of misogyny analyzed by Chizuko Ueno¹². Quoting the theoretical framework in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* by Kosofsky, Ueno defines male bonding as male homosocial desire. They consolidate their gender identity and

¹⁰ Kim, Jinsook. "Misogyny for male solidarity: Online hate discourse against women in South Korea." (*Mediating Misogyny*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018), 152

¹¹ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 89.

¹² Chizuko Ueno and Lan Wang, *Yan nu: Riben De nu Xing Xian Wu = Onnagirai = Misogyny* (Shanghai Shi: Shanghai san lian shu dian, 2015).

masculinity through a collective gender identity among males. Therefore, they objectify women to reassure not only their individual masculinity but also the collective masculinity shared by all males.

Behind misogyny is these male trolls' fear of being feminized or castrated. Although such bonding is homosocial, their objection to potential emasculation generates homophobia. For instance, steelworkers in northeastern China used to take pride in their work and heroism during the socialist period when the iron and steel industry was prioritized by the state.¹³ However, massive layoffs were incurred by the market economy in postsocialist China. What followed was more and more verbal and physical violence conducted by laid-off workers towards women around them, even when it is their wives who support them financially.¹⁴

Another factor behind homophobia is that homosexuality challenges the role of women as the mediator in this homosocial male bonding premised on the traditional heterosexual structure. Therefore, male bonding paradoxically relies on mutual recognition between males, misogyny, and homophobia.

¹³ Zheng Wang and Lü Xinyu, eds., *性别与视觉：百年中国影像研究* (Shanghai Shi: Fudan University Press, 2016), 212.

¹⁴ Zheng Wang and Lü Xinyu, eds., 223.

Analysis of gendertrolling also intersects gender with race. The essay “Limitations of ‘Just Gender,’” by Lucy Hackworth focuses on intersectionality and how the studies of gendertrolling overlook it. Many victims of gendertrolling were targeted because of not only their gender but also their race. “The harassment removed or ignored to focus on ‘just gender’ would, by design, include that which is racist, homophobic, transphobic or transmisogynist, ableist, or based on religion or beliefs.”¹⁵ Similarly, the term “Chinese Tianyuan Feminism” (中华田园女权) reveals the racial aspect of gendertrolling in China, with a more intricate mechanism.

1.2 Tianyuan Nüquan: Backlash and Feminism Bashing

In recent years, the most commonly used term by Chinese gender trolls is “Chinese Tianyuan (Bumpkin) feminism/feminists.” It is a pejorative term coined by Chinese netizens, a portmanteau of feminism (women’s rights), and “Tianyuan,” which alludes to Tianyuan Quan (Chinese native mongrel dog breeds). The literal meaning of this term is that feminism locally stemmed from Chinese society. It hints at a stigmatized image similar to “Feminazi” in American contexts.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, Tracy Everbach, (eds.) *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, (2018), 59.

However, this term in use does not have a concrete definition. With its wider spread, it evolved from a category of feminists in China into a convenient phrase classing every Chinese feminist. On the one hand, users of this term attempt to debunk the allegedly “hypocrisy” of Chinese feminism by emphasizing the distinction between it and alleged “authentic” feminism. On the other hand, they would also employ this term to bombard anyone with feminist opinion indistinguishably, insisting on a specious homogeneity of being “feminists” in China. Criticisms toward Chinese feminists focus mainly on the following four aspects.

The first and most common accusation of Chinese feminists is Egoism. Male netizens claim that Chinese Tianyuan feminists, on the one hand, want to enjoy the “gendered privileges” enjoyed by females on the one hand, such as the bridal price; on the other hand, they refuse to take responsibilities such as housework or reproduction. Also, Chinese grassroots feminism is often associated with plutocracy. Some internet influence “encourages” their female subscribers to take advantage of their heterosexual relationship in a way that reinforces patriarchy. The opponents of feminists would also include them as Chinese grassroots feminists. By incorporating different women with different opinions into the category of Tianyuan feminists, they claim that the downsides of each group are shared by all the Chinese feminists.

The other frequently invoked stigma put on Chinese feminists by online trolls is extremism. They often describe Chinese feminists as provoking polarized agonism between males and females. Antifeminists claim that the efforts of Chinese feminists to criticize and tackle patriarchy are to pursue a matriarchy in which females enjoy supremacy over males. Another critique to scaffold their charge of extremism on Chinese feminism is that feminists always behave militantly and polemically. A similar term commonly used by these gender trolls is 女“拳,” which turns the Chinese characters for Women’s rights into Women’s fists.

In addition, netizens frequently perceive Chinese feminists as unorthodox or unauthentic. As analyzed in the earlier paragraph, the word “Tianyuan” in this phrase shows their obsession with orthodox and an urge to repel ideologies that are neither authentic Chinese nor authentically Western. They believe Chinese feminists only make a poor parody of their Western counterparts, attacking Chinese feminists for not receiving “orthodox” Western education on feminism, and thus not having knowledge about gender differences. Regarding people who have encountered Western feminist theories and history, those trolls alter their strategy and assert that these feminists only do empty talk, yet their theories are inapplicable to Chinese society.

The fourth claim is that Chinese feminists are traitors of China. Some netizens contend that Chinese feminists are under “foreign influence” and feminist NGOs in

China are funded and commanded by “Western or foreign hostile force.”¹⁶ They assert that feminist NGOs have political agenda against the communist party under the banner of feminism. Thus, they regard feminists as traitors to China.

Emphasizing the “unorthodoxy” of feminism stemmed in China by the word “bumpkin” (*tianyuan*), gender trolls in China seem to believe that feminism is a western discourse, even though feminism has been introduced to and developed in China for more than a century and was part of the official narrative of socialist China. In fact, “Bumkpin Feminism” is not the first catachresis of feminism in China:

In a conference in Beijing on Chinese Women and Feminist Thought hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Science in June 1995, many of the Chinese women participants “indicated a series of negative associations with the term ‘feminism,’ in particular, the idea that it was an expression of the individualistic tendencies of Western ideologies and of attempts to assert power over men.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Javier C. Hernández and Zoe Mou, “‘Me Too,’ Chinese Women Say. Not so Fast, Say the Censors.,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 24, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/world/asia/china-women-me-too-censorship.html>.

¹⁷ Evans, Harriet. *Women and sexuality in China: dominant discourses of female sexuality and gender since 1949*. (United Kingdom, Wiley, 1997), 223.

This opinion first shows that the apologetic practice of Maoist-Marxist feminism in China did not leave enough heritage to remind people nowadays of the history of feminism in China. Second, instead of opposition against “cultural” appropriation or appeal for localization of feminism, these outcries of gender trolls are similar to the Eurocentric view of white feminism criticized by Rafia Zakaria in *Against White Feminism*. Regarding Western feminism as the one and only authority, they refuse to recognize any feature outside western feminism to be feminist qualities.¹⁸ The belief that white feminism determines and differentiates the ultimate feminist virtue and unenlightened pre-feminist impulse is reminiscent of colonialism’s binary of civilized white savior versus barbaric colonialist. Such an opinion also denies alternative tactics adapted according to local conditions, discouraging any localization of feminism, which contradicts the alleged stance of gender trolls. Moreover, it reflects the Chinese imagination of the Western authority on minority discourse, possibly due to the internalization of coloniality.

Gender trolls would employ “Bumpkin feminist” to bombard anyone with feminist opinion indistinguishably, implying a specious homogeneity of being “feminists” in China. However, this term does not have a concrete definition. On the one

¹⁸ Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*. (United States: W. W. Norton, 2021), 11.

hand, gender trolls frequently allege feminists to be traitors funded by Western anti-China agencies. They project their fear of western cultural imperialism onto feminists, who, in gender trolls' belief, are the spokespeople for the Western ideology. On the other hand, users of this term attempt to debunk the hypocrisy of "Tianyuan feminists" by emphasizing the distinction between it and alleged "authentic" feminism represented by the West. Their criticism of Chinese feminists reflects the profound influence of coloniality.

As shown in the scholarly works on gendertrolling, signifying these contradicting connotations, the stigma conveyed by the term Tianyuan Feminism is a pseudo-concept that is an all-embracing collage of all criticisms for various schools of feminism and de facto female adherents of patriarchy. With its "inclusiveness" and resultant vagueness, this patchwork term and multi-layered gendertrolling represented to become the best catholicon to stigmatize and repel feminism in China. To sum up, for gender trolls, the word "feminism" works somehow like a floating signifier without any fixated definition in the debates between gender trolls and victims under attack.

1.3 Preview

In the following thesis, in chapter one, I will first examine state feminism and neoliberal feminism as two options available for Chinese women today. By drawing on

their limitation and problems respectively, the background of the formation of “feminist without feminism” is manifested. So does its significance. As a decentralized bottom-up women’s movement, it enlarges the participation and helps avoid the risk of being targeted by gendertrolls and government censorship.

In chapter two, I will analyze two “feminists without feminism” cases. In the first case, Yang Li’s controversial stand-up comedy performance demonstrates two different ways popular feminism is consumed in China. From a different perspective, “Ladies’ Character” reflects the female audience’s unspoken discontent towards the representation of females in cultural production and Chinese policy damaging the rights of single women or structural flaws creating plights for women in general. These two cases further demonstrate how feminists without feminism harbor the potential to create a slit in current public discussion about women’s rights and bring social changes.

2. State Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism: Frankenstein of Biopower, Capital, and Commodity

“Dear dad and mom, don’t worry about me. The world is big; lives are full of various possibilities; I can find joy in being single.”¹ This ad was on a lightbox in a Beijing subway station in Spring 2016 (see figure 1). This anti-marriage bombardment advertisement was crowdfunded within one month. According to one of the organizers, Li Cheng, it is in response to the 2014 commercial of baihe.com, an online dating service. The slogan in the baihe.com commercial is “Because of love, don’t wait.” However, the message delivered by this commercial was not about love but only about pressure given by the family to be a filial daughter by getting married on time. In the commercial, a grandmother on her sickbed constantly asks her single granddaughter whether she plans to get married. To soothe her grandmother, the young woman registers a baihe.com account and eventually brings a face blurred man to her grandmother, happily announcing that she is finally getting married.² This commercial was regarded as marriage bombardment aligned with the then trendy phrase “leftover women.”. By creating anxiety and shame over their marital status, the term “leftover women” hints at

¹ “首例眾籌「反逼婚」廣告亮相北京地鐵站,” (theinitium, February 6, 2016), <https://theinitium.com/article/20160206-dailynews-free-will-in-marrige/>; my translation.

² Xi Xuchu, “百合网‘逼婚广告’弄巧成拙,” (people.cn, February 10, 2014), <http://it.people.com.cn/n/2014/0210/c1009-24311045.html>.

an image of undesirable and unhappy women to reinforce the traditional social norm and push more women into marriage.

The concept of “leftover women” was proposed and promoted by All-China Women Federation.³ Why has such an organization founded to protect women’s rights now become the perpetrator of suppression of Chinese women? In addition to the revitalization of traditional gender roles as wives and mothers, such a policy also attempts to fulfill the needs of reproductive laborers of neoliberal development in postsocialist China. If we revisit the history of feminism in China, we will realize that such a collaboration between feminism and nationalism through marriage and reproduction is not an exception.

³ Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women* (Zed Books, 2014), 19.



Figure 1: Anti-Marriage Bombardment Advertisement

2.1 State Feminism: Movement for “Equality between Men and Women” Led by Patriarch

According to Harriet Evans, the official discourses between the 1950s to 1980s shared common ground in their approach to marriage as a public issue: it is “not a matter of private enjoyment but a ‘cell’ of the entire cause of revolution, something important to the interests of society as a whole.”⁴ The prevalence of eugenic concerns in official discourses about sexuality and marriage is apparent in the requirement. During

⁴ Evans, Harriet. *Women and sexuality in China: dominant discourses of female sexuality and gender since 1949*. (United Kingdom, Wiley, 1997), 8.

the Maoist era, with a unified job-assignment at graduation policy, most youths entered state-own centralized work units surveilling and regulating almost every respect of employees' lives. Such a work unit provided housing, hospitals, medical resources, and daycare centers. On the one hand, to a certain level, it helps to socialize a particular portion of housework that was perceived as wifely duties, such as childcare. On the other hand, It massively penetrated private life. One's marriage also needs to get the approval of their work units. Sexual desires are correspondingly regulated. In operation since the 1980s, all couples undergo a medical check-up before marriage to guarantee superior births, domestic happiness, and social stability.⁵ The official discourse presented as scientific fact a series of assumptions about the sexual difference that reflected moral and social as much as medical concerns.⁶

Furthermore, many scholars have written that the gendered role is one of the crucial tactics to form the nation-state as an imagined community. Among their works, a well-accepted consensus is that "elements of national identity and cultural difference are articulated as forms of control over women and... infringe upon their rights as enfranchised citizens."⁷ In her article, Kandiyoti contends that while women are

⁵ Evans, Harriet, 50.

⁶ Evans, Harriet, 53.

⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991): pp. 429-443, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298910200031501>, 429.

employed as an instrumental symbol, they are often not recognized with equally full citizenship as males within the nation.⁸

When western feminist discourses started to spread to China in the early 20th century and received widely active social responses, the female subjectivity was still rendered as the secondary encompassed by the national identity.⁹ Even in the widely regarded first feminist publication in China, *Women's Bell* (女界钟) published in 1903, the male author Jin Tianhe voiced for women's rights due to his desire to motivate women to leave the households and enter the public society to develop and advance the nation. "The desire to emulate an upper-class white European man in his marital bliss reflects the painful situation of Chinese men and their psychic struggles in relation to white European men."¹⁰ Such discourse was generated by Social Darwinism, internalizing the backward/advanced or barbaric/civilized binary brought by raising European imperialism in response to the Western gaze. Jin's envision of a "feminist" future was framed upon Chinese intellectual males' desire to keep abreast with European men. Therefore, the object of desire, or the Other, to construct the self of men, namely an ideal

⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, 435.

⁹ Tani Barlow. "Theorizing Woman: Funu, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family)" In *Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, pp. 173-196, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 177.

¹⁰ Lydia He Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, eds, *The birth of Chinese feminism: Essential texts in transnational theory*, (Columbia University Press, 2013), 2.

image of women, consequently changed. Ironically, feminism in the West at that moment was still a marginalized social movement. To make his point, Jin Tianhe extravagated it as a mainstream trend in the West. However, voicing for women with a patriarchal authority still failed to transcend gendered roles. For example, *Women's Bell* still proposes an ideal women image as wives of modern Chinese gentlemen or mothers of future nationals.

He Yinzhen (or He Zhen) seems to be the first to respond to this question directly. She first offered a critique of the male voice and fantasy on the price of women's subjugation in mainstream male intellectual's appeal on women's liberation represented by *Women's Bell*. According to He, women's liberation is not the real motivation of these male intellectuals. Instead, with an internalized patriarchic view that women are their private property, their craving for liberated women reflects their craving for liberated wives as the other to spotlight their liberation as the self.¹¹ In their nationalist response against being othered by the West, Chinese male intellectuals chose othering Chinese women.

Furthermore, later under the regime of the Chinese Communist Party, according to Hershatter, although the policy positively granted women working rights and

¹¹ He-Yin Zhen, "On the Question of Women's Liberation," in Liu, Lydia He, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, eds. *The birth of Chinese feminism: Essential texts in transnational theory*. (Columbia University Press, 2013), 60.

elevated social status, the images of progressive model women have been still employed by the nation to mobilize people to contribute their labor to collective production actively.¹² Unlike the model figure of traditional mothers and wives identified and absorbed into the Confucianist canon in feudal periods, the model woman figure in the Mao era was consciously nurtured by the local governments to form a national narrative and contribute to a national mobilization.¹³ Once again, women have been coerced by nationalism as a mere element without receiving any existential recognition.

According to Wang Zheng, similar to *Women's Bell* in He Yinzhen's critique, Chinese state feminism is often perceived as a self-contradicting organization leading women's liberation while subordinating to the state patriarch.¹⁴ Some scholars directly regard All-China Women Federation (ACWF) as the byname of Chinese state feminism.¹⁵ "The party-state, through the ACWF, defines the causes, methods, and vision of change and serves as the guardians and male protector of women's rights and interest.....[Women] cannot be their own agents of change."¹⁶ However, Wang Zheng

¹² Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Volume 8) (Asia Pacific Modern), (University of California Press, 2014), 210.

¹³ Gail Hershatter, 236.

¹⁴ Wang Zheng, "'State Feminism'? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (January 2005): pp. 519-551, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20459044>, 519.

¹⁵ Clara Wai-chun To. "State Feminism in China." *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2007): 1-2.

¹⁶ Jude Howell, "Women Politicians and Change" (paper presented at the Political Studies Association Fifty-first Conference, 10-12 Apr. 2001, Manchester, UK).

challenges the view that ACWF is a party-state organ which “make Chinese women into statist subjects.”¹⁷

Wang Zheng argues that a critical factor neglected in this simple equation between ACWF and Chinese state feminism is ACWF’s “ambiguous nature.”¹⁸ Founded in 1949 to include and uniform all existing organizations in China focusing on women’s rights and interests, ACWF has long served as a leading organization for women-work (妇女工作), of which the primary mission is to mobilize women to participate in the communist revolution while solving problems that pose an obstacle to women’s contribution to the revolution.¹⁹

The Chinese government supported the 1995 FWCW because it is eager to “connect China’s tracks with the world” (与世界接轨) re-enter the world and incorporate into capitalist globalization.²⁰ Although the state’s agenda is the national interest, Chinese feminists outside and inside ACWF strategically benefit from NGOs’ legitimization in China after the government repressed all kinds of organic non-governmental activism since the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Moreover, the

¹⁷ Wang Zheng, 520.

¹⁸ Wang Zheng, 521.

¹⁹ Wang Zheng, 521.

²⁰ Zheng, WANG, and Ying ZHANG. “Global Concepts, Local Practices: Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women.” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 40–70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40607999>

conference brought Western feminist discourses to “transform a Marxist theory of equality between men and women.”²¹

When WF defined itself as an NGO hosting the NGO forum in 1995, this act signals an attempt to coalesce all feminist NGOs in the field to regulate and incorporate them into the state-led scheme for women’s rights. Moreover, it was also an attempt to negate the necessity of any non-governmental feminist organization, since the state already makes efforts to address women’s questions through ACWF. Due to the same non-governmental status, ACWF has never had the administrative power of many government branches.

Podcast *Youdian Tianyuan/In the Field* (有点田园), founded by Chinese feminist activists Lü Pin and Xiao Meili, interviewed one ACWF women’s hotline operator and one anti-violence NGO volunteer, whose jobs are both guiding domestic violence victims to seek protection from the governmental authority (this podcast has been currently unshelved from Apple podcast and other podcast platforms except Spotify, however, it stops updating since June 2021 in Spotify). The episode title was a quote from the ACWF hotline social worker: “I teach them how to call the police every day, but no one has gotten a written reprimand.” While the ACWF hotline operator focuses on teaching victims how to seek help from the police, the NGO volunteer teaches

²¹ 世妇会专题, accessed September 15, 2021, <http://www.women.org.cn/col/col230/index.html>.

victims to expect less from the police. In this interview, both mention some police officers who do not know about the practice of anti-domestic violence reprimand. Furthermore, they both noted the contempt policies shown to ACWF officers who inquire about collaboration to help domestic violence victims. The NGO volunteer even deliberately warns victims about the option of mediation provided by police or local court, which required them to sign a mediation record stating they will not take any further action. It might be used as an act of political expediency to prevent the victims from further actions.

To retrospect the five-year progress of this anti-domestic violence legislation, in an interview by Sixth Tone activist Feng Yuan explicitly comments that “many places have not yet included the prevention of domestic violence in their government work plans, evaluation systems, or training curricula.”²² According to an annual report issued by Equality-Beijing in 2020, since the enforcement of the Anti-Domestic-Violence Law in March 2016, the death caused by domestic violence in China on press reports solely counts at least 942, with a total death of 1214 including 920 women as 76%, by December 31, 2019.²³ On average, at least three Chinese women have been killed by domestic

²² Yiwen Cai, “China’s Anti-Domestic Violence Law at the Five-Year Mark,” Sixth Tone, March 16, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006903/chinas-anti-domestic-violence-law-at-the-five-year-mark>.

²³ “上海受理和核发保护令情况考察,” Equality-Beijing, April 1, 2021, <http://www.equality-beijing.org/newinfo.aspx?id=84>; “《反家暴法》实施四年多项措施实

violence every five days. The seemingly inexorable conundrum of domestic violence demonstrates that ACWF cannot perform to advance enforcement of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (中华人民共和国妇权益保障法) and other regulations designed to protect women.

Moreover, in recent years, ACWF has even arguably shifted its focus away from equity between males and females but shoulders more responsibility for political mobilization. Numerous activists had been repressed by accusing them of collusion with “oversea anti-Chinese hostile force,” feminist activism was not immune. On March 6, 2015, two days before international women’s day, five Chinese feminist activists were detained in charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” before their planned protest against sexual harassment. They are later known as the Feminist Five and international actions were taken to protest their detention.²⁴ This tendency to regard feminist activism as the frontier of ideological war soon are reflected in an essay by Song Xiuyan, vice president of ACWF in 2017. She writes,

“The hostile western force is intensifying their strategy to divide our nation..... they are touting western feminism, and some of them intervene

践中遇冷,” 新华网, November 25, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2020-11/25/c_1126782389.htm.

²⁴ Zheng, Wang. “Detention of the Feminist Five in China.” *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476–82. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.41.2.476>.

women issues in China under the banner of human right protection or philanthropy, in hope to find entry point (to spying) in the women question.”²⁵

With such a tightening political climate for feminist activism, Feminist Five’s strategies of online activism are increasingly relatable for women who want to have online discussions on women’s rights without being silenced by censorship. It is tempting that the internet can enable awareness of individuals about gender issues as social issues. However, Li Maizi reminds readers about the risk of being labeled as politically sensitive by the government in her conversation with Fisher. Maizi and her fellow activists responsively adopt a guerrilla-like strategy to take spontaneous actions without a centralized organizer.²⁶ Such a feminist movement aims to build a women’s community instead of making the fame of one or two opinion leaders, which risks controverting the original perspective of an equal society without hierarchy.

²⁵ Xiuyan Song, “把讲政治贯穿于妇联改革和工作全过程,” CPCNews, June 13, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0613/c227126-29336313.html>.

²⁶ Hong Leta Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2021), 184.

2.2 *Lean In in China: Commodify and Consuming Feminism*

On September 18, 2013, New York Times published an article in its “Female Factor” column, titled “For China, a New Kind of Feminism.” The title of its translation published in cn.NYTimes.com targeting Chinese readers gives a quick glimpse of the core argument of this article: “*Lean In*, Spawning New Feminist Movements in China.” (向前一步，催生中国新女性主义运动)²⁷

Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, the self-help-alike semi-autobiography of billionaire entrepreneur and chief operating officer of Meta Platform (formerly Facebook) Sheryl Sandberg, topped NYT bestseller lists for over a year since its publication in March 2013. Not only attracting attention brought by Sandberg’s notability, but this book was also promoted as a feminist manifesto. Following its success at home in the United States, *Lean In* was soon translated and published in China by CITIC Press Group in June 2013, only three months apart.

This NYT coverage interprets the acceptance of *Lean In* among Chinese readers with a positive tone. It first highlights the enthusiastic welcome received by Sandberg in two book promotion events in Beijing. It then follows with a question: “As the Chinese government strikes anew against freedom of speech, detaining even mild-mannered

²⁷ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “‘向前一步’，催生中国新女性主义运动,” The New York Times (The New York Times, September 18, 2013), <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20130918/c18tatlow/>.

democracy activists, civil society advocates, and popular public opinion leaders, might there be a feminist revolution in China before there is a democratic one?"²⁸

Lean In inspire the founding of the "Lean-In Circle," a small group of young students from many prestigious universities in Beijing who meet to talk about the message in this book. One interviewee shared her opinion on the Chinese title of this bestseller, which translated as "Move One Step Forward" (向前一步). She believes it might misguide the readers to diverge from the critical point: overcoming one's inner hindrance.²⁹ Similar comments about *Lean In* are seen in the remarks of Feng Yuan, an experienced feminist activist and the founder of the Gender and Development in China network. Expressing her disagreement on relying on personal approaches to reduce structural gender inequality, Feng thinks such a personal message in *Lean In* is necessary to mobilize more women when the feminism-bashing trend brings fear of feminism.³⁰

Are such individualized narratives about empowered women a practical approach to changing women's gendered plight? Does it successfully trailblaze a new wave of Chinese feminist revolution predicted by the NYT journalist? Feminist critics seemingly have drastically different opinions. In "Sheryl Sandberg and the Business of Feminism," Nicole Aschoff first reviews the status quo of feminist ideals versus reality

²⁸ Didi Kirsten Tatlow.

²⁹ Didi Kirsten Tatlow.

³⁰ Didi Kirsten Tatlow.

as the backdrop: Women gained almost equal access and rights as men in terms of education and health care. However, the opportunities for women and the social and cultural image of women are still apologetic and far behind, and the situation for women of low socioeconomically status or minorities is even worse.³¹

Sandberg attributes the obstacles facing women nowadays to a holding-yourself-back mindset, including inner doubts and underestimation of themselves. She predicts possible criticism and defends herself with a chicken-and-egg metaphor in this book. She explains that her call for more women in power does not contradict feminists who aim for institutional changes.³² However, in “Sandberg and the business of Feminism,” Aschoff counterargues these points by bringing up Kathi Weeks’ opinion in *The Problem with Work* that “valorization of work dominates feminist analytical frames and political agendas.”³³ On the one hand, under the banner of feminism, Sandberg’s manifesto neatly fits the narrative in which corporates attract and train hardworking employees who are more prone to endure harsher exploitation with longer working hours and lower compensation. On the other hand, with more public discussion and media exposure, once Sandberg’s ideas spawn more women’s success, their stories of empowerment and fair opportunities help justify the agenda of these corporates. Thus,

³¹ Nicole Marie Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital*, 2015, 35-72.

³² Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* (Random House UK, 2015), 8-9.

³³ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 152.

instead of being a part of a universal endeavor for the emancipation of all women, Aschoff criticizes Sandberg that her meritocrat narratives of capitalism exclude the non-elite majority and undermine the efforts of feminists who fight for structural changes. It “reinforces the fundamentally exploitative social relations that characterize our society and strengthen a system that permanently divides women at the top from women at the bottom.”³⁴

In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Banet-Weiser holds a similar critical perspective. She refers to *Lean In* as one of the most prominent resources in the market to help achieve confidence as a vital theme of popular feminism.³⁵ Depending on confidence and ambition as the solution to gender inequality, Sandberg’s proposal in *Lean In* maintains the capitalist apparatus in which “entrepreneurialism and capitalist accomplishment are the only routes to feminist political identity”³⁶ Instead of converting into feminist subjects, readers who follow the guidance in *Lean In* will become better economic subjects with better individual capacity to join the existing structure. Such feminism is popular because it does not fundamentally challenge the system of patriarchy. They usually stop once they achieve visibility, as if participation in feminism through receiving the message on popular media outlets is sufficient.³⁷ To a

³⁴ Nicole Marie Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital*, 2015, 36.

³⁵ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, 94

³⁶ Banet-Weiser, 95.

³⁷ Banet-Weiser, 4.

certain extent, it even conspires with patriarchy to maintain the status quo since it “eclipses a feminist critique of structure, as well as obscures the labor involved in producing oneself according to the parameters of popular feminism.”³⁸

Tracing this failure in the history of feminist movements, Nancy Fraser believes “the legacy of second-wave feminism’s myopic refusal to sustain a materialist critique” had stored up trouble for the current incorporation of neoliberalism and feminism.³⁹ In her co-authored manifesto *Feminism for the 99%*, Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser categorize *Lean In* as liberal feminism, which regards women as an underrepresented group, and “feminism” has been appropriated to emphasize the diversity values, to justify the power behold by elites in the heart of the system, while most women are still trapped in the basement. The gendered repression of elite women has been outsourced to these women from more vulnerable classes. The speciously inspiring call for women to break the glass ceiling cannot alter the struggles facing women of the working class and lower class, whose primary concerns are survival, not seizing power.⁴⁰

³⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation,” *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2019): pp. 3-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>, 21.

³⁹ Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2013): pp. 418-437, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>, 421.

⁴⁰ Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), 13.

Different from Fraser's critical attitude towards the original sin of unsatisfactory liberal feminism, Rottenberg compares liberal feminism to neoliberal feminism while affirming the effort of the former to highlight contradictions within liberalism between its supposed mission to actualize universal equality and its gendered exclusion (as well as exclusion based on race, class, and sexual orientation). While liberal feminism got its name for challenging the founded discourses and structures of patriarchal liberalism, in contrast, neoliberal feminism is co-opted by neoliberalism.⁴¹ However, Rottenberg disagrees with those who abruptly claim that the messages in *Lean In* are not "real" feminism. She remarks that such a voice falsely assumes the existence of one true definition of feminism.

Furthermore, in a more pertinent transnational context, Rottenberg more specifically unfolds the colonial message hidden in *Lean In*. Sandberg insists that her readers, which assumed to be Women in the United States, should appreciate their luck to be born in the civilized West with centuries of feminist progress ahead of "many places in the world where women are denied basic rights."⁴² Gender equality is utilized by neoliberalism as a benchmark for civilization to reproduce the colonial binary order

⁴¹ Catherine Rottenberg, 421

⁴² Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* (Random House UK, 2015), 38.

of a liberated West and the uncivilized Rest, in which liberal principles are taken as unquestionable universal standards.⁴³

The New York Times coverage of the popularity of *Lean In* in China, which was mentioned at the beginning of this section, audibly exhibits this colonial scheme of transnational neoliberal feminism. By asking the question “might there be a feminist revolution in China before there is a democratic one,” the journalist does not only imply that feminist revolution is impossible without enlightening herald from the United States or the West but also denies the history of Chinese feminist revolutions throughout the republican period and socialist period. Political scientist Ann Norton also once argues that to picture the Muslim world as extremely misogynic is one essential component of Islamophobic discourse production in the United States.⁴⁴ Hence, similarly, by speciously emphasizing that Chinese women cannot have their own feminist awakening moment unless triggered by illumination sent from a white female savior who enlightens them in the heart of darkness, this consolidated image of China as an internally obstinate and conservative society is employed to juxtapose the United States as a self-critical civilized society with every-advancing gender relations, even if *Lean In* evades the discussion of structural sexism in the United States. The image of

⁴³ Catherine Rottenberg, 422; Farris, “Femonationalism and the ‘Regular’ Army of Labor Called Migrant Women,” *History of the Present* 2, no. 2 (2012): pp. 184-199, <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.2.2.0184>.

⁴⁴ Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (S.I.: PRINCETON UNIV PRESS, 2020), 67.

China as the left-behind other thus forms a perfect reference to showcase the liberated West.⁴⁵ Hence the focus on gender conflicts is deflected.

In this binary of progressive feminists versus powerless help-seekers, race is not the only factor to intersect with gender. In *Against White Feminism*, Zakaria's critique of white feminism aims to surface "the division between the women who write and speak feminism and the women who live it; the women who have voice versus the women who have experience; the ones who make the theories and policies, and the ones who bear scars and sutures from the fight."⁴⁶ In China, such a division is not only between Chinese female consumers and producers of western popular feminism. It also widely exists between ordinary Chinese women and Chinese influencers or celebrities who market themselves as feminist icons.

The earliest and most famous social media icon that has been criticized for being a "Tianyuan feminist" are Mimeng and Ayawawa, around 2015. They both present themselves as lifestyle influencers mentoring their female readers to take advantage of their romantic relationships while constantly rooting for materialism, neoliberal competition, and hypergamy to raise anxiety in their readers. In their essay aiming to map the complicated strands of "locally emergent woman's agitations identified and perceived as feminism" in contemporary China, Angela Wu, and Yige Dong categorize

⁴⁵ Catherine Rottenberg, 423.

⁴⁶ Rafia Zakaria, 11.

this type of social media influencer as entrepreneurial C-fem (Chinese feminism).⁴⁷ This essay counts these influencers as feminism because they encourage their readers to violate transitional expectations on women to be submissive and self-sacrificial to maximize their materialistic gain from the marriage market.⁴⁸ They name another Chinese feminist strand as Non-cooperative C-fem, referring to women who “denounce the prevalent marketization of the marital institution” or thoroughly reject marriage.⁴⁹ Non-cooperative fem harbors the hope of social change. However, because of the coexistence of these two strands of ideology, both perceived by the Chinese public as feminism, the society “projects and criticizes non-cooperatives in the image of its entrepreneurial counterpart.”⁵⁰

However, in recent years, a new strand of Chinese feminist influencers has emerged and flourished on social media: feminism as a business. They seem more apt for the name of entrepreneurial C-fem, for they make profit directly from their identity label of feminism. Among them, Liang Yu is arguable the most successful one. Organizing donations of feminine products for female health care workers during the pandemic, Liang Yuan has attracted more and more publicity since 2020. Her fame

⁴⁷ Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (September 2019): pp. 471-492, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1656538>, 487.

⁴⁸ Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, 479.

⁴⁹ Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, 481.

⁵⁰ Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, 486.

brought her the chance to feature in the commercial for L'ORÉAL Paris. In the video celebrating the 50th anniversary of the iconic slogan “Because We're Worth It” of this cosmetics megacorporation, Liang Yu intrepidly expresses her rejection of traits such as cuteness or gentleness in Chinese mainstream beauty standards. She says that people with these features could be perceived as submissive and frail. Her outspoken “feminism” could rapidly attract female customers, especially among social media users. From a feminist influencer to a beauty product endorser, Liang’s path reflects the trend to commodify and consume feminism.

Later, Liang Yu’s choice to join the Chinese Communist Party further complicates her trajectory due to the crisscrossing of neoliberal feminism and state feminism. On March 12, 2021, Liang announced on Weibo, the central battlefield of her activism, she was pleasant and honored that the [party] organization accepted her membership application.⁵¹ Giving up the protesting stance and voluntarily being engulfed by state feminism, Liang Yu alienates other organic feminists, as if subordination to state feminism is the only ultimate path. Her public posture reproduces the binary of legitimate state feminism and dangerous grassroots feminist dissidents.

⁵¹ Pin Lü, “经血染红旗？评梁钰入党事件,” Medium, March 14, 2021, <https://pinerpiner.medium.com/%E7%BB%8F%E8%A1%80%E6%9F%93%E7%BA%A2%E6%97%97-%E8%AF%84%E6%A2%81%E9%92%B0%E5%85%A5%E5%85%9A%E4%BA%8B%E4%B%B6-14d0b22fb2e0>.

Her pursuit of personal interest shoves other feminist activists into political precarity. In hindsight, since Liang is less dissenting compared to other “dangerous” feminist activists and some of her campaigns were launched in collaboration with ACWF, possibly L’Oréal made a politically secured choice to feature Liang in their commercial touting the feminist label. On the one hand, as I analyzed, it aims to attract female consumers who support the feminist cause. On the other hand, it can ensure Liang Yu’s stable political status is not a latent time bomb leading to their political jeopardy and resultant financial penalty in China.

In summary, from the celebrities' and influencers' perspectives, the feminism label can be easily monetized. It can be a means to achieve neoliberal success, and their success can further become material to scaffold their individual story as empowered women. From the consumers' perspective, the meaning of the consumption goes beyond the product itself. First, it can be seen as conspicuous consumption. The label of feminism is consumed as a token to demonstrate their class as elite women able to afford indecency in a neoliberal feminist sense. Furthermore, this label of feminism can showcase one's subscription to the neoliberal value of meritocracy and self-responsibility. It helps to demonstrate that one is a more capable female labor, thus opening more potential corporate opportunities. In this sense, it also converts into a unique form of capital and helps further capital accumulation.

2.3 Conclusion

Starting the chapter with the phenomena of marriage bombardment and responsive anti-marriage bombardment online and offline organic movement by Chinese women, I further analyze the practice of Chinese state feminism and western neoliberal feminism as necessary historical background. Although they stemmed from two different ideologies, Chinese state feminism, and western neoliberal feminism share various similarities.

They are both trickle-down schemes in which those with vested benefit in the center of power define one true definition of feminism and decide what action to take. For Chinese state feminism, it is the central government of CCP, paradoxically the nation and the utmost resemble of the patriarchy; for neoliberal feminism, they are the elite women in the upper class.

Secondly, they both are utilized to justify the values of the existing system. All-China Women federation is an instrument to incorporate non-governmental organizations into the government, part of governmental image building and mobilizing women to follow central government policies. Meanwhile, neoliberal feminism reproduces the values of neoliberal competition and colonial hegemony established by the West over the Rest, in which women's rights are appropriated as a benchmark of civilization.

Thirdly, they share problematic stands on women's marriage and reproduction. The Chinese government wields biopower over the population by encouraging more women to take the gendered domestic role as wives and mothers to reproduce, with insufficient measurement to help working women fight workplace discrimination because of their marital status and parenthood. While state feminism imposes a work-life balance expectation on Chinese women, neoliberal feminism represented by *Lean-In* deliberately promotes the myth of work-life balance, justifying neoliberalism's gendered division of labor.

Moreover, both Chinese state feminism and western neoliberal feminism tend to consume the symbolic "exchange value" of feminism. Chinese state feminism uses All-China Women's Federation to regulate all feminist organizations, demonstrating the inclusion of women in political participation and attention given to women's questions. In the logic of neoliberal feminism, it is a label demonstrating one's subordination to neoliberal values of self-responsibility. This label can also be achieved through consumption as conspicuous consumption to showcase one's elite class and capability to afford the luxury of independence.

These critiques of Chinese state feminism and western neoliberal feminism reveal their flaws in addressing Chinese women's daily encounters with gendered exploitation. Alongside the stigma widely attached to the identity of "feminist," these

two factors push these women into “feminists without feminism,” referring to their action for more changes on gender equality while rejecting the identity as feminists.

3. Feminists without Feminism: Transcending Consciousness-Raising Group

In this chapter, I will do two case studies as examples of “feminists without feminism” defined and analyzed in chapter one.

3.1 Between Benign Violation and Popular Feminism: YANG Li’s Stand-up Comedy Performance

“How can he look so average and still have so much confidence?” This line from Yang Li’s (杨笠) stand-up comedy went viral in 2020, even among people who never watched her show. She performed in three seasons of the show *Rock & Roast* (脱口秀大会) and received criticisms for her gender-related opinions.¹ Yang Li simply draws on females’ anxiety in everyday life. This theme makes her routines both relatable and evocative for the female audience. She explicitly stated that she has no feminist agenda. However, her jokes about men resonate with widely circulated feminist critiques. For example, one of her punchlines, ‘he always wants to teach you something,’ could be summarized as ‘mansplaining,’ a term many feminists would use.

Consequently, at the beginning of 2021, groups of self-identified defenders of men’s rights bombarded her. These netizens aimed to launch an online campaign to get

¹ *Rock & Roast Season II*, (China: Tencent Video, July-September 2019), <https://v.qq.com/detail/8/83744.html>;
Rock & Roast Season III, (China: Tencent Video, July-September 2020), <https://v.qq.com/variety/p/topic/tuokouxu3/index.html>.

government censors on Yang Li for her insulting all men and inciting hatred between males and females. According to *Global Times*, “discussions under the #Yanglibeingreported had gathered more than 470 million readings and more than 125,000 comments on Sina Weibo.”²

March 2021, Yang Li became the target of the heated cyber debate again. She is featured in an advertisement for a laptop of Intel. Intel rapidly removed this advertisement after male netizens massively criticized it and planned to launch a boycott against it. Soon, Intel was called guilty of sexism by both males and females (Chen, *South China Morning Post*).

The netizens claimed as defenders of men’s rights attempt to pose themselves as rational and logical, contrasting the unreasonable and malicious image they associated with Yang Li. Their rhetoric in the complaining letters well reflects this intentional strategy or unintentional adherence to gender stereotypes. The expression ‘inciting hatred between males and females’ was employed to demonstrate that they are concerned about sexism for the goodness of both genders. However, in general, verbal comedies have many controversial jokes on gender issues. Stand-up comedies,

² “Man-mocking comedian accused of being ‘sexist,’ but who is the joke on?” *Global Times* (Beijing, China), Dec. 28, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202012/1211259.shtml>.

Xiangsheng, or skits disrespectful towards females never intrigued such push-back among these male netizens self-claimed as worried about sexism.

In contrast, when someone speaks up about their concern for this sexism against women in comedies, most responses given by these male netizens are that these opponents are overreacting or extravagating and, ironically enough, inciting “hatred between males and females.” For instance, the 2015 Spring Festival Gala by CCTV was widely criticized for sexism. However, Xinhua Net, as the central government's official mouthpiece, published an article called ‘Chunwan Discriminating Females? Stop making a Fuss’.

Although many male netizens show intense apathy toward Yang’s comedies, the audience in her stand-up lives did not share this apathy. *Rock & Roast* is a stand-up comedy competition relying on live audience polls and weighted votes from judges. Yang’s rankings indicate that most of her comedies were popular among the audience and the judges, which were primarily males. Why does such a difference exist? To what degree was the controversy fermented by its unique locale, namely cyberspace? This essay focus on how the location of cyberspace contributed to the opposition against Yang that did not present in her live performance. The liveness of live comedy performed by Yang, and the resultant interaction premised by the liveness, ensure the offense within it is perceived as an acceptable challenge and violation of norms, different from the offense taken by male netizens.

3.1.1 Acceptable Violation Sanctioned by Liveness

In her monograph *K-pop live: Fans, idols, and multimedia performance*, Suk-Young Kim focuses on the liveness of K-pop as its main attraction.³ She analyzes the liveness in different formats, including live concerts and mediatized forms of K-pop that strategically reproduced the liveness, resorting to numerous performance elements beyond the music. Tracing the theoretical framework of liveness, one can find that Philip Auslander, in his work *Liveness* published in 1999, complicates the notion of liveness beyond the narrowest definition as “physical co-presence of performers and audience.”⁴ Auslander sees liveness as flexible and argues that mediatized performance can also have different levels of liveness.⁵ However, preserving liveness in mediatized format is conditional. To examine whether internet-circulated Yang’s performance clips maintain essential elements of her original live performance and whether they meet the criteria for liveness, the following sections will first analyze the liveness in her live performances.

³ Suk-Young Kim, *K-pop live: Fans, idols, and multimedia performance* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁴ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: performance in a mediatized culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 112.

⁵ Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historic-Philosophical Perspective,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (September 2012): 3.

3.1.1.1 Interactivity

Stand-up comedians have a face-to-face relationship with their audience. It is liveness by the narrowest definition. As a seemingly spontaneous conversational performance constantly attempting to engage the audience, stand-up comedy per se heavily relies on interaction with the audience.⁶ Laughters of the audience achieve the most expected and typical interaction.

As Ian Brodie concludes, laughter is the best indication that the stand-up comedian successfully built a connection with the audience.⁷ The mechanism is simple: the audience goes to stand-up comedy to have some fun, and the comedians are obligated to amuse them. In response, the audience is expected to express their feedback through their laughter and thus encourages the comedian to proceed. Even Yang Li herself turn this point into a joke:

A joke got a good response. It is just for one reason: resonance.....So, when I said men are garbage, and the audience was happy to hear it, it shows

⁶ Anne-Karin Misje, "Stand-Up Comedy as Negotiation and Subversion," in *Popular Imagination: Essays on Fantasy and Cultural Practice*, ed. Sven-Erik Klinkmann (Turku, Finland: Nordic Network of Folklore, 2002), 87.

⁷ Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World Series)* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 217.

*that men are possibly, probably, maybe somehow problematic (All of Yang Li's comedy excerpts in this essay are translated by me from Chinese.)*⁸

Comedians expect and predict laughs. Yang Li, for example, paces her talking to pause for laughter. The *Rock & Roast* competition, in which she performed, has a time limitation for each performance. She took the time of laughter into consideration. More eminently, she took the audience into consideration when writing her routines. In addition to laughs, cheers and other various audience responses often request and solicit some improvised lines from the comedians immediately.

The live stage of *Rock & Roast* is much bigger than regular clubs, the conventional venues of stand-up comedy. It weakens the effectiveness of laughter to intermediate audiences and comedians. However, the voting system of *Rock & Roast* compensates for this loss and provides the audience a specialized channel to express their attitude towards the performances.

The second-person narrative is another element for stand-up comedians to increase interaction with the audience. "This direct engagement brings the audience even more fully into the performance, as their worldview is either validated or

⁸ *BYE 2020: Comedy Night*, (China: Tencent Video, Dec. 25, 2020), <http://v.qq.com/detail/8/89003.html>; my translation.

impugned.”⁹ In some of her gigs, Yang explicitly draws both the female and male audience to her performance by speaking to men (‘you’) as women collectively (‘us’).

3.1.1.2 Intimacy

Another crucial component of liveness is the intimacy between comedians and the audience, essentially made possible by the staging. The most iconic stage of stand-up comedy consists of a curtain and a brick wall. The simplicity creates an impression of “performance abstracted from any artifice.”¹⁰ “If it is theater, it is theater removed from its trappings, with nothing intruding on the intimacy between audience and performer.”¹¹

Although the staging within the recording studio of *Rock & Roast* lacks the simplicity of the classical setting of brick walls and curtains, the seating arrangement stimulates the one for stand-up in clubs or bars. The spatiotemporal intimacy is explicitly reflected by the psychological closeness between the audience and the performer on the stage. The size of the audience is maintained small, with only three to four rows closely surrounding the front semicircle of the stage. For the best experience of the audience, different from other TV shows, the seats for judges are arranged behind the audience rows.

⁹ Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World Series)* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 24.

¹⁰ Brodie, 51.

¹¹ Brodie, 51.

The microphone plays a vital role in amplifying the comedians' voices. In this way, the audience can hear whispers, caresses, and murmurs.¹² Another pertinent technique to Yang Li's comedy is the projection of close-ups on screen at the live site. One of her widely circulated lines, "men are garbage," was delivered to the audience through partially visual performance, for she only lip-synced the word "garbage."¹³ These techniques of amplification are critical to recreating the intimacy of stand-up performed in small bars or clubs.

The intimacy, conversely, ensures more interaction between performers and the audience. When Yang did a callback of the punchline "men are garbage" for the second time in another performance, the audience completes her sentence by shouting out her lip-synced aphonic word "garbage."

3.1.1.3 Marginality

In the discussion of stand-up comedian's performance of the "self," Brodie argues that "this social identity, demonstrated by vernacular theory about the stand-up comedy as a type is largely focused on someone having a perspective and speaking from margins."¹⁴ It requires comedians to uphold authenticity and consistency of their

¹² Brodie, 52; Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 187.

¹³ *Rock & Roast Season III*, episode 5, released Aug. 18, 2020, on Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/variety/p/topic/tuokouxiu3/index.html>.

¹⁴ Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World Series)* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 90.

marginalities with details throughout their performance. The marginality of Yang is her gender identity as a female suppressed and exploited by a male-dominant society. Her marginality remains constant through her persistence on the motif of her gendered experience in her stand-up comedy, in which she further details her identities with more intersectionality, such as rural women or single women.

The marginalized cultural identities of comedians can be shared, overlapping, or contradictory with the audience.¹⁵ The consistency of the marginalized identities is insufficient to engage the audience. The comedians need to continuously maintain and reaffirm the shared identity with the audience through their performance.¹⁶

Two prominent elements employed in her performance for her detailed persona and the shared marginality with the female audience are her intimate narrative imitating the mode of “girl talk,” her content about shared female anxiety, and the collective first-person perspective (‘we’) to include the audience:

We, women, know that our words are not important, and nobody cares except our friends. So, we just say nice things to make our friends happy. But you men are different. You guys are the leading characters of this

¹⁵ Brodie, 90.

¹⁶ Brodie, 105.

world [laughter], always standing in the center of the world. Every word you say is supper important and full of wisdom.¹⁷

She alternates between two aspects of marginality. She shares her own experience to solidify her female identity; she responds to women's generally shared experiences to strengthen her bonding with the audience. However, the audience is not homogenous. While she frames her marginality in the bonding with the female audience, she positions herself opposite the male audience. She applies some self-mockery to mediate this opposition:

I need to make more money quickly. You can tell from my personality. My career probably will not last long. I don't want to be poor. I don't want one day to be recognized by people on the street in my eighties, and they will say, 'See, she is the comedian who said men are all garbage! Wait, is she picking the garbage?' [laughter]¹⁸

3.1.1.4 Benign Violation

This opposing marginality in her comedy might not lead to offense to men. Even as a violation, it can still be regarded as acceptable by the male audience. As McGraw

¹⁷ *Rock & Roast Season III*, episode 5, released Aug. 18, 2020, on Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/variety/p/topic/tuokouxiu3/index.html>.

¹⁸ *BYE 2020: Comedy Night*, (China: Tencent Video, Dec. 25, 2020), <http://v.qq.com/detail/8/89003.html>.

and Warren write in “Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny,” humor with benign violations can elicit laughter and amusement, even though moral violation is usually associated with negative emotions. To qualify as a benign violation, the offense in comedy needs to meet the following conditions: “(a) a salient norm suggests that something is wrong, but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, (b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, or (c) the violation is psychologically distant [for the audience].”¹⁹

As for Yang Li’s joke, on the one hand, a dominating patriarchal norm supports male subjectivity subjugating females to their gaze. Yang’s reversed gaze upon males might trigger the audience who strictly follows this patriarchal hierarchy. On the other hand, a norm peculiar to performance is that the comedians on the stage are the spectacle examined by the audience. The voting system of *Rock & Roast* emphasizes this aspect of the power dynamic. Additionally, her teasing, although addressing all the male audience with a collective pronoun “you,” always following jokes contextualized by an individual case scenario, creates a safe psychological distance for most male audience members.

¹⁹ Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, ‘Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny,’ *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1142, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797610376073>

3.1.1.5 Comic License

Moreover, including the most benign violation, jokes in stand-up still work as social critiques.²⁰ Both the performance and the persona of comedians operate under the “comic license.” It allows comedians as the “dysfunctional persona” to revel in “dysfunctional” world views, which can easily be discounted and rejected.²¹ The disguise of “just kidding” provides a secure channel for comedians to share their “marginal” opinions. Yang’s satire on sexual coercion at the workplace or the “casting couch” well demonstrates the operation of the comic license:

Yang: In this show, I have two options. One way is just to work hard and write my jokes myself, like these male comedians [laughter]. But I can also choose not to write at all. When I have time, I can just knock on the door of Li Dan at night (Chinese comedian, executive producer of this show, and Yang’s boss. The following two names are her male peer comedians) [laughter and cheers] I will knock my way into the final round. Door-knocking (pioneer) comedian [laughter and applauds]. Just kidding. We can’t do that. It’s not fair [even more laughter and applauds].

²⁰ Lawrence E Mintz, “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” *American Quarterly* vol. 37, no. 1 (1985): 77; Sophie Quirk, *Why stand-up matters: How comedians manipulate and influence* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 139.

²¹ Sophie Quirk, *Why stand-up matters: How comedians manipulate and influence* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 140.

Li Dan (as the judge): Don't knock on my door. You can go to Cheng Lu.

Yang Li: If he doesn't answer, I will knock on Cheng Lu's door. If Cheng Lu doesn't answer, I will knock on Jianguo's door. I will knock my way into the final round of this competition. Door-knocking (pioneer) stand-up comedian [laughter and applauds]. Just kidding. We can't do that. It's not fair [even more laughter and applauds].²²

The comic license plays the most crucial role to make potential offenses acceptable and even amusing to a specific group of audience (male audience in Yang's case). It transforms the comedy stage into a playground that suspends social norms and a safe space to provoke the audience's reflections on social norms. However, in Yang's mediatized gigs circulated online, the comic license during her live performance is lost with the liveness of her performance.

3.1.2 Lost In Mediatization

As Kim argues in her monograph that mediatized K-pop preserves different levels of liveness due to the deliberate endeavor of production companies, *Rock & Roast* has made efforts to maintain the partial liveness of the performance.

One common technique to preserve the "liveness" is the usage of multiple cameras to emphasize the "local" audience as the surrogate or proxy for the home

²² *Rock & Roast Season III*, episode 2, released Jul. 29, 2020, on Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc002009hbt05i.html>; my translation.

audience. A camera dedicated to filming the audience provides more than “simply the sound of the audience.” The “home” audience can also see their facial expression and be psychically contagious by the atmosphere.²³

The local audience and judge can interact with Yang through laughter, votes, and other immediate responses. By contrast, the home audience cannot alter or contribute to the show. Due to mediatization, loss of interaction marks the loss of marginality as a social identity established by comedians on stage. In regular live performances, the separation of performer and audience by a stage and the intimacy re-bridged by the microphone can be seen as a balance of power. However, in mediatized performance of Yang, with the intimacy drastically lost, the amplification of her voice on stage turns metaphorical. It indicates that the mediatized comedian has a hegemonic say over the audience. This dubious authority of Yang as the performer on stage, alongside the publicity endorsed by Tencent Video, the streaming platform of *Rock & Roast* with one of the most significant market shares in video-streaming in China, further offset her marginality established in live performance.

Consequently, the comic license premised by marginality is suspended. The comedy being mediatized is no longer a “dysfunctional” or safe playground for any transgressive thought to slip in without constraints on duty to social norms. Losing her

²³ Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World Series)* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 101.

folklore-ness as of the people, Yang's mediatized performances become the de facto canonical version.²⁴ In mediatization, it lost its fluid context granted by the liveness.

Therefore, due to canonization, the comedies of Yang are now fixed as printed text, open to any harsh scrutiny and falsification. It contributes to the fact that most of the cyber discussion on Yang is based on her excerpted videos or written lines taken out of context. Without its context, her comic license is in double jeopardy. To regard the comedian's jokes on stage as their offstage opinions "would risk turning social commentary into madness," according to Richard Herring as cited by Quirk.²⁵

A later performance by two comedians in *Roast* (吐槽大会), another production by the same company and casts of *Rock and Roast*) responded to Yang Li's famous lines "men are garbage" and "why men are so ordinary yet so confident."²⁶ It sets a paradigm to preserve liveness in mediatized performances:

Welcome to the Fashion Show Spring 2021,

Today, designer Yang Li,

Brings us her newest menswear brand.

Gar Ba Ge – Wear [Two male comedians put on garbage bags]

²⁴ Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World Series)* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 187.

²⁵ Sophie Quirk, *Why stand-up matters: How comedians manipulate and influence* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 37.

²⁶ *Roast Season V*, episode 5, released on Feb. 28, 2021, on Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc00200olklqer.html>.

The material extracted from these two models

By Designer Yang Li

Is so ordinary,

But the clothing shows so much confidence

Stand up, our male audience!

I am so ordinary

But I am so confident. ²⁷

By self-mockery, this performance questions Yang's criticism of men without offending the female audience who supports Yang. In this show, the proxy or surrogate of the home audience is no longer the local audience or judges but the performers. By directly relating themselves to the audience, the comedians maintained their marginality, legitimizing the opinions conveyed in their performance with comic license without being scrutinized outside the comic setting. However, possibly due to lack of controversy, this performance was rarely mentioned as a paratext in the cyber discussion of Yang.

3.1.3 Popular Misogyny vs. Popular Feminism

Providing the same effect of madness as Herring warms, the excerpted yet most controversial lines from Yang's comedy are used by online popular misogyny as the best

²⁷ *Roast Season V*, episode 5, released on Feb. 28, 2021, on Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc00200olklqer.html>; my translation.

material to reverse online popular feminism. In *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser emphasizes that popular misogyny is reactive against popular feminism.²⁸ It appropriates the logic of popular feminism to mobilize male anxiety. On the one hand, it follows the core principle of economy of visibility shared with popular feminism. Yang's stand-up comedy gained success for involving more people to discuss female experience under patriarchy. Similarly, misogynists attempted to gain publicity and impede or even reverse her success.

On the other hand, same as popular feminism, popular misogyny revolves around "injury," while popular feminism targets injuries caused by sexism, popular misogyny targets injuries caused by feminism. When participants of this "censoring Yang Li" campaign encouraged more men to join them, one of their slogans was that "the tricks of those feminists really work" (打'拳'真的有用), implying that they were appropriating popular feminist tactics. One frequently repeated comment on Weibo and Zhihu is, "how will women feel if we exchange 'men' with 'women' in her lines."²⁹ However, only few of her punchlines can be altered in this way. Most of her jokes would

²⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 37.

²⁹ Chiming Shuangbiao bot (Screen name), Weibo, Sep. 14, 2021, 10:33, <https://weibo.com/6190405002/Kyb5Dt7n1?type=reply>; Li Xialuoke (Screen name), Zhihu, Dec. 29, 2020, 04:11, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/341040794/answer/1650994414>

be invalid since many experiences mentioned are peculiar to women, such as appearance anxiety and tokophobia.

Moreover, popular misogyny and popular feminism heavily rely on the discourse of capacity. As Banet-Weiser argues, both promise “a neoliberal notion of individual capacity” (for work, for confidence, for economic success) and attribute obstacles to this capacity to the “injury.”³⁰ In other words, popular feminism does not intend to criticize or challenge neoliberalism. Instead, it even embraces neoliberalist values. It is popular precisely because it is not radical. It is also applicable to the case of Chinese gender trolls, as analyzed in the first chapter.

Such a tendency is pronounced in Yang’s comedy. Tapping into the neoliberalist capacity, her comedy is a neoliberal practice. Some of her performances in *Rock & Roast* have one or two lines of product placement. She links her joke to a promoted product or even turns the product placement into a joke. She also performed at an Alibaba commercial event to promote its membership for makeup and skincare shopping, mainly targeting female customers.

From this sense, one can argue that her comedy is ineffective for feminism because it is a harmless protest concealing the fundamental contention and keeping women bearing the status quo. However, it is undeniable that her stand-ups attracted

³⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 45-46.

attention to feminist issues and sparked public debates. As Quirk argues, to make any contribution to social changes, stand-up comedy as “a medium to communicate to the mass of people, it must, by definition, be popular.”³¹

The popularity of Yang Li’s comedy led to the formation of online “fans” communities gathering women who shared acceptance of her comedy and its feminist transgressions. Although members of these communities rarely clearly identify themselves as feminists, by congregating in grassroots group discussions about Yang Li, they find a new way in social media to overcome barriers to feminist activism caused by widely circulated feminist-bashing. Such an online community can be regarded as an organic version of consciousness-raising groups, the community that played a crucial role in the early formation of the Women’s Rights Movement, which will be analyzed in-depth in the later section of this chapter.³² The possible effect brought by the online fan community indicates that Yang’s comedy could open a slit for possible social changes.

Additionally, the identity of Yang as a female comedian is a form of violation. The history of females entering the stand-up comedy industry parallels the chequered advancement of feminism. Stand-ups written and performed by male comedians were

³¹ Sophie Quirk, *Why stand-up matters: How comedians manipulate and influence* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 171.

³² 5. Katie Blevins, “bell hooks and Consciousness-Raising: Argument for a Fourth Wave of Feminism,” in *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, ed. Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach (Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 91-108.

rarely regarded as their gendered experience. In contrast, the online oppositions against Yang exemplify those perceptions that female comedians are often highly bound with and limited by their gender. Yang has been frequently accused not as a comedian but as a woman. One gig in her most criticized performance explicitly responds to this point:

I had a hysteroscopy by a male doctor[laughter]. I was scared immediately when I entered the operating room because his first sentence was 'please lie down' [laughter]. The whole process was so professional without any awkwardness. That moment was the best of this year..... I was treated not as a woman, but as a human.....after the anesthesia, he asked, 'how do you feel?' I said, "I feel free" [laughter and applauds].³³

3.1.4 Transcending Popular Feminism

This section analyzes the liveness of Yang Li's performance composed of four elements: interaction, intimacy, marginality, and comic license. However, in online circulation, especially her widely spread excerpted clips and lines, mediatization lost her liveness with the marginality and comic license. The relatively favorable reception of Yang's live performance and the extreme negative emotions aroused by her primarily male critics on social media represent different ways popular feminism is being consumed and debated in China today. The "comic license" of Yang's live performance

³³ *BYE 2020: Comedy Night*, (China: Tencent Video, Dec. 25, 2020), <http://v.qq.com/detail/8/89003.html>; my translation.

allows Yang to express female “injuries” and complaints openly and at the same time cajoles the male audience to temporarily participate in Yang’s routine as co-conspirators through laughter rather than gendered antagonists. In decontextualized social media, this liveness and mutuality are lost, and Yang’s criticism of patriarchy is taken literally and personally by antifeminist netizens.

Furthermore, I argue that both popular misogyny behind criticism of Yang, and popular feminism reflected by her jokes, subscribe to neoliberalism. Drawing on females’ anxiety in everyday life while revealing males’ privilege behind it, Yang’s popular feminism is certainly transgressive. It attracts attention and provokes online discussion on gender issues, bringing them into broader public discourse. In cyberspace, where the rise of feminist demands is countered by increased gendertrolling and feminism-bashing, the online discussion soon turns into a space fueled by antagonism and personal attacks. Nevertheless, Yang’s identity as a female comedian and her online fan community as an organic consciousness-raising group are still effective in attracting attention and provoking public discussion over feminist issues. It shows the potential to open a slit for social changes.

3.2 Feminist without Feminism: Ladies' Character and Consciousness-Raising Group

On March 6, 2018, two days before international women's day, an ordinary Weibo user SUMBuer (screenname) posted a drama idea. Staring four single professional women leads in their forties autonomously cohabitating, this proposal for a drama/synopsis of a drama called "Ladies' Character" attracted tons of attention on the internet overnight. It was reposted thousands of times with creative re-creation/derivative creations. Another Weibo user, RAINXuan (screenname) soon designed and posted posters that attracted even wider cyber attention to this drama idea. Even Chen Shu and Zeng Li, two of the ideal actress SUMBuer mentioned, also reposted this drama idea with positive comments. Later in May, Easy Entertainment, the mother company of the agent of actress Chen Shu, officially announced they undertake the production of "Ladies' Character."

Contrary to these pronounced feminist interpretations, SUMBuer later deliberately claimed that "This is just a random thought. I respect any form of value, and I respect everyone. I am not a feminist or advocating feminism....."³⁴ Her deliberate denial of a feminist identity makes this event a vivid embodiment of "feminists without

³⁴ Chengting Mao, "Feminist Activism via Social Media in China," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 26, no. 2 (February 2020): pp. 245-258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1767844>, 246.

feminism,” in which ones deny their endowment of feminism yet concerned about the gendered experience of women.

Chinese media platforms widely covered this story with similar commentaries. Most of these articles attributed the popularity of this post to the lack of independent female characters in mainstream Chinese soap operas. Even SUMBuer herself comments that “no petty familial fights, no in-law rivalry, no cheating, this drama does not have these cheesy cringy plots.” Moreover, some of them emphasize the misogynist tendency in this story pitch, expressing concern about censorship because of this transgression and opposition against the mainstream media outlet that copes with the signal urging women into marriage and reproduction released by the central government. Another concern is that playwrights might self-censor and compromise to finally arrange marriages for these four single women as their ending.

3.2.1 (Counter-)Narrative of Female Rivalry and Undesirable Single Women in Popular Culture

The close bonding between these four heroines represents a feminist ideal of sisterhood, opposing female rivalry ubiquitous in nowadays Chinese soap operas. One prominent genre of female rivalry would be palace scheming drama, a genre first created and defined/began by the 2004 Hong Kong drama *War and Beauty*. This genre usually features power struggles between the emperor and his harems and concubines. In these stories, the elevated status of one harem or concubine is often at the expense of others’ miscarriages and even death. Thus, they usually plot against each other. Without

upward social mobility that was exclusively available to males in the traditional patriarchy, such hypergamy was the only “career” path for these women. Therefore, dramas of this genre are full of intensive female rivalry.

However, the intensive female rivalry expands to Chinese dramas with contemporary urban settings as well, despite their supposedly advanced gender-role attitudes. The biggest hit drama *First Half of My Life* in 2017, which marketed itself as a female-centered drama, provides an example of the general tendency of inserting female rivalry in Chinese soap operas regardless of their period. This drama was adapted from the original novel of the same name by Yi Shu. The novel is a homage to *Remorse* by Lu Xun as a Chinese version of an extended discussion in his earlier famous essay “What Happens After Nora Walks Out.” Yi Shu also borrowed the name of two main characters from *Remorse*: Zijun and Juansheng. Unlike the tragic ending arranged by Lu Xun as a satire, the end of this novel finalized an independent female figure Zijun. Overcoming various difficulties in her life, Zijun eventually learns to support herself without help from her ex-husband Juansheng, her female friend, and her business partner. Resorting to her efforts, she reverses her previous role in this novel as the weak.

Ironically, in the adapted drama, the added protagonist who does not exist in the original novel, He Han, turned this feminist work into a Cinderella-style romance with a crony love triangle and unexpected female rivalry between Zijun and her best friend and the girlfriend of He Han, Tang Jing. Many intractable challenges faced by Zijun are

swimmingly solved by He Han, sometimes even in a fashion of *deus ex machina*. The transformation of a more independent Zijun was not preserved in this adaptation. On the contrary, the only change in Zijun is that she relies on a different man in the second half of the drama. The drama lost the feminist awakening dimension of its original novel and repeated Cinderella's cliché with a rich implication of patriarchy with the romance of the strong independent men (He Han), weak attractive women (Zijun), and strong independent yet unattractive women (Tang Jing).

The story of “ladies’ character” conveys the discontent of the audience towards the current market of Chinese drama, which lacks works resembling current plights facing Chinese women. Instead of modern Cinderella romantic stories, they have been longing for realistic depictions of women’s daily experiences in patriarchic postsocialist China, which resonate with their lives.

In addition to the audience’s urge to consume popular cultural products positively and realistically representing women, preeminently, *Ladies’ Character* resonates with the sentiments of female Weibo users against the “leftover women” discourse. As this thesis scrutinizes in previous sections, Chinese state feminism does not challenge the gendered role imposed on women to be wives and mothers. On the contrary, the All-China Women Federation even produced a humiliating phrase “leftover women” to push single women into marriage to fulfill their reproductive duty in the household for the nation even while they are productive labors in the corporate

market. As for Western neoliberal feminism, even the solution for Work-life balance in *Lean In*, which touts feminism for personal gains, also implies a belief in marriage as a default choice for successful women.

Single women can live an enviable life. This simple message conveyed in the short post of “Ladies’ Characters” broaches the idea in the minds of many women yet is not visible in most media outlets. By contrast, various mass media production acknowledges and reproduces the malicious imagination of “leftover women.” For instance, because of images of a few participants in the renowned Chinese speedy dating show “If You Are the One,” the initially neutral phrase “Nü Boshi”(女博士) referring to women with doctoral degrees has been the byname of bookish and unattractive women. This imagination of “leftover” well-educated women is widely spread, whilst a 2009 report shows no significant difference between women with doctoral degrees and other groups of women regarding their average marriage age and marriage rate.³⁵ “Ladies’ Character” counters such a narrative initiated by the state that highly educated and professionally successful women are undesirable.

³⁵ Zheng Wang and Lu Xinyu, eds., *性别与视觉：百年中国影像研究* (Shanghai Shi: Fudan University Press, 2016), 277.

3.2.3 Feminist without Feminism as Organic Cyber Consciousness-Raising Group

As we examined in the earlier chapter, Chinese online misogyny, Western neoliberal feminism, and Chinese state feminism all utilize individual capacity to mute feminist appeals on the structural and social level to prevent them from entering the public discussion from the personal level. For example, victim-blaming is a common tactic to depoliticize sexual harassment, which should be treated as a social issue, neither a legal issue between only the victim and the culprit nor a moral issue of the molester.

A rallying slogan of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s can form a powerful counterargument to this repression of women question at the individual level: "The individual is political."³⁶ Consciousness-raising groups are one of the most vital realms to reaching this consensus between women. It is where women share their personal experiences encountering sexism. However, such discussions enlighten them that their own experiences stem from the gendered power dynamic of society. Thus, these groups soon fueled both personal and social changes, as Polk explains:

"As members of the group share experiences and attitudes, they become aware that the problems they thought were theirs alone are less a

³⁶ Unknown author

function of their own personal hangups than of the social structure and culture in which they live. Through sharing experiences, women find that personal problems related to being a woman cannot be solved without an understanding of the society and, often, without attempting to implement changes within it as well."³⁷

According to bell hooks, the consciousness-raising group has the following vital features: (1) group members share their everyday experiences of sexism, (2) discussion and communication play vital roles in the process of group formation (Luise Eichenbaum believes that discussions in consciousness-raising groups can also provide psychological help as a mutual-aid group or therapy group for female victims of gender violence),³⁸ (3) its objective is the conversion of group members to feminist activists, (4) it reaches agreements upon realistic expectations for change, (5) it is non-hierarchical, everyone's voice can be heard.³⁹

³⁷ Polk, B. B. Women's liberation: Movement for equality. In C. Safilios-Rothschild (Ed.), *Toward a sociology of women*. Lexington, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1972, 321 -330; Diane Kravetz, "Consciousness-Raising Groups in the 1970's," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1978): pp. 168-186, [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1978.tb00532.x.](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1978.tb00532.x;);

³⁸ Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 2-5.

³⁹ bell hooks. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. (Cambridge: South End Press), 11.

In an essay that positively regards digital feminism as the herald of emerging fourth-wave feminism, Katie Blevins compares the current online community of feminists to the consciousness-raising group:

*"The ability for geographically dispersed individuals belonging to marginalized groups to connect and challenge hegemonic discourses..... allows marginalized groups to participate and form more cohesive communities, regardless of geographic limitations. These digital networks can function as expressions of new collective identities, both resistant and transformative."*⁴⁰

By sharing these features, feminists without feminism also resemble the functions of a contemporary version of consciousness-raising groups, for it provides safe cyberspace for women to voice their problems and experiences equally and freely, with a drastically reduced risk of being targeted by gender trolls. While consciousness-raising groups in the early stage of the feminist movement usually consist of friends or colleagues who were acquaintance before joining the groups, social media gather strangers regardless of the geographic limitation.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Katie Blevins, "bell hooks and Consciousness-Raising: Argument for a Fourth Wave of Feminism." (*Mediating misogyny*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018), 98.

⁴¹ Katie Blevins, 98.

However, in *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks criticized the trend of lifestyle-based feminism since the 1980s in which “any woman could be a feminist no matter what her political beliefs.”⁴² Although her description seems identical to feminism without feminism which I propose as a valuable alternative for the currently available approach to women’s plight in China, it is vital to differentiate these two. Emphasizing lifestyle-based feminism disregards wrongly the necessity of learning about “patriarchy as a system of institutionalized domination” and making a well-informed decision to be a feminist, bell hooks disagreed with those who utilize the label of feminism to improve their economic status.⁴³ From this sense, this critique is more applicable to elite neoliberal feminists analyzed and criticized in the previous chapter who utilize the feminist label for their personal gain.

Bell hooks had an evident opposing attitude towards elites-defined feminism, of which prosperity followed the progress made by the consciousness-raising group. The history of institutionalized feminism is the history of the exile of previous feminist trailblazers. The consciousness-raising groups gathering women from various socioeconomic backgrounds are replaced by academic feminism exclusive to privileged

⁴² bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

⁴³ bell hooks, 7.

groups of women. Such a transition symbolizes that feminism thus loses its “mass-based potential.”⁴⁴

In contrast to elites-defined feminism, the new trend of “feminists without feminism” heralds a possible return of consciousness-raising group as a mass-based women’s organic movement, a movement for the majority of women to reclaim their voice from the most privileged 1%. It is a genuine appeal to disenchant “feminism,” to renounce this speciously progressive posture with a regressive political stand, to live a progressive life without invoking the ostentatious label and its “exchange value.”

3.3 Limitations

In the aforementioned cases of “feminists without feminism,” this organic women movement sufficiently demonstrates its potential to gather women to reflect on their daily experience with sexism and patriarchy while circumventing gendertrolling and political risk facing activism in Chinese cyberspace. As the section on consciousness-raising groups emphasized, participants of “feminists without feminism” are usually motivated by their personal experiences. Thus, it is difficult for them to be self-reflexive towards their internalized sexism. Moreover, as in the case of Ladies’ Characters which

⁴⁴ Bell hooks, 10.

focuses exclusively on upper-middle-class urban women, it is difficult as well to be alerted by neoliberal tendencies.

Secondly, not directly interacting with feminist bashing, this movement is not destigmatizing feminism targeted by gendertrolls in the Chinese context. It is lucid that feminists without feminism can be seen as an endeavor to shift away from the collective identity of feminists. Therefore, they never intend to eulogize feminism. However, as their unwished-for result, it is almost impossible to impact or alter misogynists positively. Moreover, such a movement can hardly include males.

Thirdly, due to the digital nature of this movement, the digital divide might be an obstacle to preventing the participation of certain groups of women. The first-level digital divide excludes women who have no access to the internet or smart mobile device, such as women of the lower class. Meanwhile, the second-level digital divide excludes elderly women who do not know how to use social media. Additionally, with various individuated focus on different issues, this movement can hardly form a massive effect and attract public attention on a large scale to cause social changes.

4. Conclusion

Starting by analyzing the projective term used on Chinese organic feminist “Tianyuan Feminist,” this thesis first reviews the cultural and social background of gendertrolling as a protuberant symptom of backlash to feminism in China today. The first chapter analyzes the structural flaws of both State feminism and neoliberal feminism, showing that they both share the following four seminaries: 1. Their trickle-down scheme enlarges its inner equality; 2. Both are Justifying the values of the existing system; 3. By evoking work-life balance explicitly and inexplicitly, they respectively reinforce the gendered division of labor; 4. They both take “feminism” as a profitable label and focus more on its symbolic exchange value. In contrast, feminists without feminism avoid the label of feminism and thus dismiss its exchange value as a neoliberal commodity”. Instead, they focus on the use-value of feminism, namely, actions to alleviate the plights of women in nowadays China.

In chapter two, in the case of Yang Li’s stand-up comedy, I argue that the relatively favorable reception of Yang’s live performance and the extreme negative emotions aroused by her primarily male critics on social media represent different ways popular feminism is being consumed and debated in China today. The “comic license” of Yang’s live performance allows Yang to express female “injuries” and complaints openly and at the same time cajoles the male audience to temporarily participate in Yang’s routine as co-conspirators through laughter rather than gendered antagonists. In

decontextualized social media, this liveness and mutuality are lost, and Yang's criticism of patriarchy is taken literally and personally by antifeminist netizens. Drawing on females' anxiety in everyday life while revealing males' privilege behind it, Yang's popular feminism is certainly transgressive. It attracts attention and provokes online discussion on gender issues, bringing them into broader public discourse. In cyberspace, where the rise of feminist demands is countered by increased gendertrolling and feminism-bashing, the online discussion soon turns into a space fueled by antagonism and personal attacks. This analysis of Yang's comic feminism shows that Chinese cyberspace constitutes an important site of contestation in understanding feminist issues in China.

Furthermore, the case of "Ladies' Character" further demonstrates the potential of "feminists without feminism" to form a contemporary version of the consciousness-raising group in China, overcoming any geographic barrier. Not only does it share the functions of therapy mutual aid groups with CR groups, but it also heirs the feature of a safe space for women to share their daily experience of sexism and thus realize that their personal experiences are an individualized symptom of the structural problems in patriarchy.

In short, "feminists without feminism" shows the potential to address problems challenging Chinese women yet unsolved or even neglected by both Chinese state feminism and western neoliberal feminism. However, the movement of "feminists

without feminism” also has its limitations. Although it can take the role of feminist education, which bell hooks emphasize about the consciousness-raising group, the equal and open access of participation create difficulties to address some neoliberal tendency, as shown in both the case of Yang Li and Ladies’ characters. Its nature as an individuated activism also results in difficulties to provoke public discussion on a larger scale. Additionally, due to the cyber locale of “feminist without feminism,” the first-level and second-level digital divide still hinder the participation of some working-class or rural women.

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