

Navigating (self)censorship in China's Feminist and #MeToo movements

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From the start of the Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018 to the present, victims of sexual assault have used public attention to seek resolution for individual cases. They have gone through a process of first being silenced to gradually being allowed to make their voices partially heard. The most important reason for this shift is the scattered nature of sexual harassment cases and the randomness of their occurrence. However, this does not mean that victims and their supporters do not need to bring any pressure to bear, nor does it mean that those of us with personal experience of #MeToo have not paid a price for the current situation.

When the #MeToo movement was in full swing in 2018, my accusation against CCTV host Zhu Jun brought discussion of #MeToo to its high point, but it soon caused all discussion of sexual harassment cases to be officially banned. Only two relatively powerful media outlets, *Tencent* and *Caixin*, published interviews, which were quickly deleted. In addition, no media was allowed to report on any sexual harassment cases going forward, especially ones involving public #MeToo accusations; this also resulted in the cases involving [activist] Lei Chuang and [journalist] Zhang Wen, among others, being forced out of the public spotlight.

#MeToo was banned mainly because of Zhu Jun's powerful connections within the system, and my accusation against him very likely involved a higher-level coverup; this is something that those in the system do not want revealed. However, the gradual relaxing of censorship surrounding the #MeToo topic was also related to the Zhu Jun case. In August 2018, Zhu Jun sued me and Mai Shao, who spoke on social media on my behalf when I first publicly came forward with my experience in July, for defamation. According to Wang Zhi'an, a former host who left *CCTV*, this changed the nature of the event from a #MeToo-inspired accusation to a judicial case, or even entertainment news. As such, both serious media outlets and those focused on entertainment found it newsworthy. After all, the authorities cannot stop the media from reporting on an active lawsuit.

As far as I know, Zhu Jun did not report his lawsuit to his superiors, who were then unhappy about him attracting more public attention to the incident. Because of this, after Zhu sued me, *CCTV* quickly abandoned the protection they had given him. Accordingly, I also had more room to speak out on social media. After this, I and other feminists worked together to explore possible ways to speak out about sexual harassment issues. In the post-#MeToo period, the cases of Liu Jingyao, who accused the founder and CEO of Jingdong, Liu Qiangdong, of rape in the summer of 2018 and sued him for damages, and Professor Qian Fengsheng of Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, who was fired for sexually assaulting a student, as well as other high-profile incidents, also helped sexual harassment issues to garner widespread attention from the general public.

In my experience, to avoid certain accusations—that we are being manipulated by “foreign forces” or engaging in “premeditated #MeToo accusations”—and the risks that come with them, feminists must emphasise that all they are doing is providing support. They should also avoid having too much social media contact with the person involved. We often receive written submissions from victims of sexual assault, but we encourage them to register for an online ID themselves and to post their own appeals, after which we can repost and spread the word. At the same time, if we establish private contacts with a party involved in a sexual assault case and provide legal and voluntary assistance, it is necessary to keep this confidential, even to the point that we only communicate via Signal or other secure platforms. In short, we cannot give the impression that feminists, and especially activists, are personally connected to the victims of sexual assault.

On social media, we also take care not to make accusations against powerful agencies such as the police and universities—especially on issues related to ineffective enforcement by police departments—as content related to this often crosses the red line for investigation, which is very dangerous. Most of the time, our accusations focus on the perpetrator of the sexual assault and on exposing the harm done to victims by the wider rape culture after an incident is exposed. Liu Qiangdong, for example, used edited videos to smear his accuser, Liu Jingyao. For things like this, in addition to writing articles ourselves, we also create various hashtags to encourage everyone to participate in internet discussions, which can also help to bring together posts that are scattered across social media.

Although many media outlets are willing to report on sexual assault cases because of the huge amount of traffic these types of stories generate, the attention has brought new challenges to #MeToo this year. It is already the case that the topic is no longer one that feminists control but is one in which men’s rights groups, populist forces, and other groups participate so that discussions of sexual assault cases can end up facing anti-publicity and anti-feminist backlashes at any time, which is counter to the original intention of #MeToo.

And, after two years of #MeToo cases appearing one after another, another inescapable issue was the constantly rising attention threshold for cases of sexual assault. From inappropriate power relations in universities to the kind of Stockholm syndrome mentality experienced by the victims of sexual assault—popularised in Fang Siqu’s novel *First Love Paradise* (第一爱乐园)—the public has become increasingly numb to a certain kind of sexual assault narrative and instead tends to focus on cases with more sensational plots. This has resulted in demands for women to provide more shocking private details; otherwise, the public does not pay enough attention.

That there is this kind of attention threshold has posed a huge challenge to #MeToo. Even though we do not want to see it, we must admit that there have been public accusations in #MeToo cases that are seriously inconsistent with the facts. For example, in the recent case of Liang Ying’s accusation of date rape, there were many details, including about forced abortion and betrothal gifts, for which no evidence could be produced. Such accusations are not only most likely false, but also the arguments are anti-sex and irrelevant to feminism. The Liang Ying case initially received overwhelming support in online discussions, but when no evidence could be provided, online opinion reversed its verdict. What prompted the accuser to make such unfounded allegations? In addition to the accuser’s situation and individual character, there is another important reason we all know well: only more and more sensational stories can arouse the public’s interest.

However, when levelled at feminists participating in #MeToo, the use of this term, “reversal,” is unfair, and is often a deliberate setup by men’s rights and populist forces. There are many reasons why the #MeToo wave has risen worldwide. One is that there is often not enough evidence in sexual harassment and sexual assault cases to meet the evidentiary standards of existing legal procedures. Another is that the public security organs fail to intervene immediately when cases are reported,

resulting in evidence being lost or becoming no longer usable. It is precisely because of this kind of insufficiency of evidence that those bringing forward cases have resorted to online appeals for a solution. Because of this, all the cases we encounter related to #MeToo are invariably lacking in evidence. Because of the absence of law enforcement on issues involving sexual harassment and sexual assault, feminists and #MeToo participants are doing the work of the judicial authorities. This is the value, but also the predicament, of #MeToo: that the participants in individual cases have no choice but to take on the work of the legal system or the media. But, in a situation where feminist organisations are suppressed and banned, this becomes an almost completely uncompensated and voluntary form of labour and emotional support, with extremely limited resources.

As I mentioned earlier, to avoid orchestrated accusations, feminists' help to victims of sexual assault must not be out in the open, which also puts #MeToo at risk of stagnation. Activists who work on #MeToo cases cannot tell the public about their participation. This means the public has a very limited understanding of the complexities of sexual assault. After all, sexual assault cases and the #MeToo movement are by no means the same thing.

In fact, #MeToo is the last resort for victims of sexual assault, because it represents the failure of the judicial system and of individual confrontation, and it means that the people involved must use methods that are injurious to themselves to save themselves. Before this step is taken, supporters who decide to intervene in a case need to do a lot of work to assist the victim. For example, they first need to explore all the possible paths to get justice or compensation, which requires a lot of offline activity and experience. At the same time, the complexity of sexual assault often causes the person involved to be in a state of long-term stress, and the rigorous examination of the sexual assault accusation becomes the responsibility and the challenge of those supporting her.

Feminists' involvement in individual cases requires understanding and tolerance of the individual, as well as sincerity and responsibility when dealing with public discussions. There are no shortcuts when it comes to these two aspects. The only way to get there is to expend a large amount of thankless labour and emotional engagement; personal restraint is also necessary. Understanding of the complexities of sexual assault comes through the process of conducting this work and, if we cannot find an outlet for our frustrations and reflections when participating in individual cases, we will not be able to make the public truly understand this complexity. Nor will we be able to put our feminist beliefs into practice, which is the only way #MeToo can be pushed further.

As the public demands for #MeToo stories remain at the level of the resolution of individual cases, and the space for public advocacy is extremely limited, it is possible that #MeToo may be reduced to a slogan. Capital and the public authorities are in the process of gradually suppressing #MeToo's previous achievements. When the people involved have no choice but to fight each other and run over each other for attention, #MeToo's original advocacy of fairness and democracy is transformed into the idea that feminists should take full responsibility for the movement, as a way of neutralising it.

#MeToo's predicament derives from censorship by public authorities, and censorship pressure on feminists continues to intensify. Feminists on social media are clearly divided into two groups based on whether they pay attention to issues relating to sexual minorities and keep in mind the importance of class analysis. Feminists who do focus on these issues are judged by feminists who do not and are labelled "egalitarian" and "the university crowd"—two terms that are clearly stigmatised on the Chinese internet. The idea is that you are sympathising with men and you are not qualified to be a feminist. Feminists on Weibo have invented many insulting words to use against other women. For example, they refer to married women as "married donkeys" (驴) and lesbians who fight for marriage equality as "donkeys in preparation" (驴). And if you object to this kind of insulting language, your status as a feminist will also be called into question.

The discussion about whether to attack married women or sexual minorities has, to a large extent, turned into an internal struggle among feminists. In the face of arguments like “same-sex marriage will lead to surrogacy, so we must oppose same-sex marriage,” that male to female trans people “want to take safe spaces away from women,” or “trans people can’t really change their gender,” and other false statements, the opposing side has to do a lot of work to refute these rumours, while also being subjected to attacks from those who accuse them of betraying feminism.

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Recently, these attacks have risen in prominence, with more conservative feminists believing the reason current feminist discussions have been suppressed by the government is because of the well-known feminist activists who have been the victims of repression. This section of the movement takes an extremely patriarchal standpoint and accuses Feminist Voices (♀♀♀, 2009–18) [a vocal feminist organisation in China whose founder, Lü Pin, was forced into exile in the United States after the detention of the Feminist Five in 2015] of taking a political standpoint because it discussed the topic of women’s rights for Muslim women. And the accusation of taking a political standpoint is currently a very serious, and possibly irrefutable, one on social media platforms, which can result in the accused being unable to rebut the charges or even being permanently banned.

However, it must be pointed out that #MeToo has made feminist issues more prominent on social networks. It is also the case that the large number of women on Weibo who pay attention to feminist issues makes our support for sexual assault cases even stronger. The presence within feminist discussions of the discrimination faced by other disadvantaged groups and the false charges of “taking a political standpoint” very likely originate in some general characteristics of contemporary young people: regardless of their attitude towards feminism, they are well aware that these kinds of accusations can have a lot of damaging power and that, given the state’s censorship of political standpoints, such false charges have become another kind of learned violence. In a situation like this, the appearance of such contradictions among feminists is regrettable, but it is also inevitable. What’s more, all feminists, no matter their position, feel that women suffer from structural oppression in all aspects of society, and feminists must confront attacks from both the state and social media platforms, such as women’s rights cases remaining unresolved, being prohibited from speaking, or having social media accounts suddenly deleted.

In a situation like this, there is understandably considerable anxiety among feminists, which often leads one group to feel that the other is causing trouble, while at the same time stressing the power of unity to an excessive degree, even to the point of demanding that feminists be unified in word and deed and considering women who violate this rule to be traitors. All we can do is to face this anxiety directly and realise that it comes from their predicament. If we exclude others because their remarks are not beautiful enough, this also violates the demands we place on ourselves as feminists.

No-one can deny that from speaking out as a participant in #MeToo to acting offline or speaking online, we have always faced censorship or self-censorship. And all we can do is confront it directly and break it down into specific problems. In the process of dealing with each specific problem, we must preserve our confidence in ourselves and not give up.

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