

Title page

(Un)filial daughters and digital feminisms in China:

The stories of awakening, resisting, and finding comrades

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## Declaration

I, XUMENG XIE, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

This thesis sets out to understand Chinese feminist struggles in a so-called digital era by looking at the experiences and practices of an emerging generation of digital feminists that came into light in Chinese feminist movements. Conceptually and methodologically, this research took inspirations from an interdisciplinary body of literature including feminist theory, sociology, media and cultural studies, girlhood studies and gender studies. Inspired by online ethnography and feminist participatory methodologies, it combined an online tracking of feminist events on *Weibo* with semi-structured interviews and social media diary study with 21 Chinese girls and young women.

This thesis explores the embedded and embodied experiences of these participants as they discover and learn about feminism, resist and challenge gender and sexual inequalities, and try to build connections with like-minded people within and beyond the digital sphere. By charting feminist responses and resistance to familial discourses and norms around girlhood and young femininity, I show the emergence of feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters that arises from but also comes to reconfigure gender and sexuality within a neoliberal and postsocialist context of patriarchal familism in China. I build upon the concepts of networked counterpublics and networked affects to explore how these (un)filial daughters are networked to carve out spaces for feminist discussion in social media. Employing an affective-discursive analysis, I also tune into how networked feminist resistance and alliances are formed not merely on the basis of how women and feminists talk about these issues but also how they feel.

## Impact Statement

Situating within the research field of digital feminisms, this research provides original and crucial insights into how social media enables new forms of feminist connections and alliances, reflecting on the possibilities and challenge for doing feminisms in the context of a neoliberal and postsocialist China. By positioning Chinese digital feminisms in relation to the rich legacies of women's movements in China, I show the continuation of feminist struggles against patriarchal and familial values, norms and discourses. In the meantime, it highlights how ordinary girls and young women actively engage in feminisms via social media in order to better understand and galvanise feminist movements as collective and intergenerational projects.

This project recognises how online feminist spaces and networks are valued particularly by ordinary Chinese girls and young women because their feminist ideas and actions are not welcomed and supported at school, family, and wider society. Speaking to a broader literature looking at young people and digital media and cultures, I call upon future scholarship to stay attuned to how younger generation navigate intimate and public life through technological advancements as well as rapidly shifting social, cultural and political contexts. Through this research, I hope to encourage researchers to actively participate in open and collaborative dialogues regarding feminist movements in Asian and non-Western contexts. This thesis serves not only to contribute to scholarly debates and research, but also to provide valuable insights for feminist practices and grassroots activism.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introducing the project

The past decade has seen growing interests in the role of internet and particularly social media in facilitating feminist activism and potential social and political change within the fields of feminist media studies (Jouet, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Munro, 2013; Rivers, 2017). Engaging with and contributing to digital feminism as an emerging field of knowledge, this doctoral research sets out to understand how feminisms are experienced, practiced and (re)vitalised in a so-called digital era. I am particularly interested in documenting grassroots feminist voices in Chinese cyberspace, particularly on the Twitter-like microblogging site *Weibo* as a prominent platform for feminist struggles in contemporary China. Mainland China provides an interesting and context-specific case for studying digital feminist activism where limited space is allowed for social justice movements and political contentions both in online and offline settings. This research therefore also takes account of the rich legacies of Chinese feminist and women's movements, one core dimension of which is to consider how Chinese women and feminists negotiate the relationship with the state facing stringent state control over intimate and public life (Fincher, 2018; Z. Wang, 2005, 2017b).

This research is one of the first doctoral research projects that gives prominence to how ordinary girls and younger women in China experience everyday feminisms and engage in gender and feminism related discussions online as forms of digital activism. It connects with the literature of Chinese feminist movements but departs from previous research that followed the notion of state feminism in the socialist era (Barlow, 2004; Z. Wang, 2005) and/or focused on the practices of high-profile activists and activist groups

(Fincher, 2018; X. Han, 2018; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). It responds to the calling for attention to the roles and voices of girls and young women in feminist movements as interwoven with social media and digital technologies which conceptualises digital feminism as a paradigmatic or generational shift in feminist movements (Harris, 2010; S. Jackson, 2018; Keller, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Munro, 2013). Admittedly, a substantial amount of this body of work has been concentrated on Western contexts. This research instead contributes to the embodied, embedded, and intersectional knowledge of feminisms across socioeconomic and geopolitical localities in contemporary Chinese society. This research presents and explores the stories of feminist resistance and yearnings for solidarity as emerged from the on/offline experiences of gender and sexual inequalities and trying to push forward feminism and gender equity through and beyond the digital sphere. Starting from this overarching research topic about Chinese digital feminisms with a special focus on the experiences of ordinary girls and young women, a list of inter-related questions was formulated as follow to guide the research project:

1. What are the main discourses about gender and sexual (in)equalities that girls and young women are responding to on *Weibo*?
2. How do girls and young women experience and engage in discussions and debates about gender and feminism online? How do their engagements in feminisms relate to and/or shape their experiences of gender both online and offline?
3. How do these girls and young women understand their online practices in relation to the broader feminist movement in China?

Taking inspirations from feminist, participatory and online ethnographic methodologies (Hine, 2015; Markham, 2005; Postill & Pink, 2012), this fully online-based qualitative research consists of an online tracking study of gender-related discussions on *Weibo* for

one month (36 posts and 391 comments recorded) and two rounds of interviews with 21 girls and young women who took part in such discussions on *Weibo* (42 interviews in total). In between these two rounds of interviews, each participant was also asked to write one diary entry per week to reflect on any engagement in discussions related to gender and feminism over a period of ten weeks (211 diary entries collected). Before the second round of interviews, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to coding and analysing digital posts collected from the *Weibo* platform along with social media diaries and transcripts of the first round of the interviews. Those preliminary findings gave me an overview of the primary topics about gender and feminism in *Weibo* discussions and that my participants were interested in, which I then explored together with the participants in the second round of interviews. Main themes in the discussions about gender and feminism ranged from sexual violence to everyday sexism and were analysed in relation to how feminist netizens and publics responded to these issues using feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005a, 2007).

Following the critical development of Foucauldian paradigm of discourse analysis to engage with emotions and affects (Riley et al., 2021), I also conducted affective-discursive analysis (Kanai, 2019) of the social media diaries and interview materials. The notion of affective/discursive practice (Wetherell, 2012, 2013) is key to this analytical approach to digital feminisms. It attends to affective and bodily responses to gender and feminist discourses as generative forces in shaping subjectivities and communities which are hence entangled with discursive and social practices of online feminist discussions and activism. Recognising the divergence in the theoretical groundings around affects and emotions and different ways of plotting the so-called affective turn across disciplines (Clough, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Hynes, 2013; Koivunen, 2010; Leys, 2011; Seigworth &

Gregg, 2010), I took an affirmative and feminist stance to draw from multiple notions of affects. My interest in affect in this project is deeply grounded in my political and theoretical commitment to understanding digital feminisms as collective political projects and how social media and digital technologies are used to facilitate social change (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). I am particularly interested in exploring feminist subject-formation in this context of digital feminist politics and examining the affective and discursive dimensions of how networked feminist resistance and forces join together and break apart. The tensions surrounding the multidisciplinary shifts to affect will be contextualised within broader feminist media and sociological scholarship and will be further explored in relation to how I approach the issue of intimacy in the formation of feminist solidarity. I will return to this in Chapter 2.

The discussion and analysis chapters (Chapter 5-7) of this thesis revolve around and expand on the central concerns with the emergence of feminist subjectivities and networked feminist resistance shown in Chinese digital feminist practices and activism. It delves into the narratives and stories of discovering and learning about feminism, resisting and challenging gender and sexual inequalities and trying to build connections with like-minded people within and beyond the digital sphere shared by the participants (n=21) of this research. These 21 participants were recruited through *Weibo* and subsequently interviewed via video chat functions on QQ or WeChat, which are online messaging services similar to WhatsApp. The choice of platform was made by each participant according to their personal preference. These girls and young women, aged between 16 and 24 years old, were either attending high school or university students at the time of interview. They came from different parts of China with varied socioeconomic backgrounds and took part in this research for their interest in and experiences of



engaging in feminist discussions online. Most of the participants self-identified as feminists, apart from two participants, Lili and Gaga. Both of Lili and Gaga expressed 'not being confident enough' to call themselves feminists, citing their perceived 'lack of knowledge' in feminism and a sense of 'not doing enough' for feminist causes. In the methodology chapter (Chapter 4) I will elaborate the research design and methods of this project including further details about the participants.

Chapter 5 draws on interview data and diaries to discuss the embedded and embodied experiences of gender and feminism of these participants, focusing on how they negotiate and respond to the patriarchal and familial norms around girlhood and young femininity. I conceptualise the emergence of feminist subjectivities in resistance and disobedience to a prevailing discourse of filial piety (*xiaoshun*) that is embedded in Confucian familial culture. Filial piety, in Confucian terms, dictates being obedient and respectful to authority and seniority as well as the obligations of continuing family bloodline through patrilineal and conjugal ties (L.-H. L. Rosenlee, 2014). This norm is hence central to the maintenance of marriage and family as highly patriarchal and heteronormative institutions in Confucianism-influenced societies, reinforcing the continuum of marriage-family (Ding & Liu, 2011) and normalising marriage and reproduction as responsibilities to the family.

I aim to explicate how this central idea of girlhood has been diversified into hybrid and multiple discourses and positions for girls and young women to occupy. In the context of postsocialist and neoliberal China, neo-familial ideals (Yan, 2018) of girlhood and young femininity creates a transitional space-time preparing girls as filial daughters to become naturally family-centred wives and/or mothers (Martin, 2023). In the meantime, the growing influences of neoliberal and consumerist cultures and economies (Liao, 2019b;

Ma, 2022; McWilliams, 2013) also push girls and women to align themselves with self-calculating and self-calibrating neoliberal subjectivities (Y. Yan, 2010). Moreover, grassroots feminist voices and discourses have gained visibility and popularity in the digital sphere particularly following the aftereffects of Chinese #MeToo movement (Lin & Yang, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021). By exploring how the participants navigate and negotiate these contested discourses about girlhood and young femininity, this thesis maps out the subjective becomings (Braidotti, 2006a) of (un)filial daughters and their experiences of feminist awakening, resistance and looking for connections and alliances via social media.

Feminism, mostly believed to be translated into Chinese from Japanese at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century as *nüquan zhuyi*, which literally means the ‘-ism’ of women’s rights or power (Sudo, 2007). Throughout this thesis, I stick to the plural form of digital feminisms to highlight the diverse and heterogeneous nature of feminist politics within Chinese social media and differences in experiences and awareness of gender and feminism as illuminated in accounts of these participants. As an overarching topic of this research, digital feminisms that I choose to focus on refer to what I call ‘grassroots’ feminist voices who generally deploy the term *nüquan zhuyi* in their activist and pedagogical practices, distinguished themselves from feminist scholars who commonly *nüxing zhuyi* in academic writing. These grassroots feminist voices exhibit both connections with and divergence from other modes of feminist organising and movements in China that are led by state-affiliated organisations or established activists and activist groups as I will explicate in the rest of this chapter. The participants of this research identify themselves as practicing and/or supporting feminism and the cause of gender equality, but they do not come from a pre-existed feminist community or group. The implication of grassroots feminist voices puts emphasis on the potentials of digital feminisms as loosely networked

resistance enabled by social media as the participants' experiences and practices come to reveal.

The (un)filial daughter becomes a key conceptual figuration weaving throughout this thesis which I will also keep coming back to in the following chapters. Drawing from Braidotti (2019a, p. 34), my approach to figuration takes figurations as 'no mere metaphors, but material and semiotic signposts for specific geo-political and historical locations.' It hence takes account of how to tell the stories of the individual participants whose stories, in such richness and complexities, link each of their experiences of gender, sexuality and feminisms to a collective imaginary that moves the Chinese feminist movement forward. In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 70) tried to differentiate a conceptual personae from a psychosocial type (such as the proletarian for classical Marxism), meanwhile pointing out the interrelationship between the two:

*'The features of conceptual personae have relationships with the epoch or historical milieu in which they appear that only psychosocial types enable us to assess... Conceptual personae and psychosocial types refer to each other and combine without ever merging.'*

Their approach sees a conceptual figuration as a knowing subject in their own, rather than a passive or pre-existed entity that is supposedly made knowable or perceptible in research practice. The significance of conceptual figuration is closely linked to the most ambitious aim of this project, which is to provide a way to think about grassroots feminist voices and struggles in Chinese social media that seemed marginal or mundane without losing vision for the wider and broader systemic and structural inequalities. This thesis is a project of learning, thinking and writing with this figuration of (un)filial daughters aligning with feminist ontology and epistemology that values situated knowledge and

'partial' perspective (Haraway, 2004, 2018). By acknowledging this, I assert the spatiotemporal multiplicity to the processes of subject-formation (Braidotti, 2006b, 2011). My analysis takes account of material and embodied differences and experiences of gender and sexuality, age, geolocations, ethnicities, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of particular participants, even though I will not be able to cover a detailed analysis of each of these differences. I intend for the capability of (un)filial daughters as a conceptual figuration not only to capture and imagine what digital feminisms in China could amount but also to critically investigate its transformative forces and inform ways forward towards the end of this thesis. In doing so, I myself may not be free from being positioned as (un)filial, whether it is to my family, culture, or even Chinese feminist heritage.

To start with I shall briefly explain here how I have been following through multiple conceptual, theoretical and cultural trajectories to sketch out this figuration and how this figuration allows me to move along with my analysis. I draw from Rosi Braidotti's (2012b) notion of undutiful daughters as a point of departure to addressing the difficulties in locating a stable and fixed subject position for resistance in contemporary Chinese feminist movement. It highlights the need for understanding the hybridity, contradictions and multiplicities in the generational narration of Chinese feminist legacies, which I will get to later in this chapter. Notably, the use of an Oedipalized figure of rebellious daughter to narrate the generational disruption or dissonance within feminist movement and theory has been notably questioned for its risk of reproducing heteronormative, patriarchal and Western-centred notions of mother-daughter relationships within feminisms (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016; Halberstam, 2012; McBean, 2015). Taking this

into account, the conception of (un)filial daughter in this project departs from simply describing the intergenerational tensions, either in biological kinship or in feminisms.

The project of (un)filial daughters is hence both ontological and epistemological, seeking to lay out an alternative model of constructing feminist resistance that is firmly located and embedded in a neoliberal and postsocialist context of patriarchal familism in China. This figuration of (un)filial daughter, however, would have found resonances in feminist and queer scholarship looking at literary texts in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China that troubled filial piety as a dominant societal norm and moral value of Confucian familial cultures. Croll (2017, p. 127) in her study of the narratives of Chinese girlhoods in early 20<sup>th</sup> century women's autobiographic literature highlighted a common theme of *panni* (rebellion) or more specifically 'female rebellion – rebellion against the constraints imposed by the conventions of Chinese girlhood'. Meng and Dai (2004) similarly used the notion of unfilial daughters to describe one collective theme of the writings of women writers in late Qing dynasty who dismissed Confucian patriarchal values as feudal and therefore must be abolished. It is of course not to suggest that girls and young women of today are still faced with same situations or fighting for same goals to step outside their family home. Much of this struggle for participation in social production and public affairs has been carried on throughout the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and partly achieved through the enforcement of a top-down socialist project of women's liberation (*funü jiefang*) after the foundation of People's Republic of China (PRC) (Sudo, 2007; Wang, 2017a). Despite that girls and women of today are no longer seen as being enclosed within the domestic space in general, the familial discourse and power is far-reaching. Although my investigation of the experiences of these (un)filial daughters starts with the realm of family in Chapter 5, it does not place this conceptual figuration in an oppositional binary

of the private and the public. As will be spelt out in the rest of the thesis, familial and patriarchal norms extend much beyond the domestic settings to shape how Chinese girls and young women experience and negotiate gender and sexual inequalities in the wider society.

This thesis digs into the situated and embodied experiences of becoming (un)filial daughters and attempts to capture feminist networked resistance as affective/discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012, 2013) of challenging the entrenching gender and sexual inequalities. I manifest how a close study of Chinese digital feminisms must attend to how feminist resistance constantly moves and traverses the boundary of online/offline and public/private. I illustrate how these girls and young women question gendered and sexual inequalities in and beyond the digital realm, especially taking issues with the spatiotemporal constellations of girlhood in relation to family, kinship and marriage as well as current neoliberal and increasingly individualistic contexts. In this sense, I argue that this neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism can be analysed as a disperse and form of parental/pastoral power (Ho, 2017) exerted not only through parents and family institutions but potentially also schools, (digital) media and particularly state authorities. It shows both the deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013) of the dualism of inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) sphere in traditional Chinese familial culture (Du, 2020; Lee, 1999) and how it is reconfigured in a neoliberal and postsocialist context.

This written rendition of (un)filial daughters in brackets best captured the ambivalence in the narratives of rebellious and subversive girlhood as found out in my conversations with the participants and their social media diaries. On the one hand, it points out their defiance of or disobedience to the filial and familial norms about girlhood and young

femininity; on the other hand, it also implies some elements about these norms that they still can or have to attach to rather than directly confronting. This culture-specific form of digital feminisms and its resistance to patriarchal familism can hence contribute to the rethinking of public/private binarism by accounting for how online-formed feminist networks and connections cut through intimacy in a conventional sense that is mainly based on sexual and intimate relationships, heteronormative and reproductive marriage and biological kinship. I shall come back to this issue later in this chapter.

The rest of this chapter provides the theoretical, political, and historical backgrounds for researching gender and feminism in China, to set up a more specific discussion on Chinese digital feminisms for this research project. The following section traces back to the socialist ideology of gender egalitarianism and the state-led project of women's liberation as part of the modernisation project of the Chinese state including how it caused disruption to patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal order and cultures. I then map out the landscape for gender, sexuality and feminism in contemporary China, articulating the entrenchment and reconfiguration of patriarchal familism in regard to its links to traditional Confucian familial culture and postsocialist and neoliberal material-discursive contexts. In doing so, I try to contextualise digital feminisms in China within multiple shifts in paradigm of feminist organising and movements by providing an overview of the emergence of Chinese grassroots feminist voices, gradually but firmly moving away from working with and within the state and the establishment since 1995.

## 1.2 Chinese feminist movements: The rise of the disobedient

*This movement, I deeply felt that it had been besieged by fear, disappointment and anger. Even those who had divergence with me in our feminist views, or my dearest friends, we all deeply feel and share these emotions. This is the situation that you have to face for anyone doing feminisms in China nowadays. But how do we carry on when we are besieged by these anger, disappointment and fear and trapped in this reality? I have just said my answer – to fight in this uncertainty... I accept that this is a precarious state, and a battle without promises or foreseeable results, but I believe this shall be a meaningful process.*

*(Lü, 2020)*

When I completed the fieldwork and started writing up the initial report for this research project in 2020, I read this article circulated online among a few feminist accounts that I followed on *Weibo*. The article was transcribed from a talk titled ‘Observing twenty years of Chinese feminist movement’ given by a renowned Chinese feminist activist Lü Pin. Lü was the founder of *Feminist Voices*, which used to be one of the most active and important feminist channels across several social media platforms before its multiple accounts were permanently shut down and removed from *Weibo*, *Douban* and *WeChat* by Chinese authorities before the International Women’s Day in 2018 (James, 2018). In this talk, Lü gave her personal recollections of how non-governmental women’s groups established themselves as significant players in Chinese feminist movement, taking centre stage around mid-1990s. She also talked about the rise of more recent forms of feminist organising and networking that have flourished in digital platforms. Foregrounding her stories was the continuous struggle for spaces for doing feminisms within the limits of



the Chinese state, and according to Lü (2020), 'the state had always maintained its predominance... in defining the boundaries for feminist movement'.

Since the foundation of PRC, women's liberation had always been claimed to be 'an integral part of modernity project' (Wang, 2005, p. 543). This can be traced further back to the early activities and political movements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1920s. Women's liberation was often used as a preferred term instead of feminism in CCP's political agenda for promoting women's rights and addressing gender inequality. In the dominant political discourse of CCP, the term feminism was associated with bourgeoisie, elitism and individualism and thus clashed with communist ideologies (Li, 1999). This became more notable during the Chinese Communist Revolution (1949-1976), particularly represented in the propaganda throughout Maoist era, where individuals were ardently urged to prioritise collective interests before personal good. Even if 'the equality between men and women' is promoted by the state, gender issues and feminism have never occupied a central position in public debates nor become the primary focus for the authorities to tackle.

Till today, the discussion on gender or women's living circumstances in official rhetoric of CCP is never only about gender (in)equality – instead, women's liberation (or other terminologies that have been used interchangeably in policy documents such as women's revolution and women's movement) is seen as a subordinate part of the goal of 'reviving the nation state' (Ma, 2019). CCP's larger politico-economic agenda such as modernisation and revival of the nation have consistently taken precedence over the issue of gender equality, thereby restricting the scope of any feminist movements independent from state intervention, let alone those initiated and organised at grassroots level (Judd, 2002; Wolf, 1985).

As an institution originally founded to lead the project of women's liberation and carry out women's work (*funü gongzuo*), Women's Federation (*fulian*) has a significant role in explicating feminisms in China and reconciling the tension between the political goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and those of women's movement. At first, Women's Federation was thought to be under the close control of CCP and primarily portrayed as a bridge between the leadership of Party and female workers. However, in post-Mao era, it gradually gained some autonomy and 'assumed a somewhat more activist role as an advocate for women's interests' (Hershatter, 2018, p. 274). In late 1980s, Women's Federation launched the 'four-selves' (*sizi*) campaign which defines four aspects of women's self-cultivation. The specific descriptions of four selves changed during the course: the first version of four-selves was self-respect, self-love, self-confidence and self-improvement and later changed into self-respect, self-reliance, self-confidence and self-improvement (Zhang, 2003). Despite a direct reference to individualistic discourse, the four-selves campaign was still associated with a strong sense of top-down enactment of idealised femininity, refiguring a socialist 'iron girl' into a neoliberal and neo-familial model of 'new virtuous wife and kind mother' (Zhang, 2003, p. 215) in the new era. These shifting discourses about managing 'small-self' (*xiaowo*) and 'big-self' (*dawo*) oftentimes reinforced a dichotomy and hierarchy between individualistic and collectivist values. However, it enacted an identification either with the family or the state, which will be challenged in my analysis of feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters in chapter 5 who resisted the patriarchal familism to identify with feminism.

Instead of raising feminist awareness, the socialist project of women's liberation mainly aimed at serving the politico-economic goals of CCP to accelerate the socialist economic and political reform. The dominant discourse about femininity and sexual difference is

that such difference should not exist at all in this socialist country – men and women are on an equal footing in terms of contributing to social and economic development. CCP actively advocated for women’s participation in education and labour force with the famous epigram ‘women hold up half the sky’. Chinese women were called upon to liberate themselves from inner (*nei*) sphere of family home and step into the outer (*wai*) sphere, devoting themselves into the construction of the new socialist state. In the early 1960s, local branches of Women’s Federation along with local committees of CCP started to use ‘iron girls’ (*tie guniang*) as a role model for young women in order to encourage their participation in those highly intensive occupations such as working in heavy industries that have traditionally been regarded as men’s jobs (see Figure 1.1 on the next page). This revolutionary female subject of ‘iron girl’ needs to be gender-neutral, or more accurately masculinised, ready to take on jobs that their male counterparts do and avoiding any performances that would be related to femininity in traditional terms (Pei & Ho, 2006; Zhou & Guo, 2013). This discourse of iron girls was adopted by the state-owned newspaper *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) to praise the physical and emotional toughness of the women as proletarian warriors and builders of the socialist nation (Lu, 2010). This term gained extraordinary popularity during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 when other media outlets also came to report women who took on heavy loads in agriculture and worked in the heavy industry like oil and mining industry across the country (Jin, 2006).

*‘Time has changed. Men and women are the same now. Whatever men can do, women can do, too.’*

This quote of Mao was frequently hailed as a slogan for women’s liberation at that time, which recast gender equality as sameness and hence precluded any discussion on issues

of women and femininities (E. Honig, 2002). Moreover, according to a study of the discourses about women's liberation in *People's Daily* since 1949, there has been much more coverage of women's contributions to and obligations of taking part in social production than the rights and benefits that female workers could enjoy (Y. Huang, 2018). This corresponded to the societal expectation of ideal femininity as an embodiment of sacrifice and devotion – towards her family in the feudal era and the paternalistic patriarchal state in the socialist China. Despite the remarkable increase in labour force participation of Chinese women, the socialist project of women's liberation failed to bring about the 'equality between men and women'. Rather, women were often silenced from addressing their specific living circumstances as gender issues were driven out of public and political discussion.



*Figure 1. 1 Chinese rural women in the fields holding their shovels ('Iron Girl Fighting Squad' and the location written on the flag)*

The discourse of neutralising gender differences was not only reflected in encouraging women to engage in masculinised modes of labour, but also in women's appearances and remaking marriage into a site for practicing proletarian revolution (W. Yang & Yan, 2017). The pursuit for fashion was criticised as bourgeois lifestyle and men and women were asked to wear so-called gender-neutral colours like dark blue and grey (H. Evans, 1997). Female protagonists in films were mostly portrayed as revolutionary and progressive heroines (Z. Wang, 2017b). When it came to choosing a marital partner, family background (preferably from a proletarian background) and political consciousness (self-identified as a Communist) would be considered more important than anything else (Zhou & Guo, 2013). Drawing on a historic text of the early 1960s, *Red Detachment of Women*, which was later adapted into a revolutionary opera, it becomes clear how the film centres entirely around the main female character, Wu Qionghua, an ambitious young woman, as she gains political consciousness of Communist ideology while serving in the army. Although Wu Qionghua is rescued by the male protagonist on numerous occasions and eventually falls in love with the man, this male character functions highly symbolically as the Communist Party or the state, often referred to as a *dangdaibiao* (party representative) in the text (M. M.-H. Yang, 1999).

In fact, gender as a conceptual term was not widely introduced to China until the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995. Before that, there were no separate terms in the Chinese language to distinguish between sex and gender, so attributes had to be put before them in order to differentiate between the 'biological sex' (*shengli xingbie*) and the 'social gender' (*shehui xingbie*) (Z. Wang & Zhang, 2010). The economic reform since late 1970s put an end to the socialist project of women's liberation that mainly focused on eliminating inequality between men and women

through public ownership and the eradication of social class. Chinese feminists were hence in need of new conceptual tools besides Marxism and Maoism to understand the living circumstances of women and to push forward women's movement. FWCW brought in the concepts of gender mainstreaming and empowerment, which were quickly accepted by Chinese feminists to expose the 'gender blindness in a class-centered Marxist theory of women' (Z. Wang & Zhang, 2010, p. 42). The attention garnered by FWCW due to its clear emphasis on gender equality was not only from the public but also from the government and official media. There were scholars and participants of the conference who expressed worries about the heightened politicisation of the previously neglected topic, fearing it could result in increased surveillance by the authorities and, in turn, impede feminist activism (Z. Wang, 1996).

For almost a decade, however, observers saw a golden age of grassroots feminist activism in China, during which new feminist NGOs sprang up in large cities like Beijing and Guangzhou and continued to grow. As a Chinese feminist historian who attended the conference in 1995, Wang Zheng (2005) contended that the introduction of global feminist movement helped to push forward the non-government-controlled feminist activism, which never existed in China before. As a notable departure from the socialist state feminism led by Women's Federation, NGO feminists and social workers took up their roles of raising public awareness of gender and feminist issues and pushing forward legislative change to promote gender equality (Z. Wang & Zhang, 2010). Most of the activities organised by NGOs, however, framed their main issues of concern as the protection of women's and/or children's rights that were tacitly permitted by the state, meanwhile clearly keeping away from challenging authority. Therefore, social services and less confrontational forms of NGO practices were much more common than street

actions in Chinese NGO activism during this period. Moreover, some NGOs themselves stayed in close contact with Women's Federation and key members of early women's NGOs were affiliated with Women's Federation.

Stepping into the 21st century, the practices of a new generation of feminists marked a major paradigm shift in Chinese feminist movements. These feminists began to distance themselves from both top-down state feminism and the establishment (*tizhi*) in general, which includes state-affiliated institutions like Women's Federation. Instead, they sought to practice feminism in the 'outer-system' (*tizhiwai*), namely, outside the establishments (Q. Wang, 2018, p. 260). Wang (2018) suggested that this dramatic turn in patterns of conducting feminist activism should be primarily ascribed to the Chinese authority's crackdown on civil organisations which forced feminists to take on guerrilla-like tactics and young women's awareness of the revival of patriarchal values coming from within the state and Women's Federation. Grassroots feminists sought to raise public awareness of gender and feminist issues through various forms of activism, including performative and arts-based activism and online feminist activism (Q. Wang, 2018).

These younger feminists moved to the forefront of Chinese feminist movements with little resource, compared to the previous generation of feminists who were already leading prestigious women's NGOs (including Women's Federation) or holding academic positions in research centres of women's studies (which also usually work closely with Women's Federation). Meanwhile, these young feminists were more willing to push the boundaries of the rules by going against the authorities and come up with creative arts-based activities to gain visibility in media and draw attention from the general public. In a broad sense, this generation of young activists adopted a strategy of performing 'fleeting' guerrilla-like appearances in public spaces in order to dodge the scrutiny from

Chinese authority (Jacobs, 2016). One example of activist groups that had been discussed frequently in academic literature was Youth Feminist Action School (*Qingnian Nüquan Xiongdongpai*), who were a loose network of performance activists/artists starting to become active around 2012. Their fame could partly be attributed to their tactic of using 'performance art to turn social problems into news stories' (J. Li & Li, 2017, p. 61). Figure 1.2 shows an image of one of the street performances of the members from Youth Feminist Action School. In this action against domestic violence in Beijing, the activists were wearing make-up to imitate the bruises of domestic violence survivors and wedding dresses with red paint as bloodstains. The placard held by the activist on the centre reads 'love is not an excuse for violence'. Interviews of these young activists found out that they were more or less conveying a critique of the establishment and authorities, in strong contrast with the previous generations of feminists who looked for ways to collaborate with the government (Fincher, 2018; J. Li & Li, 2017). Despite the continuation of moving away from the paradigm of working with and/or within state institutions in feminist politics and activism, the influence of offline feminist actions is rather restricted. These activist street performances have primarily been confined to a few major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, indicating that feminist activism has not effectively extended its reach to a wider demographic until the emergence of social media in China.





Figure 1. 2 An anti-domestic violence feminist performance/protest conducted in Beijing in 2012

(Source: China Daily)

Another reason for the significant academic interest in Youth Feminist Action School and alike is that many of the researchers conducting empirical research on feminist activism in China were 'insider-researchers' (B. Wang, 2020, p. 429). Some researchers had developed relationships with these famed feminist groups and were sometimes members of those groups themselves, which allowed for a more intimate insider perspective of participating in feminisms. However, it needs to be noted that the majority of previous research on Chinese feminisms have focused on the practices of renowned activists and activist groups and paid little attention to how ordinary girls and young women experience and engage in feminisms. My project hence seeks to address this by capturing the rapidly evolving and diversified ways in which feminism is understood and practised by girls and young women in China.

Youth Feminist Action School were already using social media to organise actions in both online and offline spaces (Hou, 2020). There were also some attempts at informal feminist education; for instance, Zheng Churan (*datu*) published series of videos on *Weibo* which challenged gendered norms of femininities in regard to appearances. However, the

strategies for gaining public attention via dramatic street performances faced significant setbacks along with the arrest of five young activists who were later called the *Feminist Five* including Zheng herself (Mao, 2020). Due to aggravating state control over mainstream mass media and collective actions, Chinese feminists in the past few years have become adept at and increasingly reliant on digital technologies and social media to circulate feminist ideas and to educate the general public (X. Han, 2018; J. Tan, 2017).

As the pragmatic change of organising and mobilising for activities which pushed social media to become the new frontier of Chinese feminist activism, digital feminisms in China have received increasing scholarly attention. A growing number of studies have been published in English academic journals documenting the trend of Chinese women trying to raise awareness of and speak against gender-based violence, gender norms and sexism especially after the influence of transnational #MeToo movement reached China in 2018 (Hou, 2020; Lin & Yang, 2019; K. Xu & Tan, 2020; Yin & Sun, 2021). In the meantime, it has been reflected in previous research that Chinese women and feminists' use of social media to talk about gender and feminist issues can be traced back much earlier than Chinese #MeToo movement. Research has reported feminist blog-writing when women bloggers living in urban China like Muzimei and Ye Haiyan started to write about their own sex life to 'sexually subvert traditions' (Schaffer & Song, 2007, p. 17) and discuss sexual rights in blog sites in early 2000s (Farrer, 2007). One extraordinary earlier example of online feminist protest documented was when activist and scholar Ai Xiaoming published nude self-portrait online to show support for Ye Haiyan who was detained for protesting child sexual abuse (Jacobs, 2016; Zeng, 2014). Even before Chinese online feminists started to adopt the hashtag #MeToo to call out cases of sexual harassment within higher education institutes, young women in ten universities had

conducted both offline and online campaigns regarding similar issues back in 2014 (Hou, 2020). The use of hashtag to call out sexism also predated the Chinese #MeToo movement when a hashtag campaign #IExperiencedGenderDiscrimination was initiated in 2013. As researchers started to realise that feminist networks and online communities have flourished 'with or without connections to the actual feminist activism on the streets' (Q. Wang, 2018, p. 271), more academic attention was directed to online feminist voices and actions in China, despite that few of the studies proposed theoretical and empirical contributions to this research field of digital feminisms. I will come back to this topic of digital feminisms with a more in-depth discussion on related academic debates in Chapter 3.

### **1.3 Gender and sexual politics in a postsocialist metamorphosis: Neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism**

Let me go back to Lü Pin's quote for a moment. When Lü acknowledges the feminist movement in China as in 'a precarious state, and a battle without promises or foreseeable results', it evokes an ambiguous futurity. It appears to be stuck in a present tense characterised by so much anger and frustration and burdened with precarities and uncertainties, but there seems to be no outlook for the future. Situating the talk within the COVID-19 global pandemic time when a tightening biopolitical control over personal and intimate lives was enabled and intensified by digital technologies in China (Kloet et al., 2020), such heartfelt worries over the already shrinking spaces for doing feminisms would have been well justified. During the past two years or so, grassroots feminist voices and expressions in China have been increasingly positioned by authorities as threats to social and political stability, and the crackdown on feminist activism has been

implemented across from offline street performances and protests to online discussions and spaces. The shutdown of *Feminist Voices* across several social media platforms in 2018 was followed by stricter surveillance on feminist discussions and groups on the platform level. In 2021 another major social media platform *Douban* took actions to remove multiple feminist groups linked to '6B4T' movement originated in South Korea which openly called for a rejection of heterosexual marriage and family as a Confucian patriarchal construct and patriarchal institution (Woo & Qian, 2021; L. Zhang, 2021).

As I shall elucidate later in the thesis regarding a feminist discourse of anti-marriage, it is forming into a crucial grassroots force of digital feminisms in contemporary China. For the recent background, China officially renounced its decade-long, stringent enforcement of the one-child policy throughout the country in 2015 and pivoted towards an increasingly pronatalist stance, in response to low fertility rate, an aging population, and an overburdened social welfare system (Alpermann & Zhan, 2019). In the meantime, official discourse and mainstream media picked up the evidently pro-family rhetoric, downplaying the previous condemnation of patriarchal kinship, patrilineal and patrilocal clans as archaic vestiges of feudalism prevalent during the Maoist era. For the rest of this chapter, I will try to provide a cartography of patriarchal familism in Chinese context. I trace back to the women's liberation in Maoist era and its top-down intervention of patriarchal marriage and family to argue that some of discontents and disobedience of Confucian familial values and norms were already embedded within this socialist project. I look into how socioeconomic transformations since late 1970s including the adoption of postsocialist market economy, globalisation and, notably, the reconfiguration of pro-family discourses altogether pushed patriarchal familism to persist and continuously

evolve as pervasive powers shaping the neoliberal and postsocialist conditions of China today.

In the Maoist era, the leadership of CCP perceived women's subordination to be a product of the patriarchal family system steeped in feudalism. As part of the socialist reform, it was mandated that women be liberated from domesticity and integrated into social production (Hershatter, 2007). The rearrangement of marriage and intimate relationships was enforced by state interventions under the political rhetoric of anti-feudalism and women's liberation, including the abolishment of forced marriage and polygamy (D. S. Davis, 2014). In this regard, the practice of marriage was no longer an arrangement between two families as in Confucian familial cultures and women were claimed to be granted marital autonomy (H. Evans, 1992). This approach partially aligns with a Marxist feminist analysis of patriarchy, which emphasises the 'ideological and political interpretation of women's roles' in reproduction, childrearing, and the broader domestic sphere as barriers to women's engagement beyond their households (Beechey, 1979, p. 77), perpetuating women's subordination within hierarchical systems, whether under feudalism or capitalism. The socialist project of women's liberation thus included some institutionalised support to encourage women's participation in labour by 'liberating' them from domestic and caring labour. For instance, in urban China a part of childrearing responsibility was transferred from the individual family to the work units (*danwei*) where childcare was provided for working parents.

The top-down intervention of patriarchal institutions of marriage and family and renouncement of familial cultures in Maoist era, however, primarily stemmed from the CCP's socio-economic goal of mobilising women to enter the labour force and to aid in the development of the socialist state (Z. Wang, 2017c) as I argued previously. Instead of

aiming at eradicating patriarchy and gender inequality as claimed, it gave rise to a reconfigured patriarchal gender regime which was called by Lee Sangwha (1999, p. 9) as 'a mixture of socialist ideas and a deep-rooted traditional patriarchy'. Patriarchy as a conceptual tool for feminists was developed in a critical engagement with classical Marxist analysis that was problematised as broad-brush descriptions of male dominance in and across human societies throughout histories (Beechey, 1979). Varied by its analytical interpretations and use, the conceptual term of patriarchy continued to incur criticisms including being ahistorical, being blind to cultural contexts, implementing biologically essentialising analysis of sex-gender and only representing an oversimplified white, middle-class perspective about women's oppression (Acker, 1989).

In regard to the specific context of digital feminism that this project looks at, it links to another problem indicated by Grint and Gill (1995, p. 15) regarding using patriarchy as a concept 'to make historically and culturally grounded analyses of the gender-technology relation'. The conventional conceptualisations of patriarchy largely hinged on the dichotomy of the public and the private (Walby, 1989) which was greatly eroded by the booming of the internet and digital technologies. Closely related to the sociocultural and theoretical backgrounds of my research on Chinese digital feminisms, I perceive the boundary between the private and the public as growingly ambivalent. In doing so, I look into the normative forces of patriarchal familism in this thesis which should be unpacked mainly in the following three aspects. Firstly, global and domestic feminist and women's movements encouraged and enabled Chinese women to step into education, workplace, politics and other public realms from which women used to be prohibited. It fundamentally destabilised the inner-outer (*nei-wai*) division of inside and outside the family (S. Lee, 1999) which was deemed as a spatiotemporal arrangement for gender

roles in traditional Confucian cultures (F. Du, 2020). In the enactment of this spatiotemporal arrangement, girls and women are expected to conform to a life course that is defined in relation to the inner realm of the family home, transitioning from their roles as daughters to wives and mothers (Barlow, 2004; H. Evans, 2007). Secondly, the relationship between 'the personal' and 'the political' has been undergoing constant shifts within the context of Chinese feminist politics (Hou, 2020). As I discussed in the previous section, the socialist project of women's liberation politicised marriage and family as sites for Communist revolution, and digital feminisms will further explore the possibilities of a transformative feminist politics of patriarchal familism as I go on to investigate. These all demonstrate how 'the political' has always been entangled with 'the personal'. Thirdly, digital technologies and social media have enabled new forms of mediated intimacies (Chambers, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017) and networked affective publics (boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015), where the boundaries of oppositional binaries of public/private and online/offline have also become more blurry (boyd, 2010; Ford, 2011).

I contend that patriarchy remains salient both as a conceptual problem and an empirical concern for Chinese feminist movement for its relationship with Confucian familial cultures and its continuing influences on intimate, social and political lives of Chinese people. However, it calls for updated and more nuanced conceptual development. Building the case from the context of a postsocialist and neoliberal China, this thesis hope to make theoretical contribution to situated and embedded analysis of mechanisms of patriarchal power. I argue that to rashly claim for a transformation or even ending of patriarchy in post-socialist China is both problematic and unhelpful, given the ongoing importance of familial bonds, values and cultures in Chinese society that constitutes a

new form of governmentality of gender that works through the familial and the intimate. Written in the setting of a rural village in early 1990s China, Yan Yunxiang (1997, p. 209) claimed 'the triumph of conjugality over patriarchy' for horizontal conjugal ties cut off the paternal hierarchy that used to define Chinese family. In regard to intimate and sexual relationships, Pan Suiming (1994, 2006) similarly pointed out several significant changes occurring in the reform era of 1990s, which he conceptualised as a 'sexual revolution' including the delinking of sex and reproduction, increasing public discussion on sex and sexuality and more open-minded attitude towards premarital and extramarital sex. Both Yan and Pan's earlier work, however, focused mostly on heterosexual experiences of intimacy and did not engage in a critical and feminist discussion on how reconfigurations of those relations and norms remained to be highly gendered and heteronormative. Moreover, this body of work established a paradigm for researching Chinese family and kinship drawing from and critically engaging with modernity theory such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck to understand how intimacy has been transformed in terms of gender and sexual relations in China (J. Liu et al., 2019; W. Sun & Lei, 2017; Y. Sun, 2017; Y. Yan, 2010; Zarafonetis, 2017). As the feminist critique from Jamieson (1999) aptly pointed out, uncritical adoption and application of concepts such as 'pure relationship' postulates a linear, Eurocentric and overoptimistic perspective that global modernity is 'eroding traditions' (Beck, 2014) and must bring about more democratic and equal sexual and intimate relationships (Giddens, 1992). In addition, both Giddens and Beck rested upon seeing the private as isolated from the public (women were naturally placed in the former arena) and failed to account for the role of gender and other power relations in 'creating and maintaining the boundaries' between the two (Mulinari & Sandell, 2009, p. 496).



Despite aforementioned traces of alterations in the familial and marital relationships in China, more recent research has suggested that heterosexual marriage almost remains a universal norm in China (Feldshuh, 2018; Fincher, 2016; Zarafonetis, 2017). Drawing attention to demographic change and lessened state control over marriage and family life in post-Mao era, Davis and Friedman (2014, p. 3) followed Andrews Cherlin's conception of 'deinstitutionalization' to study the variations and/or persistence of practices, norms and structures of marriage. Later research, however, presented evidence of 'coexisting and conflicting trends of individualism and familism', contending for a conceptualisation of 'reinstitutionalization of marriage and family' (J. Song & Ji, 2020, pp. 2-3). It shows the complexity of sociocultural landscape in China and the continuous processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the marriage-family continuum. Still, most scholars have to some extent come to agreement on the ongoing influence of patriarchal familism as structuring and regulating various aspects of individual life and interpersonal relationships which differentiated China from many western societies (Santos & Harrell, 2017; Song & Ji, 2020; Zarafonetis, 2017). Donner and Santos (2016, pp. 1130-1131) proposed a 'bottom-up approach' to interrelationship between modernity and intimacy in China which should not presume 'a breakdown of broader moral and normative structures, but a reconfiguration of these structures and the way they are implied in marriage, love lives, and other close relationships'.

To sum up from here, I conceptualised the neoliberal reconfigurations of patriarchal familism as the overarching context for discussing girlhoods, gender and feminist politics in this thesis rather than a restructuring of intimacy in a narrower sense which only attends to sexual, romantic and familial relationships. Instead, it is closely linked to the interconnectedness of private/public spheres. This conceptual framing of intimacy firstly

requires a critical interrogation of CCP's postsocialist governmentality (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009) which reappropriates the idea of isomorphism of family and state to justify that political and social stability is hinged upon a Confucian ideal of harmony in familial and other aspects of social relations that are hierarchal and patriarchal. On the other hand, patriarchal familial discourses have already been endorsed by and incorporated into a postsocialist and neoliberal political agenda of producing filial nationalist subjects (D. Wang, 2020) under conditions of patriarchal authoritarianism (Fincher, 2018).

Poststructuralists, feminists and queer theorists focusing on western contexts have reiterated that bonds, relations and intimacies that seemed to only reside in the private realm had always been regulated and publicly mediated (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Foucault, 1978). In the context of China, Friedman (2005, p. 313) offered an insightful conceptualisation of 'the intimacy of state power' noting that intimacy which thought to belong to the private sphere (family or kinship) had always been founded on 'a larger collectivity' regulating the territory of what can be recognised and included as ideal intimate relations through affective ties. This is also why I chose to focus on patriarchal familism as both a context for Chinese digital feminisms and also what Chinese digital feminisms challenge and respond to. As Zhu (2016, p. 26) pointed out,

*The 'family' in Chinese society is both a subject and an object of social governance. Although there is no clear definition, for the general public, 'families' here do not only point to the forms and meanings of modern family, but also refer to ... the dominant forms of family within the framework of the heterosexual marriage system, which puts an emphasis on traditional familial morals and cultures. The term 'family' here carries a heavy 'traditional' implication and a conservative tendency towards familial values.*

The past few years saw a resurgence of Confucian discourses that naturalised women's family responsibilities and proliferation of neoliberal perception that assumes women's ability to perfectly juggle career and family, which sustained the entrenchment rather than dissolution of patriarchy intersecting with other hierarchical relations and inequalities. The popularisation of 'leftover women' discourse in mass media and political rhetoric around late 2000s and early 2010s offers an illustration of this conflicting process. In the first place, the discourse of leftover women cast a stigma upon women above their mid 20s who have supposedly enjoyed a certain level of economic and educational success. The term 'leftover', however, strips off the question of agency in decisions concerning marriage and instead implies that these unmarried women have been left out in the marriage market for not fitting into traditional ideals of femininity (Feldshuh, 2018). Linking back to the context of patriarchal familism, it is insightful to interrogate how Chinese authorities deliberately perpetuated the perception of pathologizing 'leftover' women to produce self-governing filial subjects who faithfully align themselves with filial obligations and answer to the state's call (Fincher, 2016). In the meantime, research presented how single urban professional and well-educated women who remained single and would have been labelled as 'leftover' actually engaged in active negotiation of this stigma, adopting a narrative of 'single by choice' (Gui, 2020). It implies neoliberal influences on emerging ideals of femininity where women are encouraged to become life winners (*rensheng yingjia*) through both achieving a successful career and having a perfect family life (F. Liu, 2014; K. Xie, 2021). This research contributes to this discussion as the participants regularly bring up how learning about feminism from online prompts them to critically reflect on societal and familial pressures on girls and women regarding marriage and motherhood, despite their being relatively young to be considered 'leftover'. A significant part of this thesis grapples with the

question how digital feminisms shape and are shaped by the interactions between the reconfiguration of patriarchal familial norms which emphasises women's familial responsibilities and the tensions with neoliberal and postsocialist discourses about independence and success.

#### **1.4 Chapters breakdown**

In the next chapter, I turn to the theoretical and conceptual framework of this thesis focusing on how to locate the feminist resistance in response to the key research question about digital feminisms in China. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework for conceptualising the resistance and transformative power as embedded within two 'sites' of analysis – the becomings of feminist subjectivities and the unfolding of feminist social media events. Through the convergence of networked affect and public sphere theory, I elucidate how to understand the potentials and challenge for constructing collective actions and solidarity in digital feminist politics by bringing in discussions on key concepts of networked publics and counterpublics as well as mediated intimacies.

Chapter 3 offers an extensive literature review, encompassing various academic debates and empirical studies within both Western and Chinese contexts pertinent to the research topic of this project. The chapter begins by delving into the field of girlhood studies, focusing on scholars who emphasize the involvement of girls and young women in feminist movements, political participation, and their interconnectedness with media and popular culture. Subsequently, the chapter situates the research within the realm of digital feminisms as an emerging area of study. Specifically, it highlights the significance of studying Chinese girls and young women as active social and political agents in the

context of Chinese digital feminisms, with a specific emphasis on the *Weibo* platform. I delve into the ongoing discourse surrounding digital activism, exploring the debate of 'slacktivism' within media scholarship and refuting simplistic and determinist claims by bringing in the study of digital affordances. The literature discussion on digital feminisms and activism hence moves towards theoretical considerations of a more relational approach, examining the intricate relationships between users, platforms, algorithms, data, surveillance, and other pertinent factors. It also involves the contextualisation for digital activism in China in relation to media and online censorship which evolves into expansive and networked forms of surveillance carried out at the levels of state, platform and even among ordinary social media users and netizens.

Chapter 4 details the methodological design, adjustments, considerations and reflections throughout this research project as both an online based qualitative inquiry that draws on online ethnographic methodology and a feminist participatory research approach seeking to highlight the participants' perspectives, knowledge and embodied and embedded experiences. It explicates the specific research methods employed during the fieldwork and data analysis processes, offering a justification for pivotal decisions made throughout the design and implementation of the project. By restating the research aims to focus on digital feminisms as experienced and practiced by ordinary girls and young women in China via social media platforms, it outlines the research question and primary research design, including a brief reflection on the pilot study. The final section contemplates how I position myself as a feminist researcher-pedagogue in this research practice of feminist participatory and online inquiry, reflecting on the methodological and ethical challenges and issues that surfaced during the course of this research conducted with 21 young participants. It then transitions to the three discussion chapters

of this thesis where I probe the findings of this research by critically engaging with the analytical framework and related academic literature as outlined in Chapter 2 and 3.

Chapter 5 discusses the emergence of postsocialist feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters in response to the neoliberal reconfiguration of patriarchal familism. I map out anti-marriage (*fanhun*) as a grassroots online feminist discourse in resistance to ideals and norms of being a girl that assume girlhood as a period of life course where a girl learns about her obligations and duties as a filial subject and then smoothly transition into a mother, wife and mature woman. By adopting the anti-marriage stance, I argue that the subject-formation of (un)filial daughters already constitutes crucial forms of resistance to patriarchal familism as ongoing power dynamics related to gender, sexual and familial power relations. In the meantime, I suggest (un)filial daughters position themselves outside the normative framework of patriarchal familism by attaching to neoliberal and postsocialist discourses of individual independence and success, showing subjective becomings of them as multi-layered, conflicting and ongoing processes.

In Chapter 6 and 7 I go on to elaborate how this resistance relates to and feeds into more expansive formation of feminist networked counterpublics and digital intimate publics via the circulation and accumulation of counterdiscourses and affects online. Focusing on feminist struggles in relation to a concern of visibility, Chapter 6 explored the various practices of making feminist issues visible to investigate the possibilities and challenge for opening up spaces for feminist discussion and resistance via feminist networked counterpublics. Chapter 7 draws on specific affective/discursive practices and the notion of mediated intimacies to explore how digital media enables feminist connections and networks, fostering a sense of belonging to a feminist community. It explicates the transformative aspects of digital feminisms by emphasising its capacity to resist

patriarchal familism by creating alternative forms of knowledge and connection. In the meantime, it extends the problematisation of affective homophily as the foundation for feminist expressions, undermining the articulation of differences in the experiences of gender and feminism and restricting the formation of more inclusive forms of feminist solidarity.

## Chapter 2 Telling the stories of (un)filial daughters

### 2.1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When I was little, my *waipo* (grandmother from mother's side) used to tell me about her girlhood. She and her two older sisters lived with their mother and *waipo*. 'There was no man in the household, so we got bullied and isolated in the village all the time,' She said, 'I had to marry at the age of fifteen. Only one year later I gave birth to your mum. Not long after that, your *waigong* (grandfather from mother's side) ruptured his lumber disc and couldn't do much heavy labour anymore, so I had to take on all the domestic chores and at the same time earn double working credits (*gongfen*) in the production team.'

Born and spent most of my summer and winter holidays in the rural area of Hunan province, I grew up listening to stories like this. It did not sound too ancient to me that a girl used to be forced to marry at a young age in exchange for betrothal presents (*caili*) from the groom's side to support her family of birth. The unfamiliar term in *waipo*'s story was 'production team'. 'I always worked harder than anyone else because I wanted to prove that I can just do as good as any man.' I could almost recite how *waipo* narrated the same storyline every time, but it took me years to understand that back in 1950-60s the farmers used to work in 'production teams' and earn credits for different types of agricultural duties to obtain food and necessities rather than getting groceries at the shops nearby. *Waipo* had always been a tough woman, so capable and hated being looked

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<sup>1</sup> The stories of my mother and *waipo* inspired me to do a PhD on the topic of Chinese feminisms and choose to focus on 'ordinary women' at the first place. My mother, as a faithful reader of my writing since I was in primary school, read some translated sections of the thesis and was aware that I included this discussion on family background for the context. I believe my late *waipo* would have given me the permission to talk about it here too.



down upon for being a woman. But she was extremely skinny and barely 5 feet tall. It was difficult for me to imagine how and why she had to prove herself through carrying one load of harvested rice four times of her own weight.

The moment that I first read the stories of iron girls in documentaries and books about Chinese women in the era of communist revolution, I immediately thought of *waipo*. I was struck by the Maoist notion of 'absolute equality' (*juedui pingdeng*) and when this totalising idea was applied to the perception of gender, it seemed to have totally ignored the possibility to discuss sexual differences at all. In retrospect, that *Waipo* took up the intensive agricultural work in the fields seemed like an answer to the revolutionary call, but I also knew from listening to her thousands of times that it was the only way for her as a rural woman to earn respect outside and in her family home. But so fixated at the ideal of being tough, *waipo* also had to push herself to the extreme to ensure that she never rested even during her menstruation periods and right after giving birth to my mother. This seemingly gender-neutral but rather gender-blind perception of absolute equality and toughness tacitly reproduced discrimination and violence against women, as faithfully engraved on my *waipo's* body that was always enduring pain.

In grade 8, my Chinese teacher gave us an assignment to write a 'heart-touching' story about a person that we know. I wrote about my mother, who gave up her chance for a better and more expensive college but chose to go into a nurse school instead so she could get a paid job sooner and support her younger brother; who later gave up her promotion opportunity for my father as he was studying for his doctorate; who also gave up her time for work, rest or just enjoy herself to take me to school, extracurricular activities and hospital. It received high remarks and praise from my teacher, though I remembered that she asked me why I crossed through the last half page of my essay and I could not reply.

I became so sad when I was writing the stories of my mother's 'voluntary' sacrifices to take care of family that the half last page became nothing but me venting why it is so acceptable for her always being the one who has to stand back. The idea that those naturally constituted as 'heart-touching' stories (as curated by myself and acknowledged by my teacher) had upset me.

It was during the process of writing this thesis that I started to make more sense of these stories of women that I know. As the participants were telling their stories of stumbling upon feminism online and fumbling about in attempt to find support and connections outside their families and schools, their stories were in a sense not of their own but resonated beyond individual levels. Those accounts held a collective significance, reflecting some commonality in their struggles and aspirations within a broader social and cultural context. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or even a known woman in the village where she grew up were constantly brought up and (re)presented in the narrations of how they experience and perceive gender and feminism.

This specific way of storytelling shows how we discursively and intimately position ourselves (Davies, 1991) in relation to the gendered ideals and norms that make us a part of the gender power dynamics. Through encountering and committing to feminisms, as I will later delve deeper into the stories of my participants, the (un)filial daughters and granddaughters are empowered to reshape the understandings of these issues and struggle to navigate them while trying to push forward feminist change. As I journeyed through the writing process of this project, I came to the realisation that feminist movement is not merely a continuous, sequential, and linear progression punctuated by occasional disruptions of dramatic and heightened moments of historical events. Instead, different space and time comes into matter (Barad, 2007) as my *waipo*, my mother and

many different Chinese women and their different stories kept being told and explored in this thesis. It calls for an examination of feminisms as a multiplicity of ongoing processes of discursive and material struggles and resistance cutting through, intersecting, and joining forces with each other, but each envelopes its own unique spatiotemporal contexts.

## **2.2 Locating the spatiotemporal 'sites' for feminist resistance**

### 2.2.1 Charting subjective becomings of (un)filial daughters

As I have mapped out in the introduction chapter, this project sets out to examine how digital technologies, social media platforms in particular, are used to push forward feminisms as collective political projects driven by desires and aspirations for change. It leads to the fundamental inquiry about feminism in this project – if feminist movement commits to a struggle for transformation of gender, sexual and other inequities, then how do we start to qualify and account for change and transformation? My analytical framework of digital feminisms in China firstly locates the spatiotemporal sites for feminist struggles and resistance within a critical examination of the complex, multifaced and multidirectional movements in which powers of patriarchal familism operate. In the meantime, it takes an affirmative stance (Braidotti, 2018, 2019a) to account for the potentials of change and possibilities of resistance by attending to the processes of subject-formation.

Starting from a poststructuralist and Foucauldian conception of power and subjectivity (Foucault, 1982), I attempt to explain how patriarchal familism operates through disperse forms of gender governance in contemporary Chinese context and gives rise to

the emergence of specific gender and feminist subjectivities. Building on this, Braidotti's feminist posthumanist theory of subject-formation as an ongoing process of becoming further emphasises the importance and possibilities of resisting dominant structures of power (Braidotti, 2001, 2006b, 2011). By taking an ontological shift towards the processes of subjective becomings, my conceptualisation of feminist subjectivities in this thesis recognises the significance of exploring embedded, embodied, and situated experiences without being fixated on singular markers of sociocultural, economic, and political conditions (Braidotti, 2011). Instead, it emphasises nuance, complexity and mobility in developing an analytical framework for subject-formation and locating these processes within the intersections of gendered, sexualised, racialised and other differences as well as power relations. In this sense, both normative and transformative powers have always been embedded within subjectivities. It calls for critical and situated examination of the 'location' as 'materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of the subject ... to posit the primacy of relations over substances.' (Braidotti, 2006a, p. 199).

This part of the theoretical discussion therefore ties back to the previous chapter where I have mapped out gender and sexual politics in contemporary Chinese context in relation to a neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism. Following what Bao (2020) conceptualised as a postsocialist metamorphosis of gender and sexual power relations, I situate Chinese digital feminisms as seeking transformation from within this intensified arena for contradicting and competing discursive, affective and material forces of traditional values and customs, commercial and consumerist cultures, market economy, the Party-state and so on. In addition, the contextualisation of neoliberal reconfiguration of patriarchal familism critically engages with sociological scholarship that investigates how conditions of globalisation (Seeberg, 2011), consumerism (McWilliams, 2013) and

neoliberalism (Rofel, 2007) have been incorporated into the nationalist modernisation project of economic reform and opening up to global market since late 1970s. Yan Yunxiang (2010) suggested that individualisation in China took a distinctive pathway, predominantly shaped by top-down state interventions with goals of reviving and modernising the nation, in contrast to the paradigm of Western Europe that was embedded in liberal ideal of an autonomous and self-determining subject. Yan (2010, p. 505) proposed to make sense of selfhood in Chinese context as always and already embedded within 'the duality of a small self and a great self, namely, as a relationship between the individual and social group, instead of an autonomous and indivisible entity'. But is this relational duality of a small self (*xiaowo*) and a great self (*dawo*) necessarily compatible with a vision for feminist movements in this thesis as collective political agendas for change? As I have noted in the introduction (Chapter 1), the socialist project of women's liberation and Confucian familism fasten women's subjectivities upon an intimate identification with either the state or the family. In a context of the rise of neo-familism (Yan, 2018) where the CCP regime continuously brings up a discourse of 'women return home' under economic uncertainties (Ouyang, 2003; Song, 2016) and family-centred femininity re-emerges as dominant norms (Martin, 2023), it is urgent to interrogate how the Chinese feminist movement could respond to these intricate and layered powers of patriarchal, neoliberal and familial mechanisms of control.

Developed from a re-reading of the religious establishments of Christianity, Foucault (1982, p. 782) in *The Subject and Power* analysed the power techniques of modern state as a new form of 'pastoral power' taking upon the notions of care that is a mix of an individualising technology of self-care and a more totalising power exercised through institutions (e.g. healthcare, law, family, etc). Taiwanese scholar Josephine Ho (2017, p.

21) drew from Foucault to conceptualise the forms of gender governance in contemporary Taiwan as 'parental/pastoral power' within a global, postcolonial and (neo)liberal context in conjunction with paternalistic, patriarchal, familial forces in traditional 'Chinese' cultures. There are, of course, numerous studies that have debated whether Confucianism and its impact on Chinese cultures and societies actually goes beyond the scope of political and philosophical dimensions and functions as a religion (for examples see Taylor, 1990; Yao, 2000). My intention here is not to conflate Foucault's discussion on Christianity with Chinese Confucianism, but rather to provide an analytical framework grounded in Foucauldian analysis of subjection and power that is viable for exploring how patriarchal familism extends much more beyond the singular family realm and pervades throughout other institutions and the wider Chinese contemporary society. It is, however, to be acknowledged here that filial piety and Confucian familial culture both as a set of moral values and societal norms in the context of mainland China is predominantly associated with Han-dominated discourses. Han-Chinese as an ethnic group takes up over 90% of the population in mainland China. This thesis is mindful of the risk in reproducing the dominance of Han cultures within the field of Chinese studies, but it has to be acknowledged as one limitation of this thesis for it barely touches upon ethnicity and how ethnicity relates to gender, sexual and other power dynamics.

The norm of filial piety as a key element of patriarchal familism as contextualised so far contributes to my cartography of (un)filial daughters. As the key conceptual figuration of the thesis, (un)filial daughters is not simply used a literary figure of a rebellious and courageous girl who goes against her family in exploration of her own subjectivities as mapped out in existing academic literature (Croll, 2017; J.-P. Liu & Ding, 2005; Meng & Dai, 2004). Drawing on what is termed as a figurative methodology (Tyler, 2008), this

figuration demonstrates some resonances with its repetitive representation in modern women's literature, mass media and academic discourse that is inextricably linked to conflicting affects of disobedience, liberation and shame. Nevertheless, the (un)filial daughters in this thesis deals with a very specific neoliberal and postsocialist context for Chinese women and feminists to navigate. The paternalistic and socialist economic and political structures that tried to directly interfere with every dimension of social, political and intimate life (as contextualised in Chapter 1) did not become a distant and irrelevant past, yet its top-down enforcement of women's liberation planted problematic gender egalitarianism in the genealogy of Chinese feminisms. More recently, a distinctive mode of self-calculating and self-making neoliberal subjectivity (Yan, 2010) emerged from the dramatic turn to market economy in spite of non-existence of political and social liberalism. Furthermore, the authoritarian regime is evolving rapidly with the help of technological advancements to achieve pervasive control over political contentions and social movements (Gorwa, 2019; Mackinnon, 2011). Confucian familial cultures and its social ordering through familial discourses of filial piety and family harmony normalising the respect and obedience to seniority and authority persisted to be what Raymond Williams (1977) termed as the residual, constantly resurfacing through CCP's political rhetoric of familial ethics and virtues (Song, 2016). Taking these all into consideration, it is pushing China to a thought-provoking postsocialist spatiotemporality for feminisms where 'equality between men and women' as a basic state policy seemingly became so banal and mainstreamed and thus flattened out the overlapping and complex power differentials and dynamics.

This conception of a highly sophisticated form of patriarchal familial control hence simultaneously sees a normalisation of expectations on girlhoods, young femininities and

certain forms of intimacies and also gives rise to feminist resistance from these girls and young women. By that I also acknowledge and engage with the feminist critique of a paradigmatic poststructural approach to discourse, social norms and power that has problematised Foucauldian analysis of subjectivities as too subsumed into or even complicit with neoliberal governmentality (Oksala, 2013). I argue that it is viable to follow through this approach but to further include fine-grained discussions on the corporeal, embodied and psychic dimensions shaping subjectivities to move beyond the marginalisation of body as merely a product of discourse (Cromby, 2007; A. Evans & Riley, 2014; Riley et al., 2021; Wetherell, 2013).

Within feminist scholarship, the recent articulations of affects and affectivity in media and cultural theory and research have particularly claimed to applaud and take account of the transformative force of the body rather than seeing the body as merely moulded by abstractions of social norms and ideology. One prominent trajectory of this turn to affect followed the vitalist philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and the work of Brian Massumi (2002, 2015) to explore affects as “‘inhuman,” “pre-subjective,” “visceral” forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these’ (Leys, 2011, p. 437). This strand of affect theory emphasises on the significance of analysing affects as pre-cognitive, pre-personal bodily forces and rejects the idea of infusing affects with structured categories of basic emotions (Wetherell, 2012). As Massumi (2002, p. 27) put it, careless mixture of affects and emotions greatly undermined ‘considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism’. Moreover, the central concerns with the bodily and material forces and intensities which, according to Massumi (1995), are so significant and useful for understanding of contemporary functioning of power and resistance exactly because



affects enjoy relative autonomy from the conscious, the subjective and hence possess transformative potentials. Patricia Clough (2008, 2009) similarly contended for the separation of affects as pre-subjective bodily forces from the cognition, expression and representation of emotion to chart the autonomy of affects that feed into movements of bodies and possible change. In order to explicate the issue of affective autonomy and modulation, Clough (2008, p. 2) argued to take account of the turn to affect 'as a harbinger of and a discursive accompaniment to the forging of a new body... a biomediated body'. Foregrounding the formation of this biomediated body is the technical context of biomedicine and new media opening up and extending the body's affective indeterminacy and its capacity for autonomic responses (Clough, 2008), which further contributes to the understandings of affective forces in the processes of subject-formation.

One ongoing theoretical debate in affect theory concerns whether and how to differentiate between affects and emotions. In some strands of affect studies, the distinction becomes much less significant or even impossible in empirical terms such as in the works of Margaret Wetherell (2012, 2013), Sianne Ngai (2005), Sara Ahmed (2004) and Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011). Ngai (2005, p. 27), for instance, found the strict distinction between affect and emotion less helpful because 'affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether...' Leys (2011) and Wetherell (2013), from another perspective, both raised concerns regarding the experiment cited by Massumi to support the theory of missing half second between bodily and cognitive response, which posited a possible empirical separation between affect and emotion. Similarly, Papacharissi in an interview reflected that the challenge of analysing affects for social researchers lies in the difficulty in isolating affects 'before cognition categorizes them into emotion at the same time that emotional mechanisms

alert cognitive ones' and the sequence is hence somehow 'imposed' by scientists (Boler & Davis, 2020, p. 57).

It is also worth noting that although there are already several distinct typologies (Clough, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Kennedy, 2018; Koivunen, 2010; Leys, 2011; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010) of differentiating between versions of affect studies, those differentiations to my understanding were primarily made to tease out the heterogeneity within this body of work with various disciplinary, epistemological and ontological commitments. Empirical research is usually more flexible on the choice of terminology and the specific operational conceptualisations of the terms. Pointing to the significance of exploring the social and physic dimensions of affects, Ahmed (2004, 2010, pp. 230–231) drew on the notion of stickiness to approach affects as something forming and maintaining 'the connection between ideas, values and objects'. This is hence particularly inspiring for social sciences researchers to rigorously engaging in the analysis of emotions and affects as cultural practices which enact alignment with specific social ideals rather than seeing them as fully imperceptible or purely experienced on personal and physiological level. Moreover, I argue that it is not only possible to work with affect studies that traverse diverse conceptual pathways but also necessary in this research. As Hemmings (2005, p. 550) pointed out, feminist and postcolonial theories should expect to find common interests in affects as a conceptual tool for its capacity to locate unexpected cracks to transform, without being trapped inside 'a repressive/subversive dichotomy'. Koivunen (2010, p. 24) similarly proposed to pay attention to 'a new common ground for many of the discussants: critique of individualism, the notion of interiority and identity politics'.

I am committed to exploring how to work with this academic debate on affect, emotion and feeling affirmatively to address my main question investigating feminisms as

collective projects to sustainably generate potentials for change. In this regard, I follow Braidotti's (2011, 2016) proposal of embracing affirmative ethics of joy in exploring affects, intensities and bodily forces that might not be fully captured through cognitive mechanisms, and meanwhile do not take a full departure from poststructuralist legacy of analysing discourses, power and subjectivity. In the research, I mainly engage with two distinctive yet related strands of affect theory and affective studies: firstly, as I have outlined in this section, it builds on the critical work that attends to the entangled psycho-discursive processes in subjective becomings (Braidotti, 2001, 2003; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013) and an affective-discursive approach (A. Evans & Riley, 2014; Kanai, 2019; Wetherell, 2012, 2013); secondly, as I will expand on in the following sections of this chapter, it aligns with a perspective of construction, maintenance and undoing of intimacies through affective ties in both sociocultural and political realms (Ahmed, 2004, 2017; Berlant, 2008, 2011; Hemmings, 2005, 2012), including and particularly how intimacies are mediated in the contexts of social media (Dobson, Robards, et al., 2018; Petersen et al., 2017; Sundén & Paasonen, 2020).

### 2.2.2 Mapping the (un)eventfulness in feminist social media events

Another promising avenue for discovering feminist resistance and exploring its potential for effecting change can be found in what I have conceptualised as feminist social media events. The concept of a feminist social media event is characterised on two distinct yet interconnected levels: on a methodological level, it is an occurrence where specific social media contents garner substantial public attention and cause intense debates on the platform of *Weibo*. In practice, I use the 'hot search list' function on *Weibo* - akin to Twitter's trending topics - which allows users to see the 50 most frequently searched topics in real-time, with updates occurring on a minute-by-minute basis. I will get into

more details about this in the methodology chapter. On an analytical and theoretical level, my conception of feminist social media event draws inspiration from media theory, feminist media studies and Deleuze-influenced studies of events, making it a complex and nuanced concept that warrants further exploration. The remainder of this section delves into the intricate conceptual pathways involved in defining a feminist (social) media event, which serves to shed light on this dynamic and evolving concept in relation to its cultural salience in the Chinese context.

In media and communication theory, one influential paradigm of researching events was proposed by Dayan and Katz as early as 1990s. Their notion of media events was closely related to the rise of national television broadcasting in Western countries and predominantly used to look into dramatized and ritualised moments of major events and occasions that are widely broadcasted through mass media on a national scale (Dayan & Katz, 1994). In this sense, media events are defined as mediated spectacles that are transformed into stories for mass consumption through media coverage which come to shape a collective experience (Dayan & Katz, 1994). Developed from this notion, Hepp and Couldry (2009, p. 12) defined media events as ‘certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants’. Despite the attention to the performative construction of media events, it still generally reproduces a top-down methodological paradigm starting from the centres that are assumed to be able to frame the event (Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

The most important conceptual insight from this paradigm of media event is to attend to how the expansive and instant reach of mass broadcasting and multiple forms of mass media could engage a vast audience to shape public memories, feelings and perceptions

about these specific heightened moments (Dayan & Katz, 1994; Hepp & Couldry, 2009). More specifically related to mediascape in Chinese contexts and in a critical response to the aforementioned and well-received notion of media events, Qiu and Chan (2009, p. 28) argued for studying the new patterns of media events in the era of new media:

*'two main aspects are to be considered here: First is the power relationship in language, which has shifted from being monopolized by traditional elites to being empowered at the grassroots level. Second is the social impact of the event, whether it will continue to perpetuate or break the traditional power structure. It is generally difficult to determine at the early stage of the event.'*

Conspicuously, this notion of new media event in Chinese context is often associated with grassroots formations of counterpower (Castells, 2009) and the related research often engages in an analysis of events as discursive and material arena where state power, platform governance and digital activists converge. Moreover, Chinese government has always been concerned with online political contention and particularly its capacity to mobilise for and turn into offline collective actions (M. Jiang, 2016; L. Tang & Sampson, 2012; G. Yang, 2009). The study of new media events inherently calls for a critical understanding of the sophisticated censorship mechanisms that are developed for limiting the potential for collective action and dissent growing from online. Under the Xi regime, there has been significant change in how CCP manages 'media events' from a highly hybrid approach which 'cleverly combines top-down hierarchical decrees and advanced censorship techniques with softer, more indirect management methods' (Schneider, 2019, p. 459). By looking at how Chinese government use a discourse of 'civilising and purifying the internet' (*wenming jingwang*) to curb confrontational modes of expressions through promoting more 'positive' modes of consensus, Yang (2017, p. 85)

conceptualised a strategy of 'affective governance' that is initiated by the state but achieved through engaging mainstream media, the official accounts on social media platforms, and ultimately social media users themselves.

To arrive at a feminist approach to the social media event, another key conceptual influence comes from Deleuze (2015) for it enables me to think of events as inherently intertwined with the past but always opens up to new trajectories and potentials instead of isolated instances of historical spacetime. I am drawing on a specific notion of event that takes account of the event as the process of becoming defined by its own indeterminacy and openness to the invention of other event(s) (Deleuze, 2015; Patton, 1997; Zourabichvili & Aarons, 2012). This notion of events as unfolding accounts for both affective and discursive dimensions that constrain or enable action, depending on how we respond to them. I therefore do not approach the concept of a feminist social media event at face value as the outcome or effectuation of an independent incident or occurrence to be told, reported or represented. This thesis probes feminist social media events as affective-discursive assemblages (Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018) that operate within the material realm of objects, bodies, and media as well as affective-discursive expressions of them. The analysis of feminist social media events in this research hence starts with a tracking of highly visible gender related and feminist discussions that went into the list of trending topics without pre-emption of where the unfolding of this event leads to. In a similar vein of the Deleuzian ontology and epistemology of starting in the middle (Deleuze, 2014), it is neither possible nor necessary to trace back to a definite starting point for a specific event. It instead requires a departure from simply documenting and describing the effects of news-worthy events and to attend to the

affective-material-discursive capacities of the event that calls feminist subjectivities, connections, and publics into being.

Feminist social media events in this research are taken as spatiotemporal sites for the affective/discursive practices (Wetherell, 2013) of resistance where the normative flows of information and narratives around girlhood and femininity are disrupted and, in the meantime, generate new directions for struggles. In the meantime, feminist social media events provide a powerful conceptual tool for looking into both the resistance and reproduction of powers in ongoing processes of (un)eventfulness. This conceptualisation of (un)eventfulness is to qualify potentials of feminist change as embedded in subversiveness arising from seemingly mundane, ordinary and everyday social media practices. It also corresponds to an emerging conceptual frame of transformation within sociological research on social and political movements. This notion of transformation shifts the analytical lens from viewing transformative events as heightened and dramatic moments of disruption to a more nuanced understanding of social transformation as an ongoing process wherein both reproduction and deconstruction of social structures coexist (Moore, 2011; Porta, 2008). This reframing dismantles the conventional notion of transformation as a sudden disruption in opposition to the continuity or reproduction of social structures. In a much similar vein, Rentschler and Thrift (2015) develops the idea of feminist eventfulness in writing about feminist archives and documentation that shift away from looking for the pivotal or 'turning-point' moments in articulating feminist history and movements. This specific account of eventfulness aims to 'better account for the capacity of feminist events to be transformative in unforeseen and often unrecognised ways' (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 241). This notion of uneventfulness in social change further helps me to qualify a social media event as 'feminist' when

seemingly mundane online discussions have been transformed into sites for networked resistance and digital consciousness raising.

## **2.3 Exploring the potentialities for feminist collectivity**

### 2.3.1 The kaleidoscope of networked counterpublics

A significant amount of research looking at contemporary grassroots activism in China revolves around the role of the internet in shaping a potential ‘public sphere’ within an authoritarian regime (Z. Li, 2004) and how this online public sphere might connect to wider civil society. The Habermasian conception of public sphere was adopted in this body of work to study online political participation where online platforms constitute an arena for discursive contentions and a space between the Chinese state and civil society (Shao & Wang, 2017). For instance, Yang and Calhoun (2007, p. 211) drew upon the concept of ‘green public sphere’ to explore the internet as ‘a public sphere of environmental discourse’ where the general publics and environmentalist activist groups can participate in opinion expression and exchange to even potentially influence policymaking. Empirical studies and academic debates about the applicability of public sphere theory to studying Chinese internet crucially developed the concept of public sphere itself, given most of them focused on marginalised and subaltern groups, communities and voices, in contrast to the Habermasian ideal of bourgeois public sphere (Brunner, 2017; Cao & Guo, 2016; Chase, 2012; Clothey et al., 2016; Pu & Scanlan, 2012; Xing, 2012).

My intention is to call for scholarship of digital activism and online political contentions to move away from the monolithic view of the digital/online as an undifferentiated and



impermeable sphere and to present an approach to analysing online communities and discourses that are dissenting, heterogeneous and kaleidoscopic. In relation to this, I start with discussing the feminist critique of public sphere theory and follow concepts such as counterpublics to build up my own analytical framework for investigating emerging feminist voices and resistance in Chinese social media platforms. Nancy Fraser (2013) provided a critique of Habermas and his interpretation of Marxist social theory as imposing a binary distinction between symbolic and material forms of reproduction in his definition of public concerns, which therefore replicated and reinforced existing patriarchal gendered power relations. It reflects the exclusionary nature of the public sphere theory and the need for rethinking the notion of public sphere to account for the experiences of marginalised social groups and communities. Fraser (1990, p. 67) expounded on exclusions based on gender, race, ethnicity and so on that were reinforced by the Habermasian ideal of public sphere and proposed to inquire into counterdiscourses created and circulated by the members of subordinate groups which constituted 'subaltern counterpublics' countering to dominant processes of deliberation and public expression. Fraser's (1990) conception of subaltern counterpublics not only considers the experiences of social groups that are excluded and marginalised in the ideal and dominant public sphere but also highlights that public sphere is not necessarily bound by physical or virtual sites. Instead, it is conceived as discursive arenas where a plurality of publics and counterpublics emerge through various strands of discourse, thereby possessing the capacity to formulate resistant politics and challenge dominant ideals (Fraser, 1990). Arguing in a similar vein, Warner (2002, p. 52) pointed out that 'there could be an infinite number of publics within the social totality' and a public is not a pre-determined entity prior to the addressing of a discourse – publics must be capable of organising themselves around the circulation of discourses. Moreover, Warner (2002,

p. 86) powerfully argued that counterpublics must not simply try to disseminate an ideology and set up a political agenda distinct from or even oppressed in the dominant public sphere but also ‘maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status’.

By consolidating these conceptual reframing of counterpublics from feminist and queer critical theorists (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), I reiterate that understanding social media as a unified public sphere defined in opposition to a physical public sphere will not do justice to the mapping of digital feminisms in China. Habermas was claimed to have questioned the role of the internet on accommodating public and political debates as ‘(i)n the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics’ (Habermas in Jensen & Helles, 2011, p. 530). More recently Chinese internet researchers also noted the coexistence of ‘various factions of “civil society” groups, including politically conservative, chauvinist, nationalistic, and apathetic subjects and businesses’ (M. Jiang, 2016, p. 46). My assessment, however, is that this has exactly revealed the limitations of the idealised conception of a singular public sphere that privileges certain individuals and collectives with political knowledge and the ability to engage in rational public debates as the only legitimate participants.

In my analysis of digital feminisms in this thesis, I deploy the concept of networked feminist counterpublics (Trott, 2021) as discursive arenas for feminist discussion and activism (Ringrose & Regehr, 2020). This concept particularly takes account of the specificities of digital platforms to understand their potentials for community building among marginalised groups and facilitating collective actions in resistance to dominant

narratives about gender, sexuality and feminism in the context of China where mass media is mostly state-affiliated and subject to strict censorship. In this sense, I follow media and cultural studies of online communities that emphasised the role of social media in the formation of diverse publics that are increasingly mediated and loosely networked via digital platforms. Based on empirical research on online communities in platforms including MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, danah boyd (2014, p. 8) proposed a concept of 'networked publics' which simultaneously refers to the space 'restructured by networked technologies' and the 'imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice'. Networked publics are claimed to differ from traditional definitions of publics for four distinctive affordances: persistence, replicability (or termed as spreadability in later work), scalability (or visibility) and searchability (boyd, 2011, 2014). These structural characteristics of social media are argued to have shaped the formation of online publics which is vital for considering how netizens on *Weibo* come together to discuss political and civic issues and form connective and/or collective actions.

In regard to the individuals who join in political and civic debates in Chinese social media, I draw on the term 'netizen' in my discussion on the formation of online communities and digital feminisms in Chinese context. Coined by combining 'net' and 'citizen', netizen was originally used to describe a distinctively intellectual online community who actively contribute to the development of internet (Hauben & Hauben, 1998). Shifman (2014, p. 25) in a study of online political memes adopted the term to discuss how 'digitally literate' netizens participate in the popularity of using memes in political discussions that give rise to a meme culture pertinent to contemporary political scenes online. Despite that, netizen might seem an archaic word in English-speaking world. In Chinese context,

however, this term is especially relevant when discussing issues around civic and political engagement in the online sphere (Fung, 2012). *Wangmin* in Chinese is commonly used to describe the general internet users, which can be literally translated to net-citizens in English. Fung (2012) argued that the use of netizens in the Chinese context differentiated from the broader population because their demographics appear to be younger, wealthier, better educated, mostly from urban China and more politically active online<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, empirical studies on youth political engagement in China challenged the oversimplified assertion that young people generally lacked interest in political participation. It was found that young people in China had been showing active engagement in political expressions and contention on social media, although these online activities might not translate into political participation in offline settings (H. T. Chen et al., 2016; Zhong, 2014).

The notion of netizen is indeed valuable for examining digital feminist activism, particularly in the context of Chinese social media, and is especially useful in this research to interrogate the relationship between online political contention and its influence on the wider society. This concept recognises that political and civic participation as a routine and integral part of social media practices for many ordinary netizens in China, given the limited space available for public discussion and debate outside of the online sphere. In the meantime, Chinese scholarship on digital activism has long been contending for the significance of less confrontational forms of social and cultural

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<sup>2</sup> This assertion is subject to change, particularly in recent years due to the increasing popularity of mobile devices, platforms, and the internet. However, when considering the specific context of the Weibo platform, this claim holds true to some extent.

resistance (G. Yang, 2009), considering the bleak conditions for political contentions in Chinese social media platforms. By examining the social media practices of a Chinese charity organisation called Love Save Pneumoconiosis, Gleiss (2015) challenged the idea that the eventual democratisation of the political regime is the only factor to evaluate the impact of online activism. The researcher instead argued that the discursive practices of the charity strategically challenged the hegemonic political rhetoric of the Chinese authority about pneumoconiosis through taking elements from official discourse and modifying and mixing them into alternative narratives (Gleiss, 2015). Given what I have discussed earlier about Chinese authorities' gripping control over online mass incidents (Schneider, 2019) and the adoption of affective governance (G. Yang, 2017), it calls for researchers to keep up with and critically engage with the limitations for digital activism in China. This is especially illuminating for examining how resistance is made possible facing tightening online censorship in an authoritarian regime such as China, tying back to the reconceptualisation of transformation as coexisting with reproduction and continuation of existing social structures and powers (Moore, 2011; Porta, 2008).

### 2.3.2 Affective ties and mediated intimacies

This section explicates two interrelated theoretical formations that inform my analytical approach to the affective and intimate dimensions of digital feminist politics in Chinese context, as well as the potentials for collective action and feminist solidarity facilitated by social media. Following my contextualisation of neoliberal reconfiguration of patriarchal familism in the introduction chapter, this thesis brings together feminist theoretical insights into intimacies from both the perspectives of affect theory and public sphere theory. In this sense, I look at digital feminisms as shaping a new form of mediated intimacies (Petersen et al., 2017) surrounding feminist discussions and practices in

response to the promises of conventional forms of intimacy (Berlant, 2011) and seek to reframe, rework and resist them.

As have discussed previously in Chapter 1, the notion of intimacy in this thesis is understood in a broader sense rather than being restricted to romantic, sexual, marital relationships or other conventional forms of kinship and family relationships. In relation to Chinese feminist politics and its challenge to patriarchal familism, I align with a conception of intimacy as a sense of sociality, belongingness and connectivity operating both affectively and normatively (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Writing about the possibilities of queer (counter)cultures as practice of worldmaking, Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 558) pointed out that

*“world” like “public”, differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright... Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.*

In addition to discursive and rhetorical dimensions of subject-formation and community building, I am interested in the intimate belongingness to a public as ‘laden with intimate affect’ (Warner, 2002, p. 87), which often depends on the mobilisation and orientation of specific affects and emotions (Ahmed, 2004). Papacharissi (2015) challenged a perception of public sphere that sees rationality as the core and ideal in the exchange of public opinion (McLaughlin, 1993) by focusing on the crucial role of affects in the formation of digitally networked publics. This aligns closely with the affective turn in the developments within critical theory (Clough, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011) which

calls for an expansion of the fields of media and cultural studies to encompass 'aesthetic-affective modes of communication' (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 111). Rasmussen (2014, p. 1326) argued similarly that

*'Withholding a too tight connection between a rational public sphere and a deliberative notion of democracy could imply exclusion of important types of non-discursive, collective forms of action, and in fact function ideologically.'*

The significance of affects in unpacking the multi-layered and entangled aspects of online political and public discussions is closely linked to the concept of intimate publics, which, as Berlant (1998, p. 281) denoted, are formed on a basis that 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness'. Following the exploration of mediated intimacies as affective ties earlier in this chapter, it is equally important to consider the emergence of new modalities of connections and intimacies facilitated by affective intensities and expressions of public feelings in social media. These modalities of online communication and connection reflect the evolving landscape of digital platforms and the ways in which personal, emotional, intimate and affective experiences are shared, communicated, and amplified within online publics and politics (Papacharissi, 2015). As Papacharissi (2015, p. 25) noted, social media and digital networks are 'hybrid spaces blurring public and private, civic and consumption-based, collective and personal narratives that assemble the story of who we are, and these stories are personal and political'. Hence it is necessary to take account of the plurality and heterogeneity of the vast array of online publics taking shape and taking up digital discursive arenas to voice their own narratives. Attending to how the normative and intimate powers of patriarchal familism operate through digital networks and social networking sites like *Weibo*, I argue

that the eroding lines between public and intimate gave form to networked counterpublics that are highly affective, contingent and unstable (boyd, 2011).

Taking online publics as both affective (Papacharissi, 2015) and intimate (Dobson, Carah, et al., 2018), I explore how social media and digital technologies come to shape the construction of friendship, connections and networks in the context of digital feminist politics in China. Media scholars have shown particular interest in documenting and understanding how social media potentially contribute to the constitution of more fluid and less conventional forms of intimate relations (Chambers, 2013). As Petersen et al. (2017, p. 4) pointed out:

*'intimacy is deeply interlinked and intertwined with social media... as... both intimacy and social media allow people to express and share what matters to them, and both encourage personalised connection and interactivity.'*

This is represented in the shift of academic attention to 'virtual intimacy' (Grassman & Case, 2009), 'mediated intimacies' (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2013) and 'mobile intimacy' (Hjorth & Lim, 2012) where subject formation and intersubjective relationships have argued to be increasingly decoupled from face-to-face settings (Jamieson, 2013). These notions are useful to further trouble and question the rigid public/private opposition (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). In this sense, the key to looking into the interwoven fabrics of the intimate and the affective also responds to the theoretical question regarding feminist discussions and practices online to query 'intimacy as no longer a "private" activity but a pivotal component of public sphere performativity' (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 478).



The concept of digital intimate publics (Dobson, Carah, et al., 2018, p. 5), on the other hand, opens theoretical pathways for conceptualising digital media culture as the centre of 'commodification of intimacy, self, and political identities; pedagogical discipline about normativity and normative intimate desires for different groups of subjects; as well as cultural scenes that promise and generate feelings of belonging and consolation'. The conception of digital intimate publics moves beyond singular and fixed physical locality, which allows me to tap into collective imaginaries of belongingness and attachment outside conventional notions of intimacies mainly related to the patriarchal family, marriage and state in Chinese context. In the meantime, I am concerned about how the formation of digital intimate publics are heavily influenced and shaped by these power structures. By looking into the , this research hence attends to the tensions between the perceptions and experiences of intimacies in the digital era as evolving and diversified (Chambers, 2013) and critical theoretical insights that the construction of intimacies continue to adhere to and reproduce conventional frameworks (Berlant, 2008).

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical and analytical framework of this research for grasping the transformative power and feminist resistance embedded within the 21 participants' accounts of digital feminisms and how it relates to their experiences of gender and sexuality. This analytical approach to digital feminisms goes beyond the representational paradigm and aligns with the affective turn to understanding the entanglements of discourses, affects, feelings and other forms of power dynamics shaping specific spatiotemporalities in and beyond the realm of social media. It connects well with a 'new media' theory of mediation wherein the analytical focus is placed on a 'multiple,

entangled processes of becoming' instead of perceiving platforms, social media contents or social media users as passive and pre-existed objects (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. xvi).

I outline the theoretical framework for exploring the transformative forces of digital feminisms in the subjective becomings of girls and young women as active participants in feminist politics and activism by looking into how they navigate the neoliberal and postsocialist contexts of patriarchal familism. I position my conceptualisation of feminist social media event in the legacies of media studies of events and also highlights the legitimacy of studying social media event in the context of China as associated with grassroots collective actions and state control over its formation. In relation to this, I develop the notion of networked counterpublics from public sphere theory and the critique from feminist and queer theorists, proposing to unpack how counterdiscourses and counternarratives of marginalised groups foster resistance and transformation of wider conditions of social injustice. Moreover, this chapter extends the discussion on mediated intimacies (Chambers, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017) as a concept to complement the understanding of connections, networks and intimacies enabled by social media in the context of digital feminisms. By looking at the affective and intimate dimensions of feminist struggles and practices online, the discussion chapters of this thesis will unpack how social media and digital networks reshape the feelings and discourses about intimacy and solidarity by enabling collective feminist resistance to the normative and dominant ways of becoming a girl or young woman in Chinese context. In the next chapter, I move onto a literature review of related fields of study to set up for my own analysis of digital feminisms in China.

## Chapter 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter draws upon specific empirical studies from both Chinese and Western contexts revolving around digital feminisms and activism, with a particular focus on articulating the active participation of girls and younger women in these practices in relation to the social, technological and theoretical background of this research. I suggest that it is crucial to draw from girlhood studies to gain a deeper understanding of the roles that girls and young women play, not only in cultural production but also as capable participants in social movements and agents of social change (Aapola et al., 2005; Kim & Ringrose, 2018). Through reviewing these studies, I will discuss the emerging forms of digital activism and political contentions with relation to a binarism of online and offline contexts that has been troubled in academic debates. Yet, it must be acknowledged that much of the existing research within these related fields have been conducted in Western contexts. This thesis highlights and addresses the critical need to carefully examine specific and varied socio-cultural contexts in order to expand the knowledge about feminist movements, digital feminisms and girlhoods in diverse and multiple forms. Moreover, it attends to the tensions within related academic debates that are situated in a globalising and transnational context of complex and localised social contexts and political struggles.

This research is situated within an emerging research area of digital feminism (Baer, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Jouet, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019) and seeks to make contributions to the field by investigating feminist discussions and activities that flourish in Chinese social media platforms. Over the last decade, digital feminism as an intersected

field of both empirical and theoretical research has seen significant contributions as well as created interactions across multiple disciplines. This body of work has focused on examining real-world cases to gain insights into how feminists from diverse cultural and political contexts utilize social media and other digital tools to document and report instances of everyday sexism, conduct feminist pedagogy, and effect political and social change through digital activism (Horeck, 2014; D. O. Kim et al., 2020; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Okech, 2021). Moreover, there have been concerns and fruitful theoretical debates regarding the recognition and navigation of material-affective-discursive flows and patterns of differences, dissonance, exclusions in community building and solidarity in feminist politics in general (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Pruchniewska, 2016).

I am particularly interested in exploring the specific platform of *Weibo* which evolved to become the most prominent platform for feminist discussions and activism in Chinese context (DeLuca et al., 2016; Xue & Rose, 2022). In relation to the analytical focus of this research project on Chinese digital feminisms, I intend to consider the implication of *Weibo* not only as a technological platform but also multi-dimensional site for governance, control and also resistance where ordinary users, netizens or digital activists and online publics, platform economies and the state all come into play. I will engage with the debate in critical social media studies that shifts away from technological determinism by deploying a relational approach to researching social media platform drawing on the concepts of affordance and vernacular (boyd, 2014; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015; Warfield et al., 2020). Through critically engaging with these theoretical debates as well as empirical research, I aim to provide a nuanced and complex cartography of how to spell out the possibilities and precarities of doing feminisms on

social media platform like *Weibo* to set up for the discussion on these 21 participants' experiences and practices of digital feminisms later in this thesis.

### **3.2 Girls and young women: Marginal subjects of feminisms?**

In this section, I am going to discuss the growing research interests on girls and young women in cross-disciplinary fields of study including sociology of education, youth and childhood studies and media and cultural studies, especially those that feature a feminist perspective. By deploying girlhood as a conceptual term, this thesis responds to the academic debates about girlhoods in global and in Chinese contexts. It engages with feminist and queer scholarship to look at a very specific but also diverse group of girls and young women in China that shed new lights on Chinese girlhoods and feminist politics in relation to the lived experiences of gender, sexuality and feminism of these 21 participants.

As my research intends to trace the disobedience and resistance within contemporary feminist politics and activism from the emergence of girl feminist subjectivities (which was outlined in Chapter 2), it follows a growing body of scholarship that takes interest in how girls and young women experience, conduct and relate to digital feminisms. Along with the growing visibility of feminism in the past decade (Banet-Weiser, 2018), feminist researchers have contributed significantly to highlighting the role of girls and young women as feminist subjects and political agents in feminist activism (Keller, 2016, 2019; Kim & Ringrose, 2018; Ringrose & Renold, 2016; Taft, 2014, 2017). This body of work follows the spirit of girlhood studies that seek to interrogate family, school, media and popular culture as important sites for the enactment and reproduction of norms and

ideals about girlhoods and meanwhile how girls and young women themselves negotiate and challenge these norms (Aapola et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 1991; Walkerdine, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Angela McRobbie's (1991, 1993) ground-breaking work on teenage girls, young women and youth culture shifted away from the focus on girlhood as merely a developmental or transitional period before womanhood (Aapola et al., 2005). It moved the 'subject' of girls and girls' studies towards conceptualising girlhood as a site for subjective becoming (Gonick & Gannon, 2014; Mitchell, 2016), encouraging researchers to keep a close eye on how a range of intersectional power differentials such as gender, sexuality, race, class, (dis)ability and other come into play. As an interdisciplinary research field, girlhood studies are particularly focused on exploring the construction of girlhood and hence encompasses the various ideals and norms associated with girlhoods and young femininity in particular cultural, social, and political contexts (Aapola et al., 2005; Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, 1997). Focusing on the discourses of 'can-do' girls and girls 'at-risk' in Western context, Harris (2004, p. 1) illuminated how girls and young women are celebrated as 'vanguard of new subjectivity' whilst neoliberal discourse of choice and individual responsibilities are also deployed to regulate such emerging subjectivities.

As noted in Chapter 2 my analytical approach is largely inspired by a body of feminist work which critically engaged with and developed the poststructuralist and Foucauldian-influenced analysis of discourse to look at the operationalising of power and its constitution of subject as in fluid, unstable and contradictory processes (Riley et al., 2021). Early feminist analysis draws from Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power to look into, for instance, 'the modernization of patriarchal power' (Bartky, 1990, p. 63) which is inextricably linked to normative forces of popular media and culture including fashion

and beauty, arguing for girls and women's self-disciplining and internalisation of patriarchal 'gaze'. The notion of the representational body (Bordo, 1995) captured the gendering process of women's bodies as a dominant ideology being perpetuated and inscribed into women's bodies, which often runs the risk of disengaging from empowering work that feminists have been committed to. Bordo herself (1993, p. 193) further reflects on related work by differentiating an 'old' feminist conception of female body resting upon social control from a postmodern one that 'emphasised "intervention", "contestation", "subversion"'. Another key area of feminist media and cultural studies of women's bodies, femininity and power brought Foucault's later work into discussion, highlighting power as not only totalising but also individualising enacting through technologies of self (Foucault, 1982; Heyes, 2011; Kelly, 2013) which converged with an increasingly individualistic contexts of late modernity in Western societies.

This informed feminist scholars to conceptualise the rise of a new gender regime of postfeminism when elements of feminist discourses seemed to be incorporated into mainstream culture whilst its political claims were contested and even repudiated (McRobbie, 2004). Specifically focusing on the implications of postfeminist and neoliberal conditions for researching popular culture and gender subjectivities, Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 149) conceptualised 'postfeminist sensibility' to highlight the 'contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses'. This concept directs at the emergence of a 'newly constructed' subject (Gill, 2008, p. 438) as girls and women experience and relate to the discourses of choice and autonomy and are encouraged to embrace these new ideals for femininity. Moreover, it sheds light on the affective and psychic forces of neoliberal governmentality (Gill, 2017) and its celebration of self-discipline, self-

entrepreneurialism and continuous self-makeover in creation of 'new femininities' (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

Feminist media scholars have undertaken critical examination of postfeminist media culture, investigating the ways in which social constructs of girlhood and femininity have become deeply intertwined with celebrity culture, entrepreneurialism, and neoliberal discourses promoting ideals of choice, empowerment, and confidence (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Jackson & Lyons, 2013). Drawing on Foucault and Butler, Evans and Riley (2014) conceptualised the 'technologies of sexiness' to map out a neoliberal and postfeminist project of sexy and sexualised young femininities through carefully analysing social norms and discourses as well as how women position themselves in relation to these discourses. It showcased a nuanced affective-discursive analysis (Kanai, 2019; Wetherell, 2012) of how girls and young women navigate neoliberal, postfeminist and consumerist contexts where discourses and feelings of sexiness were constantly reproduced, resisted and/or subverted in their negotiation and responses (A. Evans & Riley, 2014).

This project seeks to contribute to the ongoing research legacies within the field of girlhood studies by examining girls and young women in relation to their engagement in feminisms. Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge that existing research on girlhood primarily reflects the experiences and voices of girls and young women from specific socioeconomic backgrounds, often Western, White, middle-class, urban and so on. This also reveals a need for more culturally embedded and localised knowledge situated in non-western and more diversified contexts to decentralise and deterritorialise paradigmatic perspectives of girlhood and young femininity (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2017). This research project hence considers these discourses of girlhood and femininities by taking the global, neoliberal and digital mediated contexts into account (Mendes et al.,



2009; Rentschler & Mitchell, 2016), whereas in the meantime explore through a localised, context-specific and embedded perspective that takes specificities, differences and power seriously.

In the mainland China context, scholars in media and cultural studies have observed how urban, middle-class, young women have been increasingly portrayed as the embodiment of postfeminist and consumerist ideals under the global contexts of neoliberalism and its localised implementation through multiple socioeconomic reform since 1980s (E. Chen, 2012; Liao, 2019b; Thornham & Feng, 2010; F. Yang, 2023). However, there still are relatively few cases of study that explicitly adopted girlhood as a conceptual term to discuss girls and young women and their experiences of girlhood. In a study of young female university students in China, Liu (2014) has mapped out the coexistence of familial ideals of femininity and neoliberal discourses of self-autonomy and self-efficacy for girls and young women to negotiate and occupy. Xie (2021, p. 195) in her research on middle-class young women in China similarly presented the dilemma of idealised urban womanhood as a juggling act between being a 'life winner' (*rensheng yingjia*) and having a 'perfect family' (*meiman jiating*). These empirical studies of girlhood and young femininity in the Chinese context directed at the salience of family for researching girlhood which was generally overlooked (Aapola et al., 2005). This connects with what I have contextualised in the previous two chapters concerning the neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism. China as a case crucially destabilised the linear temporality of late modernity that is based on a progressive narrative denoting the shattering and demolishing of family-oriented traditions (Beck, 2014). In this sense, the shifting landscape for gender and sexual politics in postsocialist China are shaped by the globalising impact of neoliberalism, the disruptions as well as continuation of socialist

ideology and Confucian familial cultures, giving rise to a distinctive form of postsocialist feminism and feminist subjectivities as I go on to elucidate in the next section.

### 3.3 Digital feminist activism: Practices, promises and pitfalls

In this section, I contextualise the research field of digital feminism predominantly drawing on Western experiences and practices to position this study of the feminist discussions and activities particularly on the Chinese platform of *Weibo* as a potentially transnational feminist project (Hundle et al., 2019). For this research, the analytical focus on digital feminisms is placed in close relation to the material and discursive conditions of the expansive reach of digital economy and the globalising forces of neoliberalism. I join forces with feminists aiming to challenge the Western-centric normality in feminist knowledge and emphasise the need to examine how these conditions and power structures manifest locally and unevenly in various sociopolitical contexts. This research also contributes to a growing body of literature looking at the emerging voices and practices of digital feminisms in non-Western contexts (Errázuriz, 2019; Nanditha, 2022; Okech, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021) specifically through interrogating China in relation to a distinctively postsocialist and neoliberal context as will be elucidated later in this section. Following this, I move forward to the discussion on the limits, possibilities, and precarities of doing feminisms on social media in relation to my research project.

#### 3.3.1 Hashtag feminism and the digital fourth wave

In an observation of feminist movements in the West, Rivers (2017, p. 8) argues that there is a 'renewed interest in feminism' and 'heightened status of feminism in the public and political consciousness'. A significant amount of work has been looking to the online

sphere, more recently social media platforms, as emerging sites for talking about sexism and sexual violence, learning about feminism and even influencing political agendas (Horeck, 2014; Mendes et al., 2019; Olson, 2016). Earlier cases could be tracked back to Hollaback! which started in New York in 2005 as a website for sharing and mapping experiences of street harassment (Mendes et al., 2019; Wångren, 2016). Another frequently studied case is the Everyday Sexism Project started by Laura Bates in 2012 which aimed to collect stories told by women from all over the world about 'sexism experienced on a day to day basis' (Bates, 2012; Mendes et al., 2019).

The rise of Web 2.0 platforms, Twitter in particular, led to the emergence of hashtag feminism, which has become a prominent form of digital feminist activism. The use of the hashtag was also often referred to as a means of 'communicating, disclosing, and narrating previously invisible experiences, emotions, and affects' (Mendes, Keller, et al., 2019, p. 1292). Some prominent examples include the feminist takeover of #AskThicke to respond to rape culture and misogyny in pop culture (Horeck, 2014), #YesAllWomen and #BeenRapedNeverReported popularised in 2014 (Baer, 2016; Keller et al., 2018), and later #MeToo as probably the most well-known case trending at the end of 2017 (Gleeson & Turner, 2019; Keller et al., 2018; Trott, 2020).

In the Chinese context, research on hashtag activism has explored LGBTQ+ counterpublic discourse of gay rights expressed in the *Weibo* tag #IAmGay# (Liao, 2019a) and anti-sexual harassment discourse creating a feminist counterpublic in the case of Chinese MeToo movement (Yin & Sun, 2021). Yin and Sun (2021) argued from an intersectional lens that dominant discourses in Chinese MeToo movement privileged elitist voices (since it was initiated in higher education institutions as mentioned earlier in the introduction chapter), whereas the voices and experiences of marginalised groups of

women such as working-class and rural women remained unheard. Along with a brief discussion on how exclusions of women in less privileged positions in terms of socioeconomic status relate to individualistic and neoliberal discourses of empowerment, their work also focused on the backlash against feminism arising from state censorship and online misogyny (Yin & Sun, 2021). Such case studies provided insightful exploration of Chinese digital feminisms by adopting established conceptual framings of online discussion groups as subaltern public sphere accommodating counter-discourses distinct from state and commercial discourses (Zhang, 2006).

Much of the Western scholarship about digital feminism also engaged with the generational debate within feminist movements (for examples see Munro, 2013; Rivers, 2017). In terms of tactics and strategies in feminist activism, the performative use of female body in protest against patriarchy, sexual exploitation and rape culture such as the cases of FEMEN and SlutWalk sometimes were regarded to be closely associated with third-wave feminism (Mendes, 2015; Nguyen, 2013; O'Keefe, 2014). Meanwhile, such feminist actions and projects were already believed to signal a generational change for feminist uptake of social media in mobilising participants, organising events and circulating contents and ideas. As more women came together in social media to speak about experiences of sexual violence and make visible issues such as everyday sexism and rape culture, western feminism was argued to be entering into the 'fourth wave' since the beginning of 2010s, with an emphasis on a 'call-out culture' thriving on the internet (Munro, 2013, p. 23). These tactics and strategies of using social media and digital technologies were also reported to give rise to digital feminist movements at globalised and transnational scale. Mendes (2015) noted that the use of the internet for organising and disseminating information constitutes an important feature of these practices of

feminist activism and adds to its potential to quickly travel across national borders and extend its influence to reach transnational contexts (see also Natalle, 2015).

### 3.3.2 Chinese postsocialist (digital) feminisms in global contexts

In the context of China, the performative activities of Youth Feminist Action School were closely connected and inspired by these feminist movements in other countries (Wang, 2018). It seems to suggest the existence of transnational links and interactions, encompassing not only feminist ideologies and concepts but also the strategies of protest and activism at the grassroots level, facilitated by the accessibility of online networks in global communication. This debate on digital feminism is hence inextricably linked to the tensions of articulating feminism in non-western contexts, where a globalising agenda of neoliberal capitalism are found to be adopting 'progressive' frameworks such as rights-based liberation and development that left racial and colonial power and violence unaddressed (Mohanty, 2013; Spivak, 1996). In regard to this, Shana Ye (2021) offered an interesting examination of two representative events in Chinese context, the arrest of Feminist Five in 2015 and Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995, which usually regarded as Chinese feminist movement's watershed moments on the global stage of transnational feminist movement. Both of these events were mentioned in Chapter 1, and for the first part of the article Ye (2021) called into question how the arrest of those five young feminist activists gained global visibility after being reframed by global media into headlines hyping courageous resisters in opposition to the totalitarian regime.

As a young researcher who has been researching and writing about Chinese feminisms in the UK, I cannot help but empathise with Ye's anxiety and assessment of such oversimplification of complexities, heterogeneity and plurality in contemporary feminist

movements in China. This reductionist understanding, as Ye (2021) argues, is often reinforced by the intricate interplay of power dynamics and psychosocial conditions arisen from the contexts of post-Cold War and postsocialist coloniality that fixates China and its Communist history as an antithesis of (western) 'progressive' feminism in mainstream mediascape. However, I am deeply concerned with the troubling tendency of taking a reverse approach to the 'outer-system' (Wang, 2018) feminist activism represented by *Feminist Five* and other political resistance that refuse to work with/in the state as complicity with (western) neoliberalism. In this sense, 'the drama of Chinese feminism', as Ye (2021) called it, became an abstraction of the East-West dichotomy whilst the localised struggles and specific experiences of these feminists were barely accounted for by the author.

I contend that it simply replicated the post-Cold War opposition which Ye (2021) proposed to challenge and deconstruct in the first place and failed to engage with more recent grassroots feminist voices that held scepticism both towards the state and neoliberal capitalism but in the meantime are still shaped by these power structures. Currently, much of the literature on postsocialist feminism emerges from Eastern European contexts. Linking back to the contextualisation and theoretical background outlined in Chapter 1 and 2, postsocialist spatiotemporalities of Chinese digital feminisms accounts for how patriarchal familial powers and the residual of socialist ideology of gender egalitarianism become enmeshed with neoliberal governmentality. This thesis hence conceives the formation of networked feminist resistance on *Weibo* as an alternative pathway for Chinese feminist movements as well as for Eurocentric perspective of digital feminisms. It also contributes to transnational dialogues among

feminist academics and activists across different postcolonial and postsocialist contexts (Koobak et al., 2021; Tlostanova et al., 2016).

### 3.3.3 The limits and promises of digital feminisms

Departing from a techno-optimistic perspective of social media and its relationship to social change, some recent scholarship has adopted more critical perspectives to examine both limitations and promises of social media in accommodating feminist activism. For this specific research that employs a critical feminist framework to look at digital gender cultures and feminisms, it is vital to recognise and interrogate how patriarchal, heteronormative, and other forms of oppressions could persist in digital spaces, making it challenging for women and feminists to navigate these environments. Drawn from empirical evidences from Western contexts to point out the reproduction of masculinist, patriarchal norms (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) in the digital realm, researchers have noted how social media become 'aggregators of online misogyny' (Rentschler, 2014, p. 65) and facilitate sexual- and/or gender-based violence (Henry & Powell, 2018). Baym and Boyd (2012, p. 327) among others have accurately demonstrated that online sphere is not an airtight self-contained space free from existing social inequalities; instead itself can be 'sites of hierarchy and exclusion'.

Earlier research on Chinese feminist activism reported the stigmatisation of feminism in mass media and popular culture in general (Du, 2017; Yang, 2014). Yang (2014) carried out a content analysis on three Chinese newspapers in Guangzhou and illustrated how feminist discourses and practices can be presented as irrational and too radical in traditional mainstream media. It has propelled Chinese scholars to take notice of the tensions, backlash and hate targeting feminists and feminisms, which have been replicated and amplified in the online sphere. In the meantime, feminist resistance to

antifeminist hate have also been found to take shape in response to this context. For instance, Liu (2017b) examined the popularity of a specific social media buzzword *Zhinanai* to illustrate how *Zhinanai* was constructed as an online feminist discourse to challenge heteronormative (hegemonic) masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) as reinforcing and reproducing the patriarchal gender regime. Literally translated into 'straight man cancer', *Zhinanai* or straight men cancer in English, was originally used in Chinese context as a joke about how men often fail to understand their partners and act 'clueless' in heterosexual relationships. Some Chinese netizens later reappropriated this word combining 'straight man' and 'cancer' to refer to men who belittle women and do not account for their own privileged positions in the patriarchal gender regime, suggesting that those most stubbornly sexist and misogynistic are like an incurable social disease. Liu's (2017b) analysis was founded on three case studies of online debates that turned into social media events, all adopting the discourse of *zhinanai* to call out misogynist and patriarchal values embedded in popular media and culture. This study provided valuable insights into the potential of social media to be used for speaking back against patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. However, it pointed out a research paradigm of studying digital gender cultures in China that was too grounded in analysis of media texts and paid little attention to the lived experiences of girls and women as social agents partaking in those discussions and activities or how discourses of *Zhinanai* worked to constitute networked feminist counterpublics.

I argue that the expressions of hostility towards women and other marginalised groups and backlash against feminist agendas should also be unpacked in a context where social media platforms showed little commitment in putting forward effective measures when algorithms and platforms enabled and amplified reactionary hate and violence (Boyle &



Rathnayake, 2019; Ging, 2019b; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Siapera, 2019). Han (2018) demonstrated how this kind of antifeminist and gendered hostility even constituted a crucial part of activists' experiences of conducting feminist activities online by investigating into the social media activities of a renowned activist group in China. Taken the positionality of these varied publics and counterpublics within existing power structures and the political economy of social media into account, my analysis shall spell out how different voices of feminism and anti-feminism came to compete for visibility and how the complicity between internet censorship and profits-driven digital platforms tends to amplify some voices while silencing others. This also speaks to a wider range of literature that examined the limitations of social media for hosting activism and politically driven counterpublics in a wide range of context. As noted by Poell and van Dijck (2016, p. 227)

*'(A)lthough the connection between social media and activism seems natural, these media are not designed to facilitate activism. In fact, the technological architectures and user policies of social media are primarily informed by commercial considerations and frequently clash with activist interests and objectives'*

Donna Haraway critically developed Foucauldian notion of biopower (Foucault, 1978, 2003) as 'technobiopower' to look more closely at the context of advanced capitalism where biotechnology, network and digital technologies are used to facilitate surveillance and governmentality of bodies, subjects, and population at different scales (Haraway, 2018; Leston, 2015). Building upon Haraway, Fotopoulou (2017, p. 19) offered a conceptualisation of new forms of 'biodigital vulnerabilities' as both productive and restrictive, which implies new potentials and challenge for feminist activism in the digital

realm. Firstly, this conception points out the tensions between the expectation on girls and young women to strive for visibility online whilst their being disproportionately targeted by trolling and abusive acts (Henry & Powell, 2018; Mantilla, 2013; Salter, 2018). Secondly, pervasive and networked surveillance (carried out on the levels of individual social media users, social media corporates and the state) has often been disguised in a discourse of visibility and empowerment (Trottier, 2016). Thirdly, 'embodied and affective labour specifically by women in relation to the material media practices in social media and activism' have been hugely neglected and undermined (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 19).

In addition, the academic debate on digital feminism responded to the challenge that digital feminist activism was increasingly 'divorced from real-world conflicts' and had little real political impact (Munro, 2013). In a similar vein of the critique of slacktivism (Morozov, 2012), such judgment of digital feminisms also carries a general assumption that digital feminist practices are underlined by a low level of personal and political commitment to political cause and concerns. It has also been suggested that digital technologies can largely facilitate so-called connective action (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), leading to an individualisation/personalisation of digital politics but in the meantime significantly undermining the potential for online contention to develop into a collective action or movement.

This could hold some truth, but I insist there is a need for engaging with the significance of consciousness-raising practices, which has been a key tactic of feminist politics since the second wave feminist movements in western contexts. This spirit of turning personal narratives into political and public issue has been carried on by digital feminisms (Anderson & Grace, 2015; Blevins, 2018; Gleeson & Turner, 2019; Mendes, Ringrose, et

al., 2019; Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). For instance, research has shown that sites for online feminist consciousness-raising including feminist blogs (Keller, 2015) and hashtags (Horeck, 2014; Keller et al., 2018) showcase how the connectivity of social media has enabled an emergent digital network formed through sharing personal stories and speaking about oppressions and inequalities in relation to experiences of others. In a case study of the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported, Keller et al (2018) demonstrated how a sense of belonging was felt by individual users of social media in discussing personal experiences of sexual violence and how the formation of community was enabled by digital platforms. Therefore, voicing personal experiences in social media should not be simply discounted as an 'individualistic personal therapy' (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018, p. 3).

### **3.4 Critical studies of social media platforms**

#### **3.4.1 Refuting slacktivism**

In a broader sense, feminist media studies and science and technology studies (STS) have been interested in exploring not only how technology can contribute to social change by looking into its effects on various forms of power relations such as gender, sexuality, and race but also the knowledge about media and technology itself is intertwined with these existing powers (Grint & Gill, 1995; Haraway, 2018; Harvey, 2020). To develop a feminist analytical framework that examines the political implications and potentials of information and communication technologies (ICTs), this research begins with a departure from a deterministic perspective that views digital technologies – including social media, which is the primary focus of this thesis – as neutral tools. Technological determinism, however, is not a recent development that appeared only till the emergence of digital technologies. By looking at historical myths about transformation brought

about by 'new' media and communication technologies, Fidler (1997) pointed out that for each time a new technology is introduced or invented, there is a hopeful expectation that it will bring about fundamental transformations. This is then followed by a sense of pessimism that the technology is fundamentally flawed and will fail to achieve its promised goals (Fidler, 1997). Such technological determinism was evident too when the internet and social media became important sites for facilitating contemporary social movements and pushing forward social justice.

More specifically focusing on social media and digital activism, a significant debate on its political impact occurred around early 2010s when the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia was hyped in media coverage as the 'Facebook Revolution' ('How Facebook Changed the World: The Arab Spring', 2011). Media scholars had argued against this oversimplified view on the role of social media in facilitating possible socio-political transformation (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). Aouragh and Alexander (2011, p. 1344) deployed an approach to political action mobilised and organised through the online by shifting away from seeing the internet as a new and distinctive tool from the 'older' forms of media and instead emphasised 'the dialectical relationship between online and offline political action'. This tied back to what was discussed in the introduction chapter about the entanglement of online-offline and physical-digital spaces. I argue the deployment of digital feminisms as a conceptual term in this thesis should not be taken as discussions, interactions and connections that only subsisted in the cyberspace.

Researching digital activism in China requires us to consider another limitation of the dominant conceptualisations of digital activism, which focused mainly on specific political contexts where both political engagement and impact are defined and evaluated in close relation to deliberative and representational democracy. For example, activities

related to the institutionalised mobilisation and participation in electoral politics (e.g. e-democracy) were considerably more acknowledged, whilst online expressions through liking, sharing and posting was notably labelled to be lacking in terms of engagement and commitment in participation such as 'clicktivism' (George & Leidner, 2019). In the context of an authoritarian regime like China as discussed in the introduction, it fundamentally undermines the legitimacy of less provoking forms of political contention and resistance, which is critically important in Chinese context (G. Yang, 2009) as I go on to explain later in this chapter. Moreover, I argue that such perspective on digital activism rests on an implication that the digital space is a pre-existed entity distinct from even if reflective of the offline world. It also presumes that online discussions and political culture are purely discursive and thus can hardly make any material change. This hence reproduces a binary view of the discursive and the material and a one-dimensional view of technology and culture, which needs to be disputed. There had been empirical evidences from various socio-cultural contexts that practices of digital activism were far more nuanced and the notion of 'slacktivism' could not fully grasp how people engage in politics and digital activism and how one's practices and experiences of doing activism may differ from another (Howard et al., 2016; Lanuza, 2015; Madison & Klang, 2020; Sutkutė, 2016). Essentially, the oversimplistic perception of slacktivism represents a form of technological determinism that oscillates from techno-optimism to the opposite extreme of techno-pessimism that 'discriminates against the technology and attempts to prevent an in-depth study of the efficacy of the technology before it begins' (Madison & Klang, 2020, p. 31).

### 3.4.2 Researching platform affordances and vernaculars

Drawing upon Gibson's concept of affordance as 'an action possibility available in the environment' (S. K. Evans et al., 2017, p. 37), media and communication scholarship developed from this notion to argue for the importance of taking a relational approach to understanding how information and communication technologies come to shape cultures and societies. I am interested in the notion of affordances for sociality in terms of how different material features of technology shape social interactions and communication differently (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Postigo, 2016). By incorporating a posthuman approach to agency as not exclusive to human subjects, it is contended that technology users do not only act based on their intended use of the technology, but also adaptively learn about the possibilities and constraints of it (Leonardi, 2011). This model of 'imbrication' of human and non-human agency (Leonardi, 2011) is useful for unpacking the interlocked relationship between platform and users in vernacular practices and use of social media (Gibbs et al., 2015; Keller, 2019; Warfield et al., 2020). In the field of social media and youth cultures, for instance, researchers have explored how young people facilitate affordances of various social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, SnapChat and so on) to explore identities, build social networks and engage in political discussions (boyd, 2014; Gleason, 2013; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2018). Feminist research on youth-led digital activism has especially benefitted from this concept in their inquiries into how varied forms of feminist networking, organising and mobilising were actualised through digital affordances (Keller, 2019; Mendes et al., 2019; Renold & Ringrose, 2017). The conceptualisation of digital affordances is hence useful for critical media researchers who are pushing for moving away from both social and technological determinism to dive

deep into how social media users negotiate the tensions between affordances and constraints of digital technology (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Shaw, 2017). Within Chinese context, Zheng and Yu (2016, p. 309) looked into ‘affordances for practices’ that operated in the presence ‘a sociomaterial assemblage’ of human actors, affects, discourses and other options of technologies to understand *Weibo*’s role in organising the collection action of Free Lunch for Children as a case study.

For this specific research, I suggest that technological features of *Weibo* such as comments, likes and blacklist also be considered in addition to these high-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) that structured the social network sites such as persistence, spreadability, visibility and searchability (boyd, 2014). In light of how digital platforms have been profiting from mining user-generated data and deploying machine learning techniques to study user behaviours, the discussion on platform affordances and vernaculars generally noted a potential for users to not only inform, but also become integrated into the infrastructure of the platform. Following critical studies of digital affordances and political economies of digital platforms (Fuchs, 2015; Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Gorwa, 2019), this research adopts a relational approach to understanding forms of feminist activism and politics as entangled with the *Weibo* platform.

### **3.5 *Weibo*: The new frontier for political contention and activism**

In the last ten years, an increasing number of research has been on investigating how Chinese internet users address sensitive issues on social media and how marginalised groups use them as a platform to fight for political causes (Brunner, 2017; Cao & Guo, 2016; Chase, 2012; Clothey et al., 2016; Pu & Scanlan, 2012; Xing, 2012). Earlier forms of

engagement online were found to be combined with 'lawful' street protests and actions (Yang, 2009). As the crackdown on offline activism tightens during the past two decades, the internet and online space become the main arena for political discussions and participation. Since the booming of social media in China around 2010s, an increasing number of empirical studies have started to explore how social media activated and enabled civic and political discussions in Chinese context. Although online activism in China had to adapt to less confrontational forms of political struggles to dodge the censorship and suppression from authority, it does not necessarily suggest that online contention has come to an extinction (Gleiss, 2015; Yang, 2009). Researchers have long been paying attention to the adoption of covert forms of language such as euphemisms (J. Liu, 2017a), humour, satire (Yang, 2009), self-mockery (Yang et al., 2015) in formulating online subversions, forming distinctive online (counter)cultures and communities. Moving beyond the dichotomous conceptual model of seeing social media as an arena for either resistance or control, related literature has generally recognised social media as an important domain for Chinese to express and negotiate political issues. More specific to look at feminist activism, for instance, Wang and Driscoll (2019) argued that renowned feminist organisations adapted to this new media landscape when social media platforms like *Weibo* started to thrive and hence opened new spaces for feminist discussions. Following this body of work, this research is attuned to the more subtle forms of struggle where Chinese digital feminists negotiate the tensions between the powerful state and the valuable spaces for channelling political expressions on internet and social media.

The interconnection between the online public sphere and the wider civil society in China has long been a subject of academic debate. Drawing upon the discussion on publics and counterpublics, as explored in Chapter 2, this research will contribute to this debate by



providing an in-depth and contextualised discussion on the case of Chinese digital feminisms. The Economic Reform in the 1990s, coupled with commercialisation of the media sector and subsequently China's full access to the internet, have led to the flourishing of Chinese internet industries and online cultures. Online platforms such as blogs and forums played crucial roles in facilitating political engagement, contention, and protest in China prior to the advent of social media. These platforms have been frequently cited in some earliest discussions on growing civil society in China (Yang, 2003). As one of the most prominent scholars studying Chinese online activism, Yang Guobin (2009, 2014) recorded how online communities took shape in the bulletin board systems (BBSs) and blogs since late 1990s to hold public discussions on political, social and cultural issues and to carry out individual rights defence. One of the earlier documented examples was a hepatitis-B carrier Zhang XianZhu suing local government for the discrimination against hepatitis-B carriers in the job market in 2003, where netizens frequenting the same BBS offered legal, financial and psychological support including contacting lawyers through internet, seeking media coverage and so on (Yang, 2009). The case of Zhang Xianzhu showcased individual-based response to injustice as a representative form of digital activism in Chinese context which involved networked actions of individual netizens.

It remained a debatable issue among scholars regarding how effectively social media could facilitate activism and collective actions in the context of China. For instance, Tai (2015) deliberated how social media had been successful in raising public awareness, facilitating political contentions, and, in some scenarios, enabling collective actions. By examining the social media practices of a Chinese charity organisation called Love Save Pneumoconiosis, Gleiss (2015) challenged the idea that the eventual democratisation of

the political regime is the only factor to evaluate the impact of online activism. The researcher instead argued that online activists displayed a resistance to the hegemonic political rhetoric of Chinese authority through offering and legitimising alternative discourses (Gleiss, 2015). Indeed, the mocking and satires of the leadership of CCP and government policies in online platforms regularly and strategically utilised humour for the expressions of political resistance and contestation (Yang, 2009). For example, the popularised use of 'harmony' (*hexie* in Chinese) or river crab (*hexie*, a near homophone for 'harmony' in Chinese) in online discourse which turned into a euphemism for internet censorship among earlier Chinese BBS users. As the Chinese government often referred to the socio-political goal of building a 'harmonious society' to justify their control over the online contents, netizens would sarcastically use 'being harmonised' or 'being rivercrabbed' as a subtle and humorous expression of something being censored and removed by the authority. The popularisation of this term later ironically led to the censoring of the word 'harmony' itself in the Chinese internet.

A significant body of literature has hence been contributed to the discussion on internet censorship in China and its impact on online civic and political activities in the last two decades (MacKinnon, 2008; Marolt, 2011; King et al., 2014). The Golden Shield Project, also known as the Great Firewall of China (GFW), is thought to have been designed even before China has fully operational and nationwide internet access around 2003 (Negro, 2017). During this early period, technological infrastructures, laws, policies and administrative departments were only started to be established. Negro (2017, p. 22) argued that one of the most significant marker of the development of this project was a surge of recorded 'mass incidents' (*qunti shijian*) from 8709 in 1993 to more than 87000 in 2005'. Given the challenges and risks associated with organising collective political

activities in China, it is not surprising that social media has emerged as a relatively secure and accessible platform for the general public to engage in discussions about political and social issues. Concerned that the internet could potentially enable greater political participation and therefore pose a threat to the stability of the Party-state regime, the CCP opted to enhance and strengthen its regulations of online activities. The focus on mass incidents represented a targeting strategy of CCP to watch closely for the capacity of online movements to translate into offline collective actions, such as protests, demonstrations, and strikes. Chinese authorities were mostly thought to have 'walked a fine line balancing Internet growth and its attendant political consequences' in the past two decades (M. Jiang, 2016, p. 30). Despite that the Chinese authorities have generally shown tolerance to criticisms, as long as collective actions are not involved in the agenda, research on Chinese digital activism has suggested that such tolerance will not hold up when it comes to addressing more sensitive issues on internet (King et al., 2013). Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2017, p. 118) successfully predicted most of the offline protests that they were watching based on social media contents and reported that '(t)he method of detection is simple, and the cost is low'. The state control over the Chinese internet largely depends on such sophisticated and evolving infrastructure and tactics of digital surveillance that allows massive monitoring and filtering of both cross-border digital traffic and domestic digital contents.

The intertwined relation between these heterogeneous elements can be particularly manifested in the online censoring of *Weibo* (guided by the gender politics of the state and made possible by the platform) and feminist social media users' responses to such censorship. This technopolitical context of pervasive and diffuse censorship hence foregrounded any research on Chinese social media including this one and it shapes part

of the theoretical backgrounds of this research to make sense of digital feminisms and the formation of networked feminist counterpublics in Chinese social media. Existing literature have reported a variety of measures implemented by the Chinese government to regulate and monitor internet activities. In 1998, the Public Information and Internet Security Supervision Bureau (PIISS) was set up under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security as a special unit of police force to help regulate the Chinese cyberspace. Technologically, the censorship mechanism is achieved by utilising 'IP blocking, keyword filtering, DNS hijacking' among many other tools (Xu et al., 2011). Scholarship on censorship mechanisms in China showed significant limitations, as most studies tended to focus on only one or a few aspects of censorship. Therefore, it is still unclear exactly how and to what extent various censorship mechanisms operate in specific settings.

Linking back to Foucauldian theory of modern power and neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2003), it becomes much more useful to look at surveillance as a growingly intricate power network than a top-down homogenous domination from the state. Despite the high level of regulation enjoyed by institutions such as the PIISS and other central bureaucratic entities, research on Chinese social media showed that political discussions and activism continued to be highly dynamic. Not only do individual netizens take advantage of online spaces to express criticism or support for the Chinese government, but the government itself has also intensified its efforts to govern and exert control over online political discourse and practices. Apart from the measures of restricting and banning contents and content providers by using technologies such as keyword filtering, Marolt (2011) notes that Chinese government takes control of public opinion online through a strategic encouragement of self-regulation. Through the investigation into the 'online discourse competition', Han (2015, p. 1006) has described

a group of social media users who voluntarily defend the authoritarian regime and shed some light on the fragmented state of online expression and public opinions. In the meantime, various forms of resistance to censorship are emerging, such as the use of irony, humour, satire and all sorts of implicit expressions that are less likely to incur censorship (Yang, 2009; Clothey et al., 2016). More closely related to feminist activism online, it also has also been noted how Chinese feminists created the hashtag 'RiceBunny' and use the emojis of rice and bunny in place of #metoo to circumvent internet censorship (Fincher, 2018; Guttenberg, 2021). As social media became the new frontier of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement, the state also stepped up the control over online political discussions and actions through a more sophisticated online censorship mechanism and propaganda (Liao, 2020).

Furthermore, writing in a context of the burgeoning Chinese grassroots online activism from early 2000s, Yang (2009, p. 237) critically examined Habermas' warning of 'the dangers of a manufactured public sphere' and proposed to consider several conditions that may 'curb these dangers'. Yang (2009) explored digital practices like 'stir frying' (*chaozuo*) where online conversations and discussions can be manoeuvred by tech-savvy web editors who strategically direct public attention to specific news events. This practice also exemplifies how internet business and online contention could become interdependent and interact with each other – as digital activists adopt marketing strategies, contentious activities and discussions also generate profitable online traffic. This provided a meaningful development of the notion of 'the power of internet' in China (Yang, 2009) as defined in the dynamic and interdependent relations between the digital economy of social media platforms (de Kloet et al., 2019; Fuchs, 2015) and netizens as both engaging in political and civic participation as well as digital labour. I argue this can

be tied back to my previous discussion in this chapter regarding digital activism and the political economies of digital platforms to push for a critical theorisation of ethical and social responsibilities of digital platforms and companies.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter provides a thorough literature review involving a range of academic debates and empirical studies both in Chinese and Western contexts. By examining the fields of girlhood studies, digital feminisms, and critical social media studies, I situate this specific research within the existing scholarly discourse and lays the ground for investigation in this thesis into the experiences of Chinese girls and young women who engage in digital feminism. To begin, this chapter explores the field of girlhood studies and particularly the body of work that has emphasised the active roles played by girls and young women in feminist movements, political participation, and their engagement with media and popular cultures. It highlights the significance of exploring narratives and experiences of girlhood, young femininity and feminism in this research which seeks to contribute to the global research literature on girls and young women and their relation to feminist movements. This chapter helps to situate the research within the emerging research field of digital feminisms at the intersection of feminism and digital technologies. I have also dived into the discourse surrounding digital activism and explores the concept of 'slacktivism' within media scholarship. This debate centres around legitimacy and real-world impact of online activism, particularly problematising its ability to effect social change. By critically examining this discourse, the research project aims to move beyond simplistic and deterministic claims and instead consider the nuanced ways in which different practices and possibilities for activism and networked resistance are afforded

through digital platforms. Moreover, it contextualises the shifting and evolving landscape for tactics of political contention in response to censorship and political climate to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique dynamics of digital activism in Chinese sociopolitical context. Throughout this chapter, I lay out a relational approach to digital feminisms on *Weibo*, seeing *Weibo* not merely as a technological platform, but as a multifaceted domain encompassing governance, control, and resistance. I seek to unravel the intricate web of power dynamics at play in the platform of *Weibo* to which ordinary users, netizens, digital activists, online publics, platform economies, and the state all contribute. In the next chapter, I outline the methodological design, adjustments, considerations and reflections of this research project which employs online ethnography and feminist participatory research methods.

## Chapter 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter details the research methods were applied in my fieldwork and data analysis and justifies some core decisions made during the process of designing and actualising this project. I will start by restating my research aim and focus and further unpacking the proposed research questions, including a rationale for conducting this research. The following section will then outline the initial research design, including brief report on the findings of my pilot study which also accounts for several alterations made to the methodology used in the formal research stage. I will provide a detailed description of the research methods utilised in the procedures of data collection and preliminary analysis. Finally, in the last section I reflect on my own subjective position as a feminist researcher and the ethical challenge and problems emerged while conducting this research.

My previous review of literature on Chinese feminisms found out that most research took two main conceptual pathways: the first followed the notion of socialist state feminism to look at women's movement in China and its relation to the state (for example see the work of Wang Zheng); some research after 1990s also tend to focus on the stories of prominent adult activists or activist groups as a part of the emerging civil society in China (Fincher, 2018; Tan, 2017). This research hence attempted to highlight the voices of ordinary girls and young women who had been relatively marginalised by looking into their actual experiences and forms of engaging in feminism. The primary aim of this research on contemporary feminist movements and politics in China is thus to find out how these ordinary Chinese girls and young women experience, understand and learn



about gender and feminism across online and offline spaces. It follows and contributes to a growing body of literature on digital feminist activism that pays close attention to feminist uptake of digital platforms and technologies to construct new forms of and spaces for feminist activism and practices (Fotopoulou, 2017; S. Jackson, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). In the Chinese context, the concept of digital feminism has also been adopted by some researchers to look at the rise of feminist expressions and discussions in social media platforms and to conceptualise the formation of new gendered identities. For instance Chang et al looked at the profile pictures of 73 young women from the cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou to explore the constitution of a new female identity of self-empowerment that is less confrontational within Chinese digital feminist context (Chang et al., 2018). Relatedly, some recent empirical studies on online activism in Chinese context acknowledged the role of internet and social media in enabling and encouraging youth participation in political discussions (Wallis, 2011; Yan, 2016; Zhong, 2014). These aforementioned studies moved away from discourses of social media use as essentially harmful or addictive for young people that used to dominate related research (Jiang, 2014; Liu et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2017), which positioned young people as passive recipients of media contents and knowledge. Such perceptions were also problematised by feminist researchers in the fields of media and cultural studies, as this research project sought to debunk.

This research project followed a feminist qualitative participatory approach to researching gender and sexual politics in mainland China with girls and young women, exploring their roles as active agents in political participation and cultural production (Jenkins et al., 2015) as well as in research praxis (L. Allen, 2008; Best, 2007). Taking methodological insights from online ethnographic studies (Hine, 2015; Postill & Pink,

2012), it attends to the embeddedness and contextualised meaning-making and world-making practices of online youth culture to make sense of why social media matters for their social, political and personal lives (boyd, 2014). By examining Chinese young women's lived experiences of engaging in gender and feminist discussions online, the findings of this research also aimed to inform stakeholders like schools, teachers, parents and policymakers to better understand young people's need for digital literacy and inclusive gender and sexuality education. As I am particularly interested in young women's experiences of gender and sexuality and engaging in online feminist discussions and activism, these following research questions were used to guide my study:

1. What are the main discourses about gender and sexual (in)equalities that girls and young women are responding to on *Weibo*?
2. How do girls and young women experience and engage in discussions and debates about gender and feminism online? How do their engagements in feminisms relate to and/or shape their experiences of gender both online and offline?
3. How do these girls and young women understand their online practices in relation to the broader feminist movement in China?

#### **4.2 Initial research design and adjustments**

The overall design of my project was largely informed by rapidly evolving online research methods, especially digital (or virtual) ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2015; Murthy, 2008; Postill & Pink, 2012), which has become more regularly used and discussed in the field of media, cultural, educational and sociological studies. These methods inspired and enabled me to document young women's participation in recent feminist debates on Chinese social media and make sense of how they perceive and negotiate their own

experiences of gender and feminism across online and offline spaces. Compared to the more conventional ethnographies, it can be more challenging to define the boundaries of research field for online ethnographic studies, since it does not necessarily involve visits to a physical site for conducting fieldwork and the boundary between offline and online is also becoming more blurry (Hine, 2009; Postill & Pink, 2012). Postill and Pink (2012) pointed out that the practices of digital ethnography might still be tied to existing cultures, communities, political structures and physical localities, but at the same time call for the flexibility of moving across on/offline contexts and places.

Much of the recent research explicitly claiming to use digital ethnography to study the Chinese internet had chosen to focus on a specific community. For example, Dong (2017) used a combined approach of online-offline ethnography to investigate the construction of class identity of elite migrants in China. Dong's research started offline with a group of young professionals who shared a preference for an automobile brand and later realised that the online elements of the interactions among these young professionals should also be a crucial part of their collective construction of lifestyle and class identity (Dong, 2017). Among researchers who are interested in civil society and political activism in China, including those who are researching feminist activism, virtual and digital ethnography has also become a methodological feature. Yang (2003) was among the first to use virtual ethnography to research environmentalist social organisations in China since as early as 2000. Common methods of data collection employed by later researchers include interviews (either conducted online or offline), observation of social media activities and recording of social media texts and images (including social media posts and comments) (Han, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wu & Dong, 2019).

Although the literature on digital ethnography had huge impact on how my research design took shape, the overall timescale for my fieldwork was comparatively shorter than what was expected in a conventional ethnography. Within six months, I completed collecting research data in two stages combining an online tracking study of feminist social media events on *Weibo* with individual interviews and social media diaries. Here a social media event is defined as a happening where specific social media contents draw huge public attention and cause debates in the online platform of *Weibo*. I intended to capture the most visible and most discussed topics about gender and feminism on the platform within the timeframe of one month and to identify the primary themes and gender discourses circulated in regard to those topics. The main purpose for this stage of research was predominantly to offer an overview of what about gender and feminism were being discussed on *Weibo*. It then foregrounded my further investigation into individual social media users (participants of the research) and how they responded to these discourses and their experiences of engaging in such discussions, which will be the primary research interests of this project.

To really focus on the second stage of my research, I did not choose to use quantitative methods like data mining to record every event and social media post within the first one month of the data collection. Moreover, as topics related to gender inequality tend to incur intense censorship in China which would cause lots of posts to be (un)predictably deleted, I considered to conduct a real-time capture of social media discussions rather than a retrospective recording. I was aware that this decision meant that I would only be able to capture the snapshots of online discussions in certain moments, but it served the methodological purpose to provide background information for the later stage of my research. There is an important affordance on *Weibo* called 'hot search list' (*resoubang*)

which allows its users to see the 50 most searched topics in real time and it is updated every minute. This affordance hence offered convenience for me to further narrow down the definition of feminist social media event as any topics related to gender and feminism made into the trending topics list on *Weibo* at specific time (see screenshot on the left of Figure 4.1 for an example of trending topics list).

To keep a systematic tracking, I looked at the trending topics list twice a day (00:00 and 12:00 respectively in Beijing time zone) and observed how *Weibo* users debated about these topics. I then singled out the most active participants in the discussions and archived everything that these 'actors' posted about the event including comments using a note-taking software which allowed me to include multimedia texts including screenshots. As shown in Figure 4.1 (screenshot on the right), the comment area of each *Weibo* post was ranked by default. Hence I chose only to include the first ten comments of their posts, for the purpose of avoiding excessive amounts of data. There were platform-level alterations of the default ordering of the comments on *Weibo*, whose procedures and logics were rather unknown and opaque to most ordinary users but would significantly impact how visibility is afforded on the platform, which I will revisit in Chapter 6.



Figure 4. 1 An example of trending topics and comment area on Weibo

Apart from observing online discussions on gender, sexuality and feminism, I also tried to use this one month to approach and recruit potential participants for the next stage of my research. My aim was to recruit 20 participants who were between 16 to 22 years old (10 adults and 10 teenagers) and had contributed to those discussions on the social media events that I tracked. Considering the possibility of participants quitting throughout the research process, I decided to invite 24 women in total to join my research. To note here that I ended up posting an advertisement for research participant recruitment inviting women who were interested to take part instead of approaching potential participants myself as it was both too time-consuming and tricky to identify the gender and age of a Weibo user. Snowball sampling was also adopted as an optional

means to approach participants. For instance, Gao joined my research first and later told me that Meng who went to the same high school with her and was in her 'circle of feminist sisters' also wanted to take part.

Girls and young women who agreed to join then was first invited to an individual semi-structured interview during which we would have some initial chat about their experiences with gender, feminism and social media. In order to have a more systematic overview of the girls' social media practices and experiences over a period of time, I designed a social media diary study, for which participants would be asked to write diaries to be collected by me, to be combined with a second interview where we would discuss the diaries retrospectively. Digital diary methods had been used in several disciplines where researchers asked participants to note down their activities and experiences within situated environments of the subject in study (Jarrahi et al., 2021; Rohm et al., 2013; Urry, 2016; Vandewater & Lee, 2009; Volpe, 2019). The participants in this research were asked to create one diary entry per week about their online/offline encountering with gender and feminist issues and discussions over a period of ten weeks, which amounted to ten entries for each participant in total. Before the diary study, I sent the participants a brief guide on how to keep a social media diary including an example from myself without giving them a formalised template. In each of the entry, they were asked to record and reflect on the most salient events concerning gender and feminism that they found about in social media, and to explain why it was important to them, how they were involved in the discussion, and how it related to their family and school life. Ten weeks later, I then asked them to send back their diaries by email. In the follow-up interviews with the participants, we then looked at some preliminary findings together

to listen to and explore their own accounts of these experiences and encounters. All aforementioned methods have been listed in Table 4.1 below.

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Aim</b>
<b>Online tracking</b>	Every social media event within one month; Every post of main actors; 10 most liked comments	Identify primary gender discourses in Weibo discussion
<b>Individual interview Round 1</b>	One hour approx. for each participant; 20-24 participants in total	Explore participants' on/offline experiences of gender (in)equality
<b>Social media diaries</b>	Ten weeks; One entry each week per participant; 20-24 participants	Understand how participants engage with gender issues in social media
<b>Individual interview Round 2</b>	One hour approx. for each participant; 20-24 participants in total	Probe into participants' own perception of their online practices

*Table 4. 1 Plans for data collection*

Before conducting the formal fieldwork of my PhD project, I did a pilot study in September and October 2018 on a much smaller scale to test out the research design. The online tracking study was finished over one week during which I tried to record every social media event concerning gender (in)equality that went into the trending topic list. At the same time, I was also paying attention to those who joined the discussion on the same event and then approached some of the users that fell into the age range of 16 to 22 and identified themselves as female according to their *Weibo* profiles. Two of them agreed to participate in the diary study and interviews. The first round of interviews was carried out on 30<sup>th</sup> September and then both of them were asked to produce one diary entry which could be anything related to gender (in)equality that captured their attention during a whole week. After I collected their diaries, I did a preliminary analysis of the transcripts of their first interviews and diaries before conducting the second interviews on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> October with them respectively.



The pilot study came up with some exploratory findings through conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005) of 260 social media texts, two diaries and four interviews. It was found out that *Weibo* had been taken as a channel for girls and young women to learn about feminism and respond to discourses about gender inequality that they encountered online and offline for the lack of such space in family and at school. Their digital practices and discussions displayed a resistance to traditional gendered discourses and informed me of some innovative means (e.g. the use of emojis and memes) and their digital literacy toolkits to participate in digital feminisms. In the meantime, this pilot study also shed light on the tensions within digital activism in thinking about the limitations of online platforms as driven by commercial interests and how that hinders its effectiveness in facilitating activism and political contention. For instance, the participants were found to face with significant backlash against feminisms and online misogyny while *Weibo* platform failed to afford them useful tools to tackle it. This was something to be noted and further explored in the formal research.

It was a good opportunity to test the proposed methods of data collection and analysis and to see what would work and what need to be improved. Mostly the research design worked as planned, but, in the meantime, the pilot also prompted me to reflect on a few methodological decisions and consider improvements that I need to make. One challenge came from the online tracking study and the difficulties in setting up a logical framework to record the feminist social media events and observe social media debates about gender (in)equality in a whole month. Since I only focused on one social media event about gender-based violence for the pilot, the amount of data could be much more overwhelming while conducting the formal research (and it did turn out to be so). It then

became a huge challenge for me to manage the workload and come up with a more efficient way to finish the first stage of online tracking. In the pilot I identified two *Weibo* accounts of police forces and two of media outlets in order to capture the varied voices from authorities, media outlets and social media users' responses to them, which worked well to show the range of online gender discourses. Therefore, for the formal research I decided to stick to this method and tried to identify a couple of actors with a focus on media outlets, government authorities and possibly feminist KOLs and other ordinary individual users for each social media event.

In this sense, the online tracking study also came with significant limitations. To only look at and record the events in the list of trending topics at specific times meant that I was only able to capture some very specific moments of online discussions about gender and feminism; moreover, the limited number of social media comments that I looked at (10 most liked comments of each social media post) possibly caused a loss of the less 'visible' comments and posts in the debates. This specific method of mapping and recording of social media events was also inspired by a walkthrough method to look at the mundane and everyday online practices by mimicking daily use of the app (Light et al., 2018). As informed by the pilot study as well as my own experiences, following the trending topics shaped part of the social media routine for *Weibo* users. This method was designed to create an immersive research site for tracking and investigating what constitutes a social media event that marks a highly visible and heightened moment for discussion on gender and feminism. It did reflect and raise concerns about the tensions between different theoretical approaches to social (media) events as mapped out in Chapter 2 and later in my own analysis and conceptualisation. The methodological choice of following the trending topics aligned with the media studies' paradigmatic conception of events in

relation to its ability to engage vast audience and achieve a high level of visibility (Dayan & Katz, 1994; Hepp & Couldry, 2009). However, for a study focusing on grassroots feminist voices and their implications, I am far more interested in how feminist netizens utilised social media to transform a trending topic into a pedagogical site for resisting dominant discourses about gender and feminism that could be explored as a unique form of digital activism. Conceptually, this will also be examined in relation to the concepts of vernaculars and affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015) in Chapter 6 to investigate how visibility of certain social media events and related discussions are shaped on the platform of *Weibo*. For instance, I will explore how posts and replies are compiled in a specific order in the comment area on *Weibo* with the expectation that it is achieved through algorithms. This aspect of digital visibility on *Weibo*, as incorporated into the user's knowledge of the platform, was used by *Weibo* netizens and digital activists to call on actions such as liking, commenting and following to 'create' a social media event and raise public awareness of specific feminist issues. However, I have to acknowledge that the adopted method of online tracking could not possibly fully capture how the visibility of event is afforded by the platform for a lack of knowledge and further engagement with the 'logic(s) of algorithms' (Sumiala & Tikka, 2020, p. 51). Albeit a challenging task, I was hoping that online tracking could still be a meaningful part of this project for the background information that it can provide for the later stage of the study. I then came up with a detailed plan including when to record, how to record and what to record in order to stay as systematic as possible and the particular methods will be elaborated in the next section.

Other considerations were linked to my interviewing techniques. For example, I did not realise how many times I missed the opportunities to ask follow-up questions. One of my

participants contradicted her stories of sexism and domestic violence that she shared with me earlier by arguing that she never encountered with gender inequality herself. Whilst noticing it during the interview, I failed to dig up on this with follow-up questions for the fear of damaging the rapport built up throughout our conversations. Later as this was brought up in supervision meetings with my supervisors and as I delve further into the literature of feminist methodologies, ethics and epistemologies, I became aware how my unwillingness to engage reflected a 'false' assumption that data collection and analysis of a research project should and could be strictly separated from each other. It could have reinforced a hierarchal relationship between researcher and participants in the process of knowledge production, as if my participant's contradictory statements were something only to be unpacked and 'interpreted' retrospectively during the analysis stage. To be able to conceptualise situatedness and positionality in feminist knowledge making also helped me to better account for the research process as affective, messy and negotiated.

In the formal research I was hence trying to be more mindful of positioning myself as a feminist researcher-pedagogue to sometimes confront and probe my participants and encourage them to actively explore their own confusions and contradictions. For instance, when Yuri asked me in our first interview how she should relate to the anti-marriage discourse as a heterosexual woman, I encouraged her to explore this topic further and wrote a social media diary on it. I would also return to this issue in other chapters. Overall, this pilot study was not only a fruitful enquiry into my research questions but also illuminated my further fieldwork in many ways.

## 4.3 Research methods

### 4.3.1 Data collection

My fieldwork started with the online tracking study which aimed to observe social media discussions on gender and feminism on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2019. I looked at the trending topics list of *Weibo* twice a day (respectively at 00:00 and 12:00 in Beijing Time) and recorded every trending topic related to gender or feminism and its discussions generated by these events. Since the first event which ranked 5<sup>th</sup> on the trending topics when I checked *Weibo* at 00:00 on 28<sup>th</sup> May, I recorded 6 events in total that matched my definition for a social media event and all were listed below (see Table 4.2).

Time	Event	Sources of data	Number of posts recorded	Number of comments recorded
28.05.19	Nanchang Honggutan Murder	Individual users (3)	3	30
		Feminist influencer (2)	2	20
		Authority (3)	2	20
30.05.19	Videoclip of a man stalking a drunken woman home	Individual users (1)	1	10
		News media (1)	2	20
		Authority (1)	1	10
08.06.19	Admission advert for Firefighters Academy	Authority (3)	4	80
		News media (2)	3	31
		Feminist influencer (1)	1	10
19.06.19	A pregnant woman was pushed off a cliff by her husband	News media (1)	1	10
25.06.19	Man beating up a girl in street	News media (1)	1	10
26.06.19	Child abuse linked to a kindergarten in Guizhou	Individual users (1)	2	20
		News media (1)	10	90
		Authority (2)	3	30
In total	6 events recorded		36	391

*Table 4. 2 An overview of data collected in the online tracking study*

During the last week of online tracking, I started approaching participants in the next stage of my research. My original plan was to look for those who participated in the discussions that I observed and approach them via direct messaging function of *Weibo*. I successfully recruited two women by this method (and one of them turned out to be 24

years old as she filled up a younger age in her profile). I soon realised that a great number of social media users had not disclosed their age in their social media profiles so it was not practical for me to tell if they fell into the age range from 16 to 22. One of the early recruited participants volunteered to share a message about my research in a feminist chatroom that she joined. I then decided to put up a recruitment advertisement using my own *Weibo* account including some basic information about myself and my plans for the research project, explicitly noting that my aim was to look for 24 girls and young women from 16 to 22 years old of various ethnicities, sex orientations and from both urban and rural areas. The advertisement was luckily noticed and reposted by a feminist influencer with over 40,000 followers and this brought me 37 women asking to join the research within three days. Most of them briefly introduced themselves while telling me about their intention to participate either by directly replying to my post or messaging me individually on *Weibo*. After posting again to tell others that the project was already oversubscribed, I started to approach some of the intended participants while aiming for diversity of the socioeconomic background of participants. They were all provided with an information sheet which explained everything that they might want to know about the project including the purpose of the research and what they might need to do as a participant. After making sure that I had clarified everything, they were asked to sign and return their consent forms and girls under the age of 18 were also asked for signed parental consent forms. In the end, I recruited 24 participants from 16 to 24 years old but three of them dropped out during the diary study or the second round of interviews. Basic demographic information of the remaining 21 participants were all listed in Table 4.3 and Figure 4.2.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Educational status</b>	<b>Current and former place(s) of residence</b>	<b>Sex orientation (if mentioned)</b>
<b>Wing</b>	16	High school student	Korla, Xinjiang	Lesbian
<b>Dong</b>	20	Undergraduate student	Urumchi, Xinjiang	Heterosexual
<b>Rong</b>	24	Postgraduate student	Xiamen, Fujian. Originally from Hunan province	
<b>Doreen</b>	22	Undergraduate student	USA (East coast). Originally from Guangdong province	Heterosexual
<b>Tree</b>	19	Undergraduate student	Beijing. Originally from Hubei province.	Lesbian
<b>Wu</b>	17	High school student	USA (NYC). Originally from Shanghai	
<b>Yuri</b>	21	Undergraduate student	USA (California). Originally from Zhejiang province	Heterosexual
<b>Lew</b>	21	Postgraduate student	Nanjing, Jiangsu. Moved to Japan for study during the second phase of research.	
<b>Gao</b>	17	High school student	Beihai, Guangxi	Non-heterosexual
<b>Meng</b>	17	High school student	Beihai, Guangxi	
<b>Kit</b>	16	High school student	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Bisexual, prefer girls
<b>Gigi</b>	20	Undergraduate student	Guangzhou, Guangdong	Lesbian, maybe bi-sexual
<b>Moon</b>	18	Undergraduate student	Inner Mongolia	
<b>Tong</b>	21	Undergraduate student	Chengdu, Sichuan. Originally from Hunan province, grew up in Guangdong province	Bisexual
<b>Kim</b>	16	High school student	Guangzhou, Guangdong	Heterosexual

<b>Corn</b>	17	High school student	Anhui province	Pansexual
<b>Yin</b>	17	High school student	Beijing. Originally from Shandong province	Exploring relationship with girls
<b>Lob</b>	17	Undergraduate student	Haining, Guangxi	
<b>Gaga</b>	17	Undergraduate student	Shandong province	
<b>Darry</b>	19	Undergraduate student	Nanning, Guangxi	Lesbian
<b>Lili</b>	19	Undergraduate student	Anhui province	

Table 4.3 Demographic information of the participants



Figure 4.2 The birthplace and current place of residence of the participants



The first round of interviews (n=24) was conducted online from 14<sup>th</sup> July to 10<sup>th</sup> August. According to different participants' preferences, either WeChat or QQ was used as the interview tool as they are both popular messaging services in China and have the function of video/audio call. In order to establish the rapport between me and the participant, I would talk to them via QQ or WeChat messages before conducting the interviews and they were given the option of choosing between video and audio call, although I indicated that it would work better for the research as we could see each other. 20 out of 24 of them chose a video interview and I always kept my camera on even with the ones who preferred not to show themselves on camera, except in cases where it would have compromised the quality of our conversation due to internet connectivity constraints. By making efforts to maintain a video presence of myself during our interviews, it worked effectively to create a sense of comfort and trust between the participants and me as researcher. This was especially important since our conversations often delved into sensitive and personal topics.

These interviews were carried out in a semi-structured fashion and the length of each varied from 60 to 97 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, I started by walking through the process of the interview and reconfirmed the participants' consent to audio-recording. I then briefly introduced myself and asked them to tell me something about themselves and how they noticed my recruitment post for warming up. The interview questions were designed to explore these women's perspectives of gender and feminism and their experiences with social media. Questions concerning the digital aspect of their experiences were asked at the beginning, such as the platforms that they frequented and their preferences for different platforms. We then touched upon their first encounter with the concept of feminism, followed by talking about their experiences of gender

inequality at school and in family and how they dealt with them. I tended to keep the more general questions like “what do you think of contemporary feminist movement in China” till the end of the interview when they started to open up and I had some ideas about their perceptions of gender equality and feminism. In terms of interview techniques, I asked follow-up questions and encouraged the participants to explain themselves through examples and storytelling. For instance, when Kim told me that she rarely felt being treated unequally as a girl, but the local culture of her father’s hometown had a preference for boys. I asked her ‘was there any particular experience that made you think that way’ and it made her open up about her feelings when she found out that boys and girls often received different amount of money as gifts from the elder during Chinese New Year.

Although all interviews were recorded, I tried to my best to write down the key points and topics that the participants mentioned to help my transcription and also important affective and emotional responses and expressions such as tears, smiles and anger in my fieldnotes, which otherwise could be lost in audio-recordings. At the end of each interview, I briefly summarised the main issues discussed and asked if they had anything to add. Then I talked them through the next step of this research, before sending them the guide on social media diary including an example of what social media diary could look like. The guide also encouraged the creative use of textual, visual and digital tools to keep record of their social media activities. At first, I was unwilling to harass the participants every week to ask for the social media diary, which would make it look like a piece of homework that they had to finish. However, it soon came out that many participants would forget about this or procrastinate the work without reminders, so I tried to keep in closer contact with the participants and collect their diaries weekly. One

of them notified me and withdrew from the research after the first round of interviews and another two participants never replied to any of my messages after two weeks. Although many participants had some delay in sending through their diaries because of school or personal issues, all other 21 participants successfully finished with ten weeks of diary keeping and I finally collected 211 entries in total as one participant sent through 11 diaries. Most of them chose to combine screenshots of social media posts regarding feminism and gender inequality with their own comments on what had caught their attention during the week. There were two participants, Wing and Meng, who did not always have access to smart phones and thus could not catch up with what was being discussed in social media. Wing went back to school on the fourth week of diary study and the boarding school would only allow students to return home once a month, but she told me that she had been using a weekly magazine as a source of information. During the ten weeks, she chose ten topics which she thought to be relevant in online discussions on gender and feminism and drew cartoons on each topic. Meng took part in my research together with her school mate Gao, from whom she sometimes would hear about what had been going on in social media. Her diaries were also based on what she deemed to be significant topics in feminism and other sources of information.

After I went through some of my participants' social media diaries, I noticed the participants used this space to talk about broader issues and inequalities within the Chinese society beyond the realm of social media. I also realised that what I found out in the online tracking of the discussions on social media events might have been less relevant to what the participants discussed in the interviews and diaries. In the pilot study, there was nearly no break from the online tracking study to the first round of interviews and then their social media diaries. Hence what I found out in tracking online

discussions provided a framing of my first conversations with the participants – both of the participants remembered clearly the specific event that was recorded as it happened only one week before the interview and thus it offered a starting point (gender-based violence) of our discussions on gender inequality. Nevertheless, in the formal fieldwork, the first round of interviews was conducted during the period of four weeks and even the earliest one was conducted seven weeks after I recorded the first social media event (see Figure 4). Furthermore, the participants wrote their social media diaries as a reflection on their encounter with gender inequality across online and offline spaces during each week and there were constantly new events emerging on *Weibo*. As a result, half of those events that I recorded were not mentioned in participants’ social media diaries or interviews at all while what they touched upon already made up a sufficient amount of in-depth data that I could look into. Taking the aforementioned issues into consideration, I decided not to carry out a systematic analysis of all the data in the online tracking study though it might appear as a reference to some specific events when the participants discussed them. But in Chapter 5, I would draw on online tracking data in the pilot study to conceptualise the emergence of networked feminist counterpublics. In the next section, I will spell out the procedures of transcription, coding and preliminary analysis accomplished before the second round of interviews.

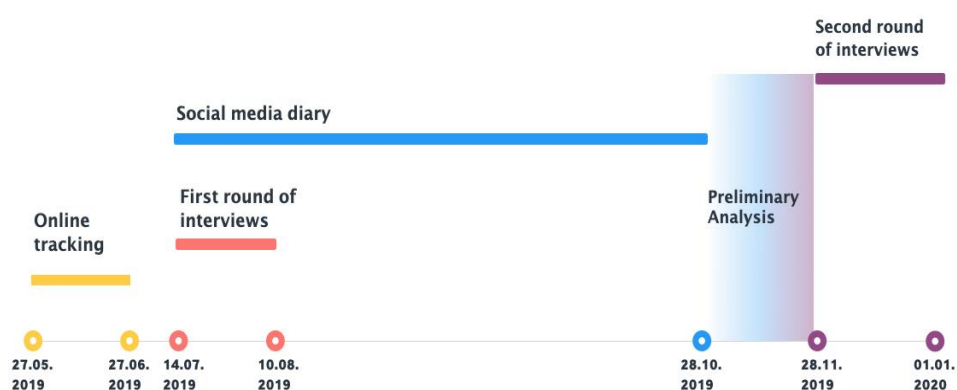


Figure 4. 3 Timeline for data collection

#### 4.3.2 Transcription, coding and preliminary analysis

In order to have a better grasp of what had been covered in the first round of interviews and social media diaries, I transcribed all 21 interviews and analysed this part of data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and all social media diaries were written in Chinese. Transcription of the first round of interviews were mostly finished during the ten weeks of diary study. As the length of the audio-recordings added up to more than 28 hours, I considered using a machine transcribing service. However, I found out that the headquarter of the service provider was based in Beijing and required all data be transferred and archived in their server. It was difficult to make sure that the data could be safely encrypted and processed, so I had to complete transcribing all the interviews manually with the assistance of the computer software ExpressScribe. I conducted the transcription in a near-verbatim manner, which meant that most of the sounds and words that I could hear in the recording, including silence, interjections and grammatical errors were recorded in the transcripts, despite that some stutters were omitted. For instance, I would mostly leave out the word 'and' (*ranhou* in Chinese) when it was not really used to indicate a chronological or logical order but only acted as a meaningless pause while the participants were searching for words. However, I would note down the more purposeful pauses such as when the participants were hinting at the importance of what they were about to say next or trying to control their own emotions. These decisions were made based on the need of affective-discursive analysis (Kanai, 2019; Wetherell, 2012), which would pay attention to both the use of language and non-linguistic cues in our conversations. Although this was a time-consuming process, it was conducive to the familiarisation with my data.

The data in my pilot study were manually coded, while the coding and analysis of such a huge amount of data generated in my formal research demanded to be assisted by computer software. Among a variety of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), I selected Atlas.ti for its capability to handle various forms of data from texts to images and also its better support for handling Chinese language. After collecting all of the diaries and completing the transcription process, I converted all text-based documents (21 transcripts and a part of social media diaries) into Microsoft Word file format and all images into JPEG or PDF format<sup>3</sup>, because these formats are more compatible with the software and can be easily accessed on different devices. Then I imported all the documents into Atlas.ti and started the coding and preliminary analysis.

The purpose of doing a preliminary analysis was primarily to figure out the frequently discussed topics in regard to gender and feminism in the first round of interviews and social media diaries, which would then help me to separate out the most pressing issues to dig deeper into in the next round of interviews with my participants. Thematic analysis would be particularly helpful to come up with a list of recurring themes in my participants' depictions of their encounter with gender (in)equality and feminism in online and offline spaces, directly responding to my research questions. Although there is a range of approaches to thematic analysis, I mainly adopted the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) which was later termed by them as reflexive thematic analysis. After the first few rounds of reading and familiarising with the data, I started to mark the interesting segments of data in all 21 interview transcripts and 211 social media diaries

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<sup>3</sup> Some social media diaries were comprised of several images. For instance, Wing drew cartoons on paper, took photos of each piece of paper and then sent them to me. What I did was to gather the photos of her cartoon which belonged to one diary entry in one single document and save d it as a PDF file.

using Atlas.ti. As those segments could be marked as 'quotations' in the software, I also tried to summarise and label the content of each quotation (data segment) in one phrase or a few phrases if more than one labels needed to be attached to the piece of data.

It is important to note that I was using Chinese in the initial coding stages in order to keep the original expressions of my participants as much as possible. The use of terminology was verified among participants in the initial codes and there were different terms found to be used to describe similar situations and problems, such as *nannü bupingdeng* (inequality between men and women) and *xingbie bupingdeng* (gender inequality). Of course, the confusions between such terms could be partly attributed to the lack of corresponding terminology in the Chinese language and sometimes caused by the lack of awareness of gender diversity. Hence the translative issue sometimes discloses how the language itself constitutes the limitations of both my participants' understandings of gender, sexuality and feminism and how these limitations must be contested and problematised in this thesis written in English. I shall return to this in the discussion chapters.

In the next stage of analysis, I started to review those accumulated codes (n=126) of marked segments of my data and draw connections to my research questions. For instance, I found over 30 marked quotations which included my participants' document of sexist jokes told by schoolteachers, physical and verbal abuse targeted at girls at school and gender stereotypes in regard to school performances. Those stories were all more or less related to the experiences of sexism in school settings and had apparently occurred in the interviews and diaries a lot while seemingly being less relevant to any of the key research questions. However, I still kept it as a potential theme as this moment which could be probed in later stage of analysis of how their feminist practices online relate to

their experiences of gender at school and in family. I therefore grouped them together under a new term 'sexism at school (RQ3)'. This type of reviewing and reworking with data was repeated for a few times before I finally came up with a list of broader themes that were centred around my research questions. During this process, I was also cautious about keeping each data segment contextualised while being allocated to the themes. One of the key benefits of using Atlas.ti for me was that it allowed quick reference back to the context of each marked quotation so I could always see what was articulated and discussed before and after the specific quotation while generating new codes and themes. In addition, it was convenient to see the topics about gender and feminism that each participant was concerned about.

Upon finishing the preliminary analysis, I devised the new interview guide and slightly customised it for each participant according to what I found out about their feminist concerns. Beginning at the end of November 2019 and finishing on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2020, the second round of interviews focused more closely on the participants' participation in online feminist discussions and their experiences, feelings and perceptions of (not) engaging in online feminisms. The recordings of interviews were then transcribed using the same approach described above and thematic analysis was again used to analyse the whole set of data including 42 transcripts of two rounds of interviews and 211 diary entries.

Thematic analysis was found to be inadequate when I tried to further investigate my participants' experiences as a girl/young woman and a feminist responding to and negotiating various cultural norms and discourses about gender and sexuality. For instance, I discovered two recurring sub-themes 'feminists depicted as extremists' and 'fake feminists vs. real feminists' in relation to my second question about their



experiences of backlash against feminism online. Nevertheless, I wanted to probe into how these two issues related to young women's experiences of engaging in feminist discussions in social media and how such misogynist and antifeminist discourses were constructed. Thematic analysis well served its purpose at initial stage for exploring and identifying key themes emerging in the online discussions of gender and feminism and my participants' responses to them. Meanwhile, for more nuanced and situated readings of gender, subjectivities and power, feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005; Lazar, 2007) and affective-discursive analysis (Kanai, 2019; Wetherell, 2012) and other conceptual and analytical tools would be needed, as also was discussed in the theory and literature chapters.

#### **4.4 Reflecting on conducting feminist participatory research online**

##### **4.4.1 The methodological complexities in online inquiry**

One of the reasons why I chose to conduct my research online was that the data I needed could be fully acquired through the internet, so it did not need to involve unnecessary face-to-face contact with the participants. In practical terms, doing an online-based inquiry came across as an appropriate methodological choice to me as it set out to be a study of digital feminisms. Therefore, to do it online seemed to on the one hand gave the both the participants and me as the researcher more control over issues such as privacy and on the other hand reduce the awkwardness that participants might feel while talking about sensitive issues in front of a stranger in a physical site. However, the issue of negotiating private/public settings in research practices turned out to be much more complexed.

Elgesem (2002) pointed out that the approach to information privacy in online spaces is vastly different from the mechanisms taken for offline communication. For online communication, it is relatively easy to restrict the access and people are usually more willing to expose sensitive information partly because of the anonymity provided by internet and ephemerality of online interactions. This was evidenced by my conversation with Meng. As Meng told me in our second interview that she never shared her experiences and feelings about son preference in her family to anyone other than me, I was curious what made her willing to open up in our interviews and replied with a smile asking her: 'Why are you willing to tell me these instead of closer friends?' Meng smiled back and answered: 'Because you are physically far away from me. Even if you knew you wouldn't be able to tell anyone around me about this... so I don't have to be afraid of what people would think.' This example questioned the notion of privacy and informed consent in terms of a set of clearly defined rules. It pointed to the need for rethinking ethics about how to negotiate different assumptions and perceptions of online privacy (of both me as the researcher and different participants who I was working with) in a specific research context.

*Weibo* is commonly considered as a public sharing service; it is distinctive from some online forums and chatrooms which are more closed or even invitees-only. For the online tracking study, I positioned myself both as a lurker-researcher (Wargo, 2020) following the trending topics and their related discussion blocks on *Weibo* but also looking for potential participants in those discussions. I knew from my personal experiences that lurking around, watching the trending topics and taking part in the online discussions were all elements of daily *Weibo* routines so I deployed this form of online tracking to mimic specific moments that ordinary users could possibly encounter. It was hence

recognised that some methodological decisions were informed by my personal experiences as a *Weibo* user and my conversations with friends and other users. During this period of time, I also took the opportunity to familiarise myself with the discursive trends about gender and feminism at that time without conducting any observations or recording activities of specific individual users.

It was the combination of the online tracking study and the interview and social media study conducted at the later stage made this project both resembled and diverged from an online ethnographic study in unique ways. The incorporation of the social media diaries has provided in-depth and rich accounts of how these girls and young women use social media to practice and learn about feminism. This social media diary approach was closely related to my intention to involve the participants in investigating the role of social media in their experiences and practices of feminism. I entrusted the participants with authority in determining the extent of what they were willing to share with me and how they would like to narrate and curate their encounters and explorations with topics related to gender and feminism. Admittedly, the research consisting of diary study and interviews could be challenged as a deviation from ethnographic methods for not conducting participant observation and not including research records of their social media activities and posts. Online researchers have been contemplating how to address concerns with replicating conventional observation within the realm of online and digital ethnography, particularly because various forms of online engagement afforded by social media platforms has obscured the notion of participation itself (Seta, 2020). The decision not to conduct participant observation was hence also a practical one. The everyday digital feminist practices of the participants (and also myself) included following online discussions, commenting on trending topics, sharing links and moving onto another

platform, a majority of which could not be observed by simply following their *Weibo* accounts as these would not be shown in the feeds or timeline.

In relation to this, the challenge of online inquiry also lies in the decision over the boundary of research site and what counts as 'data'. As Markham et al (2018, p. 3) argued, it had become increasingly impossible to set up and perform standardised 'ethically correct actions' based on a preventive model of doing ethics in online research. Despite that, I referred to the ethical guidelines of Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) in the initial design process. In regards to the issue of privacy in the pilot study, I found out that a more private/intimate space could be constructed on *Weibo* and, as I touched upon in the literature review, the distinction between public and private are becoming much more blurry and hard to navigate (boyd, 2010). Therefore, I sought to a perceived (Whiteman, 2012) and contextualised (Nissenbaum, 2011) approach to making sure the understandings and decisions about privacy were discussed and explored during and after fieldwork. In the first stage of online tracking of social media events, I tried to separate between the more 'public' spaces on the *Weibo* platform such as the comment area under the posts by institutional accounts (the authorities, the accounts owned by mainstream media, etc) and the more 'private' ones such as personal pages of individual *Weibo* users. In the second stage of interviewing and diary studies, I also tried my best to create a good communication about what information and data would be collected from my participants (franzke et al., 2020).

Data collected from my participants included texts, pictures and other contents that they voluntarily shared with me based on a clear understanding of the purpose of my research. They were informed when I first approached them that they held the right to quit at any stage of the research and, more importantly, involved in the decisions related to what

constructed as the site of data collection. Upon approaching them personally through *Weibo* messages, I also explained to them that they could choose a preferred and familiar social networking application used for future contact with me and it should allow them to have control over whether and what I could access when they post something in their social media accounts. For instance, among the participants who chose to do the interviews on QQ, fewer than half of them gave me access to their Qzone after adding me on QQ. Although my original plan was not to 'observe' their social media activities since I already incorporated the social media diary method into the research design, there were a few participants who mentioned their posts on *Weibo* or other platforms during our interviews or sometimes in personal online conversations with me. Besides this, I have maintained regular communication with the participants throughout the ten weeks of diary study as I collect the social media diaries. Some participants such as Gao and Kim even came to me with social media discussions that they found interesting and/or shared their own social media posts outside the usual collection timeframe of their diaries. These insights they have offered could never have been accessed by simply following their social media. I discussed with these participants which ones to be included in my field notes and only did so after explaining to them how I would process and store the data and getting their oral approval. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants and only for the purpose of transcribing. Recorded audio files were deleted once I finished transcribing, while transcripts and data collected in the diary research would be kept for ten years after the end of my research for reviewing, according to the UCL data retention schedule. I also strictly adhered to the principle of anonymity in order to protect participants from being identified.

#### 4.4.2 Doing feminist participatory research with young participants

Doing research with young people requires careful ethical considerations and decisions through the whole research process from designing, conducting to analysing data and presenting the results, as outlined by Alderson and Morrow (2011). As the participants of this research are mostly in their late teenage years or early adulthood, there are significant ethical and epistemological considerations concerning the tensions between protection and participation. During this research I focused on highlighting young people's agency by making sure that their active participation and engagement with decision-making in the research process. The participants were invited to take part in this research and provided with participant information details to help them make choice whether to participate. I explicitly wrote in the guidance on social media diary that the participants would be encouraged to use various forms including writing, screenshots, drawing to record and reflect on their experiences of engaging in online gender-related discussions.

Following a participatory research methodology (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Horgan, 2017) was not only a methodological 'choice' but is also related to my epistemological stance on seeing young people not only as social actors but also collaborators in research practices as processes of knowledge production. I have reflected in the previous section how social media diary has encouraged the creativity and active participation of the participants in designing and curating their own social media diaries. This element of the research design has produced multimodal records of how social media ignites the participants' feminist learning and practices as well as in-depth reflections from the participants themselves. More importantly, it played a pivotal role in shaping the second round of interviews for allowing me to have a clearer focus on

the range of key topics that the participants showed interest in and were included in the social media diaries. The second round of interview, therefore, created a highly collaborative research space where the participants helped me to focus, elucidate, correct or recontextualise the insights that I had garnered by reading through their perceptions of gender and feminist issues. This, in turn, fed back into what should be regarded as feminist knowledge of the realm of digital feminisms in this research.

As I grapple with my own positionality during this whole research process including the writeup phase, I have become more aware how ethics is intertwined with epistemological and ontological positionalities of researchers – in this case, myself. This is something to be continuously and intensively reflected on and hence will be woven into the whole thesis particularly in the analysis chapters (Chapter 5-7). I positioned myself in this research both as a feminist researcher who pursues an ethical research practice and a young Chinese woman who came across and learned about feminism from social media. As a doctoral research student who was in my twenties, for instance, I found this ‘identity’ helpful to build connections and rapport with the participants. The youngest participant was ten years younger than me, and I was only two years older than the oldest of them when I conducted the fieldwork. In attempt to build a safe and comfortable environment for my participants, I told them clearly at the beginning of the first interviews that they are welcome to share anything with me and I do not care much about the formality of their expressions. I would also use social media ‘buzzwords’ and intentionally avoided academic jargons in our conversations, trying to create ‘a common language’ between me and the participants. This safe space of disclosing personal experiences and stories in the research practices was hence co-constructed by me and the participants. I wanted to make sure that the participants felt listened to. I was described by some participants as

friendly and approachable and may appear as a trustworthy older friend who speaks the same language, has some knowledge about the context of Chinese feminisms and is able to empathise with their encounters and experiences. With these participants, I also found myself starting to develop a more intimate relationship that resembles friendship. This is not unfamiliar to feminist researchers who do research with women, which also generates concerns about exploitation (Kirsch, 2005). It is undeniable that as a researcher I am more likely to occupy a privileged position even in thinking of this project as processes of collaborative knowledge production about Chinese digital feminisms. In no way did it imply that I was entitled to 'evaluate' the perceptions of the participants by taking up a position outside. By contrast, I found myself taking on a pedagogical role in the interviews to 'guide' the participants and encouraged them to critically interrogate the discourses about gender and feminism including their own perception.

Most of the interviews went well, although there were also occasional moments of awkwardness such as when one participant told me about her first experience of masturbation. As a general rule of practicing feminist research ethics, I tried to step back and give my participants time to think about what to disclose in our conversations after making sure that they understood their rights to ask to withdraw any provided information at any time. At moments like this, it was particularly important for feminist researchers to practise care while not disregarding girls and young women as competent research participants (Daley, 2015) by encouraging the participants to make decisions around the boundaries of disclosing and sharing. The girl then went on to say, 'I wanted to overcome this. I shouldn't feel embarrassed talking about this'. I took that as a chance to follow up asking why she would 'feel embarrassed' when she mentioned masturbation.



To follow a feminist participatory methodology obviously does not achieve a once-for-all resolve for addressing existing patterns of inequalities in power relation extending beyond the research practice itself. For instance, I noticed that by following institutional codes of ethics parental consent was a requisite for girls who were under 18 years old, which could have possibly reproduced the power imbalance between parents and children (Danby & Farrell, 2004) and marginalised the voices of younger participants in research. When I was recruiting participants for this research, a 15-year-old girl from Shenzhen contacted me via direct message on *Weibo* after seeing my recruitment advertisement. She was also the president of the only feminist student organisation at her school (an elite secondary school) and very keen to talk to me. However, after trying to convince her parents for two days the girl got back to me saying that her parents refused to give consent since they thought taking part in this research would be a distraction from school and study. Neither were they willing to talk to me even though I asked if I could call them directly and explain about this research, given that I was aware the topics as explicated on the recruitment advertisement could come across as sensitive to parents. The girl also told me that her parents 'had already been quite unhappy for all the energies that I've been putting into the feminist organisation'. It was tricky to engage younger participants in this sense, if the parents held a strong opinion about both children's participation in research and the topics/objectives of the research project, which was also part of the reason why I chose to focus on girls and young women in high school and university or college. I argue that this small episode of parental consent also evidenced a need for examining to what extent and how the institutional concerns for ethics tie to an instrumentalist justification for use and outcome which is not always compatible with what feminist researchers try to push for (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012). Although this research did not involve younger children, I have already found it a struggle

to negotiate between safeguarding children and empowering them through promoting their right to participate (M. A. Powell & Smith, 2009). Therefore, these codes of ethics as guidelines offer a foundation for ethical conducts but need to be constantly updated to account for the difficulties and tensions reported and reflected in actual research practices.

Thinking about my own subjective position as a feminist researcher will be carried on throughout the thesis to reflect on the ethical challenges and issues arising during the whole course of the research, which does not end with the completion of fieldwork. In this chapter, I have critically examined the methodological design and considerations, in particular focusing on the complexities and dilemmas encountered in regard to doing a fully online-based inquiry as well as including young participants in the feminist and participatory research project. The following three chapters will now dive into the discussion on the findings of this research, starting with responding to the research question about how girls and young women experience, negotiate and challenge gender and sexual inequalities in the context of contemporary China.

## Chapter 5. Becoming (un)filial daughters: The emergence of postsocialist feminist subjectivities

### 5.1 Introduction

*The anti-traditional love of the daughters that goes against customs. The pursuit for their own dreams battling pressures from outside and within. The contradictions, choices and avoidance facing the daughters when they are entering into maturity. The clash of cultural values as well as kinship and connections between the daughters and their parents. And their doubts, aspirations, worries and fears about what will happen for their future life and their own destiny. Some of them betrayed their family, went against the wills of their parents to look for romantic love and independence, whilst carrying a guilt towards parents and family. Some of them were not yet inspired by new thoughts and thinking, wasting their youth in the enclosed space of their family home and abiding by the strict rules taught in traditional education. Some of their young and confused hearts are taking the blow of both modern and traditional cultures and enduring the pressures of living in between.*

*(Meng & Dai, 2004, p. 15)*

I begin this chapter with this quote from Chinese scholars Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, who were writing about a group of modern women writers' experiences of coming of age during the New Culture Movement over a hundred years ago. These rebellious young women-writers responded to the Movement's call to challenge Confucian moral values and familial cultural norms, which were fiercely criticised as outdated relics of feudalism that needed to be abandoned. The paragraph above eloquently captures the pain of being

an 'unfilial daughter', which involved rejecting Chinese traditional culture that had been passed down and normalised through kinship and lineage, while also struggling to pursue independence and maintain familial bonding and intimacy. In my reading of this text, it also brings to light the danger of perpetuating a binary opposition between traditional and progressive (feminist) aspirations, which can leave women stuck in a dilemma feeling awkwardly caught in-between. Taking this as a starting point, this chapter will map out the feminist resistance located in this conceptual figuration of (un)filial daughters, which I introduced in the introduction chapter.

This chapter examines the intricate and dynamic encounters between these (un)filial daughters and the overarching and complex discursive, material and historic conditions of gender and sexuality in contemporary Chinese society which I conceptualised as neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism. It draws attention to the contexts of gender and sexual inequalities that girls and young women push back against which constitutes a crucial research question that this project intends to respond to. In the introduction chapter, I have detailed how gender, sexual and other power relations in contemporary China have been undergoing a 'postsocialist metamorphosis' where socioeconomic conditions of individualisation and neoliberalism intersect with the continued influence of Confucian cultures and socialist ideologies (Bao, 2020, p. 24). As reviewed previously, recent scholarship has pondered over a concerning revival of familism in renewed forms since 1990s which is initiated by the Chinese state to consolidate its governance and control over economy and population in face of an aging population and decreasing fertility rate (Song & Ji, 2020; Yan, 2018). By framing these spatiotemporal specificities of gender and feminist politics in contemporary China, this

chapter intends to investigate (un)filial daughters as emergent postsocialist feminist subjects and how they relate to Chinese feminist movements.

In the light of the contextualisation and drawing from Foucauldian analysis of subjectivities and powers (Allen, 2013; Foucault, 1982), the analysis of postsocialist feminist subjectivities in this chapter reveals a multi-layered negotiation. My analytical framework grounded in a Foucauldian notion of subject as produced by historically and culturally specific practices of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1978, 1982). The following analysis draws from the data of the interviews and social media diaries of 21 girls and young women who participated in this research. Adopting feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005) and the conception of psycho-discursive positionality (Davies, 1991; Wetherell, 2008), it seeks to show how these girls and young women enact, resist and negotiate the dominant and idealised forms of girlhood and young femininity available for them to occupy.

The following section of this chapter starts by exploring the experiences of son preference as a recurring theme emerging in my participants' narratives and experiences of girlhood. It investigates how son preference as a patriarchal norm that ties girls to the inferiority in the patriarchal order also functions to marginalise and regulate femininity through a norm of filial piety highlighting filial obedience and obligations. From the participants' diverse and multi-faceted experiences of girlhoods, I explicate how girls are silenced from reflecting on and finding faults with son preference for the shame inflicted upon girls through the poetics of reticence (Liu & Ding, 2005). I focus on the norm of filial piety which naturalises heteronormative and patriarchal expectations on girls to become future wives and mothers. This positions girlhood as a developmental phase and enacts a heteronormative futurity hinged upon familial obligations of marriage and

reproduction, denying the desires and experiences of queer girls and creating further marginalisation. I then discuss how a feminist subjectivity of (un)filial daughters takes shape in its reflections on patriarchal familial norms and gendered and sexualised power, which revolves around a resistance to filial piety and starts to challenge what they observe about women's representations and experiences of intimate relationships, marriage and motherhood. Towards the end of this chapter, I present how independence and individual success has often been prioritised in these (un)filial daughters' aspirations for feminist change and gender equality. I consider this postsocialist feminist subjectivity of (un)filial daughters as a form of 'new femininities' (Gill & Scharff, 2013) in the global context of neoliberalism as well as in the affective-discursive context of revived, renewed and reconfigured patriarchal familism in contemporary China.

## 5.2 Coping with ongoing patriarchal familism

One core research question of this research concerns how Chinese girls and young women experience and respond to gender and sexual (in)equalities across online and offline spaces. This chapter draws up the findings from interviews and social media diaries to explore how the participants navigate their girlhoods in relation to gender and sexuality within ongoing patriarchal familism. I found out that the depictions of first-time encounter with gender inequality occurred at a young age including gender stereotypes, discrimination and even abuse that they either experienced by themselves as a daughter, sister or granddaughter or witnessed what other girls of similar age in their family came across. One specific term/theme that had been brought up frequently in their narratives of gender inequality was son preference (*zhongnan qingnü*), indicating that it is a patriarchal and sexist cultural norm that still lingers in family values and local cultures

across the country. In previous studies of son preference in China as well as other regions in East and South Asia, however, it was mostly conceptualised as a gender bias and much attention was paid to researching how such bias and preference related to imbalanced sex ratio at birth and so-called phenomenon of missing girls due to sex-selective abortion and infanticide (for examples see Chen, 2018; Das Gupta, 2010; Das Gupta et al., 2003).

The extensive academic literature about son preference in China mostly discussed it as a demographic and/or socioeconomic issue influencing and influenced by the family planning policy, whilst the cultural dimensions of son preference and how it has been psychosocially experienced by girls and young women received less attention. From a feminist perspective, this section investigates the embodied and situated experiences of son preference and gender inequalities in the family realm to look at how such patriarchal values are entrenched in local familial cultures. I argue that it stipulates a form of femininity that discursively and affectively inflicts shame upon girls and naturalises their endurance with inequalities in situ.

#### 5.2.1 Acting tough: 'I won't cry'

Only two out of the 21 participants in this research clearly denied that their life had been influenced by son preference. Both are the sole child in their families and are from relatively developed urban areas. However, others' experiences suggested the contrary that neither being the sole child nor coming from a well-educated or wealthier family background could promise a family life free from the overt or covert bias that boys are better than girls. Some of them told me that although their parents (or at least the mother) had not shown explicit preference of a boy, they had sensed that the older generations like their grandparents had been treating them differently from their male cousins. For example, Kim told me that she felt 'a little bit uncomfortable' when she first found out the

boys in her family were receiving more money in their red envelopes<sup>4</sup> during spring festival and it was the first time that she realised that being a girl is 'different' from being a boy. Kim is a 16-year-old girl growing up in Guangzhou, one of the most developed cities in Southern China, whereas her narration was situated in the rural area where her father originally came from and she would visit with her parents during traditional festivals. Kim shared this story while being asked by me about her childhood experiences of gender inequality and she started by saying that it was only 'a minor thing' that she could remember. The receipts of different amount of red envelope money in Kim's account showed how boys had been valued more (both literally and metaphorically) and had made her 'uncomfortable'. In the meantime, she also tried to underplay her own uneasiness emphasising this childhood event as 'a minor thing', which showed the emotional labour in navigating girlhood within a cultural norm of son preference.

Such different treatment towards boys and girls in the family also applied to the display of affections and care. For instance, Meng, a 17-year-old girl from a small city in Guangxi, mentioned in both interviews that her male cousins did not have to do anything and could easily get attention and care from the elders in her family. She told me that her father really wanted a boy – not only that he said so a few times in front of Meng, but also evidenced in that 'he would rather spend time with a younger male cousin of mine than with his own daughter after being away for work for a long time'. Meng wrote in the diary that she used to think her life would be much better if she could become a boy. Following

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<sup>4</sup> Red envelope or *hongbao* refers to the monetary gift given during traditional holidays or special occasions. The elder members in a family will usually prepare red envelopes for the younger who are under a certain age (usually under 18) or still at school.



up on this in a second interview, I asked her about these ideas, and she started telling me more about her personal experiences of son preference in the family:

*My grandparents they have three sons – my dad and two of my uncles. I'm a girl and both of my uncles only have daughters, but my dad's sisters they all have sons. So my grandma really, really wants a boy. She loves the boys of her daughters so much and barely care about us (researcher's note: the girls). And she can sit there all day and keeps nagging that we don't have a boy under our family name Meng and say that my mum and my uncles' wives are all useless etc... So I just felt that being boys is great. Your grandma will love you and your dad too... At school the boys are more energetic and tend to get more attention from the teachers, while I'm always quiet since little... Also, since I was bullied a lot by the boys in our family, like, they'll spit at me sometimes, but my grandma always stands by them.*

*(Meng, 17 years old, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Meng's experience exemplified how girls and women would be expected to bear the weight of son preference as both daughters (or granddaughters) and wives in the patriarchal kinship system. Meng as a girl in her family had been suffering from verbal, physical and emotional abuse, but as the interview transcript showed above, she tried to trivialise its severity to call behaviours like spitting at her 'bully'. Furthermore, the boys' habitual behaviour of 'bullying' her was further normalised in the domestic setting as it had been tolerated by her grandmother. Meng's grandmother as a senior in the family is positioned in the patriarchal familial order as someone Meng needs to pay respect to. This resonated with Yan Yunxiang's observation in an ethnographic study conducted in rural China which found that a Chinese form of 'woman power' emerges, whereby

married women, while fulfilling the roles of mother and mother-in-law, also become 'supporters and protectors of existing family values and patriarchal power' (Y. Yan, 2006, p. 121). As I have investigated in Chapter 1 and 2, Chinese girls and women are expected to align themselves with patriarchal familism through taking on their familial and filial obligations. Meng's grandmother particularly showcased her alignment with the familial role of grandmother to protect and care for the male offspring in family as a form of parent/pastoral power (Foucault, 1982; Ho, 2017) and how violence and abuse caused by son preference was not only normalised but also rendered invisible.

It is also noteworthy that in this same excerpt Meng rationalised boys getting more attention from schoolteachers as them being more 'energetic'. It seemed to have positioned the masculinist performativity of 'energetic' boys as opposed to herself being always 'quiet', which revealed an internalisation of a rather essentialist and binary view of gendered nature of boys and girls enacted in both school and family contexts. In relation to what she said next about being the supposedly quiet victim of getting bullied by boys in her family, this showed the problematic undertones of seeing various forms of misogynist abuse and gender-based violence sanctioned and normalised by son preference as acts of bullying at an individualistic level. It has been suggested in empirical studies in western contexts how education policies and public discourse of bullying may not be effective enough in understanding and/or dealing with gender-based violence since they failed to address gender power relations and cultural norms around femininity and masculinity (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Although most related research was conducted in school-based contexts mainly to inform change in educational policy and practice (also see Rawlings, 2019; Walton, 2005), this case provided an insight into how

community values and local culture play a huge part in shaping gender dynamics at school and in family.

On a certain level, Meng started to take account of her own experiences of violence and abuse as the results of a patriarchal norm that only sons would be valued in the family, which other adult women as wives and mothers in the family had also been subject to. In Chinese customs, children will automatically take their father's family name if not request otherwise. Even if the practice is becoming more flexible in recent decades, the importance of having a son is still embedded in the norm that only male heirs will be seen as keeping the name and continuation of the family in patrilineal and patriarchal cultures. Moreover, if a woman cannot bear a son for her husband's family, then she would probably be regarded as 'useless' to quote Meng's grandmother. Meng continued to tell me about a boy in the same class with her in high school whose name is *Jiaqing* (*jia* in Chinese means family and *qing* means celebration). The boy introduced himself in front of the whole class saying, 'my whole family rejoiced over my birth and it was why I got this name'. Meng said: 'At that very moment I was so jealous of him. I really was.' She then compared it to what she knew about her own birth. Her grandmother was keeping her mother company expecting the birth of the new-born baby. Then as soon as her grandmother knew that it is a girl, she went back home and never visited the hospital again. Meng offered a vivid depiction of the striking comparison between a new-born boy who naturally became the pride of his family and her own birth as a girl that made her grandmother turned away from her as well as her mother.

I asked Meng if she had ever tried to discuss these feelings and thoughts with her family. She told me that her mother had been the only one that she could turn to, but her mother also disliked that Meng would always cry while talking about these experiences. Meng's

mother kept telling her that crying means that she is not being 'tough' enough. As I noted down in my research diary, 'Meng is usually a timid but calm girl. However, she was getting quite emotional and nearly burst into tears while recalling these.' As Meng spoke, she was trying to align herself to her mother's perception of emotional toughness as an important characteristic of 'a good girl': 'I'd do as my mum asked me to. I won't cry.' Considering Meng's mother had been the only one in the family who 'protected' her from sexism since she was little, it further deepened her worries that she might disappoint her mother for 'being a softie' if she kept talking about these 'bad experiences'. Discursively Meng seemed to position herself 'on the same side' with her mother because both of them were somehow failures in the norm of son preference (her mother's failure to produce a son and her failure as a daughter). She also went on to tell how her mother as the only person who went to college had to 'sacrifice her job to take care of me (note: referring to Meng)' so Meng could not bear to disappoint her mother. Linking back to how Meng aligns herself with her mother's perception of toughness as an ideal form of young femininity, it was understandable why she attempted to restrain her emotions during the interviews. Meng's attempt to become tougher and 'feel' less in order to cope with son preference also implied how performing the ideals of a good girl requires huge affective labour (Hardt, 1999).

As mentioned previously in this chapter, although son preference and its relation to the sex ratio at birth in China is a well-researched topic, there was little theorisation in academic literature to account for how girls who had been born into families with a strong preference for boys struggled to live with this patriarchal norm. Delving into Meng's case, this section shed lights on the affective labour (Hardt, 1999) of navigating their own embodied experiences of girlhoods within a patriarchal familial culture of son

preference. As exemplified in how Meng showed 'obedience' to her mother to 'act tough', it left little space for Meng and girls with similar lived experiences to question and resist the patriarchal and familial norm of son preference. It could also lead to them associating the experiences of discrimination or even abuse with being a girl itself as shown in Meng's queer imagination of becoming a boy. However, this is not to suggest that all girls with similar experiences have always been passively victimising themselves for being born as a girl.

In the interviews with Meng, the affective intensity of shame, sorrows and other feelings about girlhood was contagious to me as a feminist researcher and as a young Chinese woman who has experienced similar psychosocial 'weight' through the efforts taken not to 'fail' my family. Reading through this affective encounter during our conversation recorded in my field notes as I presented above, I came to become more aware of the limits of feminist ethics of empathy. During the interview, I was hastily writing about the moment of Meng's revelation of her own vulnerabilities that she 'nearly burst into tears' while also feeling unsure what an ethical response would look like in this emotional moment. Despite feeling tempted to say something regarding her insistence on the need for acting tough, I chose to remain silent and wait for Meng to continue the conversation. It was until the writeup stage of this thesis that I was able to constantly interrogate the possible projection of my own (dis)obedience to familial and filial norms. This project of (un)filial daughters hence challenges me to practice feminist care and empathy without recentring my own vulnerabilities in research necessitate staying 'attuned to others but also remain hesitant as to how and why we are moved affectively' (Page, 2017, p. 18). I will further this discussion on how son preference resides in a gendered and familial discourse of filial piety in the following sections. I identify filial piety as the key to unpack

patriarchal familism and to trace how feminist awakening and resistance as (un)filial daughters emerge as the girls reflected on and challenged filial piety as passive obedience as I continue.

### 5.2.2 Protecting yourself: 'Sometimes you have to wear rose-coloured glasses'

Among a range of common explanations for son preference, family planning policy in China particularly had been believed to add to the severity of son preference (Das Gupta et al., 2003; Li & Cooney, 1993). As I mentioned in the introduction, one child policy was enacted and adopted during the 1980s and the social norm of son preference had been seemingly intensified and institutionalised along with the nationwide implementation of the policy (Ebenstein, 2011). Of course, one child policy itself was neither intended to cultivate nor suppress son preference, but was a major part of Chinese government's population control. Despite that it is a directive from the central government, previous research has also found out that the local practices of family planning varied greatly (Short & Zhai, 1998). In fact, 7 out of the 21 participants in this research have siblings. For instance, Tong brought up in our first interview about a particular localised reinterpretation of one child policy in the province where she was originally from – if the first child of a couple were a girl, then they should be allowed to have a second child. Tong, who was 21 years old and studying at a university in Chengdu at the time, grew up in Shenzhen but originally came from Hunan. During our conversation, she mentioned hearing about the 'one-child half-child' (*yi hai ban*) policy in Hunan from her relatives. This policy allowed married couples who had their first child as a daughter to have another child without punishment for breaking the rules of the family planning policy. This was because daughters were regarded as a 'half-child'. This again legitimised the cultural norm of son preference which literally put different 'values' in relation to the

gender of the child <sup>5</sup>. Similar local practices were reported by all four participants growing up in Guangdong province (Tong, Doreen, Gigi and Kim) that it is common to see families with more than one child (and usually it would be several older girls and one younger boy). This again discloses the limitations of understanding and/or defining son preference as a quantifiable demographic problem of sex ratio at birth, as it renders invisible how it is experienced and negotiated by young women within their families and local communities. This section, therefore, intends to consider how girls and young women respond to this patriarchal norm in relation to their local cultures and its institutionalisation in family planning policy.

In a more general sense, more (male) offspring means good fortune for Chinese families across localities, but there are some specific communities which are more closely associated with this cultural belief, Chaoshan or Teochew (a region in Guangdong province with its distinct cultural characteristics) as one prominent example (Huang & Huang, 2007). For instance, Doreen, 22-year-old young woman growing up in Guangdong province who was studying in the US, talked about one of her school friends from Chaoshan who has five sisters and only one youngest brother whereas her parents have implied that all property of the family will belong to the boy. This could be read as an amplified form of unequal financial investments in sons and daughters, echoing Kim's story about red pocket money. Doreen did regard this to be a form of son preference and inequality within the family whilst her friends chose not to focus on the unequal treatment. She was attempting to make sense why her friend would accept such tradition as 'that's how it is':

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2007/01-13/853727.shtml> [accessed 3 April 2020]

*I think when you're in this culture for too long, you couldn't just stare at ...  
Emmm, I mean, for instance if my family is like that, I cannot keep looking at this  
one point. Otherwise how could I live? Sometimes you have to wear rose-  
coloured glasses in order to live, because you cannot change anything at this  
moment. You'll have to focus on things that'll make you happier, so you could  
live more comfortably. That's necessary. She has to do so. She couldn't be like, oh,  
my parents are giving the house to my brother etc etc...*

*(Doreen, 21 years old, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Doreen was aware of the privilege that she herself as the sole daughter of her family could be better positioned to resist the norm of son preference because she did not live through such conditions, which she thought made it easier for her to realise 'something was not right'. In this thesis, the notion of family is oftentimes brought up as an imaginary of intimacy rather than a fixed structure, and there is no possible monolithic way to define it. It is not simply an issue of the differences in each participant's family structure, but also how the reference to family varies in each scenario. As previously mentioned, when Kim and Meng talked about son preference in the family, they both included the generation of grandparents as well as other cousins, whereas Doreen here only talked about herself and her parents as a family unit. This also accounts for my insistence on using patriarchal familism to frame the discussion on the experiences of (un)filial daughters and how resistance arise from their deviation from the normative form of familial relation and intimacy, rather than discussing family as a fixed spatial concept that tried to enclose girls and women within clearly drawn boundaries. Instead, in numerous accounts as I have presented and will be presenting in this thesis, the pervasive powers and intensities of filial piety and patriarchal familism extend well beyond the domestic



space. In the same interview, Doreen tried to explain to me how she came to understand why and how this friend had to accept the situation to look at the 'happier' things in life:

*She told me, 'my family is not too bad at all. For some other families that were poorer (than mine), the daughters would be sent to others or a child welfare'. Her family at least could raise all the six girls and everyone got to go to school... To her it was a fortunate thing. It was such a shock to me. Because if I have been growing up in a family like this... I'd hate it so much. But what she said just made me think too... Perhaps her family life was happy. Apart from the unfairness, she had so many sisters, and everyone could do makeup together, and talk with each other, and she could ask for help on schoolwork etc. It was just one big family.*

*(Doreen, 21 years old, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

As I argued previously in this section, this norm of son preference is not only embedded in familial culture but the normative elements of it has also been adopted and normalised in government policies, showing again patriarchal familism as a form of gender governance and a pervasive parental/pastoral power (Foucault, 1982; Ho, 2017). Girls from families that had a strong son preference showed great difficulties in articulating their own experiences as unfair treatment. Both Meng and Doreen's friend felt a sense of powerlessness in the face of the entrenched patriarchal norm. It was a significant point Doreen trying to make here that certain 'truth' or reality of life would need to be neglected. What was at work in her narration of her friend's story was the need to maintain a good and happy family life in order to live within this family so the affective-aesthetic discourse of 'wear(ing) the rose-coloured glasses' was sought for as a way of self-protection. The metaphor of 'wear(ing) rose-coloured glasses' indicated Doreen's reading of her friend's coping strategy as an intentional ignorance of gendered inequalities in relation to

financial interest (i.e., inheritance of properties) and instead focusing on what her family did to support her (educational needs). It on one hand revealed the importance of family and kinship for girls who were financially dependent and would need family support to access educational opportunities; on the other hand, it could be linked to the Confucian familial norms of filial piety and family harmony (Shen, 2019) underscoring the need to keep the seniority in your family happy. Relating to how Meng distanced herself emotionally and intimately from her grandmother as a symbolic figure of executing the patriarchal norm of son preference, her subjective construction of femininity at the same time aligned with her mother's expectation on her to be 'tough' facing discrimination and abuse. In discussion of the sociality of happiness, Ahmed (2010) drew on an ideal of family as happiness to discuss how positive feelings and happiness are naturally oriented towards the site of family. This echoes with the notion of 'rose-coloured glasses' and the need for 'keeping your family happy' as mentioned by the participants in this research. It normalises a certain way of aligning with the familial ideal. Return to the perception of carrying out filial obligation as affective labour, it started to show how filial piety reinforced the patriarchal order through idealising a dutiful and obedient young femininity. More importantly, this gendered norm of obedience rendered invisible the affective labour required for active maintenance of familial intimacy and harmony by refraining from complaining and 'finding faults' (such as what Meng tried to do with her mother) and shutting down their own feelings.

### 5.2.3 Becoming unfilial daughters: Disclose the 'dirty laundry'

As Croll (2006, p. 473) has noted, 'within a variety of kinship systems, a high value is uniformly placed on familial obligation and harmony, the centre or core of which is filial piety or duty.' In Confucian ethics, the primary requirement of being a good son or

daughter has always been filial piety (*xiaoshun*). This norm of filial piety traditionally places utmost importance on obedience (*shun*), meaning that one should not act against their parents' wishes. It had been suggested that filial piety in recent years had shifted from an absolute submission to parental authority to a mutual commitment of providing care, nurture and intimacy (Ji & Wu, 2018; Shen, 2011). Meanwhile, social researchers also pointed out that filial obligation continues to be considered an important part in Chinese kinship relationship (Zhang, 2016). Compared to son preference which directly constitutes a part of girls' experiences of inequalities and violence within family, the norm of filial piety upheld the power structure in a much more nuanced way and sometimes evokes a discourse of love for your family. Just like one participant Wu said:

*Pointing your finger at family would be much more difficult than talking about experiences of gender inequality at school – because you love them and you still have to live with them.*

*(Wu, 17 years old, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Wu's quote above spoke out the difficulty in doing so because to challenge son preference or any patriarchal familial norms felt like you were pointing finger at people that you loved. In the name of love for family, there was evidently a norm of remaining silent about these inequalities that cut off the possible complaints about inequalities and unfairness. This rhetoric of love in the meantime showed how affective labour taken to maintain family harmony – by taking upon the filial daughters themselves to pacify any complaints – was taken for granted and naturalised. This highlighted the norm of filial piety as working through the powers of a reconfigured patriarchal familism in contemporary China, which demands proactive maintenance and management of family harmony and intimacy, rather than passive obedience (X. Xie, 2023). However, previous research on

filial piety and Chinese kinship has failed to account for the gendered nature of the norm of filial piety. Despite shifts in its meaning and manoeuvre over time, it continued to maintain and reinforce patriarchal familism. One predominant conceptual framework tends to see filial piety as a power imbalance on two axes of age and generation (Cheung & Kwan, 2009). Sociologists such as Shen Yifei and Yan Yunxiang drew up theory about late modernity to look at the breakdown of traditional forms of patriarchy in contemporary China to develop a more intersectional lens to look at how familial culture and relations intersected with other power relations (Shen, 2011, 2019; Yan, 2018). Moreover, compared to their research which mostly based on observations and interviews with families formed by heterosexual marriage, my research shifted focus onto the (un)filial daughters who lived through the weight of son preference and filial piety but were further seeking the possibilities to question and deconstruct it.

Lili, who is a 20-year-old girl from Shandong province and has a younger brother, told me about the different expectations that her parents had on her brother and herself. Her parents were always telling her that she should stay in the nearby regions in order to take care of the family while choosing which university to attend. In contrast, her brother was encouraged to go to the bigger cities outside Shandong province. Lili used to see this as a kind of unequal treatment, but after her grandmother got injured while staying at home alone, she felt that she needed to take on the responsibility of caring. In one of her social media diaries, Lili wrote:

*Maybe my parents were just trying to protect me... Because if I choose to stay (near home), they can offer me more help. Plus, girls are more considerate than boys. Maybe they're happier to have me by their side instead of my brother.*

*(Lili, 20 years old, Social media diary no. 2)*

Talking about son preference in our first interview, she argued that her experience suggested the opposite. She believed that her parents treated her better than her brother, given that they had lower expectations on her academic performances while always being very strict with her brother. The significance of contextualising the concept of son preference within the larger framework of patriarchal familism was also highlighted, as this concept contains inherent ambiguity and fails to address how daughters may be 'preferred' in certain scenarios than sons, such as caring for parents. In the quote above, her parents' infantilising her as needing protection was justified in the name of their love for her as a girl. Therefore, as a daughter, she needs to pay back by conforming to the ideals of filial obligations and take on her caring responsibilities as a daughter. This is a great example showing how parental control over daughters could be perceived as care and protection for her, which ties back to my conceptualisation of parental/pastoral power (Foucault, 1982; Ho, 2017). Moreover, the notion of family or parents was in fact such a totalising figuration in Lili's quote and many others included in this chapter. It is sometimes impossible to decipher which exactly parent/family member that they were referring to, nor did it seem important, but it represented a familial ideology that the girls were expected to accept and respect instead of challenging.

In the social media diary of another participant Corn, one social media comment that she saw on *Weibo* offered a similar articulation of this love rhetoric. The comment was posted by a girl sharing similar experiences of son preference to Lili and Doreen's friend. She has a younger brother and has always thought that her parents love her more than her brother. After she graduated from college, however, this girl found out that her parents decided to give the house that they live in as a present for her brother. 'There are things that I don't know how to explain. But this doesn't mean that my parents don't love me',

the girl said. This echoed previous studies on son preference in China that although urban daughters in sole-child families did enjoy relatively higher family investment (Fong 2002), Chinese parents still tend to spend more in supporting sons in terms of education and property especially in rural area where there would be both sons and daughters in family (Song, 2008; Hannum et al., 2009). In response to the previous comment that she saw online, Corn wrote in her diary:

*Girls whose family has this issue of son preference tend not to admit that her parents don't love her. Because this is an unacceptable fact, especially for the case above in which the parents favour the girl on the outside. To admit (son preference of her parents) is like to admit that everything they own is an illusion. Too high a cost. They'll just tell themselves that there's no such thing as son preference in the family.*

*(Corn, 17 years old, Social media diary No.7)*

In this quote above Corn was trying to make sense why girls living in families that have a preference for boys would show a rejection to acknowledge their own experiences as a form of gendered inequality. Corn was 17 years old at that time and was living with her mother and stepfather who has two children – one half-brother and one half-sister – both of whom are older than her. She mentioned in the interview having a ‘very traditional’ mother and a ‘extremely paternalistic stepfather’ who made her never feel supported by her own family. In my understanding, these girls and young women who had experiences of son preference were psychosocially facing a dilemma where they either had to ‘wear rose-coloured glasses’ as Doreen’s friend was doing to keep focus on the ‘happier things’ in life or to bear the weight of not being ‘loved’ by their parents (at least not as much as their brothers were). The familial norm of filial piety would have commonly discouraged

the girls to interpret this as discrimination or unfair treatment, but it evidently took great affective labour to manage. Parental control in this regard sometimes acted in a way that they refused to acknowledge and accept how their children perceive things differently which, for instance in Meng's case, had been how she reacted to sexism. Going back to Meng's case where she felt that she had to 'endure' all the abuse for being a girl, what she regarded as inequality and bully was trivialised by her mother as 'dirty laundry in the family which should not be made public'. Hereby Meng chose to stay silent about these things in order to avoid any possible divergence, as any divergence can be regarded as a challenge for the parental authority and failure to practice filial piety. In the meantime, how girls perceived and negotiated such authority and power can be more complex and nuanced, as Meng obviously did not obey her grandmother or her father as much as her mother despite that they should be considered to stand in higher position than her mother in the Confucian family hierarchy.

This related to another issue regarding how filial piety as a highly disciplinary discourse normalised the obedience of girls and urged girls to subdue their own feelings, perceptions and inspirations rather than challenging their family, which work through a poetics of reticence (Liu & Ding, 2005). The reticent poetics/politics is best understood as an aesthetic-affective intensity that promotes a well-mannered and respectable subject in Chinese culture, emphasizing self-discipline and moderation while refraining from direct and forceful repression when transgression of social paradigm occurs (Liu & Ding, 2005). In their discussion on queer politics and filial piety, Liu and Ding (2005) pointed out what appeared as tolerance from the parents in its essence enacted intensive silencing affects of homophobia on queer sexualities as subversions and resistance to the heteronormative and patriarchal family (X. Xie, forthcoming). In this research I have

found out how this reticent poetics/politics is noticeably sustained through the matrilineal power. The girls' relationships with their mothers were crucial to unpack how the generational and gendered power dynamics worked in an intersectional way in the girls' subjective construction of femininities (and masculinities) and their positions within the familial discourses. It was a common theme across Meng and a few others' cases that the participants would mention more often and show more affection towards the mother than the father or any other family members. The mother in their narratives was also the main person who would listen to their complaints and disappointments and show some understanding. Nevertheless, in the traditional Chinese familial hierarchy, the mother took up an interesting position where she would be expected to manage everything within the inner/domestic arena including to take care of and educate the children (L. L. Rosenlee, 2004). Meng's case showed how her mother to some extent recognised her experiences of bullying as 'the dirty laundry' within the family but in the meantime asked her not to disclose it to anyone outside for the sake of familial reputation. Despite that, in our interviews she still chose to disclose to me for the first time. I asked her why she would not tell any friends around her but could tell me who was basically a stranger to her. Meng said:

*It's because you are physically far away from me. Even if you knew you wouldn't be able to tell anyone around me about this... so I don't have to be afraid of what people would think. Especially for a place like where I'm from, they probably wouldn't say anything in front of you. But people will talk behind your back.*

*(Meng, 17 years old, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Connecting to the figuration of (un)filial daughters, here Meng was still trying to keep the image of being a dutiful and filial daughter who listened to her mother but at the same



time negotiating an acceptable way to defy the norm of filial piety and familial discourse of reputation. Her words were implying that she would open to me about 'the dirty laundry' within her family only because I would not be able to spread it among the local community as someone who she met online. The pressure of familial culture came from people close to her and was not something to be shaken off easily, but Meng's resistance was represented in her attempts at discovering and constructing a safe place to reflect on these issues in our conversations. In addition, she also noted the influence of her friend Gao who went to the same school with her and also took part in my research. Gao first brought the concept of feminism to Meng's attention when they became friends and since then they had regular chats about gender and feminist issues which helped Meng to stop 'finding fault' with herself and understand her own experience of son preference as a sociocultural issue. But unlike Gao who showed huge passion to 'change the status quo by starting from changing the people around', Meng wanted to 'escape from the environment and small circle' that she had been living in. From Gao's social media diaries, I also knew that she and her group of feminist friends at school (including Meng) had a chat about filial piety:

*I don't think filial piety is love. It is a form of power. Last week I wrote that the state is like a family. Or I can say that the family is also like a state. Individuals in a state are categorised into different social class. There is also a hierarchal order among family members, and that is our beifen (researcher's note: it can be translated into English as the seniority in the family). I cannot find any justifiable reason for filial piety. It just indicates that your parents or any senior members in the family – they have shown kindness to you and thus you have to*

*be prepared to do anything to pay back. Just because you were born into this world. This is like power relation within kinship and family relationships.*

*(Gao, 17 years old, Social media diary No.5)*

Gao suggested that a crucial element of filial piety was the authority of the older generations, which traditionally shaped a hierarchal family relationship between parents and children wherein the children must show obedience when divergence occurred. In her perspective, the construction of parental authority and filial piety were partly based on an essentialist idea that children owed their parents as parents gave them life and raised them. Gao criticised a familial hierarchy based on age seniority quoting a common saying that 'the daughter-in-law now becomes a mother-in-law' as 'a false claim for power'. It aptly pointed out that a naturalised emphasis on women's roles as daughter-in-law and mother-in-law was only to reproduce and ensure the continuation of the heteronormative and patriarchal family as girls and women are expected to align themselves with familial and filial norms. This presented a powerful case challenging what was conceptualised as 'girl power' (which is totally differently from the postfeminist discourse of Girl Power in western contexts) in previous ethnographic research in rural China of Yan Yunxiang (2006) to evidence waning influences of patriarchy. However, I contend it was far from an indication of transformation of the patriarchal familism as suggested. Gao's reflective contemplation seemed particularly convincing given Confucian notions of filial piety and isomorphism of family and state have been fit into CCP's postsocialist governmentality (F. Du, 2020; D. Wang, 2020).

### 5.3 *Fanhun*: Challenging heterosexual and patriarchal norms of marriage and beyond

In relation to the discussions on how my participants' experiences of gender in family were shaping and shaped by their responses to cultural norms of son preference and filial piety, this section explores the emergence of a discourse of *fanhun* (anti-marriage) as a form of resistance to patriarchal familism and its links with feminist discussions in the online sphere. I will show how that the feminist discourse of *fanhun* involves and emerges from an array of perspectives of gender and sexual inequalities rather than simply a rejection of marriage at an individualistic level. Affectively and intimately coalesced around what Wu and Dong (2019, p. 476) captured as 'gender antagonism', I draw from the experiences and perceptions of particular participants to argue that anti-marriage has gone beyond that to pose a challenge to patriarchal familism as structuring different axes of intersectional power relations. Resistance from these (un)filial daughters hence encapsulates more than a refusal of filial duties and responsibilities as daughters to be respectful of parents to constitute a response of refusing to take on the expectations on them to become wives, mothers and the *inferior* in patriarchal familism. The following sections unpack this response to heteronormative, familial and patriarchal discourses about girlhood, female sexuality and women's positionality within intimate relationships, marriage and motherhood. It demonstrates how this resistance takes different but related discursive pathways: question girlhood as a stable and uniform category; challenge of male-superiority in marriage and intimate relationships; resistance to women's filial and familial obligations as wife and mother; queer disobedience to the heteronormative marriage and family; feminist inspirations for independence and success.

Even in current days, romantic relationships of teens in China are generally labelled as ‘puppy love’ and regarded unreliable and harmful to young people’s academic performance. Although there has been no specific legislative explanation for sexual consent, sexual and romantic relationships are strongly opposed and remain a social taboo for teenagers, whilst young people in both urban and rural areas have been reporting sexual experiences before adulthood (Song et al., 2013). As suggested in the introduction chapter, the notion of sexual revolution in 1990s was particularly influential as an illustration not only for the growing visibility of topics related to sex and sexuality in both popular and academic discourse, but also that sex was being gradually separated from its procreative function while pleasure and desire started being explored (Pan, 1994). Nevertheless, the abstinent approach to (Confucian) sexual morality and medicalised discourse of sexual health continued to pervade in laws, public policies and sex education and remains barely changed up till today (Liang et al., 2017; Peng, 2012).

As mentioned previously in the introduction chapter, researchers have identified a discourse of leftover women widely seen in mass media and everyday discourses, resulting in the stigmatisation of single (and usually well-educated) women at their late 20s or above (Feldshuh, 2018; Fincher, 2016). Despite their age falling below this age range, the participants in this research demonstrated the prevalence of marriage as an almost universal norm in China which pressures women into marriage before a certain age range. This also explains why discussion on marriage and leftover women is relevant even for younger girls. For instance, Yin wrote in her social media diary in response to the proposed change of legal marriage age:

*What I think to be the most harmful is that it’s going to be (the right thing) to do in everyone’s subconscious. It’s inevitable that some people would use this to*

*make fun of female university students. It's hard to say what kind of message is being implied to these girls in adolescence. It's like saying, oh when you grow up you could get married. Is it what growing up for? To get married?*

*(Yin, 17, social media diary no.2)*

Yin here was writing about her comments on the news which caused a heated debate on social media: a law professor and delegate to the National People's Congress (the legislature of PRC) proposed to lower the legal marriage age from 22 for men, 20 for women to 20 for men and 18 for women. By pointing out the cultural and social implications of law change, Yin expressed a worry that the decrease in legal age of getting married would further normalise and justify the pressure and expectation for women to enter marriage. What could worsen women's situations in marriage is the discourse of 'leftover women' that I mentioned earlier. As a buzzword which used to prevail in both popular and official discourses, it depicted well-educated and professionally successful women as leftover women who will be left out in the marriage market, implying that these single women should be blamed for 'their own competence and independence' (To, 2013, p. 2). Darry who was 19 years old expressed concerns after seeing the same news:

*Getting married at 18 years old, gosh, I was still in high school! How are they supposed to finish college if being expected to get married and have kids at such young age!*

*(Darry, 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Fincher's (2016) research on the discourse of leftover women noted how media reproduced a patriarchal rhetoric that women's pursuit for higher education and career would undermine their opportunities for marriage and make them become 'leftover'. Darry's quote about marriage and childbirth above was also reflective of feminist critique

of the patriarchal discourse asking women to prioritise marriage. This also implied that the regulatory discourse of marriage works with familial moral values dismissing women's pursuits for education and career as selfish, self-oriented and failures to perform familial and filial obligations as I also go on to develop in the next few sections.

Even if my participants are still at a relatively young age, almost every one of them has talked about marriage either in their social media diaries or the interviews. The image on the right (Figure 5.1) was an excerpt of my participant Wing's social media diary, in which she drew about her perceptions about marriage. This 16-year-old girl from Xinjiang questioned the things that people wanted to obtain from marriage (money, companion and love) and argued that all of these can be found outside marriage. Then she drew a

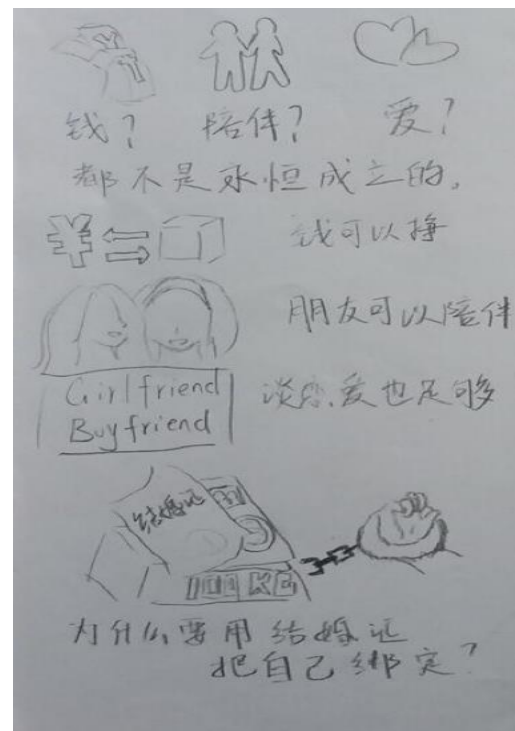


Figure 5.1 Wing (social media diary no.3)

hand cuffed to a 100kg weight on which placed a certificate of marriage and wrote below: 'why would you bind yourself to a marriage certificate?' It represented a prevalent feminist discourse of *Fanhun* (anti-marriage) in Chinese social media that the 'patriarchal' or 'traditional' (quoting some participants' original word) form of marriage contributed to women's oppression.

### 5.3.1 Challenging male-superiority in intimate, sexual and marital relationships

Among 21 participants, 17 of the girls explicitly expressed that they would not want to get married. The participants critiqued the legislations and cultural norms regarding marriage, property rights and gender-based violence as shown in some of the quotes above. Therefore, this rejection of marriage was not only about the personal 'choices' of my participants, but representative of discursive formations of critiquing and challenging marriage as a universal patriarchal familial norm. Some believed that laws and policies pushed women into a disadvantaged position in marriage or even intimate relationships in general and made it difficult for women to get out of a relationship or marriage even when suffering from violence. For instance Gao wrote about the loss of 'rights' (*quanli* 权力) for married women:

*I think women in marriage could lost some rights at a certain level... For instance married women would need their husbands to sign on consent forms for surgeries including tubal ligation (I saw news like this on Weibo). Marital rape is not regarded as rape to most people in China, which means that women lost their sexual autonomy in marriage. Also, there was a way of human trafficking that if a woman cried for help in street, the trafficker only needs to say 'it's just my girlfriend/wife getting cranky' and then no one would step in and help. That is to say, in public opinion, women don't really have autonomy in sexual relationships; their boyfriends or husbands could take her anywhere against her will.*

*(Gao, 17, social media diary no.1)*

Gao's comment above seemed to have taken up a liberal discourse of women's rights and autonomy, but it also touched upon the normalisation of women as subordinate to their

male sexual and/or marital partners in different sorts of scenarios. The conflation of marriage and sexual/intimate relationships was also evident here as her quote started to question the gender power relations implicated and reproduced within heterosexual intimate or marital relationships. Implicitly she was already critiquing the institution of heterosexual marriage and its relation to the legal system and the state which could be traced to Marxist analysis of marriage and capitalism circulated in social media. There were three participants (Gao included) who mentioned *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the foundational work of Engels while talking about marriage. When I asked whether this was included in school curriculum, they all reported to have discovered the work from some feminist reading list shared by feminist microbloggers on *Weibo*. Probably influenced by classical Marxist analysis of women's oppression and capitalism, those participants see the hegemonic form of heterosexual marriage as the cornerstone for the exploitation of women and thus the institution of marriage needs to be wholly eradicated as a long-term feminist cause. However, most participants showed some ambivalence about whether the abolition of marriage is needed urgently to dismantle the patriarchal system. For instance, Rong wrote in her diary:

*Fanhun is not to force every married woman to get a divorce. It is really to reject women's internalisation of a value that sees themselves as the second sex within intimate relationships. We're not simply opposing a piece of paper, but the (kind of) marriage and intimate relationships.*

*(Rong, 24, social media diary no. 2)*

This quote represented a common notion of anti-marriage as challenging the cultural norms and values that legitimised male dominance within marriage and intimate relationships. More specifically, it pointed to women's agency in transforming this as



starting from resisting these patriarchal values. This array of anti-marriage discourse focused on attempts to break through and challenge the cultural norms about marriage that upheld gendered power relation in marriage and intimate relationship – men as always superior to women. Describing her response to a *Zhihu* (Chinese equivalent of Quora) post titled ‘will the institution of marriage be dismantled’, Tree has written the following paragraphs in her social media diary:

*If I look at those women who are in the traditional form of marriage, even though men are bound to be the breadwinners, the married women have to take on the loads of housework and take the risk of being cheated on. They won't even be able to blame their husbands for cheating, since they cannot take the risk of becoming independent. In this kind of highly unequal relationships, I only see the how women are constrained and have to adhere to morals of chastity and obedience. But sometimes I was thinking – isn't this male-superior-female-inferior (男强女弱) type of relationship widely accepted by publics even if they are not a married couple? Should they be considered as a residue of bad traditions or one specific form among the diversity of relationships? I have no answers to that, but at least I think that any relationships shouldn't be unequal... The relationship itself has to be pure and shouldn't merely bound by interests and benefits. One partner must not wholly dependent on the other.*

*(Tree, 19 years old, Social media diary no. 9)*

In this paragraph above, Tree expounded on how the normative form of heterosexual marriage that dictated male as dominant and female as subordinate had been legitimised by another societal norm that men should provide for the family (men as breadwinners) while women would be financially dependent. This might be a commonplace when

women were restricted to domestic domain, but this norm was increasingly regarded to be challenged due to women's participation in labour force. In the same diary Tree went on to share that her uncle's wife earned much more than her uncle; meanwhile relatives and friends would still want to help her uncle with his business and expect her uncle's wife to take on more caring responsibilities. With the persistence of the obstinate norm and expectation which was depicted by Tree as 'male-superior-female-inferior' in terms of earning power, the transformation of 'unequal' gender relations in heterosexual marriage might not happen naturally even if the norm of men as providers was broken. This provided a great illustration of the discursive-material-affective dynamics (Ringrose et al., 2020; Wetherell, 2013) of the idealised form of marriage that formulated a performance of male superiority within the patriarchal family. The story told by Tree denoted that the conventional form of family structure is inextricably entwined with the discursive articulation of the gendered norm that women should take on caring responsibilities within the domestic sphere while men should provide material support. In this case, Chinese men's superiority in the domestic context was supposedly justified by their higher level of economic contributions to the family. Whereas women's participation in social labour posed a threat to the norm of men as providers, women's inferiority and obedience in marriage and intimate relationships as 'widely accepted by publics' still needed to be performed. As Luo (2017) pointed out in an analysis of the neoliberal gender configurations after the Chinese economic reform, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity had become increasingly defined by socioeconomic success. Tree noticed how other relatives and friends would help her uncle with his career on one hand; on the other hand, her uncle's wife was still expected to contribute more to caring responsibility and save face (*mianzi*) for her uncle. It was implied that a hegemonic form

of masculinity suggested earning less than your wife (or female partner) constituted a possible loss of respect (roughly equal to *mianzi*) from others, but in the meanwhile, it was the woman who had to pay extra affective labour of reviving or supporting the performances of masculinity.

In addition to economic and social status, the norm of male superiority is also hinted in the psycho-discursive (Wetherell, 2008) representations of masculinity and femininity – girls and women are often portrayed as wanting or needing the protection of men. The participants dismissed and challenged this representation that women need protection as serving to undergird the gender power relations within marriage and family. Figure 5.2 (next page) is a screenshot captured by Tree, in which shows an image of a woman seemingly riding a scooter for kids while a boy and an adult man walking beside her. The *Weibo* user who posted the image said, ‘you’ll know who’s the real baby in the family by a look’. The comment circled by Tree then replied, ‘two men spoiling a baby’. Tree argued that it is based on a patriarchal norm of femininity that women should perform weak and vulnerable therefore need to be protected, and then she debunked the absurdity of this norm by telling a story happened between her and her younger male cousin. The four-year-old boy accidentally hit her while playing, and the instant reaction of his mother is to tell him that Tree is a girl and he needs to protect her instead of hurting her. The binary and sexist construction of femininity and masculinity was particularly conspicuous here:

*It was so ridiculous. I am older, stronger, taller and bigger than him. But his mum still ignored all these factors and tell him not to do that just because of the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ assigned to our sexes.*

*(Tree, 19 years old, Social media diary no.8)*



Figure 5.2 A screenshot of social media post in Tree's social media diary no.8 (anonymised)

Tree was not the only one who had reflected on this issue. Rong also wrote in her social media diary that this discourse of men as the protector serves to bolster 'a traditional gender relation which allows male dominance'. She suggested that this almost resembled the master-servant relationship and 'we are still stuck in this fixed duality and gendered power relation', which prescribed it as the only acceptable form of marriage or intimate relationship.

### 5.3.2 Resisting marriage and motherhood

Following previous analysis of the girls' rebellion against marriage as formed in response to the societal norms that pressured Chinese women into marriage before a certain age and legitimised their subordination to men and attachment to the family, this section continues to discuss the subversion to marriage as resistance to the norm of filial piety. As explained in the introduction and the previous sections of this chapter, to produce a male offspring constituted one core dimension of filial piety and familial discourses of women's familial obligations as wives in Confucian values (Leung, 2003). For instance, I discussed how Meng's experiences of son preference prompted her to align herself with her mother within the patriarchal familial order as they both were marginalised in the

family as failures or shameful – Meng herself for being a girl and her mother for not producing a son. She later spoke of how learning about feminism online and Gao's feminist group at school enabled her 'spirits of subversiveness':

*XX [initials of the author]: You spoke of the spirits of subversiveness, so what exactly are you resisting or subverting?*

*Meng: For instance they would say that women had to get married and have kids... And when you get married and have kids you'll drop these (rebellious) ideas (laughs). All these ideas that you're having is because you haven't got married and become a mother yet. And I just told them that I'd do well even if I don't get married. And even if I'll have kids in the future, I won't change my mind... My mum used to say to me, 'don't reject marriage just because of your experiences of son preference. I just want you to live a normal life as anyone else'.*

*(Meng, 17, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Meng laughed at the absurdity of dismissing her rebellious anti-marriage ideas as only a phase that would pass when she got married, but it also implied how women would be pressured into marriage against their will to complete their filial obligation. Moreover, her mother showed awareness of Meng's experiences of son preference and its possible effects on her attitudes towards marriage but 'living a normal life' by complying with the societal norm of marriage would be much more important. Recognising that feminist discussions with her friends and readings of feminist work initiated her own reflections on filial piety, Meng's anxiety about failing her mother did not hold her back from expressing these rebellious ideas despite knowing that it would be unacceptable for her mother. Similarly, Moon talked about how she struggled with conforming to filial piety for its tensions with her rebellion:

*XX: What exactly does your feminism help you to rebel against?*

*Moon: It was... hmm, if it were not for (learning about) feminism, I could still be feeling torn between being rebellious and... being accused of by my family? You know, like, two contrasting ideas or responses – should I be a good kid? Or should I just endure the offence? Now I feel different honestly, I'm like, who the f\*ck want to be a good kid... I might never meet its criteria.*

*XX: So what exactly are the criteria or definition for a good kid?*

*Moon: It is basically being easily controllable, I guess... Like, well-behaved, sensible, filial, those are just interchangeable words for controllable, from my point of view.*

*(Moon, 18, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

This quote again showed how the gendered discourse of filial piety prescribed a norm of obedient and passive femininity for girls to perform, whereas feminist subversiveness and rebellion was also formed in response to this norm. It took affective labour though for the girls to have some sort of alliance within the family, as exemplified in Kit's having lengthy debates with her mother about gender issues and the attempts to 'convert' her mother. Lob also shared that she had been trying to explain to her mother about why she would not want to get married or have kids.

*XX: Do you talk to anyone about what you think of these gender issues?*

*Lob: Yeah I sometimes would talk to my mum about this and she would, like, nod along but she's never started these talks herself.*

*XX: So do you think she's listening or she's just, like... (\*smile and nod)*

*Lob: (\*replied immediately) I think my mum has really listened. For instance I've told her that I don't want to get married and have kids in the future and she's been supportive. Because she thinks in this kind of environment it's okay if you don't want to get married or have kids.*

*(Lob, 17, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In the conversation, I intentionally implied a doubt whether Lob's mother was passively listening or really trying to understand and engage with her idea of anti-marriage since she said that her mother never initiated such talk. Lob's quick response somehow revealed her anxiety about having someone in the family who showed support as she also told me in the same interview that her mother was the only one in the family she could talk to about these ideas. It was a commonality among my participants that such discussions on gender, sexuality and feminism would mostly happen with their mothers. Some participants such as Meng linked this absence of father in related family conversations to gendered labour of care. In the quote below Meng discussed a discourse of motherhood and maternal love that expected women to be 'selfless' and 'self-devoting' as 'shackles on mothers'.

*...Mother are usually portrayed as superwomen. If only it's for their children, they are willing and able to go anywhere and do anything. Women are weak, while they become tough as mothers. Such statements can be seen everywhere. Here I'm not criticising or denying the maternal love. I just want to emphasise that this kind of selfless and self-devoting love shaped by our social values is – no, it has put shackles on mothers, or even all women. It's always the mother's fault if anything goes wrong with the kids. She has to take on some responsibilities more or less. Meanwhile the father is never mentioned...*

*(Meng, 17, Social media diary no. 2)*

Meng was trying to unpack the sexist double standards of childrearing which regulated motherhood through a discourse of love and devotion, whereas men were not expected to perform familial obligations at the same level. Moreover, in the interview Meng told me how her mother had to sacrifice her career opportunities after graduating from university and marrying her father to take care of the family. Rong also shared her views on the familial discourse of women's obligations as mothers:

*Look at the women nowadays. They have to work and do all the housework. Take care of kids and be good to their parents-in-law too. Those are just what you're bound to do; otherwise you'll be a disqualified wife. I thought if you're married those should be the liabilities of both partners. But men suddenly disappeared here... Many years have passed since we started talking about this issue of 'childrearing like a widow' (sang'ou shi yu'er). But nothing really changed.*

*(Rong, 24, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Rong in this conversation brought to my attention about a specific term 'childrearing as a widow' which described men's absence in parenting and pervaded the discussion on anti-marriage and motherhood in online feminist discussions. She used the term to discuss the patriarchal familial norm of motherhood that normalised women's contribution to both domestic labour of doing housework and affective labour of taking care of children and performing filial piety to parents-in-law. From what these participants have shared with me, it becomes evident how anti-marriage resistance is formed even among younger participants in response to the norm of filial piety that sees marriage and motherhood as family responsibilities. It does not only show critical reflections on obedient girlhood and femininity enacted by filial piety, but also how these



girls and young women start to actively negotiate their anticipated roles as future wives and mothers. This process elucidates the emergence of distinctive feminist subjectivities embodied by these (un)filial daughters who are decisive to carve out paths outside the life courses arranged by patriarchal familism.

### 5.3.3 Queering the continuum of marriage and family

This section discusses several stories about 'coming-out' by expressing resistance to marriage in front of parents which met with dismissive attitudes or anger. It also shows a form of queer subversiveness emerging from my participants' explorations and performances of gender and sexuality outside the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2011). Moreover, some participants like Corn were reluctant to align themselves with specific identitarian categories or terminology of sexual orientation, which was also why I chose to use their own descriptions in the demographic information table (Chapter 4, Table 4.3). Although there was seldom an open discussion about sexuality in family conversations as reported by most participants, the girls themselves showed anticipation for resistance from parents as they were aware that they were breaking a norm.

*Wing: When I was in the third grade of middle school or first year of high school, and we started to talk about marriage. My mum had always been expecting that I would get married and have kids. But I knew I had different sex orientation from others since I was young. I kept telling her that 'you were always nagging that I should get married and have kids but I think this is not going to come true'. And she was not listening. With my mum and dad it was... I think it was like talking at cross purposes.*

*XX: So even if she knew what you were really thinking she's still trying to ignore it? Is it what you meant?*

*Wing: I don't know if she's trying to ignore it. She's probably not willing to believe. It feels like she's thinking that I'm thinking of that only for the time being. But apparently, I came to the realisation in the first grade of middle school and nothing changed up till now. This is not a random idea which would only last for a bit.*

*(Wing, 17, 1st interview)*

In quote above showed how Wing's attempts to come out to the mother was implied in an expression of resistance to marriage and motherhood that she was not going to 'get married and have kids' as her mother expected. Wing was confused about her mother's silence and diversion of topics afterwards and accounted for such dismissive attitudes towards her sex orientation as 'a random idea which would only last for a bit'. In other participants' stories, the difficulties of coming out were associated with (worries about) strong opposition from family.

*XX: You were talking about your expectations on relationships and having someone who could understand and support your views on gender equity would be of the utmost importance. However you also said that you don't know any boys who could meet this criterion... So how could this work?*

*Yin: Emmm, in fact now I don't even think gender is such an important factor when I'm looking for a relationship. There's this girlfriend of mine who's kind of acting like a 'boyfriend' (note: emphasised by Yin). So I'm open to this, I'm totally fine with trying with someone of the same gender as me.*

*XX: Have you tried talking to anyone in the family about this?*

*Yin: Can I talk about this? (laughs)*

*XX: So it's an absolute no-no in the family?*

*Yin: Perhaps... Okay it's still possible that if they know it they'll gradually accept too? They won't beat me to death at least, hopefully (laughs).*

*(Yin, 17, 2nd interview)*

*And with family I don't dare to talk about this... My mum... I've been testing her attitude. During this Spring Festival there was one time, there was one time when I was taking a walk with my mum and I said 'I might do something that you find unacceptable. You should be prepared'. Then my mum's instant reaction was like, 'it's okay if you don't get married or have kids, but you must not be gay'. I said what if I am, and she became really angry. After this I don't dare to... Even if it's this kind of tentative coming-out.*

*(Tree, 19, 1st interview)*

Yin in the quote above spoke about her being 'totally fine with meeting someone with the same gender' but in the meantime was aware of the possible reactions from her family. She tried to keep positively hoping that 'it's still possible that if they know they'll gradually accept it', but in reality coming out to her family is rather unthinkable for her. This was echoed in Tree's experience when she attempted at coming out to her mother when she was in high school suggesting that she 'might do something that you (note: referring to Tree's mother) find unacceptable'. After the conversation ended up with her mother getting 'really angry', Tree could not attempt at another 'tentative coming-out'. Coming out to parents constitutes a double blow to the filial norm as both a refusal of heteronormative filial obligation to 'get married and have kids' and then a failure to live up to their parents' expectations. These narratives of coming out to parents

demonstrated that only parents' acceptance of their expressions of sexuality would be perceived as a successful outcome. The filial regulation of girls' sexuality needed to be understood as both discursively and affectively, as filial piety did not always compel girls to be passively obedient but rather required them to actively maintain a good relationship with their parents. This, however, did not disrupt the gender and age hierarchy of filial piety as suggested in some former research (Santos & Harrell, 2017) but suggest a new investment in 'intergenerational contract' (Croll, 2006, p. 473). Moreover, this norm of filial piety was highly gendered. For instance, Yin told me that her mother had totally different levels of expectations on her and her brother as filial children. Treating her mother well (*dui ta hao*) for Yin as a girl child was a 'mandatory requirement' whilst with her brother it was more like her mother begging for 'care' and attention. The experiences and practices of my participants hence demonstrated a queer resistance in China that differed from and challenged the mainstream discourse of 'breaking silence' and pride in western queer politics. As these queer girls negotiated their shame, frustration and desires in an attempt to break from the trap of heteronormativity and patriarchy, their struggles spelt out on the (im)possibilities for performing filial piety and a subversive and queer girlhood.

#### 5.3.4 Exploring and reflecting on (post)feminist aspirations

Lastly, strong resistance to the norm of marriage was translated into young women's inspirations for finding fulfilment and values outside the hetero-patriarchal marriage and family. One noteworthy affective-discursive pathway of yearning for independence from their family was constituted through a discourse of prioritising education and career.

Every single one of the participants that I interviewed mentioned that they wanted to do better at school. For instance, Kit, being the top student at school, said in the interview:

*I think I do need to study very hard (laughs). It is a matter of utmost importance for me, to study and to find some area that I'm interested in. Then I want to do relatively successful in this area. On this basis I'll be in a better place to spread my feminist ideas, because I think the most important is to put (ideas) into action.*

*(Kit, 16, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Education was usually depicted as an essential means for the participants to achieve 'independence', 'self-fulfilment' and 'individual success' in their future endeavours. It evidently drew some connections with the capability approach to education and girls' empowerment (Seeberg, 2011), demonstrating a resistance to a sexist and patriarchal perspective about girls' academic performance which was frequently encountered by the participants at school and in family. For instance, Corn wrote in this social media diary that:

*Although parents may care about their daughters' school performance, they only want the girls to get into college and then marriage and motherhood. Many girls feel depressed and the future seems so dark (to them), just because they feel that they don't have any choices. Their minds of thinking have been trapped inside a fixed model through education. They feel depressed but they don't think that escape will be possible, so they will only hate being a girl.*

*(Corn, 17, social media diary no.10)*

Corn leaned towards a feminist perspective of how education enable and empower girls to think of possible ways and offer them 'choices' to live their lives outside the norm of

marriage and motherhood. However, academic performance in the girls' narratives was prioritised as a matter of utmost importance mostly for its association with better job opportunities in the future. There is a significant temporal dimension of the dramatic opposition between the patriarchal familial notion of girlhood as a transitional phase to prepare the girls into future wives and mothers and Corn's (post)feminist vision of future calling for girls themselves to stop being 'trapped' in this patriarchal model of girlhood. Linking back to what Kit said in the quote above, as the top student at school she also constantly felt the need to study very hard to get into 'a better place'. The role of school education was less pronounced than online feminist discourses in terms of helping girls to make sense of experiences of gender and sexual inequalities. This brought me to the discussion on a neoliberal discourse of upward mobility (Walkerdine, 2003) that shed lights on how neoliberal subjectivities would be expected to navigate the ambiguities and precarities of neoliberal economy and their own aspirations for breaking through the social class. In my participants' cases, their aspirations for independence and self-fulfilment reconfigures a neoliberal and individualistic discourse of empowerment and success that financial gaining and independence could enable them to defy the patriarchal and heteronormative order of gender and familial relations.

*Some women would say that returning home is a big cause of life and where everything leads to in the end. Otherwise they would say that only being able to balancing between family and career could be considered as true success. But this was not written as the standards for success for men.*

*(Gigi, 20, social media diary no.2)*

*You have to prove your values to the society – I don't mean that a woman without a job is not valuable – but on the level of the whole society, you have to*

*be seen by others so people will hear your voice. If you choose to step aside, I'm sorry no one will listen. If you're going to be a housewife... In previous times they'll probably acknowledge the reproductive values and your devotion to domestic labour. They'll think that you're working hard for managing the whole household, as men are working outside. But in contemporary society we're taking what women do for the family as natural rather than their contributions.*

*(Tong, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Tong's quote above articulated an idealised imagination of 'previous times' when domestic and reproductive labour and women's work inside family (*nü zhu nei*) was valued in the gendered arrangement of labour enacted by traditional Confucian familial cultures (L. L. Rosenlee, 2004). Her reflection also illustrated how the inner-outer distinction (*nei-wai*) in traditional patriarchal system in China had been reconfigured in the present times of neoliberal and postsocialist China where women are expected to juggle between family and career. In expressing an anxiety of 'no one would listen', Tong seemed to hold onto a clear division between the public and private sphere as success in career would be much more socially recognised and valued in contrast to the ongoing devaluation of reproductive and domestic labour. Instead of further challenging the neoliberal discourse of familial obligations, it presented a postfeminist and neoliberal ideal of femininity that highlighted visibility and ability to climb the 'power hierarchy' (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 426) as also echoed in Kim's diary:

*The more you wanted to cover my mouth to make me shut up, the more I wanted to climb up to the top to make everyone see me and hear me.*

*(Kim, 16, social media diary no.2)*

This normalisation of anxiety of wanting ‘to be seen’ and ‘to be heard’ as well as the need for recognition in the wider society was evidently shaping a (post)feminist discourse of visibility. It needed to be considered within the context where a discourse of women return home (*funü huijia*) reappeared in state media and propaganda suggesting that women should ‘return home’ (Song, 2016) and a recent pronatalist turn in family planning policy of China which now encouraged people to have more than one child. ‘family/state as isomorphism’ shows how patriarchal familial discourses have been endorsed by and incorporated into CCP’s filial nationalist project (Wang, 2020) and patriarchal authoritarianism (Fincher, 2018) which sees the heteronormative family as the foundation for governing and maintaining social and political stability.

Linking back to this discursive context of a neoliberal reconfiguration of familism and patriarchy, state discourse such as ‘family virtues’ shaped a new feminine ideal of virtuous wife and good mother (*xianqi liangmu*) that juggles family and career. I also demonstrated how the norm of filial piety does the discursive work to silence feminist subversiveness within and beyond family and in the meantime formed a resistance to heterosexual marriage and intimate relationships among girls and young women. These findings pointed out some expressions of affective-discursive feminist subversiveness in anti-marriage embedded in digital feminist discussions and politics directly challenged the official rhetoric and policies of CCP and started to divert from the strategy of working with/within the state power. However, some of the discursive formations based on anti-marriage remained close to the postfeminist ideals and sensibility (Bae, 2011; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013) that highlights individual empowerment and success. These affective-discursive expressions of anti-marriage lacked in terms of radical and



intersectional critique of the neoliberal forms of gender and sexual inequalities across and beyond the family.

#### 5.4 Conclusion: Theorising the subjective becoming of (un)filial daughters

From this chapter I illustrate the subject-formation of (un)filial daughters as ongoing and never-ending processes of subjective becoming. This needs to be further explicated here in conceptual terms to consider the specific spatiotemporalities in these girls and young women's accounts of both their embedded and embodied experiences of girlhood as well as what they see themselves to become in response to the potentialities and constraints of girlhood and young femininity in China. The age range of the participants was between 16 and 24 years old, with 10 of them being under the age of 18 when the research was conducted. In the thesis I have tried to refer to particular participant as a girl or as a young woman in each case according to their age, although all participants in fact referred to themselves as girls in most scenarios of our conversations and in their writings. The original Chinese words used included *nūhai*, *nūsheng*, *meizi* and *guniang* and the first two were used most. It ostensibly has stretched the rigid definition of girlhood as a universal experience or expectation on a coming-of-age phase before female adulthood (Driscoll, 2002; Helgren & Vasconcellos, 2010) which in sociocultural and legal terms in China would be under 18 years old. I argue that it needs to be considered in relation to the discursive construction of womanhood in Chinese political and public discourses where marital status and family roles are most relevant markers to define the subject position of a woman compared to age (Barlow, 2004). For instance, the collectivist construct for women '*funü*' in Maoist era as a unity for womanhood actually came from a combination of the word *fu* (wives or married women) and *nü* (daughters or unmarried women). The

cultural politics of these self-referents is of great importance too to gain insights into the varied lived experiences of girlhoods of these Chinese girls and young women as they navigate the transitioning from girlhood into (young) womanhood. Girlhood hence has become a discursive site for their expressions and negotiations of subjectivities.

I have previously argued in the introduction chapter and literature review how specific ideals and norms around girlhood are very much constructed societally and culturally and oftentimes normalised in legislative and other state institutions. Confucian familism, which is the dominant set of societal norms as well as moral values in Chinese societies, has created a linear progression of daughter-wife-mother roles for girls and women defined in relation to familial and filial obligations (Evans, 1997, 2007; Leung, 2003). In identifying filial piety as a core dimension of Confucian patriarchal familial culture, I argue that it feeds into the parental/pastoral power (Ho, 2017, p. 21) of governmentality over Chinese girlhoods and young womanhood through normalising gendered and patriarchal discourses of obedience to parents' expectations and alignment with filial responsibilities (Zarafonitis, 2017).

I attempt to show (un)filial daughters as postsocialist feminist subjectivities take shape in response to this form of parental/pastoral power of patriarchal neo-familism (Yan, 2018), but immediately pose a challenge to it. In contrary to an oversimplistic claim over a 'post-patriarchal' China (Shen, 2011), I argue it is crucial to recognise that the norm of filial piety remains highly gendered, upholding and intersecting with heteronormativity and patriarchy, and continues to shape the societal expectations and familial norms around Chinese girlhood and femininity. Nevertheless, former research also suggested that online feminist debates and discourses themselves constituted a part of the reconfiguring forces of patriarchal familism, questioning the universal normalisation of

marriage and motherhood as women's familial duties in particular (Tan, 2017; Wu & Dong, 2019).

There is a noteworthy temporal dimension in the disobedience of these (un)filial daughters through their resistance to marriage and motherhood. (Un)filial girlhood can be seen as a site for their strategical delay of marriage. The younger participants have also reflected that they experience less immediate and urgent pressure from families and society in practical terms. In our interview, for instance, Yin mentioned her older cousin who used to resist marriage had to reconsider marriage when she got closer to 'that age'. Despite being seemingly justified by medical sciences of reproduction health, the idealisation of age for marriage and reproduction itself is also very much a cultural and political construction. For instance, queer theorisation of time and temporality has always suggested how queer people's experiences of temporality do not coordinate with the linear, progressive, 'straight' time that often marks stages of life according to a heteronormative or homonormative forms of familial ideal (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005; Luo et al., 2023). The figuration of (un)filial daughters also contributes to this body of queer temporal studies by shedding light on the challenges faced by girls and young women as they navigate societal expectations of marriage and motherhood as normative milestones of female maturity.

In addition, this chapter shows how these girls and young women strategically and discursively position the future for themselves to become strong, powerful and financially independent women for the purpose of gaining leverage for delaying or rejecting the filial and familial norm of marriage and reproduction. As both education and professional career were mostly linked to a goal of financial gaining, the influences of neoliberal discourse were obvious in these narratives where one's reliance on parents

and family for financial support was seen as restricting their individual autonomy in terms of sexuality and marriage. Education was also described as enabling girls to think of possible ways and offering them 'choices' to live outside the norm of marriage and motherhood and as a pathway for them to achieve 'independence', 'self-fulfilment', 'success' and to 'become more powerful'. This form of resistance to heteronormative and gendered norms of marriage and filial piety, while representing meaningful and significant grassroots voices within Chinese digital feminisms, raises questions for its association with an individualistic mentality and its alignment with neoliberal and postsocialist conditions of governmentality. In the next chapter, I will move onto a discussion on digital feminisms as practices of resistance and collective actions through the formation of networked counterpublics on *Weibo*.

## Chapter 6. Constructing feminist counterpublics: The possibilities and precarities of feminist visibility

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 I explored how specific participants in this research drew upon ideas and concepts about gender, sexuality and feminism learned online to make sense of their own experiences of gender and sexual inequalities. Towards the end of last chapter, I attempted to highlight the links between the emergence of postsocialist feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters and an online counterdiscourse of anti-marriage (*fanhun*), forming into the resistance to patriarchal and familial control over girlhood and young femininity. Linking to my critique of normative and dominant form of Chinese girlhood as a straightened and flattened spacetime produced by the parental/pastoral power of patriarchal familism in Chapter 1 and 2, Chapters 6 and 7 now move onto the complexed ways in which this parental/pastoral power pervades into and plays out in a postsocialist and neoliberal governmentality of the digital realm. This chapter delves into how collective and networked practices of feminist resistance are constructed via the formation of feminist networked counterpublics.

This chapter investigates the possibilities and precarities of doing feminism grounded in a concern for visibility (Dahlberg, 2018), by making feminist issues visible and through building and maintaining emergent feminist counterpublics (McCosker, 2015). In the literature review, I have pointed out how this focus on visibility in feminist politics and activism has been troubled in neoliberal economies of digital platforms in terms of how visibility labour could be easily co-opted, monetised and exploited (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2018). I will try to query this form of doing feminism online as visibility activism where

these feminist networked counterpublics intentionally break through and disrupt dominant discourses and conditions for gender and feminisms by offering and highlighting counterdiscourses and counternarratives. As I will go on to argue, their struggles for visibility manifest both possibilities and precarities of doing feminism in a digitally mediated context of China taking account of networked authoritarianism (Dal & Nisbet, 2022; Mackinnon, 2011) and networked surveillance (Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Trottier, 2016). Fotopoulou (2017) provided a particularly critical analytical framework for thinking about the multifaceted acceleration of digital technologies and its implications for feminist politics and online activism as revolving around the ambivalence of vulnerabilities and visibilities. It is increasingly normalised that girls, women, LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups are expected to conduct the visibility work as well as the sense of surveillance of all sorts of online exposure and activities on digital platforms, whereas the ‘embodied and affective labour’ of activism is rendered invisible (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 19).

This specific chapter brings together two different parts of research data from my project: a part of the analysis draws from the interviews and social media diaries, but I also intend to further explicate the findings from the online tracking study in the pilot study of this research. In the pilot study, a particular social media event of sexual violence that received great public attention and generated debate was examined in relation to how netizens gathered in digital spaces in response to how this event was covered and represented in the official and news accounts on *Weibo*. I conducted an affective-discursive analysis (Kanai, 2019; Wetherell, 2012) of these social media posts to investigate how they act to reveal and challenge the unjust handling of this case to pressure the law enforcement and authorities to take actions and address sexual violence.

I conceptualise a specific form of feminist networked counterpublics (boyd, 2014; Trott, 2021) as arising from related discussions on this social media event of violence.

As discussed in both introduction and methodology chapter (Chapter 1 and 4), following new media events is a vernacular or genre of practice (Gibbs et al., 2015) on *Weibo* which also has special cultural importance in the study of Chinese digital activism. It has since seized the attention of many media scholars (for example DeLuca et al., 2016; Jiang, 2010; Qiu et al., 2017; Qiu & Chan, 2009; Yang, 2009). The research on (new) media events in the Chinese context (Qiu et al., 2017) has paid particular attention to how netizens and grassroots activists use digital platforms in combating social injustice and pointed out its potential for mobilising and organising collective actions (Yang, 2009, 2012). In the meantime, these highly visible events for the capacity to transform into mass incidents (*qunti shijian*) attracted much attention from the Chinese government. Subsequently, governance and surveillance of the contentious aspects of social media events became normalised and exercised diffusively both at the level of platform and ordinary netizens (Pickard & Yang, 2017; Qiu, 2017; Yang, 2017).

In this sense, although mapping out the counterdiscourses from the discussions on a specific event, such as the violence-event in my pilot study, is a promising starting point, it falls short in capturing the multidirectional and complexed possibilities that this specific event leads to. A feminist and critical approach to social media events must take account of its capacities 'to be transformative in unforeseen and often unrecognised ways' (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 241) through inspecting feminist networked counterpublics as arising from responding to these social media events. I argue that the transformative capacities to make an event 'feminist' subsists in its undetermined unfolding, to which a range of coordinated and collective actions and digital practices

including likes, reposts and comments, netizens, and networked counterpublics all contributed, as I also explicated in Chapter 2. Employing a Deleuzian theory of event (Deleuze, 2015; Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), I have argued in Chapter 2 that the assembling of an event on social media could be examined at two interrelated levels: 1) how texts, images, photos and other modalities of expressions articulate and narrate the event; 2) the effectuation and actualisation of event in the material realm while recognising that an event is irreducible to its corporeal effectuation (Zourabichvili, 2012).

For this research, this Deleuzian approach to the social media event addresses the challenge of making sense of the unpredictable unfolding of a specific event in times of intensified visibility within the context of feminist activism and resistance. I suggest a conceptual framework of the feminist social media event that frames the unpredictable unfolding of this event as an affirmative development of the virtual to bring about change in how it is to be discussed, to be felt, to be experienced and to be activated into a new event. I argue that this affirms the (un)eventfulness of digital feminisms as having potentials for real-world impact, countering to some former criticisms in research literature (Christensen, 2012; Munro, 2013). Moreover, to looking at this specific event of a public display of sexual violence in further depth could offer crucial implications on how to understand the (in)visible labour embedded in digital feminist politics and activism that has been taken for granted in an undifferentiated critique of digital activism as slacktivism (G. M. Chen et al., 2018; Madison & Klang, 2020). On this basis, I could then draw on the participants' actual experiences of engaging in online feminist discussions to look at feminist activism in relation to this issue of visibility.

Before I get to the analysis of this specific social media event of sexual violence in my pilot study, it is necessary to first include a brief walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) of the basic



functionality of *Weibo* to clarify how I practically identify the event in the first place. *Weibo* is usually known as a Twitter-like microblogging service by those from non-Chinese contexts who are not familiar with the platform. It is true that *Weibo* is to some extent an equivalent of Twitter for Chinese people as the latter platform has been banned in mainland China. There are still significant technical differences, so here I take the mobile application of *Weibo* to explain the most important feature and interfaces that a user would come across to join *Weibo* discussions and in particular to engage with a social media event. The mobile application is demonstrated here rather than the web version because 85% of *Weibo* users are using the mobile phone application<sup>6</sup> and all my participants access *Weibo* on their mobile phones.

When one opens the mobile application of *Weibo*, it first shows a 'timeline' of posts created and shared by other users followed by them and personalised advertisements. Then if they go on and click into one specific post, full text of the post will appear along with the number of reposts, comments and likes. The comment area of the post will be shown on the screen by default. It is also possible to see who has liked the post by clicking into the 'like' tab or who have reposted (including the contents of their reposts) by clicking into the 'repost' tab. The comment function of *Weibo* is intuitive as replying to a post in a forum and users are allowed to reply to others' comments which will be grouped under the comment that they reply to (see Figure 6.1). Each of the comments will be shown with the number of likes it has gained and will be ranked by 'hot degree' which is defined by the number of likes and replies that it has received. Much attention therefore will be directed to the comment function of *Weibo* as a public platform by design for discussing

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<sup>6</sup> For more information see <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/sinaweibo/>

news and current affairs. Compared to Twitter which used to only allow users to respond to one's post by retweeting or creating a new post at that time, *Weibo* developed and promoted a more sophisticated comment function from its early stage. To comment on one's post has remained a vital affordance for facilitating communications and discussions on *Weibo*.



Figure 6. 1 An example of a Weibo post and comment area (user IDs anonymised)<sup>7</sup>

Another important *Weibo* affordance that I touched upon in the methodology chapter is the 'hotsearch list' (*resoubang*) that resembled trending topics on Twitter. It lists 50 most searched topics on the *Weibo* platform in real-time and is updated per minute. By clicking

<sup>7</sup> This screenshot of the Weibo app (International Version) was taken in 2019 during my fieldwork. The user interface has changed slightly since then but the key logic of displaying comments in an order 'by hot degree' (which basically means based on quantified interactions) as mentioned in this thesis remained the same.

into each topic, the user will be shown a thread of posts responding to this topic ranked by relevance and popularity through platform algorithm. Each 'topic' in the hot search list provides a space for further issue-specific discussions similar to previous forms of online engagement and political deliberation on BBS forums (Yang, 2009). One key difference here is the algorithms and platform affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) that shaped the techno-politics of censoring and promoting the visibility of certain topics and posts in a highly opaque procedure (Li, 2021), compared to the manual curation by *banzhu* (forum administrators).

## 6.2 The unfolding of events and the contingency of feminist networked counterpublics

In this section I will use the example covered in my pilot study to expand on how I went about the online tracking of an event that aroused fierce debate on *Weibo*. The event itself was initiated by a 7 second videoclip uploaded by an ordinary *Weibo* user claiming to show an incident of a man sexually assaulting a woman. Later the involvement of police and news media in the investigation of this incident reported it as domestic violence because the man and the woman involved were a married couple. It was claimed to occur on a bus in Beiliu on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018 and the original *Weibo* post was reposted for over 70 thousand times within 24 hours. '#BeiliuBus' soon appeared in the top 10 most searched terms on *Weibo*. This matched what I was looking for as a social media event explicated in the research methodology, so I started to track related debates on 26<sup>th</sup>. I soon located six Big-V *Weibo* accounts (verified accounts with a large number of followers) which were active in reporting or discussing this event: the social media user who

reported this and uploaded the video, two news media *Beijing Youth Daily* (BYD) and *News Headlines*, and the official *Weibo* accounts of three state institutions (the Chinese Communist Youth League or abbreviated as CCYL, Beiliu and Zhongshan police). These accounts were chosen for the following reasons: BYD was among the news media which reported this event instantly and *News Headlines* soon kept updating on this event during the next day. Local police forces Beiliu and Zhongshan were directly involved in the investigation into this event and the CCYL is one of the most active state institutions in *Weibo* speaking for government and the Chinese Communist Party (Zheng, 2013). These accounts' every post related to this event were recorded in a verbatim fashion, along with 10 most liked comments under each post. Any images or links that contained in the posts or comments were recorded in my field notes (see Figure 6.2).

头条新闻 **The post of NewsHeadline**  
 9月26日 09:18 来自 微博 [weibo.com](http://weibo.com) 已编辑  
 【网传#中山公交女子被猥亵# 大声哭叫无人劝阻? 警方回应】25日,有网友上传视频称,中山市发生公交车上猥亵女性事件。视频中一女子试图逃离,却遭一男子强行抱回后排。期间女子哭叫,但周围乘客与司机始终未进行劝阻。网友称,视频转自微信群,自己并不是目击者。26日上午,@北京青年报了解到,警方目前已介入调查。[O网页链接](#)  
 14228, 31276, 48560 **Number of reposts, comments and likes of the original post**  
 評論: **Top 10 hot comments (Sort by number of likes)**  
 1. 大早上看到就来气 公交车上的人是死人吗??  
 2. 最让人绝望的是路人的漠视以待  
 3. 坐顺风车可能会被奸杀,白天坐公交可能会被qj,地铁可能会有猥亵,拿快递也会有性侵事件,出租房都可能会有被拖出去的风险,我们女孩子活着全靠运气?女生出门在外需要保护自己,但是也需要男性学会自重我们同样身处于这个社会的女性。  
 4. 如果是夫妻闹矛盾,精神疾病可以这么暴力对待?直接摔座位上?这样也挺可怕的。  
 5. 上了灵车 一车的死人  
 6. 各位冷静一点,是不是强奸还有待定论,但是冷漠的围观确实该谴责。  
 7. 这下没有脸笑印度了  
 8. 太可怕了!!!! 没人帮忙  
 9. 虽然说事件还没调查清楚,但是能明确的感受到女生的无助与害怕,评论里还有说是情侣在玩?玩你👉呀,你和你对象这么玩啊  
 10. 拍视频的人也是够冷漠的

Figure 6. 2 A section of my fieldnotes

Types	Weibo account	Number of original posts	Number of comments analysed
The original poster	@KeXueYongBuZhiBu	14	130
News media	Beijing Youth Daily	3	30
	News Headlines	6	60
Authorities	Zhongshan Police	2	20

	Beiliu Police	1	10
	CCYL	1	10

Table 6. 1 Number of posts recorded

### 6.2.1 #BeiliuBus as a spatiotemporal multiplicity

Looking at how #BeiliuBus transforms the incident of sexual violence on public transport into a trending topic on Weibo, it becomes apparent that there is no definitive way to chronologically mark the starting point of this specific event. This shows the emergence of a social media event from the surface (Deleuze, 2015) of this 7-second videoclip displaying the violent incident where a man hit and dragged a woman (in physical state of affairs). In the meantime, it is only transformed into a social media event through the convergence of a large amount of online data, traffic and contents (such as sharing, likes, and comments within a short period of time). With the intervention of platform algorithms of Weibo, this trending topic of #BeiliuBus started to trigger and attract more participation and engagement, producing huge amount of textual, graphic and visual contents and data that has encouraged further interaction from other Weibo users. It also demonstrates how a social media event incorporates multiple and complexed spatiotemporalities.

This particular event manifests through an ongoing process of spatiotemporal becoming where ‘audience’ gathered in response to the incident at different clock-times (in relation to the time when the violent incident occurred) as well as in speedup time where speed of communication, interaction and mobilisation become accelerated (Poell, 2020), and the physical location where the incident happened and the digital space holding related discussion become entangled. To further complicate the spatiotemporal contexts for the event of #BeiliuBus, it needs to be located in a post-MeToo era of the Chinese feminist movement. The Chinese #MeToo movement first gained huge public attention in July

2018 and social media users since became more aware of the topic of sexual violence against women (Lin & Yang, 2019). This incident could not be singled out as a case of sexual violence on an individual level, for this high level of visibility and debates received on the platform *Weibo* is itself actualised by an accumulation and/or intensification of affects (Paasonen, 2015) through repeatedly seeing, documenting, talking about and getting angry at incident of sexual violence. Other similar cases were constantly mentioned in its related online discussions as well as in interviews and the participants' social media diaries (both in the pilot study and my formal fieldwork). Just two days before this Beiliu Bus event, a press release of a local Procuratorate in Henan Province caused great criticism and disputes, for 'boasting' about successfully achieving the settlement of a sexual assault case where a 17-year-old girl was raped by a 16-year-old boy. Some netizens referred to this case in the comments and criticised the authorities for constantly failing to address the patriarchal 'roots' of sexual violence. One commentator specifically spoke of patriarchal gendered power relation was embedded in legislation:

*So what the police means is that as long as they are in a romantic relationship or marriage, it's out of the reach of law. The woman as purely a child-bearer is not protected by our legislation.*

In my field notes, I documented another post that was circulated among feminist microbloggers on *Weibo* that I followed but was only found to have been taken down by the *Weibo* platform by the time I attempted to take a screenshot of it. It was a compiled list of the news title posted by a feminist netizen who searched for similar cases reported in the same year, dramatizing the level of prevalence of sexual violence to justify higher attention paid to addressing this problem. On one hand, it evidences the precarity of 'having visibility' in Chinese digital sphere which is subject to evolvingly dispersed form

of networked authoritarianism (Dal & Nisbet, 2022; Mackinnon, 2011) that encourages platform governance (Gorwa, 2019) of users' contents to reduce direct involvement of the authorities. On the other hand, it pushes politically aware netizens that care for social justice to become more critical about undermined free speech online. During the whole process of tracking this social media event initiated by an offline incident of sexual violence, I explored the formation of counterdiscourses (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) that challenged official and media rhetorical framing of this event as domestic violence started to emerge. By mapping out the main discursive responses as this event unfolded, I inspected how this discussion extended from the prevalence of sexual violence to a strong resistance to familial and patriarchal discourses underplaying the violence within the contexts of intimate relationships, marriage and family that appeared in official report and coverage of this event. The most prominent themes related to gender and feminism in news reports, official statements of the authorities and in the comment area of these posts are listed in Table 6.2.

<b>Themes in social media posts of the original uploader</b>	<b>Themes in official statements and news report</b>	<b>Themes in social media comments</b>
Woman being harassed and battered	Cause of the event: relationship issues	Widespread violence targeting women
Cooperating with Zhongshan police	Relationship between the two actors of event: marriage in fact	Marriage and violence
Criticising Beiliu police for mishandling the case	Result: the woman 'chose' to go back home on the same night	Masculinity and violence
Addressing domestic violence	Result: the man had been 'persuaded' not to use violence and would be detained for five days	The credibility of social media news

/	Notice: not to spread rumours online	Malfeasance of officials
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Table 6. 2 Discursive themes in reporting of the event and online discussion

In addition, I observed a conspicuous interweaving of diverse spaces of digital/physical and public/private or even collapsing into each within the realm of social media events where both the authorities and feminist counterpublics were trying to (re)negotiate and (re)establish the boundaries. As I noted in the introduction chapter, the gender order within patriarchal familism is enacted through a relational binary of inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) that does not equal to a totalising spatial segregation of family or state (ideally or physically) from the outside, even though it could be (L. L. Rosenlee, 2004). In contemporary Chinese contexts, however, it works much more similar to what Williams (1977) theorised as the residual that feeds into contemporary structure of feelings. This inner-outer distinction hence organises what is considered central and important concerns and what is deemed peripheral and trivial both discursively and affectively. As Beiliu Police defined this incident as a ‘domestic issue’ and claimed to have ‘persuaded’ the man to avoid using violence in the future, it positioned this case as peripheral by tossing it to the more ‘private’ realm of family. In the meantime, feminist netizens formed into networked counterpublics (Trott, 2021) and resistance in the comment areas of these police statements, directly challenging the underplay of a ‘public’ display of sexual violence during daytime on a bus.

### 6.2.2 The concurrence of counterdiscourses and bifurcation of the #BeiliuBus event

I could argue that it was the discrepancies in the mediation of spatiotemporalities of #BeiliuBus event as discussed in the previous section that pushed this event towards to a bifurcation (Massumi, 2002). In response to the initial counterdiscourse that strategically located the #BeiliuBus event in the public realm (it happened on a bus and hence needed



to be addressed by the public authorities), the official (as well as news media) rhetoric tried to situate the violence incident only as a daily episode within intimate relationship or domestic sphere. The police statement disclosed that the man who used violence and the woman who was thrown around were actually a couple with kid, although their marriage was not registered since neither of them reached the minimum age of legal marriage in China. In reaction, the counterdiscourse shifted its focus onto reframing sexual violence itself as a public concern, countering the traditional Confucian division of the inner and outer spheres that defines women's roles solely in relation to the inner sphere (in family and kinship). Within this framework, women are naturally subordinate to men, whether it be their father, husband, or son in different stages of her life course (Leung, 2003). As such familial norms and values of the inner-outer (*nei-wai*) distinction were replicated and reiterated in public discourses, it further normalised that women are often expected to conform to the norms of tolerance and submission even in the cases of violence. Paradoxically, it was the authorities' outright attempt at maintaining the boundary between inner and outer spheres that drove netizens to directly question #BeiliuBus event as an illustration of how patriarchal familial power extends beyond the family. The news coverage and police statements that were trying to trivialise the incidence as 'relationship issues' incurred affective-discursive responses to this patriarchal familial discourse of domestic violence as a private issue and thus out of the reach of law enforcement. Below I listed several most liked replies to a news report published by the account of Beijing Youth Daily (owned by a CCP-affiliated news agency):

*User 1: 'Come on! Even if they're really married, if the woman wasn't consensual that would be an assault!'*

*User 2: 'Persuade??? F\*cking awesome job!'*

*User 3: 'You guys persuade him not to use violence? I persuade you guys to be decent human beings!'*

*User 4: 'He'd dare to act like this in public. What do you think he's like at home? Can you even do a proper investigation? Acting against women's will constitutes assault!'*

Here user 1 and 4 were both explicitly responding to the notion of 'relationship issues' represented in media and official narratives, emphasising the violent act against woman's constituted a public concern which should not be treated as a discordance within intimate relationship to be addressed in the domestic realm. In a way, their calling upon law enforcement to further investigate posed meaningful challenge to the rigid distinction of the inner (*nei*) and the outer (*wai*) which is justified in the patriarchal familism. The comments from user 2 and 3 adopted a similar perspective to look at this event as a public display of domestic violence but showed much stronger affective charges and intensities. These two comments directly pointed to the absurdity of the police taking actions of 'persuasion' as a typical means of mediating 'relationship issues' or conflicts rather than addressing the nature of gendered violence.

Unlike traditional media events that started from centralised institutions like national broadcasting channels (Dayan & Katz, 1994; Hepp & Couldry, 2009), social media events appeared not to be framed from the top-down. Indeed, these networked counterpublics are discursive arenas where more grassroots resistance and actions could take place. These replies quoted above, which were taken in the comment area of an official news media, constituted powerful evidences of netizens and counterpublics directly 'talking back' to the authorities (hooks, 1986), using *Weibo* as a 'public' platform for their networked presence to keep this event visible in the public realm. This is central to

research on feminist social media events to attend to the points of bifurcation and divergence where social media enabled netizens to join forces and form into connective and/or collective resistance to dominant narratives about issues and concerns that matter to them. It hence gives rise to a specific and contingent form of feminist networked counterpublics (Mendes, 2015; Trott, 2021) and feminist resistance in response to trending topics on the platform of *Weibo*.

### **6.3 From presence to resistance: Feminist visibilities on and beyond *Weibo***

#### 6.3.1 Liking, reposting, following: 'Evaluating' visibility

From the interviews and diaries of the research participants, I observed a common concern with visibility to show networked feminist resistance on *Weibo*. As discussed previously in the literature review, there have been growing concerns within critical social media studies about the notion of visibility. These research inquiries have looked into visibility as a specific platform affordance (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), as vernacular practices on specific platforms (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2019; Warfield et al., 2020), and also in relation to the contexts of networked surveillance (Trottier, 2016) and attention economy (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Webster, 2014). In this specific research, the participants' experiences of digital feminisms demonstrated various forms of feminist engagement, including creation of and interactions with online contents, community building, consciousness raising and so on. The forms of engagement are defined in varied ways in specific cases but are found to be evaluated and measured by particular participants through a quantifiable logic of visibility as I go on to show throughout this chapter.

Media scholars have suggested that vernacular and everyday social media practices are informing and significantly informed by the affordances of digital platforms (boyd, 2014; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Drawing from Facebook's algorithm-enabled automated selective mechanisms of EdgeRank that determine whether a certain post is 'worthy' of appearing on News Feed, Bucher (2012, p. 1167) conceptualised a 'regime of visibility' that produced a fear for 'becoming invisible' in the neoliberal social mediascape. Just as I have argued previously in Chapter 2, it has become a common practice for *Weibo* users to follow the trending topics (social media events) that are gaining high level of visibility at specific moments and usually for a short duration on the platform. 18 out of 21 participants reported to have participated in a feminist social media event by liking, reposting and following, when they see it in trending topics. Below I present a quote from Rong which presented a significant perspective of how visibility is constructed as a platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015), understood as a mundane genre of feminist practices on *Weibo*, which suggested how digital feminist activists proactively engage in feminist social media events rather than simply following the hot topics.

*Rong: (Talking about the #metoo movement in China)...Yeah, in fact there are many feminist microbloggers on Weibo who know each other. So it's like... For instance, when there's something that the police don't want to be involved into, they will repost this thing and then there will be discussions and people will start to pay attention... If it goes into the trending topics, these become public voices and therefore (form a supervisory power to) the authority. In return, this also helps to protect the rights of the victims somehow. But I think this effect is almost neglectable. Indeed, the most fundamental thing that we need is to change the legislation. So, the feminist movement is still a very weak force in China, I'll say.*

*(Rong, 24, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

The significance of making feminist concerns visible on *Weibo*, as revealed by Rong, lies in its ability to seize public attention in a relatively short time. This resulted in the development of an event-driven approach to making a networked counterpublic visibility as confrontation to public authorities, as I discussed in the previous section. What Rong shared above further manifested an intentional use of *Weibo* to press the authority to act on some specific issues, which could be unnoticed or easily silenced in mainstream media outlets such as newspaper and television news. The everyday practices of reposting and liking to send it 'into the trending topics' carried on expectations of raising the visibility of public concerns, despite being under close scrutiny of the authorities and the platform. Moreover, it showed how these collective actions could be initiated and orchestrated through established links between feminist netizens rather than being fully organic and unexpected. In the meantime, the unfolding of feminist social media events, as I discussed previously in this chapter, is messy, bifurcating, and contingent upon the 'regime of visibility' (Bucher, 2012, p. 1167) at the intersection of a neoliberal attention economy, censorship and platform governance. Rong pointed out how unreliable this short-term heightened visibility of a certain event could be, as research on other highly visible events of hashtag activism similarly noted (Clark, 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2019). It was not surprising to see such frustration in the feminist movement in China where spaces for resistance had been squashed by postsocialist governmentality and networked authoritarianism (Mackinnon, 2011), leading her to hold onto the hope of pushing for legislative change as 'the most fundamental thing'.

It is useful to take a closer look at Rong's quote which offers some insights into underlying problems with sticking to an approach to political and collective actions that reduce them

to disruptive and transformative moments (Moore, 2011; Porta, 2008) and ignore the cultural and social dimensions of consciousness raising and community building in feminist movements. While social media can generate significant visibility for feminist and social justice causes, I argue that the frustration and tension as seen in the quote above stems largely from the convergence of different temporalities. While activists strive for change and transformation, the slow pace of legislative and policy change means that the promise for communicative immediacy afforded by social media is often at odds with the longer-term work and efforts required (Barassi, 2015). This links back to what I conceptualised in Chapter 2 as the (un)eventfulness of feminist social media events, for the illusion of sudden change fails to acknowledge that feminist change often involves addressing the mundane and the everyday (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). In speaking of high-profile movements like #metoo, Clark-Parsons (2021) examined the potentials of networked feminist visibility as transformative politics by connecting personal accounts and experiences of sexual violence to wider systemic oppressions at transnational and global scale. It connects the tactic of 'making visible' to the feminist ideology of 'the personal is political' where strategies of articulation and storytelling map out collective and political aims for working towards resolutions beyond individualistic level (Mendes, Keller, et al., 2019).

In relation to this, I argue it is of critical importance to consider the nuances in whether and how visibility has indeed been valued as a measurement for digital feminist activism to deepen our understandings of complexed and complementary forms of activism that account for the hidden labour undergirding visibility. For instance, Rong's description above noticed how these networked acts of co-creating a visible moment for feminism also generated huge digital traffic on platforms like *Weibo*. *Weibo* like other 'free' social

networking services relied on and profited from its users' creation of and interaction with contents as well as user generated online traffic (Fuchs, 2016). Rong has also shown an awareness of how platform affordance and algorithms play out in turning digital practices and interactions on these platforms such as likes and reposts into visibility. In the same conversation Rong argued that:

*Moreover, as a social media user who don't get lots of followers, you may think that it won't make any differences by saying something online. But there're 300 million Weibo users<sup>8</sup>. If every one of Weibo users could say something for justice, these 300 million people they would actually be much more powerful than any KOL. I think people shouldn't have ideas like it is meaningless for me to comment or like anything, because I don't have many followers. I think every 'like', every comment and every repost is meaningful, since the ranking of trending topics can see every repost of yours.*

*(Rong, 24, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

I use the term 'feminist influencers' to refer to particular microbloggers who focused on posting about feminism with a relatively larger number of followers. Drawing from the scholarship on influencer cultures (Abidin, 2016), I adopt this concept to highlight the digital labour in feminist influencing and visibility. I shall come back to it later in this chapter when I discuss the case of another participant Moon, an 18-year-old feminist influencer with more than 5000 followers on *Weibo*. In our interview Rong was using the word KOL (an abbreviation for key opinion leader) so I decided to keep her original

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<sup>8</sup> According to Weibo, there were approximately 486 million active users in 2019. However, it is not clear if Rong was referring to other sources of information. The main point of Rong is about solidarity and what collective action can amount to.

expression in the quote, but it is important to unpack the nuances in terminology for its implications on how I approach the visibility work in digital feminist politics on *Weibo*. As a culture-specific term popularised in Chinese mediascape, KOL is usually differentiated from *Wanghong*. *Wanghong* literally translates to internet fame and hence is more similar to the conceptions of internet influencer and micro-celebrities (Abidin, 2016). However, in the Chinese context *Wanghong* is usually related to content creators who focus on lifestyle, entertainment and social media marketing, whereas KOL is often used to refer to those who have acquired their fame through their professional opinions and comments on a specific topic especially politics or social culture. The *Weibo* platform originally used the term KOL to advertise for the legitimacy of knowledge sharing on the platform through a variety of 'experts' and intellectuals from different industries and professions. I avoid conceptualising these digital activists as KOLs to resist the subtle sense of aligning with the platform governance of knowledge regarding what qualities as 'professional', 'key' opinions. I read Rong's statement as a more populist perspective that seemed to push back this platform governance by recognising the potential of creating feminist visibility through the orchestrated efforts of 'millions' of ordinary *Weibo* users, thereby enabling their common concerns to be heard and possibly addressed. Although it reflected a desire for solidarity, it also perpetuated a rather reductionist view of assimilation, overlooking the embedded complexities and differences in organising and mobilising for feminist actions. Feminist theorists have been consistently emphasising the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the diverse perspectives and intersectional experiences within feminist movements, as well as the structural barriers leading to further marginalisation (Dean, 1997; Hemmings, 2012).



Regarding these mundane practices of liking and reposting as forms of making feminist issues visible, Gigi presented another different perspective to question whether it qualifies as digital feminist engagement and how effective it could be. For Gigi, her own practices of reposting and liking other social media users' posts was regarded to be simply 'repeating' rather than seeing herself as actively involved in debates. Gigi saw actions such as 'liking' and 'reposting' as a means of 'repeating' which did not involve active engagement in debate and knowledge making. Corn similarly called herself 'just a liker' suggesting that she would usually like others' posts to show that she agreed to what they were talking about without taking time to articulate her own thoughts through words. In this sense, these affordances of 'like' and 'repost' created accessible and convenient ways to express one's attitudes towards certain issues and partly replacing the deliberative forms of language and communication in public debates. Whilst Rong recognised the 'power' of liking or reposting on *Weibo* in potentially forming networked visibility and collective resistance, Gigi and Corn held the belief that such actions only indicated a low level of political efforts and hence aligned more closely to criticism of digital activism as slacktivism (G. M. Chen et al., 2018).

### 6.3.2 Qualifying visibility of feminist networked counterpublics: The politics of consciousness raising

As the first discussion chapter (Chapter 5) showed, the first realisation of gender inequality among the participants occurred at a young age, while it was often described as they somehow 'sensed' or 'felt' being treated differently from boys around them. Most girls, however, at that time were not equipped with knowledge to understand the problem, nor were they taught how to deal with such issues by their parents or at school. For instance, in my first interview with Tree, I asked her when she started to become

interested in feminism and she told me that she had no idea what feminism was before she read a story about women who suffer from domestic violence in her first year of high school.

*XX: So, have you ever felt that gender inequality does exist in your life before that?*

*Tree: Emmm... Yes. I never had the chance to get to know the term of feminism systematically. There was this feeling that the inequalities had always existed, but I just wasn't able to express it with words at that age.*

*(Tree, 19, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Feminist knowledge of gender and sexuality were conspicuously absent in family and school education. Indeed, in Chapter 5 I have documented several stories of my participants where they were asked to put up with son preference in the family and how conversations about sexuality would often be dismissed. The participants frequently referred to internet and social media as sources of information for proactively educating themselves about feminism. Doreen told me that she first heard about the term 'feminism' on *Weibo* and then started to build the knowledge and further explore feminism when she attended a sociology course at an international high school in the United States. Many participants talked about first encounter of feminism as 'life-changing' and a feeling of 'confirmation' when things suddenly 'made sense'. For instance, Moon, Tong and Kit first came across the term 'feminism' when they were following feminist influencers who were either fanfiction writers or sketch artists and mentioned feminism in their posts.

Taking Lili as another an example, she is from a medium sized city in Anhui and only came across feminism one month before our first interview. She saw the recruitment advertisement for my project that I posted on *Weibo* and reached out to me asking if she

could also join. In the first interview, Lili told me that she had very little knowledge about feminism and gender issues but had become interested in exploring feminist issues and hence would like to share some thoughts and experiences. I hence encouraged her to participate in this project as a chance to record her own 'learning process'. Lili's social media diaries recorded her learning of concepts such as gender stereotypes and societal norms as well as what she observed in her daily life and social media to give examples and reflect on these stereotypes and norms. One social media diary entry from Lili particularly caught my attention, in which she was grappling with the conflicting perceptions of sexual and gender differences arising from the contents she encountered on social media. During our second interview, I probed into this and Lili shared her experiences at a driving school where the instructor asserted that men are better drivers than women. The driving instructor's sexist statement upset Lili at first, but then she went saying: 'I had seen male drivers doing much better than myself and other women at the same driving class. I kind of bought into this...' Our conversation continued:

*Lili: Emmm... Before I started taking the driving class, the female drivers in my family were ticketed much more frequently than the males as I can recall... When I searched online there were so many (bad) things said about female drivers.*

*XX: What do you think about such opinions? Do you believe that men are intrinsically better drivers?*

*Lili: Well, women tend to be more calm drivers normally... But in the case of an accident, women might indeed handle it worse than men.*

*XX: You wrote about this in your diaries too, right? Do you remember you mentioned – according to the stats, and this is said about China, if we look at the*

*rate of fatalities caused by car accidents... There is a much higher possibility that the severe accidents were caused by men rather than women?*

*Lili: Oh... Right... I wrote this. I saw this too. Why am I thinking differently now?*

*I don't know... (Laughs)*

*XX: (Laughs) You were quite hesitant about this. Why did you change your mind?*

*Lili: I guess I often build my perception of things based on the experiences of myself and a few people around me. It's too narrow-minded (of me) ... If I search (online), I would see more information...*

*(Lili, 19, 2nd interview)*

This excerpt of our conversations presented only a small segment and peek into Lili's ongoing process of feminist awakening through proactively searching for information through online platforms, which was accompanied with confusions. The statistics that Lili included in her social media diary were taken out from a *Weibo* post as she followed a few accounts who post about women and gender issues such as the official account of UN Women. Nevertheless, her impression was that 'there were so many (bad) things said about female drivers' and she had to search intentionally for reliable sources of data. Linking to the broader context of post-truth era where the digital could potentially duplicate and intensify existing exclusions (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Ringrose, 2018), this suggested how sexist and misogynistic misinformation circulated online constituted a significant obstacle for young women and digital feminists to navigate.

Social media in a sense constituted an accessible channel for alternative knowledge about gender and feminism. However, the politics of visibility of various counterpublic discourses have always been entangled with existing and entrenching power relations

without necessarily challenging them (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016). Prior research has already suggested the need for contemplation on the ongoing exclusion and relative invisibilities of women's voices and feminist knowledge in counterpublic spheres (Salter, 2013). Experiences from participants of my research indicated similar problem, where Lili would still refer to her own experience of failing her own driving tests trying to confirm that women are not good at driving as men, even though the data online clearly countered the stories and anecdotal circulated in mainstream media and told repeatedly by people around her. The dominant narrative and discourse about a terrible female driver can get repeatedly told, circulated and reproduced on mainstream media, whereas feminist counternarratives and counterdiscourses were what Lili had to intentionally look for. Moreover, the exposure to feminisms in social media may not initiate a sudden transformation of their understandings of gender and feminist issues. As a feminist researcher-pedagogue, I took the interview and social media diary as a participatory and collaborative form of feminist pedagogy (Liao, 2020; Ringrose, 2018) to consistently probe and challenge Lili to encourage her to notice these contradictory discourses about gender differences that were often presented as natural and unquestionable. In the end she reflected on herself being 'narrow-minded' and needed to become open to 'more information'. Lili's case suggested the need for an active engagement in challenging their own embodied knowledge of gender (Ringrose, 2007) as a starting point for feminist awakening and consciousness raising.

Other participants reported how they actively and conceptually engaged with what they learned from online feminist counterdiscourses to build up and develop their own understanding of gender and sexual inequalities observed and/or experienced in daily life. In one of Gigi's social media diaries, she reflected on her mother's experience of

having to give up a prosperous career in a large foreign company for being pregnant in response to a *Weibo* post about the dilemmas of professional women. The original *Weibo* post used 'the double taxation on mother and professional woman' to describe the dual pressure of caring labour and career that contemporary Chinese women had to take on.

*My mom paid a great price for this. She might have told me about it, but I never truly understood until I got to know about feminism and became more sensitive to these issues... Three years after she left her job, my mother went back to work and joined another medium-sized company, she had to endure constant job switches and a 30% decrease in payment... I don't like the opinion saying the women who lost their positions in the job market it's because they deserve it. That's just making women to be blamed for structural inequalities. Women had to bear all the prices. The state wants a higher birth rate, but they haven't done enough to create a fair system. They just had the publicity that corporations mustn't discriminate against women (in hiring) while policies were not improved accordingly...*

*(Gigi, 20, social media diary no. 2)*

Gigi drew upon her mother's experience of wage loss and described it as the 'motherhood penalty', a term that had gained traction in online feminist discourses at the time. Gigi went on to conceptualise the motherhood penalty as a consequence of profit-driven corporate logic and a neoliberal job market that systematically marginalised women due to their familial and caring responsibilities. In the meantime, she highlighted the failure of the state to implement policies or provide practical support for fair and inclusive recruitment practices. Her analysis of professional women's situation partly drew from a classical Marxist interpretation of reproduction and childrearing as the foundation of

patriarchy and the exploitation of women, as noted in her social media diary. In addition, it also accounted for the current neoliberal conditions in a postsocialist state that ceased to offer institutional support for family and women (as opposed to the inclusion of childcare within work units in the socialist period which I discussed in Chapter 1). Taking her mother's lived experiences as example, Gigi provided a thought-provoking analysis of a Chinese professional woman who bear the weight of intersectional and structural power structures of neoliberal reconfiguration of patriarchal familism. Gigi was an undergraduate student at that time majoring in business administration and had never taken any sociology courses before, but she told me in our first interview that after following feminist discussions and influencers in social media she 'learned how to see things differently and adjust her own perspectives of them'. Although she described her own participation in online discussion as 'simply repeating others' ideas' since she seldom posts original contents, her social media diary proved otherwise. I intend to acknowledge that Gigi provides valuable insights into feminist politics of consciousness raising in these diaries. Gigi's writing took me into her own journey of getting to know and learn about gender and feminism and applying the knowledge to understanding her own experiences of gender and sexual inequalities.

Following my critique of the parameters of visibility that rely on quantifiable metrics of interactions on social media platforms, I argue that such parameters can undermine the potential and aspiration of ordinary girls and young women to articulate consciousness raising as a valuable form of feminist politics. The significance of consciousness raising lies in challenging normative ways of knowing and living by including diverse and alternative voices, perspectives and forms of knowledge in the context of digital feminisms. In the excerpt below, which was taken from one of Corn's social media diaries,

she was responding to the feminist discourses of anti-marriage that she was exposed to in social media and reflected on how it enabled girls including herself to think about marriage as life choices.

*Although Weibo is a website that I frequently visit these days, I actually disagree with lots of opinions that Weibo feminists have. But they exist for a good reason. Anyway, Weibo feminism has offered girls another possibility – you can choose not to get married, not to have kids; you should have a good job rather than have a good husband; you can lower your moral standards; you can be selfish... These all seem to be small things, but in real life there's no one to tell girls that you have other choices... They need an external voice telling her 'you can choose no'. Because there's no such voice in their own life. Many women come to awareness just by luck, the voices of Weibo feminism can happen to wake some women up.*

*(Corn, 17, social media no.10)*

In the diary Corn was challenging the dominant moral values and familial responsibilities attached to girlhood and womanhood, which naturally positioned feminist resistance to marriage and motherhood as 'selfish' and not up to the moral standard. A filial girlhood that complies with the paradigmatic life script based on a linear, forward-looking heteronormative temporality of life course (Halberstam, 2005) is construed as a transitional phase for girls to prepare to become future wives and mothers (X. Xie, 2023). To engage with feminist counterdiscourses of anti-marriage allowed her to look beyond this script. Moreover, Corn pointed out the feminist counterdiscourses online as multiple and diverse, and how she had been navigating her own feminist subjectivity through 'disagreeing', challenging, and aligning with certain point of views. Feminist awakening and subjective becoming as ongoing process (Ahmed, 2017; Kim & Ringrose, 2018) for



Corn was to open up a 'possibility' to go against the patriarchal and filial norms of marriage and motherhood, the familial obligations of being 'kind wife and virtuous mother' (Yin, 2022; Zhang, 2003). It could be linked back to the constitution of feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters, showing its emergence through this online discourse of anti-marriage. Another participant Tong similarly presented a process of feminist knowledge-making and world-making through her responses to various feminist discourses and an analysis of the construction of different discourses among several feminist influencers that she followed:

*At that time my feminism is more like... I would say I was thinking about women taking control and becoming powerful, but yes, at that time I didn't pay much attention or think much about what power actually is... and the inequalities and more marginalised groups of women... Then I followed quite a few feminist KOLs on Weibo and some of them actually do this for a living, and their ideas are sometimes worded to be more provoking.*

*(Tong, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In my first conversation with Tong she talked at length about how she related to the variety of feminist discourses on *Weibo* to present an interesting typology of feminist influencers mainly based on their understandings of intimate relationship and marriage. She called two of the feminist KOLs (this terminology was mentioned previously in Chapter 6 and here I am quoting her original expression) 'feminist speculators', which was also used by Panda who participated in the pilot study. Because Tong believed that they were only 'teaching women how to get the best out of intimate relationships' but still 'trapped in the traditional institution of marriage despite the pursuit of a reversed power relation'. Tong also recognised that they had influenced her in some way, such as their

strong resistance to the norm of filial piety, since she had never questioned filial piety before following one of these 'feminist speculators'. Meanwhile, Tong's divergence from their perspectives mainly lied in that these 'feminist speculators' mostly focused on familial relationships and the family and 'barely challenged the inequalities that women faced with in the wider public sphere like education and career'. She seemed to align with a neoliberal discourse of individual autonomy which she depicted as 'Western' notion of freedom but at the same time showed some acknowledgement of cultural norms surrounding marriage in China that restricted this 'autonomy' or freedom (Gill, 2007):

*Tong: I think everyone could have their own distinctive ideas. Some women, such as I myself, do not want to enter a marital relationship. There are of course others who are more radical. Not really radical. Just those who have a much bigger detest towards marriage – they do not only want to escape from the norm; they are trying to break the norm. But in the meantime, there are women who want to get married and ... emmm, whatever they want to get from the marriage, in this case I don't think marriage is meaningless... So you don't have to criticise these women as if they've failed you...*

*XX: You are saying women should get to choose freely whether to get married or not?*

*Tong: Yes if they have the autonomy.*

*XX: What do you mean by autonomy?*

*Tong: For instance the autonomy of... Hmm, this is... I know it's difficult to say there's a full autonomy. I'm leaning towards a more 'western' perspective regarding this issue. Like, you could choose not to marry even if you're passing certain age. Not having to be pressured into marriage when you're still young.*

(Tong, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Tong attempted at charting the differences and heterogeneity in feminist counterpublic discourses about marriage and anti-marriage in resistance to patriarchal familial control over women. Besides this, it suggests the limitations of perceiving anti-marriage discourse as embodiment of frivolous resentment or gender antagonism (Wu & Dong, 2019) as the varied stance on and response to marriage and family taps into the conflicts and heterogeneity among feminist counterpublics on Chinese social media. Tong reflected on this issue, in disapproval of using the pejorative term *Tianyuan feminist* (*tianyuan nüquan*) to differentiate grassroots feminist voices from 'the real feminists'. *Tianyuan feminist* is regularly used by antifeminist and misogynistic groups in Chinese social media to taunt digital feminists and feminisms. This term was originally taken from the name of *tugou* or *zhonghua tianyuan quan*, a domestic dog breed in China. As feminism is widely accepted in China as an imported concept, this term has been used to abash and disparage online self-claimed feminists as ignorant and poorly educated like peasants. It implies the grassroots digital feminists are promoting 'fake' feminism compared to the 'Western' and 'real' feminism and reinforces a postcolonial notion of feminisms as imported Western knowledge. Tong agreed that it is not possible to achieve a unanimous definition of 'the real feminists' which capture the struggles of all feminists and women, showing an awareness of the range of feminist discourses and counterpublics on *Weibo*. By showing the fostering of feminist networked counterpublics as discursive arenas for multiple and situated expressions of feminist ideas, knowledge and resistance, I argue that the presence of diverse and different perspectives to look at gender and feminist issues are key to digital feminist politics.

### 6.3.3 Digital writing as under-the-radar counterpublics

As discussed in the literature review, empirical studies found out that political contents circulated on Chinese social media were subject to stringent censorship especially those that directly called upon collective actions (Chen et al., 2013). Given this context, feminist visibility in 'public' platforms such as *Weibo* was expected to be strictly policed not only by censors but also increasingly by feminists themselves (Fincher, 2018; Wang, 2021). Echoing previous research on online activism and civic participation in the Chinese context that underlined the significance of covert and low-profile forms of struggle (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Gleiss, 2015; G. Yang, 2009; P. Yang et al., 2015), I draw from two participants, Wing and Lew, who shared their experiences of writing online fictions about gender issues to conceptualise digital writing as a more hidden form of constructing feminist networked counterpublics. Wing in our conversation about her explorations of queer sexuality told me how she first came across depictions of sexual behaviours in online-published erotic novels and became familiarised with this genre. Later towards the end of our first interview, Wing told me that she had not only read erotic novels but also wrote erotica-like fanfictions herself. Notably, Wing regarded writing as a way to 'discuss those issues that might cause huge controversies in a less provoking fashion'. The intentional adoption of this 'less provoking' form of writing is further confirmed by what was understood by Wing as the biggest 'struggle' facing online feminist practices which is to try to 'maintain a harmonious online environment'. On one hand, it can be perceived as a means to negotiate queer and feminist stances in the contexts of tightening censorship (not only from the state, but also from other potential 'audience' online). On the other hand, it reveals the precarities of engaging in feminist and queer activism and practices given affective governance (G. Yang, 2018) through discourses of harmony and

civility which increasingly position feminist and queer voices as resistance and subversions, hence threats to social harmony and stability.

Although fanfiction is often dismissed as frivolous and inconsequential activities, but in Lew's account of her own writing practices, it can actually serve as a powerful form of feminist pedagogy. In the Chinese context, it could be traced back to women's blog writing that focused on women's specific embodied experiences of sex and sexuality in late 1990s (Schaffer & Song, 2007) that greatly pushed forward the so-called sexual revolution (Pan, 1994, 2006), breaking through the sex taboo in public discourse. Unlike more overtly political and confrontational forms of activism or those that enjoy a much higher level of visibility on platforms like *Weibo*, fictional writing thrives on another platform similar to Tumblr operating partly under the radar (Abidin, 2021), sometimes adopting more coded language, metaphors and subtle references to convey messages. Seeing a relatively 'safer space' than *Weibo*, Lew contends that her writings encourage girls and young women to engage with feminist discourses that take less confrontational forms of expressions. One of the most important aspects of fanfic writing as a form of feminist pedagogy is its long-term and sustained practice. For instance, Lew told me that writing had been an ongoing activity that she continued for years since high school, but she became 'much more committed' after finding a specific online platform where she could share and discuss her work with others. According to Lew, this online publishing platform allows women like her to build connections with like-minded feminists who are committed to 'challenging patriarchal structures' and 'to be inspired by each other's feminist ideas'. These under-the-radar fanfiction writing practices also display the potential for forming into networked counterpublics where girls and young women engage in writing, discussing and responding to each other. Similar to the pedagogical practices of consciousness

raising on *Weibo*, writers and readers learn from others' feminist insights, to develop an understanding of the complexities of gender and power in Chinese society.

Wing's writings belong to a niche genre of queer femslash writing (Dhaenens et al., 2008; Yang & Bao, 2012; Zhao, 2017) which imagines a restructured system of gender and sexuality. From Wing's own perspective, this allows some 'flexibility' in her exploration of girl-to-girl relationships. As discussed in Chapter 5, Wing had a couple of attempts at coming out to her mother but continuously received dismissive responses such as 'you're a kid you know nothing'. Wing explicitly expressed her confusion in our conversation where she questioned the contradiction of the dismissal and silencing strategy of any conversation about sexuality with her mother continuously 'nagging' about expecting Wing to get married in the future. I have previously argued that the norm of filial piety warranted a naturalised expectation on girls to enter heterosexual marriage and motherhood. In this sense, the dismissal of Wing's coming-out as only a developmental phase normalises girlhood to be strictly aligned with patriarchal familism, which is expected to transition into dutiful daughters, wives and mothers (Leung, 2003; Zhan, 1996). In comparison, fanfiction writing constitutes an alternative space where queer girls and women like Wing herself were able to resist the heteronormative discourse of filial obligations, creating a queer erotic imaginary where she could explore queer desires and temporarily escape from the heteronormative girlhood. Although Wing did not show me any of her work, she told me that writing is like 'to expose my own shadow... or another part of myself'. When I asked her about the motivation of her writing, she said:

*I'm discontent with the current situation. Because there were so many stories, even including my own experiences, could demonstrate the ongoing prevalence*

*of prejudices against women. I wanted to change that in my own fictions, and this was the starting point of my writing.*

*(Wing, 16, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Seeing her own fictions as mainly ‘fantasies and imagination’ in which patriarchy need to and could be overturned, Wing’s perception of digital writing put an emphasis on its capacity for creation of alternative worlds and narratives away from patriarchal and heteronormative forms of intimacies which she does not feel attached to. Writing hence is also an extremely intimate activity for Wing, in which she opens up about her own stories and experiences of vulnerabilities and desires as expressions of resistance to existing gender and sexual power relations. Wing stressed a few times in the first interview that she had been a ‘nobody’ online with few followers on *Weibo* or on the online publishing platform that she was using for sharing her fanfiction works. However, I noticed that she posted on her Qzone expressing her excitement after one of her short stories was liked by over 300 people. This observation again illuminates the context of digital feminisms where acknowledgment and recognition in online communication are intricately linked to economies of visibility, as quantified by measurable indicators such as likes, comments, and other forms of online interactions.

## **6.4 The precarities of managing feminist visibility**

### 6.4.1 The invisible labour in digital feminist politics of visibility

Taking feminist influencing as another distinct form of doing feminism on *Weibo*, I consider it to mainly include the management of dedicated social media accounts that focus on the promotion of feminism. This type of activism requires a high level of

commitment and digital feminist labour (Mendes, 2022), usually involving the creation of original content that is both accessible and pedagogical (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019) as well as constant engagement with feminist social media events in order to gain traction and visibility for the contents being produced. Moon, being an example of this, was an 18-year-old girl who had just graduated from high school when I first contacted her. She started as an individual feminist influencer in 2018 and joined an online feminist group running a *Weibo* account collectively to publish short essays about feminist theories and commentaries on social news. She had formed a close relationship with several other feminist influencers since then and gradually became known among feminist netizens on *Weibo*. One most followed feminist influencer among Moon's influencer circle had more than 200,000 follower and Moon herself had more than 5000 followers. Speaking of the reason why she started out a feminist influencer, Moon told me that she first knew about feminism from a *Weibo* post which was reposted by a manga artist and she was at once 'struck by the idea and accepted it'.

*XX: As a feminist influencer there might be something that you really wanted to communicate to the publics. So what messages do you want to convey to others?*

*Moon: Emm... For me I just wanted people to see this world clearly and not to turn a blind eye to patriarchy... [I hope] more and more women would wake up so my feminist creations could be well-accepted by more people. I'm not like those [feminist influencers] who talk about theories ... I just do whatever I feel I am able to and speak about whatever happens to me that I would like to share. If I see something that doesn't feel right, I'll speak out. I'll write down my thoughts and post them right away.*



.....There was this app called XXX and the extremely misogynist campaign about auctioning girls. Their posters were circulating in our classroom. When I saw it I was really furious. So I posted it on my Weibo and mentioned other feminist microbloggers who I had followed and followed back.

XX: What kind of things that you see in your daily life would make you feel that 'oh I want to share it and let other people know about this too'?

Moon: I think it would be those things that you see everywhere but carries on the oppression of women. Like the poster I just talked about, some people might think it's funny, but I don't think so... I don't want to stay silent about this. I have to speak out. That's basically what I thought of.

(Moon, 18, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)



Figure 6.3 The promotional poster for the social networking application

Moon was referring to a particular action she took upon seeing a promotional poster for a social networking app that she found to be 'very troubling' (see Figure 6.3). Moon circled out the most prominent message on the poster, read 'secretly auction your

roommates [\*smirkingemoji]; help them find high-quality partners'. This mobile application was created for university students to connect and make friends with others on their campus. The developers put forward a function allowing people to 'advertise' their roommates by putting up their information (such as age, height, weight, hobbies, etc) in order to look for potential partners for their roommates<sup>9</sup>. Moon posted this poster on her *Weibo* and later incurred huge traffic leading to controversies about the slogan on the poster such as 'auction your roommates'. But as Moon used another black circle to highlight what appeared to be the interface of the advertised app, which featured only girls being 'auctioned', she strongly criticised it for perpetuating an extremely patriarchal message and objectifying women. This makes a good case to demonstrate how young feminists identify the 'implicit' sexism in their day-to-day life and document it in social media in order to raise people's awareness of similar issues. As the incident was noticed and reposted by other feminist influencers, it then caught the attention of many more who followed them.

Even though Moon told me that she and the feminist influencers she knew were advocating for the 'decentralisation' of digital feminist activism, I could not help but notice there is still a hierarchy based on how 'visible' a feminist influencer is. The visibility is primarily evaluated according to the number of followers that the influencer has as well as average number of likes, comments and reposts signifying how actively the followers interact and engage with the contents created by the influencer. Moon herself was mindful about the number of followers that she had and admitted that a crucial part of her work was to 'get to the wider public', which was also measured by how many 'likes'

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<sup>9</sup> Blind dates are still very common to see in China and this application was trying to push this tradition into university campuses by encouraging setting up blind dates for friends.

and comments and reposts that each post received. She mentioned once in our second interview that one feminist influencer who is close with her actually started later than her but quickly gained a much bigger follower base. In response to this specific standard for the popularity ranking among feminist influencers based on visibility, Moon reflected how she 'would still have this funny thought that I'm senior than her [note: Moon's influencer friend] as a matter of fact'.

As Marwick (2018, p. 163) pointed out, 'the affordances of social technologies converted audience into metrics and encouraged people to compete for attention on social media'. Others who do not get such scale of attention would sometimes call themselves a 'nobody' like Wing and thus find posting original contents even more intimidating as they lacked both the impact and the expertise in feminist theories. As I mentioned earlier, Gigi called herself a 'megaphone or repeater' while describing her main form of online feminist engagement through reposting. She wrote so in her first social media diary: 'I usually remain silent on social media. Even though I have reposted thousands of others' posts, there are only a few comments received.' In this sense, Gigi and some other participants do not even consider reposts with a low level of interactions as gaining visibility. Dong also mentioned that she often posts about gender issues in a highly active discussion group on *Douban*, a popular social media platform in China. One of *Douban's* key features is to allow people with interests in the same topic to build a discussion group and it works like a forum where group members can post and interact through replying to others' posts. However, gradually Dong started to find it 'pointless to try to discuss anything serious there', because she noticed that there were usually few replies to her posts.

In addition, from what I have found out in this research, I contend that there is a conspicuous affective dimension in navigating and managing feminist visibility (Baym &

boyd, 2012) within feminist networked counterpublics. Countering to certain simplistic views on digital activism as necessarily suggesting low level of political engagement and commitment (George & Leidner, 2019), the pursuit for visibility is usually driven by high level of passion and aspiration and even continuous commitment. The experiences of particular participants in this research sustain a demand for more careful examination of activists' affective digital labour for gaining and managing visibility which have been easily marginalised and rendered invisible (Mendes, 2022). It is also meaningful to point out that visibility online aligns too closely with the capitalist profit-driven logic of social media platforms where visibility is constantly measured through a set of parameters such as numbers of likes, comments, and followers afforded by usually opaque algorithms built into the platform. This neoliberal economy of 'public' attention (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Webster, 2014) is hence normalised on a quantitative logic of the number of likes, comments and reposts that the posts garnered. In the specific context of digital feminisms, it disguises the complexities of the experiences of individual participants in feminist discussions. It becomes particularly problematic for ordinary girls and young women whose voices are already marginalised in the general society, as it may amplify self-doubt or hesitation to speak up, as evidenced in the cases of my participants.

Another important aspect of the invisible digital labour (Fuchs, 2013; Mendes, 2022) carried out by the participants in their feminist practices could also transcend the boundaries between online and offline spaces. In relation to the feminist politics of consciousness raising, I have noticed that particular participants try to bring what they learn about gender and feminism from social media not only to make sense of their own lived experiences, but also to educate those around them. This shows how the digital feminist labour of feminists can extend into offline spaces and have a real-world impact

on people around them. For instance, Kit is a 16-year-old girl who is in the second grade of a high school. As I mentioned in the Chapter 5, she talked about her experiences trying to teach her mother about feminism and convince her into pro-feminist thinking in our first interview: ‘... Basically I attempted to transform her way of thinking (laughs). Up till now I think it works. I have seen some results, so I feel good. My mum is the first one that I successfully changed, and this also made me more confident to bring the ideas to my classmates, to the school.’ Kit finds the experience of successfully persuading people around her more ‘satisfying’ than engaging in online debates, as she is able to ‘see the results’ in person. Linking back to my former discussion on Dong’s experiences of frustrations, she told me that posted contents about gender and feminism on *Douban* but few engaged with her post through likes, comments and replies. It questioned again the limitations of digital feminist politics when visibility prevails as the norm of evaluating feminist activism and its implications for digital feminists’ perceptions of the outcomes for feminist pedagogy and consciousness raising. In specific online settings such as forums or microblogging sites like *Weibo*, it could be exceptionally draining to be the one who is always ‘belabouring’ and ‘preaching about’ feminism without visible outcomes where visibility of online contents is merely measured by quantifiable engagements such as numbers of likes, reposts and followers.

#### 6.4.2 Misogynistic and antifeminist policing across on/offline

From the experiences of the participants, engaging in feminist practices to gain visibility in social media platforms also came with great challenge and even risks of antifeminist and misogynistic hate and abuse, echoing former research contextualising the barricades and challenge for digital feminisms across different digital platforms and countries (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Ging, 2019b; Mendes et al., 2018; A. Powell & Henry, 2017). In

relation to the increasing visibility of feminism in contemporary Western media landscape, Banet-Weiser (2018) discussed the surge in networked misogyny via digital networks and technologies. The backlash against feminism has also been noted to become a banality in Chinese social media platforms (X. Han, 2018).

Most of my participants (n=17) experienced 'being targeted' for speaking for gender equality or feminism, even if they did not explicitly manifest themselves as feminists in those settings. Pejorative terms like *tianyuan* feminists have been regularly brought up by my participants in the interview as well as social media diaries. Although new terminologies have been introduced, the animosity and hate towards feminism and feminists is not a recent phenomenon particular to the platform of *Weibo* in Chinese context. Corn told me that the first time when she saw the term feminism on internet at the age of 12 (she was 17 when I interviewed her), she 'had a really bad impression (of feminist and feminism) because the people were saying mean things about it'. Indeed, apart from providing easier access for feminists to gain information and to connect with each other, social media have also found to be magnify the voices of those who speak and/or against them (Han, 2018; Tan, 2017). In this section I am going to delve into the experiences of the participants of *Weibo* feminism and unpack how the affordances of the platform such as report and blacklist are used or not used to report and deal with such backlash.

17 out of 21 participants were aware of the need for dealing with antifeminist backlash and hate while engaging in digital feminisms, although they perceived the causes of these risks in different ways. Some reported that the abusive comments and replies mostly came from other social media users who they came across randomly online. Dong once had the experience of being 'dissed by dozens of people' because she commented on a

Weibo post about the admission policy of a police academy in China questioning why the percentage of females admitted 'shouldn't exceed 15%' of the total admissions. Her comments incurred much verbal attack resembling trolling acts (Herring et al., 2002; Mantilla, 2013; X. Xie et al., 2022) as few of the 'attackers' were really responding to what Dong was talking about. The trolling acts replying to Dong's comment soon extended outside the comment area of the original post, as some of the trolls clicked into her Weibo page and started 'cursing' in her other Weibo posts and sending abusive private messages to her. This demonstrated how online hostility on platforms like can easily move across different digital contexts, intensifying what Marwick and boyd (2011) conceptualised as a context collapse due to the difficulty in discerning the potential audience of specific online contents. While being asked by me how she thought about this phenomenon, Dong told me:

*They [note: the trolls] really don't know anything about feminism. They have no idea what feminism is and do not care about its appeals and agenda, or what feminists are doing. They are simply opposed to it, or perhaps just venting their feelings. I think it's probably a kind of fear of women's social status rising gradually. If [the troll] is a man, then that's probably a fear of losing his own privileges; if it's a woman, she's probably... Maybe she wants to distance herself from feminists to prove that she's a 'good' girl...*

*(Dong, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

From what Dong said regarding her encounter with antifeminist gender-trolling, it is interesting that she ascribed this kind of hostility to the trolls' misunderstanding or lack of knowledge about feminism. In the meantime, Dong was aware that feminism had been widely portrayed as a challenge to the status quo and a threat to 'men's privileges', which

has led to this backlash against feminism from men and even women had to ‘distance’ themselves from feminism or she might be regarded as problem seekers too. This links to what Ahmed (2014, 2017) write about feminists being positioned as ‘wilful subjects’ of ‘killjoys’ for being disruptive forces to societal norms and existing patriarchal and gendered power relations.

According to Moon, part of her experiences as a feminist influencer revolved around antifeminist and misogynistic abuse and violence accompanying the relatively high level of visibility online. Moon encountered severe online trolling after she called out the problematic ‘bid your roommate’ campaign and gained unexpected level of visibility as mentioned previously. Moon shared her encounter with being trolled and targeted by a collective of paid online commentators (*shuijun*, water army as word-to-word translation in Chinese, similar to ghostwriters in English<sup>10</sup>) after calling out the aforementioned campaign of ‘auction your roommate’ as misogynist. Moon told me how she noticed her original post being reposted by many trolls (or bots) who repeated similar insults:

*They had hired some sort of online ghostwriters, I think, to post bad comments and disparage me. It was just this kind of stuff. It was a relatively slight level of internet abuse. I just laughed it off and mimicked their robot-like way of commenting and cursing. Gradually they started to go away.*

*(Moon, 18, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Moon downplayed the severity of the internet abuse by calling it ‘a relatively slight level of internet abuse’, but later revealed that she actually ‘had concerns’ over her own safety.

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<sup>10</sup> Internet ghostwriters, or *wangluoshuijun* in Chinese, refers to the professional or semi-professional posters and commentators who can be paid to post or comment online.



As the campaign was targeted at a specific university, Moon feared that the company that developed the app could potentially track her down which caused her mental stress. Despite this, Moon described how she coped with the situation in a uniquely affective and performative way to show how she 'laughed it off'. She also referred to her response as a 'counterattack' which resorts to the mimicking and adaption of the trolls' form of speech as a performance to show how the trolls expect to influence her psychologically and how she 'doesn't care at all'. She created a collage of screenshots of posts made by the ghostwriters and ridiculed them with the comment, 'Is this the best your ghostwriters can do?' Moon insisted that her attempt to deal with the situation using humour rather than engaging in an argument with the trolls was effective and caused them to 'go away'.

In addition to these gimmicks of manoeuvring the trolls' attention as a form of unwanted visibility as I conceptualised elsewhere (X. Xie et al., 2022), Moon admitted that she ended up with a decision of closing the comment area for those who were not followed by her<sup>11</sup>. It is also the highest level of restriction that *Weibo* users are afforded to control over who is able to reply to their posts and comments. In 2012, *Weibo* once tried to shut down the comment function across the whole platform in order to 'stop the spreading of rumours and misinformation', but this action drew fierce criticisms from the publics for throttling the expression of political contention and subversion on the platform<sup>12</sup>. As discussed in the introduction and in this chapter, the affordance of 'commenting' is core to the fostering of forum-like civic and public discussions on *Weibo* (H. Wang & Shi, 2018).

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<sup>11</sup> Weibo affords its users the choice of who are allowed to reply to your posts. There are three options: 1. Everyone 2. Your followers 3. Your followers who are followed back by you.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2012/03/%E6%96%B0%E6%B5%AA%E5%BE%AE%E5%8D%9A%E5%EF%BC%9A%E7%BD%91%E5%8F%8B%E5%AF%B9%E5%85%B3%E9%97%AD%E8%AF%84%E8%AE%BA%E7%9A%84%E8%AF%84%E8%AE%BA/> [accessed 2 August 2020]

Comments appear automatically in the ranking from the highest to lowest number of likes that each comment has received when users click into a post. It affords each post to function like an online forum with easy access to seeing and responding to what others have said about it. However, as trolling is becoming a serious problem particularly in the comment sections, the platform of *Weibo* is reported by the participants as acting too slowly to catch up with the evolving situations. Despite *Weibo's* launching of a new 'comment protection' function in 2018, which is aided by algorithms to detect and filter abusive comments for users who activate this strengthened mode of protection, none of the research participants reported actually using it. It was unclear whether the participants were not aware of it or because they had concerns about its effectiveness, as the *Weibo* platform itself warned against the possibility of inadvertently deleting 'legitimate' comments.

The participants' account of utilising *Weibo* in feminist discussions indicates a general awareness of the implications of social media affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and the technological affluence of digital feminists, as exemplified in their strategies of coping with antifeminist backlash. On most social media platforms like *Weibo*, my participants' 'solution' to those antifeminist acts including trolling was mostly to 'report' or to 'block' the trolls and not to engage in debates with them. However, according to my participants' experiences, their attempts to report the abusive comments 'barely would succeed'. By contrast, Tree expressed her confusions why 'it is so easy to report feminist microbloggers' which mostly led to the inactivation of their accounts. Still, some participants suggested the avoidance of using this function if at all possible. Doreen argued that it might compromise the platform environment of 'free speech' if some choose to report all comments that speak against themselves. Wing expressed similar

concerns regarding the misuse of reporting, worrying that it would lead people to think of it as ‘a handy little tool and when they encountered with someone who held different opinions, they would just report that’ and consequently undermine ‘the harmony of internet environment’. Blocklist had also been used but only when the trolling or abuse lasted for a period of time. Gao told me that she had used the function blocking so frequently that her blocklist on another social media platform has already reached the upper limit for the number of users one could add. She tried to urge the administrator to increase the limit, while the platform did not take any actions.

It was revealed through my participants’ experiences that social media contents related to feminism and gender equality had been censored in social media platforms like *Weibo* while antifeminist hostility and hate were generally normalised as a ‘different opinion’ or ‘free speech’, quoting Wing and Doreen as mentioned above. The platform of *Weibo* has neither provided clear guidance on defining and addressing online abuse nor effective tools to support its users in dealing with it. The expectation that digital feminists should be responsible for maintaining ‘the harmony of internet environment’ is even more concerning. This notion of harmony is closely connected to postsocialist governmentality that adopted Confucian ideology and moral value of harmony. The experiences of internalising the norms of maintaining harmony among women and feminists, as exemplified in Wing’s case, highlight how the pursuit of harmony becomes an affective labour involved in online feminist engagement (Arcy, 2016). I argue that it is reworked into the normative ‘feeling rules’ (Kanai, 2019, p. 7) in postsocialist digital feminisms that inhibit women from expressing anger and rage that might disrupt the ‘the harmony of internet environment’. I will further unpack in relation to the affective governance (G. Yang, 2017, 2018) of Chinese internet in the next chapter.

In this research, misogynistic and antifeminist hostility and abuse is not only found to exist in online communication, but also extends into offline settings and comes from acquaintances at school as shown in the participants' experiences. Lew, who I introduced in the previous section, said in our first interview that she would usually post her own opinions on Qzone rather than *Weibo*. When I went onto probe her the reason behind that, Lew told me: 'I know all the people there so there's fewer risks'. Qzone as another popular social networking site in China has in-built microblogging service where users can write short posts like *Weibo* but it could also be used to publish longer online diaries. It is often connected to the user's QQ account which is a major instant messaging service like WhatsApp. Qzone affords users the control over access to their own Qzone page on an individual basis. In comparison, more 'open' social media platforms like *Weibo* grant public access which can only be restricted by blocking the specific user. Lew was clearly projecting the primary risk as the compromise of privacy in public platforms like *Weibo* and the possible 'bad comment' coming from strangers rather than her acquaintances. However, she once discovered that someone who knew her from the university had been calling her 'a feminist bitch' behind her back:

*XX: So do you think that what you've posted online had influenced others?*

*Lew: Yeah maybe. Emmm... I think it has impacted a few girls (in a good way), but it's a very bad influence for most boys I'd say.*

*XX: Why do you say so?*

*Lew: I know someone's calling me a feminist bitch behind my back. But this... This makes me kind of pleased actually. At least what I've been saying makes them feel uncomfortable, which means it works and some people will learn something through what I've said.*

*XX: Can you tell me more about this? Do you know who that person is?*

*Lew: I don't know who exactly. I just knew someone's calling me that. I saw on my Qzone one day... There's this function on Qzone called 'little secret'<sup>13</sup>. You're not able to know who's posting it but you'll just see them. And there's one day I saw that. But that's it. I don't know who that is, and I don't care anyway.*

*(Lew, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Lew is a first-year postgraduate student majoring in information engineering at a prestigious university in China. This discipline, often regarded as 'masculine' in China, recruited twice more male students than females in Lew's college. In the second interview, she then told me that she 'did not get along well' with some of her male counterparts in the same department and there might be 'more than one of them' who had been calling her names. Although they had never used this pejorative in front of Lew, such abusive comments extended from online spaces into offline settings like college campus in this case. Lew's strategy of dealing with such abusive behaviours was 'not to care' and insisted in our interviews that being targeted by the abusers actually made her feel 'pleased'. Both Lew and Dong were aware that their feminist stances had been seen as disruptions to the existing gender power structure in general. Meanwhile, they had to adapt and develop psychological resilience to cope with the hostility, as there were limited resources and support systems available to assist them in addressing these abusive acts. Following previous research that took notice of how online and offline forms of gendered hate and abuse converge (Henry & Powell, 2018), digital feminists as feminist killjoys (Ahmed,

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<sup>13</sup> 'Little secret' is a specific function on Qzone that allows users to post anonymously. When users click into the section of 'little secrets', they will be able to see all the posts from the people on their friend list, but it remains unknown to all who have posted each of them.

2017; Kuo, 2019; Ringrose & Renold, 2016) are not some digital avatars that could be taken off in offline spaces, especially given the increasingly blurry boundaries between different contexts including destabilised dichotomies of public/private and online/offline.

## **6.5 Conclusion: Socio-politico-technological implications for feminist networked counterpublics**

This chapter chose visibility as a focal point to discuss the possibilities and precarities of crafting spaces for feminist resistance via feminist networked counterpublics. Previous studies have suggested that platform vernaculars, affordances and governance could give rise to different publics that are subjected to different levels and forms of visibility, reproducing and reinforcing exclusions and invisibilities that are buttressed by gendered, sexualised and racialised powers (Evans & Riley, 2022; Massanari, 2017; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Going back to my conceptualisation of feminist social media events which shifted from documenting heightened moments of visibility to attend to the processes of its unfolding, the collapses of spatiotemporal contexts on social media (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; A. E. Marwick & boyd, 2011) could also open up space for feminist resistance to normative and dominant ways of telling stories that are worthy of visibility in unexpected ways.

I draw upon particular participants' experiences of managing visibility to continue this ongoing discussion on the implications for understanding visibility in the context of digital feminisms. It is worthy of mentioning what has been referred to as 'tyranny of algorithms' by Crystal Abidin (2022, p. 184) to point out the opaqueness of algorithms in specific mechanisms and procedures of shaping the modalities and levels of visibility on

social media platforms. In the cases of the digital feminists in this research, many of them have shown awareness of the affordance of visibility as driven by algorithms of *Weibo* and other social media platforms. This algorithmic opaqueness hence amplifies and is even incorporated into the regime of visibility (Bucher, 2012) that encourages users and netizens to participate in the pursuits for visibility that are increasingly normalised as tacit, effortless and invisible labour (Abidin, 2016).

Aligning with feminist epistemology of location and situatedness (Braidotti, 2006b; Haraway, 2018), I argue that it is important for feminist media scholars to redefine the accountability for feminist visibility in the context of digital feminisms by recentring the pursuits of feminist political agendas and forming collective feminist solidarity (Dean, 1997; Hemmings, 2012). It takes account of visibility not only as an affordance and/or a vernacular practice enabled by digital technologies and social media platforms but also closely related to tactics and strategies such as consciousness raising that has always been central to feminist struggles (Blevins, 2018; Gleeson & Turner, 2019; Whittier, 2017). In the meantime, it acknowledges the discrepancies in the immediacy and ephemerality of social media temporalities and the slowness in institutional (Page et al., 2019), political (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015; Thrift, 2012) and social change (Papacharissi, 2016), also allowing the investigation into digital feminist activism and politics to slow down its tempo. Moreover, the accountability of visibility in shaping networked feminist counterpublics needs to hold digital platforms accountable for monetizing and capitalising from the contents, interactions and online traffic created by digital feminist labour (Mendes, 2022) and hence have an ethical responsibility to address the amplified abuse and violence targeting digital activists and marginalised social groups.

To conclude this chapter, I have followed and developed the notion of networked feminist counterpublics (Ringrose & Regehr, 2020; Trott, 2021) where girls and young women attempt to carve out a space for resisting the dominant narratives and discourses of patriarchal familism. Focusing on feminist struggles in relation to a key issue of visibility, this chapter has shown the various practices of feminist resistance in digital sphere. Along with the previous chapter, these two chapters mapped out networked feminist resistance and transformative forces arise from digital feminist politics in contemporary China. The next chapter will move onto the exploration of affective and intimate dimensions of digital feminist politics that seek to form intimacy and feminist solidarity outside the normative familial relationships in and beyond the digital realm.



## Chapter 7. Fists, ghosts, and networked resisters: The affective wildfires of digital feminisms

### 7.1 Introduction

*A single spark can start a prairie fire. Does it sound too naive to say I actually believe in this?*

*(Gao, 17, 2nd interview)*

One of my participants, Gao, quoted Mao Zedong in our second interview when I asked her how she thinks of the future for Chinese feminist movements. As a 17-year-old girl from a small town in Guangxi Province, Gao presented herself to be relentlessly optimistic and meanwhile she seemed to be quite self-conscious of being perceived as 'naive'. The quoted phrase 'a single spark can start a prairie fire' was originally used by Mao Zedong in a letter to convince his early communist comrades into guerrilla tactics and later turned into one of the most famous catchphrases for his hyped persona as a revolutionary military strategist. It is not my intention to give credits to Mao Zedong or his complicated role as the patriarch for the socialist state of PRC for almost three decades. Instead, it reflects how Gao positions herself in relation to the feminist movements in China in a sense of bleakness. This quote leads to the following discussion in this chapter where I shift my analytical focus to exploring the formation and undoing of intimacies as affective ties in digital feminist politics. There is, to say the least, a certain degree of ambivalence in it as shown in Gao's quote above, echoing Lü Pin's vision of Chinese feminist movements as discussed in the introduction chapter. If affective and intimate dimensions of digital feminist politics are to be taken as wildfires, it is important to recognise how uncontrollable and uncontainable such forces can be. Unfolding from this metaphor of

feminist aspirations for transformation as wildfires, this chapter maps out the affective circuits of feminist rage, anger and belongingness which have the potential to fuel digital intimate publics (Dobson, Carah, et al., 2018) in resistance to the normative forces of patriarchal familism. However, it is also important to acknowledge that these digital intimate publics as shaped by affective ties and forces are also subjected to surveillance and governance facilitated through social media platforms and could possibly turn against the very solidarity that feminists strive for.

By delving into the narratives and experiences of the participants, it becomes evident that these girls and young women expressed feeling misunderstood and unsupported in regard to their feminist aspirations both in their families and at schools. This underscores why they are motivated to build a space for feminisms via social media. In the following section, I will start by examining what I called feminist worldmaking as finding new ways of knowing, feeling and living that do not have to conform to patriarchal and familial forms of bonds and intimacies. Through in-depth investigation into three feminist narrative-events, I will then map out the affective-discursive circuits of affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2019, 2020) and dissonance (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Pruchniewska, 2016) in the participants' experiences and practices of digital feminisms. Following this, I shift my focus onto the antifeminist slurring of femi-fist intensified by the use of emoji and memes and, more importantly, how digital feminists on *Weibo* rework its meanings to highlight women's power and claim for feminist wilfulness (Ahmed, 2014, 2017). I also bring in a discussion on an affect-charged figuration of *changgui* as embodiment of both rage against internalised misogyny and feelings of vulnerabilities. Drawing on Wetherall's (2013) notion of affective/discursive practices I will dig into particular aesthetic-affective narratives of *changgui* that involve repetitive

and intentional ordering of what and who deserve to be seen as comrades for affective homophily of sharing the rage. This discussion on *changgui* exemplifies and explores an epistemically and politically informed approach challenging the paradigmatic mode of feminist politics in contemporary China as a dichotomy of feminist resisters and patriarchal state/family (Ye, 2021). In addition, I draw from the notion of affective governance (G. Yang, 2017, 2018) to map out how networked surveillance and governance functions in more subtle ways than many well-researched censorship mechanisms such as direct suppression and restriction on feminist voices. By looking at how the Chinese government use a discourse of ‘civilising and purifying the internet’ (*wenming jingwang*) to curb online contentions through positioning conflicts, contentions and subversion as negative, Yang (2017, p. 85) conceptualised a strategy of ‘affective governance’. As I have outlined in Chapter 2, the affective turn of research in both empirical and theoretical cases have been working to re-centre and further the discussion on what is felt and experienced in and through bodies and what connects and moves bodies. I stay close to the forces of affects, feelings and bodily sensations in processes of knowledge production, subjective becomings and community building (Ahmed, 2000; Kennedy, 2018; Koivunen, 2010; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012). Acknowledging the divergent perspectives within affect theory and affect studies, I do not see them as totally irreconcilable. In this chapter, I deploy different notions about affects throughout this thesis as many did share a common interest in how emotions and/or affects form, disrupt or consolidate a collective solidarity. My conception of affects in this specific chapter aligns more closely with the scholars who do not strictly differentiate between affects and emotions, but instead emphasises its capacity to translate into affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012, p. 148) within the realm of digital feminist politics:

*'that draws on a broader range of affects – rage, frustration and the desire for connection – as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation, but that does not root these in identity or other group characteristics. Instead, affective solidarity is proposed as a way of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from.'*

From there I try to trace back to girls and young women's experiences of gender and sexual inequalities in school and at family and how their voices of calling out these inequalities have been silenced. I argue that in a postsocialist China Dream of 'shared future for humankind' where feminist voices and yearnings have been largely left out, girls and young women were pushed to seek for connections and networks in the digital sphere. This chapter takes a different but complementary theoretical route from the previous two chapters to argue that it is through this imaginary of feminist collectivity and solidarity that subversive feminist subjectivities are produced and take shape.

## **7.2 Feminist politics of intimacies: Finding alternative ways of feeling and connecting**

In this section, I analyse the interviews and social media diaries with 21 girls and young women who participated in this research in order to explore their experiences of discovering and learning about feminisms from online that tap into their experiences and disobedience of normative discourses about gender and sexuality. Following the discussion on the possibilities and challenges for constructing feminist counterpublics and networked resistance in the previous chapter, this section further examines these participants' experiences and practices of feminisms to explicate how they craft out new ways for feeling and building affective ties with other (un)filial daughters. This and the

following sections will show that affective and emotional affirmations and responses are central to feminist knowing and worldmaking (Naezer & Ringrose, 2018; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2016). By looking into the experiences of participants who feel that their feminist aspirations are often not understood by their families and schools, I highlight a need expressed by the participants for opening up new modes of support and networks via digital platforms.

I resort to the notion of mediated intimacies (Chambers, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017) to understand how social media platforms, particularly *Weibo*, provide users with the opportunity to develop social connections beyond family and school. The need for connecting with like-minded people is a common topic in my conversations with the participants and their social media diaries regarding why social media mattered to them. A recurring theme among the participants was the importance of social media in building feminist connections and support who may be difficult to find in their immediate social circles like school mates and family. For these girls and young women, social media significantly expanded their reach to getting to know others who shared similar values and experiences. Among 21 of all participants, five of them have reported that they feel 'estranged' 'disconnected' or 'can't fit in' with their family or peers because of the divergences on the view of gender and feminism. For instance, while talking about her relationship with family, 17-year-old Wu told me:

*'There are so many things that I can never discuss with them. I can... I can have dinner with them and have fun etc, but we stand so differently on certain issues... There will be these divergences, and you will be different from others or you cannot truly fit in, or truly be happy. Because (I'm) separated from them.'*

*(Wu, 17, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Wu came from Shanghai, a city that stood out as one of the most prosperous metropolises in mainland China and was known for its remarkable strides in economic advancement and relative openness to cultural diversity. At the time of the interview, Wu was studying in an international high school in the US which also offered her opportunities to learn about feminisms across international contexts. She described her relationship with parents and family as rather 'democratic and relaxed', but she also 'sensed' that her feminist perspective and ways of talking were often 'in conflict with some family members'.

Through analysing the participants' experiences with using and moving across multiple platforms, I also noticed that these girls and young women displayed a proactive selection and negotiation in these social media platforms to seek for and navigate different forms of mediated intimacies (Chambers, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017). Although I recruited all my participants on *Weibo*, most of the participants mentioned their experiences of using various social media platforms during our interviews or in their social media diaries. As previously mentioned, there were noticeable differences in how these participants perceive the level of openness and types of social ties fostered by different platforms and mobile apps that they love to frequent. Instant messaging applications like QQ and WeChat, in comparison, usually extend from existing networks in daily life. Therefore, the social networking services Qzone and WeChat Moments as extensions of QQ and WeChat respectively are mainly used for maintaining and developing social ties with colleagues, schoolmates, family, and friends. *Weibo*, *Douban*, and *Tieba* are more widely used for communicating with a broader and more general audience and meeting new people. *Weibo* as a microblogging service/platform, the notion of openness or publicness is particularly promoted by its slogan, 'whenever, wherever, discovering new stuff',

endorsing an ideology of sharing through encouraging users to follow – trending topics, microbloggers, contents etc (Fuchs, 2016).

A few of my participants such as Dong and Moon have experiences of meeting feminist friends on *Weibo* and then add them on *WeChat* after getting to know each other further. According to most participants, those two types of social networking sites cannot replace each other in daily use for the different kinds of social bonds that each platform affords to build and maintain. Similar to what I found out in the pilot study, it was reported that *Weibo* has continued to be seen as ‘the place to go’ when it comes to finding people with similar interest in feminism. Rong told me in our casual chat after the first interview that she seldom posted about feminism on her *WeChat Moment*, but even if she did, most of her friends would stay silent or just ‘hit the like button and scroll down’. Doreen similarly believed that she herself and other feminist friends do not like posting about feminism on *WeChat Moment* or *Qzone* since it feels like intrusive ‘if you’ve known that your friends and family are not interested’. It seems to be a common concern among the participants in this research to manage a relatively controllable boundary between platforms or apps as well as online and offline acquaintances; meanwhile their social media practices suggest that they navigate and traverse across different platforms (for varied pursuits) and on/offline.

Even among the more ‘public’ platforms like *Weibo*, *Tieba* and *Douban*, girls and young women have shown their own preferences. For instance, Dong had been a long-time user of *Douban* and made each entry of her social media diary as a record of what she posted about gender issues on her favourite *Douban* group and how other group members responded to her. By contrast, Rong told me that she does not use *Douban* for social networking at all and it is just for ‘reading the movie or book reviews’. Wing and Dong’s

experiences on different social media platforms as presented below also explained partly why *Weibo* stood out for the participants and other young women in China as the most important platform for learning about feminism and disseminating feminist ideologies (Peng, 2020; Xue & Rose, 2022).

*Wing: The microbloggers that I followed on Weibo will sometimes share things from Zhihu and I feel... based on those contents that I read ... I might not like the environment there. I used to visit Tieba very often when I was in middle school. But now it seems to be much less active and there were few people left in those 'bars' I frequented the most. So...*

*XX: What were you referring to when you said you didn't like the environment on Zhihu?*

*Wing: It's just... Well, on Weibo if you express some different views from others they won't be very... emmmm... they just won't react that fiercely. But on Zhihu people could start cursing as soon as divergence occurred.*

*(Wing, 16, 1st interview)*

*(It is understandable that) people have really different attitudes toward feminism related topics... and it's not like that there's one best platform, but maybe some are just a little bit better than the others. Some are just not for me. There are platforms that have those very suggestive videos with sexy girls and as soon as you log on the app the thumbnails are shown on their home page... Well, they kind of use that as clickbait. I know there must be both female and male users but those (videos) are automatically shown to you and it's so hard to filter out contents like those. I'd say it's more driven by men's preferences, I'd say. And it's a common thing on lots of apps.*



*(Dong, 20, 1st interview)*

Both Wing and Dong referred to something about digital environment that they value and expect to get from the platforms. Wing talked about how different opinions in discussion might endure to exist on the platform(s) and how active the individual users and communities on the platform are interacting with each other. However, this does not suggest that *Weibo* users would always expect a high level of interactions, as many examples from the previous chapter have evidenced. Wing herself also talked about her experiences of feeling 'neglected' on *Weibo* where no one replies to her posts and thus she gradually became less willing to share her own ideas. In my second interview with Dong, she told me that she preferred to post in *Douban* group rather than *Weibo* simply because 'there would be more people replying or simply liking', implying an affective affirmation and agreement with her feminist ideas. Still, both girls above accepted that *Weibo* is the most valuable channel for feminist discussions for its relatively 'friendliness' towards feminism and gender related topics in general comparing to many other online platforms such as *Zhihu*. In both cases, platforms were viewed to have produced different 'environments' or ecologies structured by design, affordances, algorithms but also shaped by users and networked publics inhabit on them. Indeed, one of the most important features of social networking sites is that it has enabled users to build connections beyond the people around them and transcend the normative forms of intimacies (Petersen et al., 2017), which was confirmed by Doreen's account:

*For example, if I were a girl born and raised in a small village, the people I could know were basically those living in the same village... If I go to school, I can know my classmates and my teachers; if I go to work, my colleagues. I may not have the chance to know people beyond this range, and I think the meaning of social*

*media is that it's largely broadening this range. I could only know a few hundred people, or a thousand. But now I may know 20 thousand or even half million... I don't know. I just feel that I can be heard by more people.*

*(Doreen, 22, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Doreen's account of 'range' and geographical proximity is rather interesting. I intend to unpack this in relation to the notion of mediated intimacies, which does not only suggest how social media and digital technologies provide new possibilities of 'doing' intimacies, that is to build new connections and maintain established ties and bonds (Gauthier, 2017), but also fundamentally changed the ways in which intimacies were perceived, understood and valued (Chambers, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017). Doreen's quote showed that she values social media for it helps to create and maintain new forms of intimacies that transcends physical boundaries and to form connections and relationships outside what would usually be excluded to immediate physical vicinity. It then goes back to the key question – why it matters for girls and young women like Doreen to 'know people beyond this range'? Linking to the discussion on feminist pedagogy and consciousness raising in the last chapter, I have noted how several participants gave similar accounts of feminist awakening from online as both transformative and affirmative experiences. It brings me to Ahmed's notion of a feminist 'snap' (2017, p. 210) – a moment when a bond 'that has been held up as necessary for life, for happiness, a bond that has been nurtured, cherished, by others' comes to a break; and in the meantime, the cracks open up the potentials for building new bonds. In this sense, digital feminisms essentially start with noticing the 'snap' of patriarchal familism that asks girls and women to hold up to the normative and intimate forces of kinship, marital and family relationships. Through affirming the collective snap moments of finally it 'made sense', new forms of intimacies

and communities are starting to be established, in the case of this research, a feminist resisterhood for the (un)filial daughters.

### 7.3 Querying affective homophily in digital feminist politics

For this section, I examine how digital feminist politics is also characterised by the fostering and expansion of intimacies and networks through affective ties enabled by digital platforms (Papacharissi, 2015). I follow such intimacies as maintained and regulated through what Sundén and Paasonen (2020, p. 50) have called ‘affective homophily’, namely the normative bonding and expression of ‘feeling the same’ (Kanai, 2019). Drawing from the interviews and the participants’ diaries, I am going to take an analytical model slightly different from the former chapters. This section discusses three particular narrative-events as affective/discursive assemblages (Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018) to trace through how ideas, articulations and feelings about gender and feminism circulate via digital networks and organise and regulate the formation of digital intimate publics (Dobson, Carah, et al., 2018). In the next section I will discuss a feminist social media event centred around Moon’s call-out of a sexual harassment incident she experienced, and how her call-out on *Weibo* was met with a significant online antifeminist backlash. I will explore Moon’s response to this backlash by refusing to be tamed and escalating the conflicts with antifeminist and misogynistic trolls. In my discussion on Moon’s idea of ‘anger is power’, anger was instantiated by Moon as affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020), hoping to build connections with other women and feminists through intentional and repetitive affective/discursive practices (Wetherell, 2013) of shared anger in response to events of violence and injustice. Meanwhile, Moon’s frequent experiences of online trolling as a feminist influencer disclosed that the complicity of

antifeminist and postfeminist media cultures as ‘safety valve’ (Berlant, 2008; Orgad & Gill, 2019) for feminist rage devised a composed femininity, pathologizing and (self-)policing anger and rage.

### 7.3.1 Moon’s call-out event: Practicing feminist rage

In one of her social media diaries, 18-year-old feminist influencer Moon shared with me a screenshot of her *Weibo* post about an episode of her encounter with a taxi driver. In her retrospective account, she was chatting with the taxi driver casually whilst the man who appeared older than Moon suddenly called her ‘good-looking and must be liked by lots of boys’. Immediately irritated by the unwelcome behaviour ‘taking a close look at my face’, Moon posted on *Weibo* about her response to this terribly unpleasant experience:

*I became to act stern and cold at once, speaking: ‘We were not even talking about appearances. Don’t you think you are impolite?’ My following remarks were all snippy too. My hands reached out for the knife in my bag, making some clinks of metal on purpose.*

*(Moon, 18, Social media diary no.2)*

As she recalled in the diary, her first short post after being forwarded by an antifeminist troll (Mantilla, 2013; X. Xie et al., 2022) was quickly picked up by a trolling mob. Moon recounted how she experienced a series of trolling and verbal abuse for posting this and was accused of having ‘persecutory delusion and paranoia because they [note: the trolls] believed the taxi driver had no bad intentions’. The rhetoric of victim-blaming could obviously find resonances in empirical studies where sexual violence had become so normalised revolving related issues such as everyday sexism, rape culture and lad culture

in a variety of educational, professional and other settings (Keller et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2018; Phipps et al., 2018; Rentschler, 2014). Moon also reported to have used tactics mentioned in Chapter 6 such as reporting the trolls, but it did not work so well as there were 'too many of them' and they even went so far as to swarm and bombard her private messages. It again revealed significant problems of dealing with networked acts of online violence on the platform of *Weibo*. Choosing not to walk away from this, Moon quickly reacted by posting a second post that was much longer including a detailed narration of her encounter of sexual harassment, directly pointing to the victim-blaming rhetoric adopted by the trolls who left misogynistic replies on her original post.

*I found out that it's a bad habit of mine that I don't like to play the victim so much, so that I kind of described the behaviour of that driver lightly. Then all those reposts showing sympathy for him??? Gosh! Did you really take a moment to think of his behaviour? While we were chatting, he inserted a 'compliment' out of nowhere totally irrelevant to the topic. He said, 'you are really pretty, boys must find you attractive.' Accompanied by a fixed gaze at my face. So what he did needs to be divided into three steps:*

- 1. Turned his head towards my side.*
- 2. Moved his face closer to mine.*
- 3. Stared at my face with a creepy look.*

*As for that creepy look, I felt I was treated as prey. Just think about it and replace me with any ordinary woman you know, you would probably think 'the man's literally using his eyes to undress her.' Just because I talked about it lightly in the previous post, you guys started feeling sorry for this old pervert? If I didn't fight back immediately, the next step would be 100% an escalation, damn it! ... He*

*wasn't saying 'you're really pretty.' He was just suggesting, 'You look like an easy target, can I try it out?' If I didn't fight back immediately, guess if it's possible for me to become 'victim X'?*

*(Moon, 18, social media diary no.2)*

By looking at this second post, Moon's narration did not only recast the taxi driver's harassment as serialised acts of aggression but also noticeably centred around her own bodily and affective reactions to the sudden stare and unwelcome 'compliments' for her appearances from a stranger (a man) that made her feel threatened. Her disclosure of disgust, fear and vulnerabilities, however, was continuously overshadowed by the trolls' mocking of her 'overreactions' to other's kindness that flooded the comment area of her posts. It is important to unpack the body politics at work here in relation to the mediated context, where the boundaries of on/offline spaces and intimate/public spaces are significantly destabilised whereas (im)material female body (Blackman, 2012; Warfield, 2018) as 'a symbolic and precarious site of control and resistance' (Baer, 2016, p. 19) is easily subjected to sexualisation. The confined space within a taxi served as a prime example of an ambiguously public setting characterised by a close physical proximity between bodies. In this case, the taxi driver's routinized scrutiny of Moon's appearances in a highly (hetero)sexualised manner understandably read by Moon as sexual advance and caused her great discomfort.

Moreover, Moon's social media diaries also included instances of a young woman being sexually assaulted and murdered by a Didi (Chinese equivalent of Uber) driver, along with similar events frequently covered and reported in news and social media. These embodied experiences of other young women intertwined with her finding herself within a comparable setting enforced and amplified a profound sense of fear about becoming

another 'victim X' as shown in the second post of Moon. In our second interview, I asked Moon about this event and how her call-out of this case of sexual harassment led to huge backlash. Moon herself understood those who joined in the trolling as outright 'misogynists'. From the first *Weibo* post of Moon, she gave an account of her performances of instantly acting 'stern and cold' at the moment of feeling violated and harassed. In Moon's perspective, it was her constant display of aggressiveness by reaching out for the knife and making 'clinks of metal' to scare off the harasser that directly confronted what was expected as a normative reaction when a girl was complimented for her looks – 'blushing, bashful and responded with a thank-you'.

In relation to this, Moon also told me that she believed 'anger is power' which was why she chose to perform herself as 'easily irritable' in her feminist influencing practices despite knowing this could provoke further misogynistic and antifeminist hate. She claimed that her responsibility as a feminist influencer is to speak out those 'inequalities that kept trying to eat us alive'. Moreover, her social media diaries (including the previous quotes) provided some glimpses into her digital tactics of consciousness raising that call upon women and feminists to learn to not only recognise systemic injustice but also to 'learn to get angry'. It illustrated how Moon's affective/discursive practices (Wetherell, 2013) of consciousness raising pedagogically oriented feminist anger and rage towards systemic injustice and violence by repeatedly and reflectively writing about her own embodied experiences. It revealed a strong intention and aspiration for crafting feminist alliance and solidarity based on feminist rage against injustice and violence. Linking to another diary entry written by Moon, she reflected on and fiercely refuted the popular discourse of self-protection in cases of gender-based violence and attached a screenshot of a *Weibo* post she shared in the same week of this diary:

*'Self-protection individualised the actual problem and can only reduce the likelihood of harm to oneself. You can only ensure that you don't get devoured. Each tragic victim of gender [violence] becomes a scapegoat for me, because if I were in such a situation, I might also die.'*

*(Moon, 18, social media diary no.6)*

In my understanding, this highly affective metaphor of eating and being devoured implicitly drew connections to Lu Xun's notion of 'human-eating old society' which is one of the most well-known metaphors in modern Chinese literature that radically accused of the dehumanizing effects of Confucian cultures and morals (Yue, 1999). Moon's reappropriation of the term is devised here to direct the critique to gendered violence as normalised in a patriarchal society. It rejected the individualising discourse of self-protection and tried to reflect on how these discourses deployed affective forces of victim-blaming and scapegoating (Gilson, 2016; Van Dijk, 2009), which Moon herself had been previously subjected to. Moreover, it conspicuously directed at 'you', implying an imaginary audience and trying to build connection and solidarity through an empathetic narrative of 'if I were in such a situation'. Moon intended to move beyond feelings of anger and vulnerabilities as simply negative and reactive politics, showing anger as potentially generative and cohesive forces for maintaining collective bonds and affective ties among women and feminists.

### 7.3.2 Reclaiming the femi-fists: The aesthetic-affective work of an emoji

In this section I turn to a highly visualised and affective slur 'femi-fist' which is a pervasive vilification of feminisms and feminists commonly accompanied with the use of emoji/meme. It usually appeared in Chinese social media with an emoji of fist 👊 in place of the Chinese character fist (*quan*). The term itself is a play of words as femi-fist (literally



translated as woman's fist) is a homophone of feminist or feminism (both pronounced as *nūquan* in mandarin Chinese), with similar connotation to *feminazi* (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012) which disparages feminists as angry, irrational and/or militant extremists. This antifeminist pejorative of 'femi-fists' serves as a powerful embodiment of online policing of feminist anger and rage (Orgad & Gill, 2019). Its masculinist and antifeminist play of word functions as a contentious and affective ridiculing and shaming of feminists who fail to identify with the normative and familial ideal of Chinese femininity that values obedience and gentleness (Liu, 2014).

Below I include a meme sent from a participant Kit to showcase what she often sees online along with the antifeminist slur of femi-fists (see Figure 7.1 on next page). Visual techniques of GIFs, memes and emojis are claimed to become ubiquitous antifeminist tactics of networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016) in what researchers conceptualised as the manosphere (Ging, 2019a). This specific meme/GIF (termed by me as 'grandpa punches') shows a grandpa, *Ye* (grandpa) in Chinese term, which represents both a symbolic and embodied figuration of patriarchal familial power here, throwing his punches supposedly towards what he would deem as femi-fists at a rather admirable speed. Noting that the speed of animated GIF is easily adjustable through GIF making software, the chosen speed of punching is crucial in shaping this animation of the physical prowess of the grandpa.

Reified in its popularisation among antifeminist groups in Chinese social media, this meme centres and reinforces the power dynamics of a patriarchal Chinese culture that positions an older man as an unquestionable figure of authority. In this context, feminists are expected to be positioned as defiance to the patriarchal order and need to be disciplined, whilst such explicit portrayal of physical violence is downplayed as playful

in-group jokes within antifeminist and misogynistic groups online, suggesting the disciplinary acts as righteous for trying to keep things in order. Relating to the digital affordances of replicability, searchability and scalability (boyd, 2014; Bucher & Helmond, 2018), the vernacular use of memes as accessible and convenient means of creating and responding to in-group relatability hence gave rise to so-called 'memefied networked publics' (Ask & Abidin, 2018, p. 835).



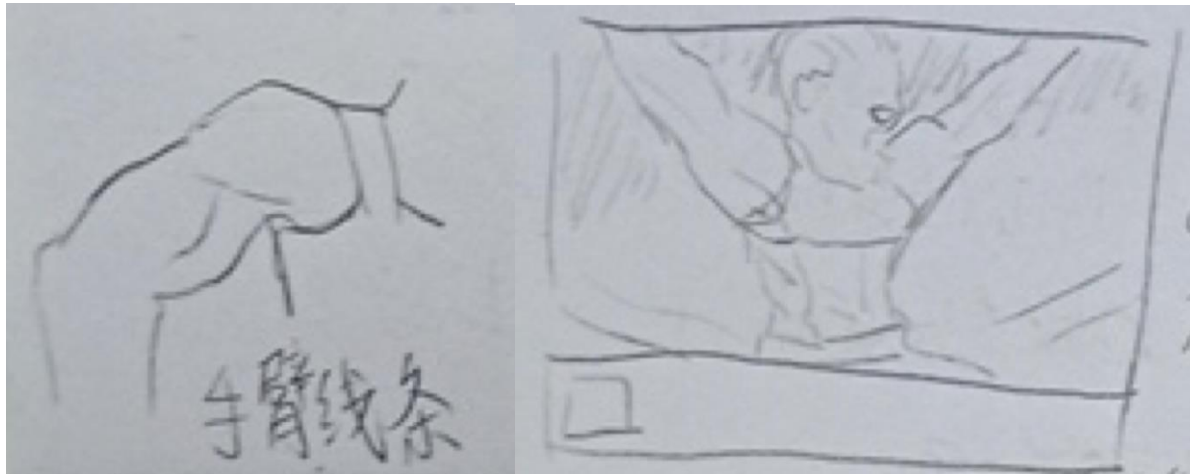
*Figure 7. 1 Grandpa punches (an antifeminist and patriarchal meme 'mocking' angry femi-fists)*

In response to this, digital feminists on *Weibo* were also reported by the participants to have striven for reworking this pejorative term. One notable example of reclaiming the name of 'femi-fist' corresponded to the rise to fame of Zhang Weili, who is a female boxing athlete and made history in 2019 for becoming the first Chinese to win the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Zhang then became a reference and even feminist icon among online feminists for her unquestionable claim to the title 'female boxer' (also shortened as *nüquan* in Chinese) as an outstanding athlete and her open confrontation of gender stereotypes as well as frequent advocacy for 'women's power' (Davis, 2019). Wing

mentioned Zhang twice in her social media diaries where she used simple sketches and drawings to keep record of online discussion about gender and feminism that stood out in her memory within one week. In one diary entry, Wing created a sketch of a section of *Weibo* showing sexist comments online such as ‘who would want to marry her’ and ‘I’d be concerned about domestic violence’ as a recollection of Zhang’s being ridiculed on *Weibo*. In the second interview, I asked Wing why she chose to draw this and she reflected on and suggest how ‘absurd’ it was to overlook Zhang Weili as one of the best boxing athletes and ‘tie her back’ to patriarchal familial relations. For another diary entry, Wing’s drawings captured Zhang Weili’s well-built physique (see Figure 7.3 on next page) and contours of her muscular arms (see Figure 7.2 on next page). These small sketches represent not only physical strength but also an embodiment of ‘women’s power’, a notion frequently brought up by Zhang herself.

What Wing was interested in capturing was a patriarchal politics of shame imposed on Zhang’s physical body for ‘not fitting into the traditional standard for feminine beauty’. Meanwhile it also pointed out an affective politics of refusal in a form of wilfulness (Ahmed, 2014, 2017), revealing shame as not necessarily a cultural inscription but rather as experienced and attached to certain bodies (Ahmed, 2004) and being circulated and passed on through networked practices of shaming. Another participant Gao brought to my attention an interesting feminist influencing account on *Douyin* (Chinese TikTok) that focuses on posting videos of female boxing athletes where the use of ‘femi-fist’ and 👊 were depleted of its shaming connotations and normalised through collective exclamations such as: ‘I am a femi-fist and I’m damn proud of being one!’ In this sense, practising and performing ‘shamelessness’ (Dobson, 2014) hence created a digital

intimate public (Dobson, Carah, et al., 2018) where a reimagination and alteration of the relationship to shame was made possible.



*Figure 7. 2 & Figure 7. 3*

*Sections from Wing's social media diary (Wing, 16, social media diary no. 7)*

In these multiple processes of aesthetic-affective politics centred around a visualised slur of femi-fist, it is noticeable how wilful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014, 2017) became sticky with the accumulative circulation of antifeminist slurring, ridiculing, shaming as well as feminist performative responses of shamelessness. However, as scholarship on digital visual cultures aptly pointed out templatability has growingly been perceived as a key affordance both of memes as a digital technological object (Harvey & Palese, 2018) and built into visuals-dominated platforms like Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020). It suggests that these social media platforms aim at designing accessible means for contents creation (e.g. filters saved photo-takers the work for colour editing and tweaks) so contents could be constantly produced and reproduced by utilising templates. On one hand, these templatable forms of cultural production and reproduction have enabled the rapid circulation, replication and amplification of similar affects, feelings, expressions and experiences through which affective ties and intimacies are formed. On the other hand, I wonder whether such pre-conditioned templates allowing little user creativity would

conform to and even reinforce affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2019, 2020) of normative expression of a uniform feeling, which might consequently limit, obscure and undermine the differences, nuances and complexities in actual political discussion and expression.

In relation to this, one participant Wu called 'people on the internet' as 'frivolous' because they 'don't seem to take anyone or anything seriously' and online platforms are full of 'agonistic, raw and poorly written words'. Wu told me in our first interview that she had been pessimistic about Chinese digital feminisms in general because her own experiences of taking part in such discussions were 'not very pleasant' and online discussions were found to turn into verbal abuse easily. In speaking of observing the waning antifeminist affects of the femi-fist slur on *Weibo*, she was highly sceptical of interpreting this as a genuine 'change of attitude' towards feminism.

*The so-called public opinions are always changing. Lately I haven't been seeing a lot less of comments such as 'femi-fist' on the top of the comment list and more comments were like 'why are you directing at feminists when it's not relevant to it at all'. This didn't happen within several years or several months. Just a few days or weeks passed, and people's attitudes toward it took a dramatic turn. But is it really such a positive effect of feminist efforts? I'd say it's more of a result of boredom. People are so fed up with the excessive joking about 'femi-fists' just as any other repetitively used gags or memes.*

*(Wu, 17, Social media diary no. 8)*

Wu pointed to 'boredom' as the main reason where the pejorative joke 'femi-fist' became so commonplace that few people find it funny anymore, and in the meantime still no one seemed to care about 'what feminism really is anyway' as she wrote in her diary.

Dismissing the notions of emotions, humour, playfulness in political rhetoric on *Weibo* as superficial, Wu aligned more closely to a Habermasian ideal of a public sphere where legitimate citizenship requires a sensibility to express and defend their opinions in a reasonable and justifiable manner. I found Wu's disillusionment with mainstream and popular feminism on *Weibo* understandable, but it is unconvincing to completely dismiss grassroots efforts in looking for meaningful and accessible means for resistance and collective actions. I intend to problematise Wu's uncritical endorsement of rationality and reason as fundamental components of meaningful public discourses in relation to her privileged family and educational background. Furthermore, her detestation of these 'frivolous' forms of online discussions and discourses in fact disengaged herself from digital feminist practices as will be shown in the second quote below and left little space for taking account of her own positionality, privilege and limits of her own perceptions and experiences. In discretion of the 'aesthetic-affective modes of communication' (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 111), Wu further directed her discontent with *Weibo* as a platform facilitating public and political forms of discussion to its limited length of each post and comment.

*Every concept and '-ism' are simplified into words or even characters. The limit put on Weibo post and comment even make people's expressions more flattened.*

*(Wu, 17, Social media diary no. 6)*

*Now I found myself unable to get anything from the feminisms on social media. People are just talking about those most basic and oversimplified stuffs, aiming at convincing those who had no idea at all what feminism is or who were just against it.*

*(Wu, 17, Social media diary no. 7)*

Wu's quotes above also expressed a concern with whether sophisticated intellectual thinking and debating could be condensed into 140 Chinese characters and how much would be lost during the process. Technologically it will be possible to breakthrough such limitation by simply using a function called long post or creating a new post in the form of an article attached to your *Weibo* post both of which allow users to write more than 140 characters in Chinese, but that does require extra steps. The *Weibo* platform would only show the first 140 characters of a singular post in the timeline, so users are still expected to click into the actual post to see the full text if it is a long post. Despite that I agree with Wu on the limited space for words as restricting, I think it is also important to acknowledge that the popularisation of visual political expressions is exactly a legitimate and productive means to work with this limitation, although it of course has its own limits in affording feminist politics and expressions.

### 7.3.3 Can the ghost speak? Outlining 'the shade of the shadow'

Another affective-discursive assemblage (Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018) that has kept fascinating, or I should say, haunting me during my research analysis is what these digital feminists regularly refer to as a ghost called *chang* (*changgui*). In popular feminist discourses on *Weibo*, *changgui* was usually used to refer to women who are not remotely interested in feminist politics and are instead complicit with and trying to maintain patriarchal familial powers. *Changgui* as a recurring figure in Chinese folklore stories could be traced back to the time of Southern Dynasties (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) containing similar narrative structure. In these similar stories, a person who was eaten by a tiger became a ghost (*changgui*) and, in turn, helped the tiger by becoming its accomplice and aiding the tiger in killing people (Tang & Guo, 2008). *Changgui* therefore is portrayed as a despicable figure that has lost its consciousness for helping the monster (tiger) rather than seeking

revenge for itself. One participant Rong offered her explanation of *changgui* drawing from a well-known feminist influencer who is often associated with the popularisation of anti-marriage discourse on Weibo:

*Hou (note: a feminist influencer) had an explanation for changgui. Changgui was a person who got eaten by a tiger and became a ghost. And then interestingly this ghost became something like a pimp for the tiger. It will trick others and then offer them as sacrifices to the tiger. That's not difficult to get. It's like, you are a woman, and you have a son. So now your son has to get married which means he has to find a wife. At the very moment all those suffers and grievances from your experiences as a wife and a daughter-in-law in your husband's family... You would think oh I've finally gone through. So you got to take the revenge and inflict all those onto your own daughter-in-law. That's a typical form of changgui I guess.*

*(Rong, 24, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

What struck me at once was that Rong used the word 'pimp' (*la pi tiao*) to describe the role of *changgui* as the proxy between the tiger and its supposedly future victim. In the perspectives of Rong and/or the feminist influencer, this horror narrative of human-eating monstrosity is immediately turned into a (hetero)sexualised and highly affective allegory of women's innate and universal vulnerabilities in a heteropatriarchal society; that is, to be consumed. The figure of *changgui* is intentionally painted to be disgusting, perhaps even more so than the actual monster who commits the atrocity – indeed, it will not come across as such a surprise when a wild beast preys on a human as it is when a human being aids in the consumption of its own species. In this specific context of symbolic use, the feeling of disgust is intensified by a combination of a fear of falling



victim to the patriarchal marriage-family continuum (Ding & Liu, 2011) and the rage of being failed by women who align with the patriarchal family and kinship despite all the 'suffers and grievances'. It hence also tells us about an implicit desire and yearning for feminist bond to cut through or replace the patriarchal lineage as the paradigm or basis for any sorts of intimacies and affective ties. This became clearer in another social media diary written by Rong:

*News title: A female professor at Shandong University proposed to lower legal age of marriage to 20 years old for men and 18 years old for women.*

*Rong's comment: As an elite and intellectual, she doesn't speak for people of her same gender, but act like a changgui for men. There's a reason for women's inferiority in this country. Not only the patriarchal oppression, but also changgui as the accomplice and other women being numb.*

*(Rong, 24, social media diary no.2)*

In this diary entry, Rong reflected on the news that she read during that week regarding a proposed lowering of legal age of marriage (which was mentioned by other participants as discussed in Chapter 5). In this short piece of writing, both Rong's rage and yearning appeared to be more pressing and specific in her criticism of the 'female professor'. This professor's suggestion on amendment in marriage law apparently went in the opposite direction of the anti-marriage tendencies of digital feminisms in China and she became an embodiment of *changgui* in Rong's account. In juxtaposing of this female professor with the 'mother-in-law' who is presumed to be eager to find her son a wife, it is possible to trace Rong's aversion oriented towards conservatism and family-oriented women but in the meantime, an underlying desire for feminist alliances. What seems contradictory and problematic (at least to my own positionality) was an amplified separatist tendency

when it is more productive to work towards feminist solidarity firmly founded on the subversion to the patriarchal institutions of marriage and family. Moreover, it runs the risk of enforcing a universalising state of victimhood and collective vulnerabilities experienced by girls and women (Koivunen et al., 2018). Other participants like Dong have shown a more reflexive empathy regarding this:

*XX: So you were suggesting that some feminist influencers were marginalising women from 'lower class' [note: the original expression in Chinese was 'diceng funü' and I was quoting Dong's own words] in a condescending way?*

*Dong: Yes.*

*XX: Can you please give an example?*

*Dong: They would call some... emmm... Those who have a lower income and are in a relationship that could probably fit into a more traditional gendered relations – it's basically like, women would cover most domestic work and contribute to the family a lot and probably sacrifice the sense of self for the family. Of course I don't think this mode of family or relationship is okay. But they (note: the feminist influencers) would call these women nüchang, using chang in the sense of changgui... this attitude towards these women I think are not inclusive enough. It's almost like they were making fun of these women or ridicule them. Maybe they think these women deserved it?*

*(Dong, 21, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In the current discursive-material conditions of highly precarious neoliberal economy and ongoing dominance of patriarchal familial cultures in China, Dong was more reflective of the privilege of considering the rejection or delay of marriage a choice. It will

be something that needs careful and continuous negotiations which may never be accepted by one's own family as shown in Chapter 5. I have struggled with how to address my own uncomfortable feelings with the use of the ghost *changgui* in varied feminist discourses circulated online as well as in some excerpts from the interview transcripts and social media diaries of my participants. To quickly dismiss someone as a *changgui*, it seems to be depleting them of their voices, which is so difficult to reconcile with my own feminist ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2006a). Nevertheless, when I carefully ponder over this concept, I keep finding its conceptual creativity and affective 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2004) fascinating. Ahmed (2004) argued that affective responses to disgust are often performed through repeated iterations of 'that's disgusting' while feeling violated and threatened to expel and distance oneself from the object of disgust. The recurring narrative-events of *changgui* in online feminist discourses engendered the accumulation of affects, feelings and emotions turning it into a 'sticky' object (Ahmed, 2004), an affective-discursive assemblage.

Drawing from a fable from the famous Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi<sup>14</sup>, Liu and Ding (2005) presented a methodological reading of a conversation between two characters, *Ying* (shadow) and *Wangliang* (shade). *Wangliang* (the slight shade outlining the shadow) questioned *Ying* the shadow why *Ying* could not obtain an independence from *Xing* the form to exist or to have its own autonomy and character. The positionalities of these two

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<sup>14</sup> Taoism is another major Chinese philosophical school apart from Confucianism and there are rigorous contemporary philosophical studies attempting to establish conversations between Taoism and the monism as in Deleuze's vitalist philosophy. Deleuze and Guattari (2013, p. 182) referred to the notion of Tao in their conception of Body-without-Organ. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to further explore this link, but mentioning this might be helpful for readers unfamiliar with Chinese philosophy to have a grasp of this philosophical text as radically against mind/body dualism (Braidotti et al., 2018; Lee, 2013).

characters in their questioning and replying are exceptionally thought-provoking. *Ying* the shadow as the casted darkness when light hits a thing or a substance with form (*Xing*) was replying to *wangliang* that is a more intangible shade. However, *Ying* the shadow formulated its answer purely in relation to *Xing* (the form-substance), which is seemingly unmentioned as a character in the text but asserts its (in)visible dominance as a central point of reference. It provides a philosophical illustration of the mobility and hybridity of subjectivities that deviate from the dualistic structures such as dominant/marginal, subject/object and self/other, resonating with nomadic subjectivities of becoming (Braidotti, 2001, 2006b). In the politics of patriarchal familism, *changgui* seems to be the casted shadow of the pervading parental/pastoral power – noting how filial piety is sustained through matrilineal power as discussed in Chapter 5, whilst the (un)filial daughters are the neglectable and invisible shades that cannot seem to find their voices. However, in specific feminist politics of assailing *changgui*, it is *changgui* who is rendered unnoticeable and unheard, whilst the voices of disobedience to the parental/pastoral power from the (un)filial daughters seek to recentre their own vulnerabilities and fear for being subjugated to patriarchal familism.

This goes back to my conceptual figuration of (un)filial daughters whom I think with and think through in my whole analysis and writing process. I also frequently think about the moments of collision with my mother that felt almost irreconcilable when she continued to stress the ultimate ‘completeness’ for a woman lies in marriage and motherhood even after my coming out to her. As a queer feminist researcher, still, I challenged myself not to impose and recentre my own vulnerabilities. As Kyrölä (2017, p. 272) noted, reflexive research practices themselves should be considered as ‘affective processes but practices of ethical subject formation, in the sense that they entail working through contradictory

and racialized affective relations'. Liu and Ding (2005) proposed a method/politics of *wangliang* that is most powerful in its constant questioning from the 'margins' of the normative order and to build connections and networks amongst the marginal/ised. Developed from this, I draw upon the implication of the affective forces of the imperceptible to argue for a collective feminist politics that needs to move beyond an individualistic perception of one's own vulnerabilities (Banet-Weiser, 2019).

#### **7.4 Impossible solidarity? Managing affective dissonance and the norm of harmony**

In the literature review, I mentioned a critique of the oversimplification of contemporary feminist politics and activism in China to an opposition between the oppressive state and heroic resisters (Ye, 2021). In the previous section, I illustrated the aesthetic-affective forces of *changgui* that sustain affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020) of fear and disgust. I argue that it could be potentially translated into a more transformative and empathetic feminist politics when *changgui* started to be seen and heard as the embodied vulnerabilities of hybrid, heterogeneous and normadic subjectivities (Braidotti, 1993). What digital feminists in China nowadays are facing and responding to is far from a hegemonic entity such as a patriarchal and paternalistic state. On the contrary, throughout the whole thesis I have been trying to show how the parental/pastoral power of patriarchal familism as diffuse, pervasive and instantiates as different forms of neoliberal governmentality, extending into both online and offline spaces.

In the meantime, a recurring normative discourse of harmony seemed to justify necessary avoidance of any sorts of conflicts in the formation of feminist alliances and processes of community-building. For instance, Wing told me that one salient element of

taking part in any public discussions online is the ‘tolerance’ of divergent viewpoints and ideas. When I probed into how that was experienced and practised in the interview, Wing pointed to the significance of ‘maintaining a harmonious environment’. I mentioned this conversation earlier in the previous chapter in a discussion on how this discouraged feminists and women online from reporting and directly confronting antifeminism for the fear of being positioned as problem seekers – an archetype of feminist killjoys (Ahmed, 2017; Ringrose & Renold, 2016). Wing took up the responsibility on herself to align with the ideal of ‘harmony’ when expressions of divergence in viewpoints and expressions of antifeminism became much obscured. It is further affirmed in another participant Darry’s account, where this 19-year-old young woman from Guangxi wrote about the expectation on women to appear composed in her social media diary:

*To be honest, I am really concerned if appearing as too pressing or radical would leave bad impressions for those who are less acceptable of my opinions, so what I say about feminism to others are mostly moderate.*

*(Darry, 19, social media diary no.6)*

Connecting this responsabilization of harmony in online settings to what Orgad and Gill (2019) conceptualised as a ‘safety valve’ for feminist rage in a postfeminist mediated contexts, the notion of harmony became problematic for enacting a norm of gendered affective labour of maintaining the intricate dynamics in contentious political discussions. In the second interview with Darry, I asked her what she meant by trying to be ‘moderate’ in her expression of feminist ideas and Darry mentioned the Confucian moral maxim of ‘harmony should be prized the most’ (*yi he wei gui*):

*Darry: Even if you’re desperate to make others understand, you should pretend like you’re not... If you’re trying to seize every opportunity to talk some sense*

*into other people, they'll just think you're trying to make everything a gender issue.*

*XX: Are you talking about your own experiences?*

*Darry: Yes. Since that one big fight with my roommate I've been thinking... (getting into fight) it'll just make you sort of an easy target if you're tagged (as a feminist)*

*XX: What do you mean?*

*Darry: You'll get targeted at if you're explicitly a feminist.*

*XX: So you prefer to avoid getting into conflicts when you talk about gender and feminist issues?*

*Darry: I've always disliked getting into conflicts... Well, for me, harmony should be valued the most (yi he wei gui). But if it's just a debate-like conversation with others I tend to speak bluntly.*

*XX: Are you talking about conversations in general including online? How do you manage conflicts of views online?*

*Darry: I might click into one's profile before deciding whether to get into debates – I'd perhaps just walk away if I sense they won't listen to me. In more extreme cases when they get more aggressive, I'd just block them. Of course, if I think they just have confusions about my ideas I'm willing to explain, but not to argue.*

*(Darry, 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

From Darry's reflections on her own experiences of discussing gender and feminism both online and offline, it becomes noticeable in conversations where conflicts occur feminists would be frequently positioned as the cause of the conflict – 'you'll get targeted', as Darry

puts it. It exposes the danger of conducting feminist pedagogy in times where feminism itself becomes repudiated (McRobbie, 2004), speaking up as a feminist immediately positions you as disruption to 'harmony', making you into a wilful subject (Ahmed, 2014), a feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010, 2017). Media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2021) argued that recent developments in big data and machine learning gives rise to an algorithm-driven homophily for instance the recommendation system of platforms. Echo chambers hence will no longer be an issue that could be intentionally avoided by users (Dubois & Blank, 2018), but structurally deployed by digital platforms to ensure polarisation for the purpose of profits through disintegrating dominant groups into clusters of 'angry minorities' (Chun, 2021, p. 243). Research on manosphere and networked misogyny (Ging, 2019a; A. E. Marwick & Caplan, 2018) for instance, presents perfect empirical cases of this problem, where an array of angry mobs of conservative groups is networked around antifeminist and misogynistic hate and backlash, claiming for victimhood of feminism.

What underlies Darry's imagined scenario of conflicted conversation is in fact a polarisation of ideas and speaking to someone not willing to listen or open to divergent opinions. However, in these cases of scenario, Darry would be the one who 'walk away' as a strategy for getting into potentially conflicted exchange. I argue that this rhetorical harmonization is not only a responsive strategy of managing antifeminist hate and violence but is increasingly constructed as a sensibility (Gill, 2007) of navigating the digital public space. This notion of harmonious online environment is hinged upon the silencing and marginalisation of subversive voices, which is complicit with CCP's postsocialist governmentality (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009). In addition, this exemplified how was further confirmed via the political rhetoric of 'civilising the internet' as affective



governance (Yang, 2017, 2018) of overt voices of subversion online that could potentially challenge the Party-state regime. It echoes previous research on Chinese feminists' report of constantly conducting self-censorship (Wang, 2021). In everyday social media practice which has been incorporated into the neoliberal governmentality of patriarchal familism and how 'harmony' appears as a normative discourse in particular participants' accounts and also a distinctive platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015) of dealing with conflicts of opinions. This is an extremely worrying issue for conducting digital feminism or any sorts of political resistance which will need further research to continue the discussion. As Hemmings (2012, p. 150) suggested, a significant challenge for feminist politics lies in 'how we move from affective dissonance to affective solidarity... particularly in terms of how we might move from individual experience to collective feminist capacity'. I argue that this challenge informs feminist movements and research to avoid imposing singular perspective and positionality, but to allow and value embodied and embedded knowledge (Braidotti, 2016, 2019b) in the fostering of feminist solidarity. Moreover, it imagines the possibilities for alternative ways of feeling with and connecting to others, to acknowledge how the (in)visibilities and vulnerabilities are experienced differently through affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2016, 2019b).

## 7.5 Conclusion

I reiterate two meaningful and potentially transformative aspects of digital feminisms as responses to gender and sexual inequalities in my conclusion this chapter by mainly focusing on the affective and intimate fabrics of feminist politics and pedagogy in the context of Chinese social media platforms. I argue that digital feminist politics allow alternative ways of knowing, feeling and connecting with others outside the realm of

patriarchal familism. Linking to the notion of mediated intimacies (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2013), I conceptualise feminist connections and networks enabled by digital media as a form of digitally mediated intimacy or belongingness to a feminist community, cutting through the 'conventional' and dominant intimate ties based on family or intimate relationships. In the meantime, I extend the discussion by engaging the concept of digital intimate public. I argue that digital feminisms on *Weibo* create digital intimate publics which depends on ideals of affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020) and expressions and feelings of sameness (Kanai, 2017). It was articulated through this chapter and empirical cases of expressing feminist rage, anger and disgust to interrogate how these ideals normalise specific 'feeling rules' within online feminist politics, reinforcing a conventional framework of intimacies and community building. It suggests the need for addressing the ongoing challenge of embracing and articulating differences that are central to feminist politics and epistemologies while simultaneously working towards constructing a sense of feminist solidarity. It lies in the onto-ethico-epistemological responsibility of feminist scholars to do the job of conceptualising what these feminist discourses, feelings and affects could form into various forms of struggles and what these feminist struggles could amount to as disruptive forces of the ongoing power dynamics.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

This research project started as a qualitative inquiry into how Chinese girls and young women experience gender and feminism in a digital era. By looking into feminist resistance and activism on a specific platform of *Weibo*, it contributes to the research field of digital feminism, which investigates how digital technologies and social media have been embraced by feminists across different contexts and how this pushes forward feminist movement and facilitates potential social change (Baer, 2016; S. Jackson, 2018; Jouet, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Munro, 2013). Taking inspirations from feminist poststructuralism and posthumanism (Braidotti, 2006a; Grint & Gill, 1995), this thesis moves away from a techno-determinist view of digital feminism as an inherently new form of feminist movement and activism featuring the use of social media and digital technologies. Instead, it delves deep into the emergence of feminist subjectivities, resistance and collective actions from Chinese girls and young women's engagement in digital feminisms through everyday and mundane social media practices.

This research project stands as one of the pioneering doctoral level empirical studies of digital feminisms in China, with a specific focus on ordinary girls and young women to explore their experiences of active participation in online discussions related to gender and feminism. More broadly, this research engages with and contributes to three main fields of knowledge: girlhood studies, feminist movements and activism, and feminist media studies. It sheds light on the intersection of these fields in relation to contextualised and situated knowledge (Braidotti, 2017; Haraway, 2018; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013) about Chinese digital feminisms, forging new paths of inquiry and

theoretical developments. At the beginning of this thesis, I proposed to respond to the following research questions through this project:

1. What are the main discourses about gender and sexual (in)equalities that girls and young women are responding to on *Weibo*?
2. How do girls and young women experience and engage in discussions and debates about gender and feminism online? How do their engagements in feminisms relate to and/or shape their experiences of gender both online and offline?
3. How do these girls and young women understand their online practices in relation to the broader feminist movement in China?

To explore these research questions, this project was informed by online ethnographic methodologies and its strength in studying online communities and contexts (Hine, 2000, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012). *Weibo* was chosen as an ideal 'site' for conducting this research for its claims for promoting sharing and a sense of 'publicness' (Fuchs, 2015) and its relevance to research on public discussions and political participation in Chinese context including feminist activism (for recent examples of research see A. Y. Peng, 2020; Xue & Rose, 2022). For the first stage of this research, I conducted an online tracking study of gender-related discussions on *Weibo* for a whole month (36 posts and 391 comments recorded). During this stage, I also completed the recruitment for research participants by posting a recruitment advertisement on my personal *Weibo* page to look for girls and young women in high schools or university with experiences of engaging in online discussions and activities related to gender and feminism. I successfully recruited 21 participants aged between 16 and 24 from different parts of China who took part in the second stage of the project consisted of semi-structured, individual interviews and social media diary study. All 21 participants were interviewed twice and after the first

round of interviews they were asked to write social media diaries once a week for a period of ten weeks. All interviews were semi-structured with a prepared question guide. First round of interviews focused on general questions around their online and offline experiences of gender inequalities and engagement with feminisms. After collecting the social media diaries and transcribing the first interviews, I did a preliminary thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) of interview and diary data which informed the second interviews exploring key issues highlighted in their diaries and former interviews that mattered to the participants. Two rounds of interviews with these 21 participants (42 interviews in total and typically 1-1.5 hours long for each interview) and social media diaries (n=211) provided me with rich accounts of how these girls and young women experience and explore gender and feminisms in both online and offline spaces.

In this thesis, I outlined the spatiotemporal multiplicities in narrating the participants' experiences of gender and feminism given their different age, geolocations, diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds and so on. Meanwhile, the discussion on individual girls and young women is essentially hinged upon a nuanced understanding of feminisms as collective and collaborative forms of knowledge and practices. Following Haraway (2018), I attended to narratives and practices of narration as historically and culturally located and, more specifically, embedded in discursive-material contexts and power relations in contemporary China. I carefully contextualised and discussed how patriarchal familism as a complex and intersectional form of patriarchy is reconfigured in postsocialist and neoliberal China (Bao, 2020), where contrasting discourses from Confucian familial culture and socialist values of gender-egalitarianism are mobilised and incorporated into neoliberal gender regime (Walby, 2020). This thesis manifested how

Chinese digital feminisms as situated within and as responses to the neoliberal and postsocialist reconfigurations of patriarchal familism.

From the findings of this research, I mapped out the subjective becomings (Braidotti, 2006a) of (un)filial daughters as emerged from within this complex context by looking into their struggles of negotiating and resisting the patriarchal, heteronormative, and familial norms about girlhood and young femininity. I elaborated how digital feminisms constituted feminist networked counterpublics (Keller, 2015; Trott, 2021) as these (un)filial daughters come together on social media platforms, learning about feminism and exploring possibilities for feminist solidarity and collective actions against gender and sexual inequalities. Adopting the concepts of affective/discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012, 2013) and networked affects (Paasonen et al., 2015; Sundén & Paasonen, 2020), I argued that networked feminist resistance is formed not merely based on how women and feminists articulate issues of inequalities but how they affectively and intimately relate to these inequalities. In the following sections, I want to take this final concluding chapter as a chance to review and reflect; aiming to recapitulate what I found out in this research in response to the research questions, to think about how I contributed to the fields of study conceptually and methodologically and the limitations of this research, and also to suggest how I wish to inform future research on related topics as well as feminist activism on the ground through this project.

## **8.2 (Un)filial daughters: The 'subjects' of Chinese digital feminisms**

As mapped out in the introduction chapter of this thesis, the ambition of this project of (un)filial daughters aims to provide a conceptual figuration to understand feminist

resistance embedded in the discursive and material conditions facing Chinese digital feminisms. I explored how the participants learned about and engaged in feminisms online to address and resist norms about girlhood and femininity that are reinforced by ongoing and evolving patriarchal familism and, more importantly, how they imagine change. Conceptually this figuration of (un)filial daughters is sutured together through a Foucauldian discourse analysis of gender and power (Lazar, 2005b; Riley et al., 2021) as well as his later work of subjection and governmentality (Foucault, 1978, 1982) and Braidotti's theory of nomadic feminist subjectivity (2011, 2012a). On this basis, I conceptualised the postsocialist feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters as these girls and young women navigate and negotiate the wider context of neoliberal and postsocialist metamorphosis (Bao, 2020) of gender, sexuality and other power dynamics. I contend that they emerge as unforeseen and unrecognised subversions (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015) to patriarchal familial discourses and intimacies.

By exploring the participants' experiences of gender and feminism, the findings from interviews and social media diaries revealed tension and conflict between their feminist aspirations and the prevailing cultural norms and expectations on them as girls and young women. To delve into these contrasting forces shaping their unique processes of subject formation, I adopt feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005) and the conception of psycho-discursive positionality (Davies, 1991; Wetherell, 2008) which proposes to understand how the participants psychosocially relate to these norms and expectations buttressed by patriarchal familism. Chapter 5 started with a discussion on son preference as a recurring theme in the interviews and social media diaries shaping how specific participants experience and position themselves in relation to this gendered and patriarchal norm. My analysis of son preference focused on how it perpetuates girls'

inferiority within the patriarchal order and operates along with the norm of filial piety enacting a filial and obedient girlhood to silence girls' challenge and resistance to the patriarchal family. Despite claims that the Chinese patriarchal family has been dissolving or descending in face of increasingly neoliberal conditions following the socioeconomic transformations in the postsocialist era (Shen, 2011; Y. Yan, 2003, 2016), this research contributes to the field of knowledge by conceptualising patriarchal familism as an intricate web of postsocialist governmentality (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009).

I have chosen to focus on filial piety as a postsocialist neo-familial discourse (Y. Yan, 2021) and Confucian moral value (Chappell & Kusch, 2007) that normalises alignment with parents' expectations and filial obligations particularly involving the continuation of the family bloodline through heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Previous research has noted a renewed ideal of family-centred femininity (Martin, 2023) that takes shape in postsocialist China under the influence of global neoliberalism, applauding the perfect balance between career and family. This is complicated by the discourse of *funü huijia* (women return home) reappeared in state media and propaganda pressuring women to 'return home' (Song, 2016) and a twist in the family planning policy which turns from strict one-child policy to a pronatalist stance. State discourse such as 'family virtues' and 'family/state as isomorphism' shows how patriarchal familial discourses have been endorsed by and incorporated into CCP's filial nationalist project (Wang, 2020) and patriarchal authoritarianism (Fincher, 2018) which sees family as the foundation for governing and maintaining social and political stability.

From the interview data and social media diaries, I identified a prevalent discourse of anti-marriage (*fanhun*) within online discussions pertaining to gender and feminist issues. This discourse was constantly raised by the participants when discussing their



experiences of engaging with feminist topics and politics that mattered to them. I argue that anti-marriage discourse takes issue with patriarchal familism and its enactment of women's familial and filial obligations (J. Song & Ji, 2020), in this special political and cultural climate where pro-family policies and neofamilism prevail in official discourse and mass media. By contesting the dominant narrative surrounding the continuation of family through heteronormative marriage, the anti-marriage discourse seeks to disrupt and question the societal expectations placed upon women, thereby opening up spaces for alternative modes of knowing and living as girls and young women.

What I referred to as the emergence of postsocialist feminist subjectivities of (un)filial daughters therefore can be best understood as disruptive forces embedded from within the reconfiguration of patriarchal familism. They manifest a multifaceted challenge and resistance to the dominant patriarchal and familial structures by questioning the norm of filial piety and the prescribed familial obligations such as marriage and reproduction placed upon them as daughters, in order to redefine and renegotiate their position within and beyond the realm of family. In the meantime, the findings of this research pointed out that anti-marriage stance adopted by these (un)filial daughters noticeably relates to neoliberal and postsocialist notions of individual success and independence. In resistance to the naturalisation of family-centred femininity and dominance of familial values and intimacies, the feminist discourse of anti-marriage sometimes complies with a specific neoliberal rhetoric of upward mobility (Walkerline, 2003) through education and career. In particular participants' accounts, access to education and better job opportunities would supposedly help girls and young women to seek 'freedom' outside the domestic sphere and provide a good life and a bright future outside the dominant, heteronormative, lineal model of marriage-family continuum (Ding & Liu, 2011). Meanwhile, certain

participants (such as Dong and Gigi) showed a more intersectional perspective and problematised anti-marriage as a popular feminist discourse online predominantly prioritised the struggles of urban, educated and tech-savvy young women.

In response to this overarching and rapidly shifting context of patriarchal familism, this thesis hence articulates the subject-formation of (un)filial daughters as ongoing processes of becoming (Ahmed, 2014; Braidotti, 2006b). I demonstrate the relevance of looking at their subject-formation as non-unitary and multi-layered processes (Braidotti, 2006a, 2019a) but firmly located and embedded in the contexts of neoliberal reconfiguring of patriarchal familism as well as resistance and conformity to it. This articulation follows the visionary affirmative ethics of Braidotti (2017) to acknowledge that both normative and transformative powers have always been embedded within subjectivities. This project of (un)filial daughters is hence also an onto-ethico-epistemological one. It aligns with and contributes to poststructural and posthuman thinking of subjectivity by showcasing a viable approach to theorising the subject-formation as situated and localised processes in a specific material-discursive context of digital feminisms in postsocialist China. This approach affirms the potential transformative forces embedded in the feminist awakening and resistance of ordinary girls and young women and in the meantime critically interrogate the global contexts of neoliberalism and that continues to shape these processes of subjective becoming.

### **8.3 Articulating the experiences and practices of digital feminisms**

Another contribution of this research is to map out how Chinese girls and young women of today navigate the landscape of gender and sexual politics and in the meantime trying

to construct a public space for feminism without flattening out their own varied experiences of gender and feminist struggles. Echoing former research on social justice movements facilitated via digital platforms (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Tiidenberg et al., 2021), it is an important finding of this research that social media are constructed as crucial pedagogical, educational and social spaces by the participants. To a considerable degree, engaging in digital feminisms initiated most participants' feminist journey of awakening, resistance and the discovery of feminist communities and support networks.

First of all, digital feminisms offer a platform for the dissemination and exchange of feminist knowledge and discourses, effectively challenging and subverting the prevailing values and norms associated with patriarchal familism. Towards the end of Chapter 5 and throughout Chapter 6, I discussed the role of social media in enabling the participants to reflect on and respond to those experiences of gender and sexual inequalities and how their subversiveness relates to their engagement with digital feminisms. For instance, in speaking of women's experiences of sexism at workplace, Gigi, Wu and Tree all drew up the concept of motherhood penalty to explain their perceptions of gender inequality outside the domestic sphere, which is still closely related to the societal expectations on motherhood and women's caring labour.

By understanding girls and young women as both digitally literate netizens and digital feminists engaging in quotidian and routine practices within digital spaces, this thesis gained insights into the unique ways in which various forms of feminist practices are constructed and adopted in the specific social, political and technological contexts of Chinese digital feminisms. This perspective allows an investigation into the strategies, challenges, and opportunities that arise as these feminists navigate the constraints and possibilities of online platforms to advocate for gender equality and social change. In

Chapter 6, I explored a range of digital practices shaping and constructing spaces for resistance from the interviews with my participants and their diaries focusing on making feminist issues visible. I looked at a specific case of sexual violence on a bus to demonstrate how feminist visibility of this incident was achieved through collective actions of netizens who joined together in the discussion, aiming to keeping it 'trending' so it would draw public attention and press the authorities to respond and take actions. This contributed to the illustration of mundane practices such as liking, reposting and following as digital feminist tactics and a vernacular to turn a trending topic into a feminist social media event. The notion of visibility was also constantly highlighted in digital feminist politics of consciousness raising in the participants' accounts. I explored how feminist awakening was associated with the participants' access to digital feminisms as alternative channel for knowledge that had enabled them to make sense of their own experiences of gender and sexual inequalities with feminist perspective.

In the meantime, the participants in this research reported to have to negotiate the potential risks as feminist visibility online are usually encountered with gendered hate and antifeminist backlash that strategically aim at women and feminists who are vocal and visible in online sphere. Echoing previous studies on online and networked misogyny (Han, 2018; Jane, 2016; Powell & Henry, 2017; Siapera, 2019), the findings of this research suggested that feminist netizens and activists had been targeted by online gender hate and violence which had not been properly addressed by platforms and censors. The participants in this research have accounted for the need for constantly negotiating online safeguarding tactics by keeping up with platform affordances and vernaculars for managing conflicts and tensions in political discussions on different platforms. Potential and actual cases of violence and abuse were found to traverse

through the boundary of online and offline. For an illustration, consider Lew's case of being called 'no.1 feminist bitch in the college' on university campus for feminist contents she posted online, and Moon as a feminist influencer with visibility experiencing networked misogynistic violence online causing her to fear for her personal identity and other information being made public (Anderson & Wood, 2022; Eckert & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020). This demonstrated that the work of digital feminists required not only digital literacy but also techno-political knowledge and affluence to take the safeguarding responsibilities upon themselves. It revealed the insufficient acknowledgement of the problem of online violence and abuse and the urgency of pushing forward policy change and digital literacy education in order to ensure and encourage young women's safe and equal participation in online public spaces.

Social media played an indispensable role for the young feminists who participated in this research, as it provided a unique space for them to learn about gender and feminism and build feminist connections and networks beyond the scope of family and school. This was particularly important as many of these young feminists reported that discussion and knowledge related to gender, sexuality and feminism were barely taught or encouraged at school or in family, making social media a crucial outlet for girls and young women to explore these topics and to find and build a supportive feminist community. In Chapter 7 I particularly traced the affective circuits in the participants' experiences of digital feminisms that network feminist expressions and form alliances based on affective homophily of 'feeling the same' such as the expression of feminist rage against violence, gendered norms and inequalities.

Moreover, my analysis extended the problematisation of affective homophily (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020) and expressions and feelings of sameness (Kanai, 2017) as the

foundation for feminist solidarity as it can shut down the possibilities for articulating differences among feminist communities. For instance, I looked at a specific figuration of '*changgui*' which is related to Chinese folklore stories of a person-turned-ghost who was consumed by tiger but instead of seeking revenge, collaborated with the tiger by deceiving others to be devoured. In certain online anti-marriage discourses, it became a derogatory name of particular married women who internalised patriarchal conservative values and saw the continuation of patriarchal lineage as their own responsibility. I unpacked the affective hues of this figuration of *changgui* that revealed the ambivalence of rage and disgust, construing anti-marriage as a reactionary response to patriarchal familism rather than a pursuit for radical transformation. Moreover, it runs the risk of universalising, silencing the embedded experiences of the more marginalised and hence leading to dissonance among feminist netizens and communities online.

In this sense, digital feminisms were also experienced as forms of mediated intimacies (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2013) or belongingness to a feminist community, cutting through the more 'conventional' and normative intimate ties based on family or intimate relationships. These affective ties of digital feminisms are critically important for young feminists who feel excluded at school and in family where subversive feminist voices are not welcomed. Conversations with girls and young women in this research suggested that the practices of digital feminisms reached beyond the online sphere as they try to educate friends and family about feminism and even build offline feminist groups at school. These hybrid, networked and multi-sited forms of feminist activism debunk some claims of digital activism as slacktivism and lacking real-world impact (Franklin, 2014; Munro, 2013). More specifically, this evidenced how impact of digital

activism extended into offline spaces and the blurred lines between online and offline contexts for conducting digital feminisms in China.

#### **8.4 Conceptualising feminist networked counterpublics and resistance**

Following the discussion on how these (un)filial daughters have learned from and actively participated in online feminist discussions, this research also looked at their online practices and experiences of navigating the possibilities and precarities of digital platforms while exploring gender and feminism online. This research took the notion of digital public sphere as a conceptual entry point to discussing online politics and cultures as well as their significance for those whose voices have been marginalised in the general society/public sphere – young women in this case of my research. It followed and furthered previous research on digital activism and online political participation in Chinese context that mostly conceptualised internet and social media as an alternative public sphere (Li, 2004; Yang, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). The findings of this research suggested that the online sphere is nothing like a pre-existed and homogenous virtual space with clear boundaries, mimicking a Habermasian ideal of public sphere where access and visibility is evenly distributed and democratically shared. On the contrary, structural and systemic inequalities such as patriarchy could be duplicated and amplified in the digital realm. Moreover, social media itself is becoming a sophisticated web of power where state control, platform governance and surveillance, netizens and activists all come into play.

The discussion on digital feminisms in this thesis proposed a more nuanced notion of digital public sphere and argued that it can only be better understood as discursive

arenas (Fraser, 1990) in the making where a kaleidoscope of publics and counterpublics coexist, organising around diverse and even contrasting discourses (Warner, 2002). Bringing together the conceptions of networked publics (boyd, 2014) and feminist counterpublics (Keller, 2015; Ringrose & Regehr, 2020), this research explored the emergence of what I called 'networked feminist counterpublics' in digital feminisms. My conceptualisation of networked feminist counterpublics takes account of how aggravating online censorship and platform governance of *Weibo* affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; Keller, 2019) shape feminist struggle for visibility and voices in Chinese social media which do not necessarily take the form of 'hashtag feminism' as some most high-profile cases in many other contexts do (Horeck, 2014; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Williams, 2015). Therefore, I have also shown how ordinary social media users are summoned into various practices of networked feminist visibility (Clark-Parsons, 2021) including following and making feminist social media events, consciousness raising, digital writing and feminist influencing. The findings of this research showed that as these (un)filial daughters joined forces online as emergent feminist counterpublics, they had also come up with decentralised, hybrid and coordinated tactics and strategies of managing and maintaining feminist visibility.

Moreover, in my discussion on the affective and neoliberal economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Geboers & van de Wiele, 2020; X. Xie et al., 2022) afforded by social media platforms, exclusion and marginalisation in gender and sexual politics started to emerge. My analysis of varied tactics and practices of digital feminisms extended the critique of normative and affective economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2018) that is based on a neoliberal logic of quantifying and monetising attention and online interactions. In



the meantime, digital feminist labour (Mendes, 2022) structuring the visibility of feminist issues is rendered invisible. I manifest how these normative and affective conditions for managing feminist visibility is also complicit with censorship, networked surveillance, and antifeminist hostility and backlash to shut down feminist voices of resistance.

In addition, I mapped out the affective and intimate dimensions of digital feminist politics and how feminist counterpublics are formed through discursive practices as well as networked affects (Paasonen et al., 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). This research suggests that the affective-discursive formation of feminist networked counterpublics appeared as decentralised, contingent but not necessarily diversified or inclusive. The intimate and affective fabrics of digital feminist politics create belongingness and connect women and feminists based on a sense of 'feeling the same' (Kanai, 2019), constraining the discussion and inclusion of differences. I argue that the formation of online publics and networks carries significant sociocultural and political implications as they may destabilise gender and other power relations and potentially push forward social change in unforeseen ways. These findings contributed to understanding of the affective dimensions of contemporary feminist politics in Chinese social media which had been overlooked in academic research. It critically engaged affect-informed feminist media studies to outline the possibilities and challenge of transforming the dissonance in online political expressions into feminist solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Pruchniewska, 2016).

## **8.5 Digital feminisms as the continuation of feminist struggles**

As I argued throughout this thesis, the findings of this research indicated the importance of understanding how social media is used for facilitating contemporary feminist activism

and politics and its implications. In the meantime, I contended that ideas, discussions, and struggles of digital feminisms of today are intimately connected to and a continuation of the broader Chinese feminist movement. In this regard, I also problematised generational narratives of feminist movements, with a focus on in Chinese context, that tend to differentiate between different 'periods' marked by major historical events such as the Communist Revolution or the Economic Reform.

In the introduction, I have noted that some accounts of Chinese feminist movements, such as socialist state feminism (Z. Wang, 2005, 2017a), tend to centre political narratives of the state and hence enforce disruptions between historic periods, presuming that women and feminists were fighting for vastly different goals in each period. I recognise these former studies on Chinese feminist movements as the foundation for my research as they do not only allow glimpses into the feminist past of Chinese women, but also shape how we think of feminist ideas and struggles at present and the outlook for future. Instead of being stuck with the issue of generational tensions within feminist movements, however, I propose to shift the analytical focus of researching digital feminisms to look at how to reimagine the possibilities for a collective change through and beyond the digital realm.

Connecting to this thread of thought, my research showed how concerns of women of today carried on and spoke to the feminist ideas and struggles of previous generations of (un)filial daughters. Admittedly, most participants of this research are still at relatively young age which means they could strategically delay their familial and filial duties of marriage and motherhood (X. Xie, 2023). For future research, it is important and meaningful to explore how such transgressions of and disobedience to familial norms and expectations could form into wider recognition and awareness of gender and sexual inequalities and activate political collective actions. On one hand, the popularity of anti-

marriage discourse in Chinese grassroots feminist voices outlines a transgressive politics of intimacy that calls for detaching from patriarchal familism. On the other hand, as discussed previously, some of current forms of transgression and disobedience are grounded in a neoliberal discourse of individual success, creating constraints and marginalisation within digital feminist politics. I argue that this individualised approach to feminism ties girls and women down to the wider conditions of socioeconomic inequalities and divisions in relation to gender, sexuality, urban-rural division, ethnicity and so on, as Dong and Gigi have already been aware of. Linking back to the context of a neoliberal reconfiguration of patriarchal familism, I contend that feminist subversiveness embedded in the discourse of anti-marriage emerge from Chinese girls and young women's experiences of and discontents with entrenching gender and sexual inequalities. It taps into contemporary digital feminist politics in China that noticeably diverts from the strategy of working with/within the state power, but not necessarily poses open challenges to wider political and social structures.

## **8.6 Limitations and reflections**

During the planning stage of this research project, I had no idea that the Covid-19 pandemic would prompt many social researchers to study the possibility of conducting fieldwork online. More empirical studies on Chinese social media taking up or combining online ethnography methodology have been published since I conduct my fieldwork, although different terminology of online/ digital/ virtual methodology might have been adopted (for examples see Gu, 2021; Tan & Shi, 2021; Zani, 2020). Compared to those studies that mostly looked at one specific community or group, one feature of this research project that distinguishes itself lies in its conceptualisation of and analytical

focus on social media event in the shaping of networked counterpublics and resistance. This shift in research focus moved away from a dominant paradigm that looked only at clearly-defined key actors in online politics and activism towards capturing the unfolding of social media events (Cheng, 2017) that is highly unpredictable and could amount to unexpected social and political impact (C. A. Rentschler & Thrift, 2015).

The online tracking method was originally adopted in this research to look at the emergence of social media event from a trending topic which largely relied on manual capturing of online discussions on gender and feminism at certain moments. This methodological choice imposes significance limitations on this research as it only captures particular moments and selective participants of online feminist discussions. It was designed to be combined with interview and diaries of participants in related discussions to explore social media events as experienced and constituted through individual participants' accounts. This method worked well in the pilot study as I looked only at one specific trending topic and quickly located two digital feminists who responded to this topic and were willing to take part in the study. However, it was later found out in the formal fieldwork that because of the prolonged duration of participant recruitment I ended up with participants who did not necessarily participate in the online discussions that I tracked and recorded. Future research could possibly resort to network analysis and computer assisted methods of data mining that could retrieve larger amount of online data (Chung et al., 2021) and develop more creative qualitative methods to trace the unfolding of social media events.

It was during the later stage of analysis and writeup that I sought to reconceptualise feminist social media events. This reconceptualisation was prompted by a more thorough and critical interrogation of media studies' conventional definition of events which

usually is hinged upon visibility. It was sparked by my concerns that I had about the methodological constraints of the online tracking study emerged after the completion of fieldwork as reflected above; but more significantly, it brought me to the potentials for approaching the realm of events as multi-layered processes of becoming (Patton, 1997). Departing from only paying attention to the abrupt and disruptive incidences and heightened moments, this approach to events that I have taken attends to the affective capacities of the unfolding of events that could potentially activate networked resistance to dominant narratives of gender and feminism. By looking into the participants' narratives of particular encounter with feminism as event of awakening and resistance, it necessarily acknowledges the capacities and intensities for continuous and subtle politico-cultural contentions (G. Yang, 2009) and more 'under-the-radar' forms of feminist resistance (Abidin, 2016, 2021). This is of particular importance in complementing different modes of digital feminisms in relation to visibility (as discussed in Chapter 6) that often have to negotiate the possibilities for collective actions that fall under strict surveillance and censorship in Chinese context. Drawing on empirical data from this distinctive sociopolitical and technological context, this research suggests alternative directions for both conducting and researching digital feminist activism, which accounts for the micropolitical practices of commenting and influencing as activism and takes its transformative potential seriously.

I completed the fieldwork for this online-based research from 2019 to 2020 and at that time there was little methodological resource that I could rely on since I wanted to combine interviews with social media diaries to figure out how my participants approach and interact with social media and whether social media can become feminist 'tools'. I looked at conventional diary study method and also empirical studies using time-logging

and digital diary where researchers asked participants to note down the social media activities that they were involved in (Rohm et al., 2013; Vandewater & Lee, 2009; Volpe, 2019). Although I called the method 'social media diary', I encouraged my participants not to think of it as a traditional diary writing that primary and secondary school teachers in China often assigned as homework and to be the designer of their own diaries. The actual ways of documenting and presenting used by my participants were diversified and multimodal. One participant Wing (who is also a fanfic writer) used cartoon-like drawing to investigate one topic each week that she thinks is relevant to online discussion on gender and feminism. Lew included one piece of fanfiction that she published online and shared with me in the interview how she perceived such writing to be a subtle way to raise people's awareness of gender inequality. More participants included screenshots of other netizens' posts, their own posts, videos and images that they saw online. In the second round of interviews, I began with asking them how the participants felt about 'the diary thing' and I was surprised by their positive responses, describing it as an 'empowering' 'inspiring' and 'precious' experience. Some participants also told me that it never occurred to them that they 'had so much to write' and the diary writing sessions each week 'was encouraging for me to be more outspoken and really start to influence others'. It again reminded me to appreciate these girls as politically active and caring for society and how much it would mean for them if their voices were being heard. Preliminary analysis of findings prompted me to realise that understanding feminists' digital practices as an exercise of social media as simply a 'tool' would be unsustainable. Particularly through the participants' reflections on negotiating of issues such as visibility and censorship in cases of online abuse and 'options' for taking action, I learned that their feminist actions and activism are bound by the distinctive environments of each digital platform. Further readings regarding platform affordances and vernaculars (boyd, 2011;

Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Q. Chen et al., 2016) enabled me to take a relational approach and understand digital platforms as interactive and technopolitical environments where digital practices are intertwined with technological features, design, governance of specific platforms as well as wider political and social contexts. The combination of social media diaries with two rounds of interviews is particularly useful in terms of understanding how these participants navigate their own journeys of feminist awakening, resistance and finding comrades, which constantly move across platforms and the blurred boundaries between online and offline settings. This method, however, is not supposed to replace alternative ways of collecting and presenting digital data such as direct observation of social media practices and events, where the researcher then needs to claim their role in editing, filtering and shaping the narrative through establishing the expertise in understanding a particular sociotechnical context (Markham, 2005, 2012).

The methodological novelty of this research emerged as a form of participatory methods by combining social media studies and interviews which involved the participants in the knowledge production practice. Therefore, it is pivotal to empower the participants as the experts of feminist voices and discussions on *Weibo* to take account of their perceptions and experiences of digital feminisms. This corresponds to my ethico-onto-epistemological stance as a feminist researcher-pedagogue and Chinese young woman (Barad, 2007). As I have touched upon throughout the thesis and reiterated in this chapter, I follow scholars who theorised research practices as research-assemblage (Fox & Alldred, 2015; Ringrose & Renold, 2014) and attempted to disrupt the normative paradigm of knowledge production. Instead of assuming researcher could give voice to the participants, I follow what Haraway (2018) theorises as a feminist commitment to situated knowledge production recognising 'knowing, seeing, witnessing, attesting, and

speaking as a particular body that is located in a particular time and place, both literally and relationally' (Osgood, 2020, p. 118). In this regard, I see my research itself as an affective/discursive practice (Wetherell, 2013) which also needed to be continuously unpacked and questioned. Taking the interviews as an example, I tried to encourage my participants to make the rules and set their boundaries of what they (do not) wish to talk about. During the interviews, neither the participants nor me pretended to be emotionless when we talked about disturbing issues such as experience of domestic violence and sexual violence. In fact, there were emotional and affective moments that some girls burst into tears or fell into silence and my own responses varied each time according to how I then 'felt' was the best thing to do. Most of these moments, however, were lost in the audio-recording and textual transcription, although I tried my best to note down most of them in the fieldnotes. It was later when I struggled with understanding those 'blank' moments in the audio files and a few descriptive words rashly jotted down that I started to realise how easily those could be lost in words. I do consider this as the limits for my specific methods of conducting, recording and analysing the interviews, testifying to knowledge and knowing as partial.

### **8.7 Ways forward: Invoking a networked resisterhood of (un)filial daughters**

In the introduction chapter I have mentioned the censorship and removal of a feminist group on *Douban* explicitly adopting a feminist politics of anti-heterosexual marriage and family, which showed connections to the 4B feminist movement in South Korea on grassroots level. In future research, I contend that it could invite some fruitful discussion to grasp the transnational links of the anti-patriarchal family feminist agenda and practice within digital feminisms across different contexts. This is not to suggest an



assimilation between these feminist movements or an oversimplified comparative case study that overlooks the complicated sociological contexts in China and South Korea. However, in both cases, familial cultures are highlighted for the continuing influences of Confucianism and young women are found to be leading voices in the emerging transgressive practices and counterdiscourses around familial culture in both contexts.

4B as in 4B movement (which later grew into the 6B4T movement mentioned above whose members explicitly claimed themselves as radical feminists) is a shorthand for its slogan '*bihon, bichulsan, biyeonae, bisekseu*' in Korean, which means no (heterosexual) marriage, no childbirth, no dating, and no (hetero)sexual relationships (J. Lee & Jeong, 2021, p. 633). This slogan carries a sense of negativity for its explicit promotion of a feminist politics of refusal (Ahmed, 2019; Honig, 2021) to practice the defiance and disobedience of a pro-natalist state and patriarchal gender regime that places women as the 'birth-machines' (J. Lee & Jeong, 2021, p. 636). Their acts of refusal involved both a destabilisation of conjugal and reproductive futurity, namely a straight, linear, chronological and heteronormative temporality (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005), as well as the establishment of self-help groups among women who committed to feminist politics of 4B (J. Lee & Jeong, 2021) – giving rise to intimate bonding and community building outside the patriarchal and heteronormative institutions of marriage and family.

It draws great relevance to what I found about how Chinese girls and young women respond to patriarchal familism in this research. It is the intention of this research to construct feminist research as potentially transnational projects. I call on future researchers to engage in open and collaborative conversations about feminist movements across Asian and non-Western contexts, not only to contribute to intellectual debates and research, but also to inform feminist practices and grassroots activism.

From my perspective, it is unhelpful to position digital feminisms as attempts to craft out fully utopian imaginary that is disconnected from the social reality (not to discredit the cultural, critical and aesthetic significance of such endeavours). My research investigated into resistance, intimacies and connections embedded and located within the ongoing processes of feminist social media events and feminist subject-formation. This project has thus made theoretical contributions to analysing nuanced and intricate forms of digital feminist practices that are shaped by and shaping the material-discursive conditions of contemporary feminist politics in Chinese context. I develop and contend for a theoretical approach to digital feminisms that delves into the everyday and mundane practices that are always embedded, embodied and located in specific material and discursive contexts and hence subjugated to normative powers of discourses and knowledge. Moreover, as the affordances, economies and governance of social media are constantly evolving, the techno-socio-political contexts for digital feminisms will not stay unchanged. The 21 digital feminists participated in this project, for instance, have shown the awareness of algorithms and affordances to keep up with understanding censorship and trying to find ways of circumvention by constantly altering wordings to fail machine-powered keyword-censoring and by using the delay and 'glitches' of manual censors to relay messages. Feminist media scholars who are interested in digital feminisms must also continue to open up the research field as a collaborative and reciprocal space to constantly learn from the experiences of feminist activists and meanwhile inform their future practices of activism.

In addition, this research pushes for understanding of how social media enables new forms of feminist networks, connections and possibilities for doing feminism. From the experiences of these ordinary girls and young women in China, it particularly matters

when their feminist ideas and actions have not been welcomed and supported at school, family and wider society. The experiences of my participants suggest that there is a silence about gender and sexuality in family conversations and school education, which leads to their turning to the internet and social media to explore these issues. Meanwhile, social media is not always a reliable source of information and participating in feminist practice online carries significant challenge and risks, which includes technology-facilitated abuse and violence (Henry & Powell, 2018). My recommendations argue that discussions on gender and sexual equality and diversity have to be acknowledged and better incorporated into school education as well as public discussion. To support young women's equal participation in the online world (Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014), formal digital literacy and guidance around issues of gender and sexual equity also need to be developed and policymakers and social media platforms need to take urgent actions by implementing more effective regulations of digital sexual and gender-based violence.

Bonnie Honig (2021, p. 101) in her feminist reading of Euripides' play *The Bacchaes* wrote: 'Sister is an anagram for resist'. The women of Thebes's flight from the city led to their practices of a new life in a heterotopia defying the order from their King and familiar patriarchal domesticity. They later asked for a foundational change and claimed for the city upon their return. Honig's reading has shown one way of re-telling a story (and constructing a theory) of feminist refusal as a gradual and productive form of world-making which, as I will argue, in itself is also a meaningful attempt at feminist world-making.

This thesis shares this spirit in its attempt at telling the stories of 21 (un)filial daughters, who refused to become filial nationalist subjects (Wang, 2020) and sought to challenge patriarchal familism that rendered alternative desires and practices of intimacies outside

the patriarchal family-state impossible. I mapped out how their feminist awakenings empowered them to think of their own experiences of gender and sexual inequalities in and beyond family in new lights. Moreover, this thesis delved deep into why their feminist commitment to and engagement in making these experiences visible begin within but extend beyond the digital space.

The emerging forms of networked counterpublics and intimacies enabled by social media paved the way for a possible future of a networked resisterhood, which would destabilise the patriarchal and neoliberal governance of intimacies through kinship and the marriage-family continuum (Ding & Liu, 2011). This research has built a case for digital feminist worldmaking combining the refusal of patriarchal familism and reimagination of intimacies to 'make kins' (Butler, 2002; Haraway, 2016) among feminist communities of resisters. It is at the end of its rope here to examine what such struggles and imagination would amount to. I hope this research project is from where parents, teachers, policymakers, social media platforms and researchers start to pay closer attention to their voices and experiences. It also requires future researchers to practise feminist care and creativity to carry on the work of paying attention to how feminist subversiveness find its pathway in the seemingly most unspeakable and unshakable.

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## Appendix

### Notes on translation and transcription:

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Mandarin Chinese. All social media diaries were written in Chinese. In write-up of this thesis, quotes or segments from interviews or diaries are fully translated into English in a verbatim fashion. Explanatory notes on translation of specific terms are included in the body of this thesis as well as in the appendix. Some important Chinese terms (such as *nüquan*, feminism) are transcribed in the standard pinyin orthography (in *Italic* form in the body of the thesis) and the original Chinese characters are given in the glossary for future reference.

## Appendix A: Glossary of Chinese terms

In this glossary I provide all terms and puns used or referenced in my thesis. Most terms are translated into English and presented in a basic Latin alphabetical order. Chinese characters and *pinyin* (*italic*) which is used to transliterate mandarin Chinese are included in brackets. I also try to explain each term or pun in English and include translative notes. Some terms such as *Zhinanai* will become more confusing for western readers if translated into English and have therefore been kept as it is in Chinese *pinyin*.

**Big-V** (大 V): Verified accounts in Weibo, including celebrities, athletes and official accounts of various institutions or corporations.

**Chinese Communist Youth League** or Communist Youth League of China (中国共产主义青年团/中国共青团): The major organisation for Chinese youth, under the leadership of CCP. Many Chinese young people will join this league at the age of 14 to 16, although might or might not fully understand the political commitment of this organisation. It is usually abbreviated as CCYL or CYL.

**Femi-fists** (女拳, *nüquan*): Femi-fist is a derogatory pun used by anti-feminist formations on Chinese social media. It is often used with an emoji of fist 👊 in place of the Chinese character *quan* (fist). The fist emoji (👊) hence becomes a common visual signifier for anti-feminism. The term itself is a play of words as femi-fist (literally translated as woman's fist) is a homophone of feminist or feminism (also pronounced *nüquan* in mandarin Chinese). Its connotation is quite similar to *feminazi* which disparages feminists as irrational or militant extremists, who conflicted with the

normative and familial ideal of Chinese femininity that values obedience, caring and gentleness. As discussed in the thesis, Chinese digital feminists also try to rework the visual of fist as a signifier of women's power, in order to counteract the negative connotations.

**KOL**, or key opinion leader (意见领袖 *yijian lingxiu*): In Chinese context, KOL is usually differentiated from *Wanghong* 网红. *Wanghong* literally translates to internet fame and hence is more similar to internet influencer in Western context. Both *Wanghong* and KOLs can be included in internet micro-celebrities. It is important to unpack the nuances in terminology for its implications on how I approach the conception of digital activists. I mostly stick to using **feminist influencers** in the thesis to refer to those microbloggers who focused on posting about feminism with a relatively larger number of followers (for example the participant Moon). Unlike *Wanghong* which is usually related to lifestyle, entertainment and social media marketing, KOL is often used to refer to those who have acquired their fame through their professional opinions and comments on a specific topic especially politics or social culture. The *Weibo* platform originally used the term KOL to advertise for the legitimacy of knowledge sharing on the platform through a variety of 'experts' and intellectuals from different industries and professions. However, in this thesis I do not conceptualise these digital activists as KOLs to resist its strong sense of aligning with the platform governance of knowledge regarding what qualifies as 'professional', 'key' opinions.

**Mass incidents** (群体事件 *qunti Shijian*): This term as used in the official rhetoric of CCP suggesting the need for surveillance, as Chinese authorities see mass incidents as threats for political and social stability. Mass incidents can occur both online and offline,

suggesting the connections between online and offline collective actions, although offline collective actions have become much rarer in China nowadays due to stringent political control.

**Tianyuan feminism, or indigenous feminism** (田园女权, *tianyuan nüquan*): It is a pejorative term often used to taunt digital feminists and feminisms. This term was originally taken from the name of *Tugou* or *zhonghua tianyuan quan*, a domestic dog breed in China. As feminism is widely accepted in China as an imported concept, this term has been used to abash and disparage online self-claimed feminists as ignorant and poorly educated like peasants. It implies the digital feminist are promoting ‘fake’ feminism compared to the ‘western’ and ‘real’ feminism. The term reveals sociopolitical power structure of urban-rural divide in China and reinforces a postcolonial notion of feminisms as essentially imported (western) knowledge. This term could be roughly translated into indigenous feminist or feminism but I avoided this translation here so that readers would not misunderstand it as a referent for emphasising the indigenous cultural roots and specific form of feminism that some researchers discuss (for example see Schaffer & Song, 2007).

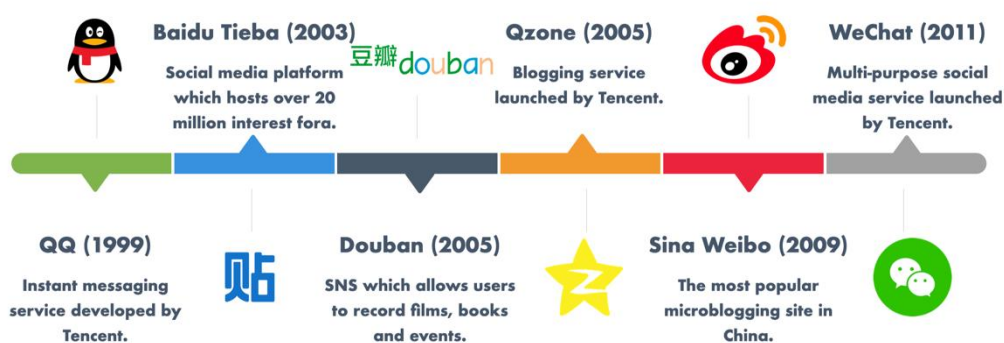
**Women’s liberation** (妇女解放 *funü jiefang*) : In this thesis it refers to the top-down socialist women’s movement initiated by the leadership of CCP and implemented through Women’s Federation in socialist era (1949-1976) to mobilise women to take part in social production. To avoid the confusion with women’s liberation movement (WLM) in western contexts I mostly used the term ‘the socialist project of women’s liberation’ for the purpose of clarity in my writing. It is also to note here that women’s liberation was often used as a preferred term instead of feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*) in CCP’s political agenda for promoting women’s rights and addressing gender inequality. It was

sometimes used interchangeably in official rhetoric as ‘women’s work’ (*funü gongzuo*), ‘women’s development’ (*funü fazhan*) etc. Under Xi regime in the past decade, the revolutionary discourse of ‘women’s liberation’ has gradually been replaced by the latter two terms with much stronger senses of postsocialist socioeconomic governance.

**Zhinanai** (直男癌): Or straight man cancer as being literally translated into English, refers to the chauvinist and sexist men. Zhinan, or straight men in English, was originally used in Chinese context as a joke about how heterosexual men often misunderstand women. Then some Chinese netizens combined the word ‘straight man’ and ‘cancer’ to refer to the men who belittle women, implying that some men are so stubbornly sexist that it is like an incurable disease. It can also use to name the sexist ideologies and behaviours of these men.

## Appendix B: Overview of Chinese social media platforms

Here I am including some brief introduction to the social media platforms mentioned in the thesis as well as a timeline for the launch of these major platforms.



**Weibo**, Sina Weibo 新浪微博 [www.weibo.com](http://www.weibo.com)

Sina Weibo is the most popular microblogging site in China with more than 550 million monthly active users as of 2021. Similar to other microblogging site including Twitter, it allows users to share short posts and interact with others through comments, likes, and reposts. There were actually other microblogging sites such as Tencent *Weibo*, *Sohu Weibo*, *fanfou* etc, developed and managed by different internet corporations, but Sina *Weibo* really became dominate in Chinese microblogging. So when people talk about *Weibo*, it usually refers to *Sina Weibo*.

*Weibo* is actually a literal translation of micro-blog in Chinese. So the Chinese word '*weibo*' can also be used to refer to specific accounts on *Weibo* platform (a microblogger) or specific posts (a microblogpost). For example: Have you checked out Li's new *weibo*? This can be asking you whether you have checked out Li's new *Weibo* posts or account.



*Weibo* promotes the openness and publicness of the platform in an ideology of sharing. Its slogan 'whenever, wherever, discovering new stuffs' is a reflective of this. Due to its large user base and wide reach, Weibo has played a crucial role in digital activism, including raising awareness of social issues and organizing collective action online.

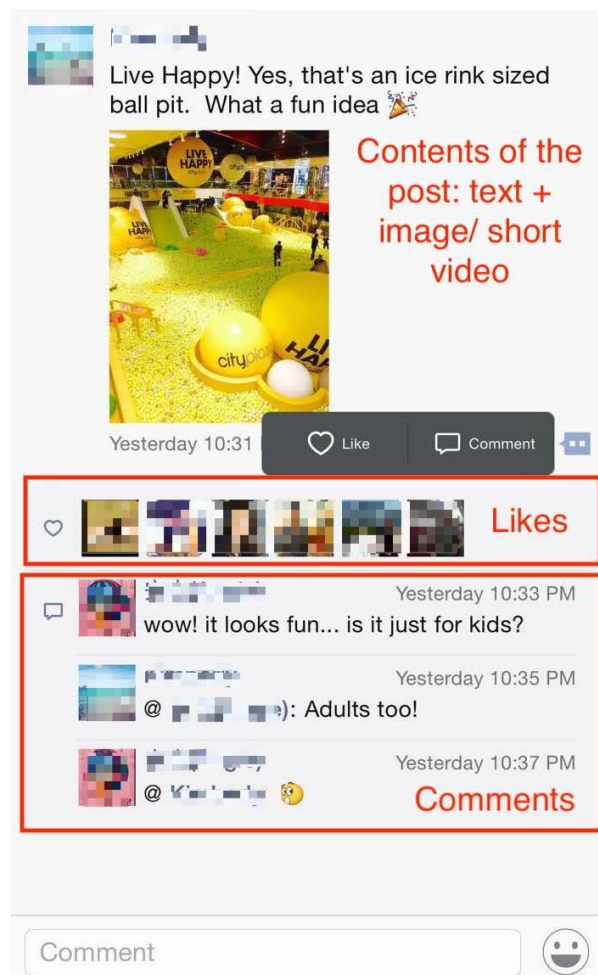
**Douban:** 豆瓣 <https://www.douban.com/>

*Douban* is also a popular social media platform in China. One of its key features is to allow people with interests in the same topic to build a discussion group and it works like a forum where group members can post and interact through replying to others' posts. Most posts in the discussion groups on *Douban* are accessible for browsing, but users usually need to set up a profile and log in to the platform in order to post. It used to be one of the most popular sites for feminist activist groups (including the famous *Feminist Youth Action School* I discussed in the introduction chapter) for its feature to foster online communities as well as the built-in feature to organise offline activities, events and meetups, etc. As previously mentioned, prominent activist accounts and discussion groups (such as *Feminist Voices*, managed by Lü Pin who was quoted in Chapter 1) have been permanently shut down since 2018. The platform has even taken a stricter stance by targeting grassroots feminists, removing groups related to anti-marriage feminist movements.

**WeChat** or **Weixin** 微信

WeChat is a popular messaging app developed by the company Tencent. It is one of the most widely used social apps in China, with over a billion active users. It is usually

considered as a mega-app or super-app, because it does not only offer instant messaging and voice/video calling features but also provides users with a variety of services such as mobile payments, gaming, and social networking. **WeChat Moment** is a built-in feature within the app that allows users to share photos, videos, and text updates with their contacts, similar to Facebook's newsfeed. It is a popular way for users to keep in touch with their friends and family and share their daily life experiences. Below is a demonstration of WeChat Moment interface (just for demonstration and it is not an actual screenshot).



## Tencent QQ

QQ is an instant messaging software that was also developed by Tencent. It was launched as a computer software way before WeChat and was the most widely used messaging service for a long time. It allows users to communicate with each other through text messages, voice calls, video calls, and other features. **Qzone** is a social networking platform that is integrated with QQ and allows users to share photos, videos, and other types of content with their friends. It also includes features such as blogs and virtual gifts. Both QQ and Qzone are popular among young people in China and are often used as a means of staying connected with friends and commonly used in Chinese universities to manage students and student campus life.

**Baidu Tieba** 百度贴吧 <https://tieba.baidu.com/index.html>

*Baidu Tieba* is a Chinese online forum platform, similar to Reddit or Quora, where users can create and participate in forums (called *Tieba*) dedicated to specific topics such as TV shows, movies, music, celebrities, and more. *Baidu Tieba* is one of the largest forums in China, where users can share their opinions, ask questions, and engage in discussions with others who share similar interests. Similar to the discussion groups on *Douban*, most posts are accessible for reading but it often requires a registered profile to reply. It has undergone significant surveillance for the affordance of facilitating political and civic discussions. If you try to access these forums, you will most likely only see a notice reads: 'Sorry. According to relevant laws and policies, this forum is closed temporarily.'

## Appendix C: An example of social media diary from the pilot study

**Panda's Weibo account**  
(processed by me to remove social media identifier)

**微博原文:**  
@人民网  
9月9日 16:00 来自 人民微博  
【男教师，如何才能留下你？】“学校里#男教师太少了#，孩子缺乏阳刚气。”开学伊始，太原部分家长和学校为同一件事犯了愁。全国教师队伍男女比例失衡现象普遍存在，且整体呈现年级越低，男教师比例也越低的态势。待遇不高、社会认同感低，是被提及最多的原因。(人民网连中国)

**高赞评论:**  
即便是选择了教师行业，男教师大多也都当官去了，极少安心一线本职工作的，基础教育阶段更明显。好多本分教书反而被人说“没出息”“没出路”啥的吧。  
这意思是女老师让孩子没有阳刚之气？真能用啊。

**我觉得——**  
“学校里#男教师太少了#，孩子缺乏阳刚气。”这样的标题，大概是能看出性别刻板印象对女性产生影响。最重要的是，我认为这样的观念是对女性的不公平。  
许多行业性别比例失衡仿佛已经是个老生常谈的话题了。在全国各地，教师队伍男女比例失衡的现象普遍存在。有记者在走访中发现，各地学前教育阶段和义务教育阶段男性教师数量稀少。如此的性别比例失衡也引起了部分家长和学校的担忧，但仿佛家长和学校的担忧又是不同的。  
从学校的角度来看，随着二胎政策的实施，越来越多的女教师选择怀孕、生育，这对学校的教学管理造成了很大的困难。从另一个角度看，我认为这也是许多用人单位不愿意雇用女性员工的原因。只因为教育行业的工作稳定、工资不高等特点使更多女性愿意成为教师，而男性却在“当老师没出息”这种观念下很少选择进入教育行业。然而近几年来，我时常看到一些观念认为因采取某些优惠政策来鼓励男生考师范专业或者进入教育行业。不能否认促进性别比例平衡是个重要的事情，但我认为促进更多男性进入教师行业最重要的是改变人们心中的性别刻板印象。社会上有种偏见，认为男人应该要事业有成，要有出息，而当老师却是没出息的表现。有许多对教师行业十分热爱的男性或许会因为这种偏见而选择放弃成为老师。我认为应该用舆论引导人们消除这种偏见，这种偏见不仅限制了很多男性，同样也限制了很多女性选择她们喜欢的职业。  
消除性别偏见，增加教师行业的吸引力，才是促成教育行业性别比例平衡的关键。然而现实是，许多学校却致力于给与男教师更多的优惠来吸引男性。这种措施无疑是对女性的不公平。倘若有一男一女两个能力不相上下的教师，男教师却因为性别而获得更好的待遇，那这对女性教师的努力付出公平吗？  
例如某学校招聘时表示男老师不需要经验就能优先，但是女老师需要经验才能获得优先考虑资格。(见图一)

**This is the original Weibo post that Panda talked about in this diary entry regarding the lack of male teachers in schools**

**These are two comments which drew Panda's attention under the Weibo post above (processed to remove the identifier)**

**In this whole section Panda writes about her own opinions on the Weibo post and comments**

**This is an image that Panda inserted in her diary showing an example of sexist teacher recruitment notice. The notice clearly writes that male teachers and experienced female teachers are preferred.**

中山市杨仙逸小学体育路学校是全国德育实验学校，广东省文明单位，广东省文明校园。为保证学校的可持续发展，学校现面向社会招聘语文、数学、英语、美术、音乐教师数名。

(一) 招聘条件

- 1.热爱教育工作，富有责任心及服务意识，具有优良的学科专业素质、心理素质和沟通能力，个人形象好。具备教师资格条件，年龄一般在35岁以下；具有胜任应聘岗位需要的相关专业知识和工作能力；具有正常履行职责的身体条件。
- 2.男教师及有经验的女教师优先，具备独立承担相应学科竞赛培训的能力或潜力。
- 3.全日制本科及以上学历，普通话二级乙等以上，小学一级职称或以上，县、市学科带头人、骨干教师优先；研究生学历的待遇从优。
- 4.应聘教师要求能担任学生特长培养工作。

(应聘的毕业生可以先安排实习)

(图一)

对于教师性别比例的失调，有人却担忧男教师太少，会使孩子缺乏阳刚之气。恕我直言，这种观念简直是奇葩。我读书也有十多年了，从未见过一个男生缺少阳光气是因为男教师太少。换句话说，女教师多使孩子有了“阴柔气”吗？我想完全没有吧。无论一个人是“阳刚”还是“阴柔”，都不是教师能简单影响甚至决定的。先不说一个男生是否一定要“阳刚”才是一个真正意义上的男性，难道女教师就一定没有阳刚气吗，难道给孩子最好的教育非得需要“阳刚气”不可吗？男孩子都不是妖精，不需要男老师来“采阳补阳”。倘若一对父母真的希望自己的孩子有阳刚之气，那这个培养也绝对是来自于家庭、学校、社会的教育，而非来自于男性教师对他的影响。

### Translation

\*\*\*15

[https://Weibo.com/\\*\\*\\*](https://Weibo.com/***)

The original post:

@RenminNet<sup>16</sup>

9 September 16:00 From RenminWeibo

[How to persuade male teachers to stay?] “There are #toofewmaleteachers at school and the kids are lack of masculinity.” As the new academic term starts, some parents and schools in Taiyuan are worried about the same thing. The gender imbalance among school teachers is a nationwide problem. Moreover, the percentage of male teachers is even lower in lower grade. Low payment and social status are the most

<sup>15</sup> Panda’s Weibo username.

<sup>16</sup> This is the official Weibo account of a news media, so I choose not to anonymise it.

commonly mentioned causes. (Renmin Net Links China)

Comments with many likes:

Comment 1<sup>17</sup>: Even if they chose teaching as their profession, most male teachers went for administrative jobs in the end. Very few of them stayed in the teaching posts. This is more common in primary education. There were some who chose to stay, but people would say that they are too unambitious anyway.

Comment 2: Does it imply that female teachers have made kids lack of masculinity? It's so easy to find a scapegoat!

What I think ----

There are #toofewmaleteachers at school and the kids are lack of masculinity. From titles like this, it is so obvious to see the influences that gender stereotypes have on education. More importantly, from my own view, such opinions and thinking are unfair.

The gender disparities (in employment) in many industries are no brand new topics. The gender imbalance among school teachers is a prevalent phenomenon in the whole country. Some journalists found out that there was a lack of male teachers in early years and primary education, which had made some parents and schools worried. However, it seems that parents and schools are worried about different things.

From the perspective of schools, as the second child policy had been carried out, more and more female teachers chose to have babies, and this had caused much trouble to the management of teaching activities. From another perspective, which I think is the key reason why employers become less willing to recruit female employees, it's because education is a stable but not well-paid profession. So females are more willing to become teachers, while males rarely chose to for teaching is usually viewed as an unpromising job. Nevertheless, in recent years, I have often seen some preferential policies as encouragement for males to take part in teacher training or education profession. It is undeniable that the advancement of gender balance is very important, but I think that, in order to encourage men to enter into education industries, it is more important to change the gender stereotypes. There are these prejudices in our society that men must succeed in their career while being a teacher would be seen as unpromising. Many men who love to become teachers might give up because of these prejudices. We should lead the public opinions to eliminate this kind

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<sup>17</sup> Panda included the usernames of the two Weibo users but they were anonymised by me.

of prejudices as not only do they set up limitations for men, but also restrain women from choosing jobs that they are fond of.

To eliminate gender bias and make teaching as a more appealing job is the key to solving the gender disparities in teaching professions. But in fact, many schools are committed to bringing in more preferential (recruitment) policies to attract male teachers. This is absolutely unfair to all females. If there is a male teacher and a female teacher who are both equipped with skills, the male teacher is treated better because of gender, would this be fair considering the hard work of the female teacher?

For example, some school stated that male teachers are preferred even if they did not have teaching experiences, but when it comes to females, only experienced teachers would be considered.

(Screenshot of the recruitment notice inserted)

People ascribe children's lack of masculinity to the gender imbalance among school teachers. To be honest, this is absolutely absurd. I have been a student for over ten years, but never have seen one boy is not masculine enough because there are not enough male teachers. In other words, is it because female teachers have made children feminine? I think the answer is absolutely no. No matter one is 'feminine' or 'masculine', the influence will not only come from teachers. Does a boy have to be masculine to become a real man? Leave this question here for now. But is it true that female teachers must not have features of 'masculinity'? Is masculinity so indispensable in education? If parents really want their kids to be masculine, it must come from the influences of family, schools and society, rather than solely from male teachers.