

The Power of Citation

Feminist Counter-Appropriation of State Discourses in Post-Reform China

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive examination of the new discursive strategy devised and deployed by Chinese pan-feminist communities in response to the pervasive state intrusion, which we call *feminist counter-appropriation*. These tactics entail adoption and strategic adaptation of the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from severe punitive measures. Our analysis discerns two types of counter-appropriation practices: deliberate counter-appropriation that involves parodic and satirical redeployment of the party-state's stigmatizing framing of feminism, and promotional counter-appropriation that uncritically embraces the sanitized version of feminism following the statist and nationalist logic yet creates room for discussion of gender-related and other forms of social inequalities. While acknowledging inherent limitations and susceptibility to manipulation by conservative forces, we argue that these counter-appropriation practices demonstrate the resilience of civil societies in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and challenge the entrenched gender inequalities in post-reform China.

Keywords: Chinese pan-feminist communities, counter-appropriation, discursive strategies, parody and satire, state discourses

In late January 2022, as numerous Chinese people were eagerly awaiting the celebration of the Lunar New Year and the first Winter Olympics to be held in China, a disconcerting incident unfolded in Feng County, Xuzhou, resulting in a dampened sense of excitement and enthusiasm across the country. A video, uploaded by a vlogger on Douyin (the Chinese counterpart of TikTok), quickly became viral and attracted substantial attention from social media users, both within and beyond China. As the video showed, a woman, scantily clad and fastened by a heavy metal chain around her neck to the wall, was enduring the frigid temperature within a dilapidated hut and dehumanizing mistreatments.¹ Previous videos shared by the same vlogger indicated that the woman was a mother of eight children and, for that matter, had been chosen to participate in a state-sponsored philanthropic initiative. Allegedly responding to the state's appeal for assistance, the vlogger arrived at the scene and was shocked by the dire circumstances. After providing the woman with a warm coat, he left promptly.

The searing outrage and delusion spawned by the woeful story of the mother in Xuzhou overshadowed the state-sponsored aurora of Eileen Gu, a US-born female athlete of mixed Chinese heritage who won two gold medals in the Winter Olympics representing China instead of the United States. The devastating contrast between their destinies exposed the contrived “feminist” narrative surrounding female athletes like Gu, which has been fabricated and disseminated by the regime to construct a forward-looking and progressive image of China. Indeed, this manufactured notion of feminism has been at the core of the statist narrative that centers on the promotion of women's rights since the United Nations (UN) conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.²

1. Shuyue Chen, “The Woman Who Gave Birth to Eight Children, and People Said She Was Crazy: The Fengxian Incident and a Public Reckoning with Woman Trafficking” [*shingle bage haizi de nvren, renmen shuo tafengle: fengxian shijian he yichang dui guai-mai funv de qingsuan*], Initium Media, February 15, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20220201-mainland-xuzhou-detained-mother/>.

2. Zhenge Wang, “Detention of the Feminist Five in China,” *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476.

Given its exceptional visibility, the case about the woman in Xuzhou was subject to less severe censorship in comparison to other public incidents. However, instead of interpreting this as a concession by the Chinese state regarding its omnipresent censorship machinery, it should be understood as an evolved surveillance strategy, given that online debates surrounding the chained mother were meticulously modulated to mitigate potential repercussions. Conversations that framed the case in ways to emphasize the unique nature of the woman's predicament or focused on criticizing the local government were less likely to be censored. Conversely, any mention of broader structural issues that extend beyond the state-defined parameters, such as human trafficking, police misconduct, and the adverse consequences of the preceding one-child policy, would be promptly removed.³ This calculated censorship mechanism spurs the public to develop more adaptable discursive tactics to evade pervasive surveillance when articulating alternative, dissenting perspectives.

Scholarly research has kept track of the utilization of diverse discursive strategies by Chinese netizens, including the employment of memes, puns, and emojis,⁴ among others, as covert means to evade censorship and circulate "illicit" information beyond the scope of state surveillance.⁵ Nevertheless,

3. Such as the demands of a thorough investigation of official misconduct or the interrogations of China's human trafficking, which inevitably links to the imbalanced sex ratio and the state's previous one-child policy. See, for example, Xie Minghua, "What I Know about Trafficking Women in Feng County" [*wo suo liaojie de fengxian guaimai funv*], *China Digital Times*, February 4, 2022.

4. Bingchun Meng "From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet," *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33–51; Kecheng Fang, "Turning a Communist Party Leader into an Internet Meme: The Political and Apolitical Aspects of China's Toad Worship Culture," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 1 (2018): 38–58; Weiming Ye and Luming Zhao, "'I Know It's Sensitive': Internet Censorship, Recoding, and the Sensitive Word Culture in China," *Discourse, Context & Media* 51 (February 2023): 1–10.

5. Lijun Tang and Syamantak Bhattacharya, "Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet," *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 2 (2011): 10–18; Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar." *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752–72; Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, "Digital Communication and Political Change in China" *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011);

the increasingly sophisticated censorship systems and heightened risks of retributive consequences have diminished the efficacy of such expressions,⁶ calling for more adaptable and creative approaches to push back the state's control while providing a relatively safer outlet for dissent. Counter-appropriation, we argue, presents one such option, wherein Internet users repurpose or adopt discursive forms originally formulated for specific contexts and employ them in entirely different situations. Such discursive practices enable them to imbue these linguistic constructs with tangible agency, thereby effecting subtle yet significant changes while minimizing the risk of direct reprisal from the state.

The discursive exchanges between the party-state and the public, as evidenced by the counter-appropriation practices of Chinese pan-feminist netizens, provide a prism to explore and comprehend the evolving dynamics of gender and politics in the era of networked communication and China's rise as an assertive power. As Petrus Liu posits, the incorporation of Chinese women and sexual minorities as vulnerable surplus populations to facilitate cross-border circulation of capital reproduction has played a pivotal role, not only in China's recent ascendance within the world trading system but also in the consolidation of neoliberal relationships on a global scale.⁷ There is, however, a lack of discussion from feminist and queer perspectives on

Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215–31; Siu-yau Lee, "Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact," *China Quarterly* 228 (December 2016): 1061–80; Xiaoping Wu, "Discursive Strategies of Resistance on Weibo: A Case Study of the 2015 Tianjin Explosions in China," *Discourse, Context & Media* 26 (December 2018): 64–73.

6. King-wa Fu, Chung-hong Chan, and Michael Chau, "Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and Impact Evaluation of the 'Real Name Registration' Policy," *IEEE Internet Computing* 17, no. 3 (2013): 42–50; Hailong Liu, *Propaganda: Ideas, Discourses and Its Legitimization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Yun Tai, and King-wa Fu, "Specificity, Conflict, and Focal Point: A Systematic Investigation into Social Media Censorship in China," *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 6 (2020): 842–67.

7. Petrus Liu *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

these structural changes and material realities. The linguistic turn in critical theories of Western academia “has reached a dead end,” to borrow from Nicholas Rose, and has not been able to explain the political economy of gender politics in a non-West setting.⁸ We might need to bring forth a shift toward a rhetoric of materiality for changes. In response to this imperative, Liu utilizes Judith Butler, a foundational figure in the linguistic turn, as an illustrative case to elucidate the underexplored intellectual connection between queer studies and Marxism. He sees Butler’s intellectual evolution from the notion of gender performativity to ethical alterity as a crucial juncture in queer studies that aligns more closely with Marxism regarding the impersonal logic of value extraction.

In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler responds to critiques of a voluntaristic interpretation of gender performativity proposed in her earlier book, *Gender Trouble*.⁹ She rejects the notion of gender as a volitional act and instead constructs an ethical framework positing that the possession of a gendered and sexed body constitutes a fundamental vulnerability that can potentially serve as a foundation for political communities. Liu argues that this recognition of the formative social dimension of the body lays the groundwork for a shared critique of the voluntarist subject, highlighting the convergence of Marx’s labor theory of value and Butler’s conception of gender. This conversation between queer theory and Marxism proves crucial for Liu to develop a new account of “the particular way China entered the world of global capital” and “a more analytically precise vocabulary (and politics) for deciphering the matrix of gendered life and political economy.”¹⁰

Taking cues from Petrus Liu’s work, this article incorporates the notion of “citation of the law” substantiated by Butler in *Bodies That*

8. Nikolas Rose, “The Human Sciences in a Biological Age,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2013): 4.

9. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

10. Petrus Liu, *The Specter of Materialism*, 5.

Matter to critically engage the counter-appropriation strategies developed and employed by Chinese pan-feminist groups and explore the efficacy of these tactics in unsettling the dominant state apparatus that has been significantly augmented to address the challenges arising from China's decades-long practices of economic liberalization.¹¹ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler elucidates the sociolinguistic construction and performative nature of gender and sex, highlighting their reification through repetitive bodily practices. Informed by Butler's work, feminist and queer scholars have developed incisive understandings of the symbolic aspects of gender and sex to unsettle essentialist notions that have historically subjected women to heteropatriarchal and masculinist norms. However, this approach has also attracted criticism regarding its practical efficacy in effecting tangible material changes. In response, Butler contests the presumption that regards gender and sex as transcendent rules existing independently before their assumption, positing instead that citation functions as the very mechanism through which these concepts are produced and articulated as a symbolic order of law. This order compels "a citation of its law that reiterates and consolidates the ruse of its own force," and the "process of sedimentation or what we might call materialization will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I.'"¹² As citational practices are always embedded in specific sociohistorical and material conditions, each enactment of citationality produces nuanced and minor differences in the established chain of the symbolic order, giving rise to slippages and ruptures within the law of gender and sex that create conditions for grounded and nuanced changes. In line with Butler's insights, we draw upon examples from Chinese social media to demonstrate how repurposing or even uncritical adoption of sociohistorically situated narratives about feminism to tell divergent stories becomes a viable strategy for

11. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 14.

12. Butler, 15.

social change as other options of resistance become increasingly restricted in contemporary China.

Our analysis situates the counter-appropriation tactics used by pan-feminist netizens within broader sociohistorical frameworks to foreground its significance on both political and theoretical levels. The article starts with an overview of how the term *feminism* is viewed in Chinese media. Tracing the evolving narrative patterns of feminism and their embedded meanings from the Maoist era to the reform era, and then to the post-reform era, we identify two strands of citational practices—what we call *counter-appropriation*—developed and employed by Chinese pan-feminist communities¹³ as a response to tightening social control. While discussions of other topics about social justice, such as labor rights and political liberty, are stringently censored and rendered practically unfeasible on Chinese media platforms, feminism and gender equality have emerged as perhaps the sole topic deemed acceptable by the state. Yet as demonstrated later in this article, these topics must be sanitized and reframed to align with broader agendas of the Chinese authorities, often taking the form of state feminism or individualistic feminism, or sometimes a combination of both. The first approach, *deliberate counter-appropriation*, proves an efficacious strategy that allows social media users to redeploy the state's stigmatization of feminism in parodic and satirical ways to expose the fallacy of its hypocrisy and fallacy. By contrast, uncritical adoption of sanitized feminism that has been appropriated by the state, or *promotional counter-appropriation*, albeit lacking ostensible parodic intentions, amplifies the discursive space for deliberations concerning women's

13. As illustrated by Wu and Dong, the realm of contemporary Chinese feminism is characterized by intricate divisions and internal conflicts, as various factions hold divergent perspectives and engage in critical dialogue, particularly regarding contentious issues (such as the acceptance of lean-in feminism and the attitudes toward entering heterosexual marriage). Resultantly, we will use the phrase *pan-feminist communities* in this paper as a means to demonstrate the collective discursive strategies employed by contemporary Chinese feminist groups, despite their nuanced differences in certain positions. See Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, "What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 471–92.

rights and gender-related issues and creates opportunities for discussions of other structural matters. As our analysis shows, these counter-appropriation practices, intentional or not, provide safeguarded and useful means to disrupt the monitoring mechanisms of the state and counteract the resurgence of denunciations (*jubao*) observed during Xi Jinping's reign.

Feminism in Chinese Media

Feminism has remained a “shady” term in the eyes of China's censorship authorities. On one hand, within the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological and propaganda framework, the term *feminism* historically carried negative connotations due to its perceived association with Western bourgeois ideologies that are deemed corrupt and antagonistic.¹⁴ The significance of “women's work” (*funv gongzuo*) was also overshadowed by the party's primary focus on class struggle.¹⁵ On the other hand, the party asserts its role in promoting women's liberation as a significant accomplishment to legitimize its position in power. Through a hierarchical organization, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) that operates under its leadership, the CCP has retained dominance over policies pertaining to “women's work” during both the Maoist era and the early stages of the reform period. This paradoxical situation has resulted in contingent yet severely constrained space for public discussions surrounding feminism and women's issues.

With the emergence of the Internet and social media in the new millennium, discussions surrounding feminism and gender equality gained significant traction and visibility. These topics became widely disseminated and gradually recognized by the public, emerging as one of the few subjects

14. Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

15. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 519–51; Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

deemed acceptable for discussion while other issues pertaining to social justice became virtually unfeasible to address within Chinese social media. The younger generations of Chinese pan-feminist communities actively harness social media platforms for activism. Grassroots feminists have developed efficacious avenues to challenge the conventional top-down paradigm and engage in vibrant dialogues with the public and mainstream media.¹⁶ Yet the feminist community encountered a severe setback in 2015, triggered by the arrest of the Feminist Five and the subsequent controversy that reverberated globally.¹⁷ This incident had a profound impact on the approach of the Chinese party-state toward feminism beyond the scope it sets. Confronted with mounting domestic outrage, the government sought to justify its actions by accusing the activists of being influenced by “foreign political forces” intent on undermining China’s socialist ideology.¹⁸ This event marked a substantial transformation wherein the state resorted to orchestrated and coordinated measures to ostracize and subdue the feminist movement in China.

The characterization of feminism as a product of “foreign political forces” and the implicit suggestion of subversion against the CCP’s ruling is part of the broader shift aimed at thwarting any form of activism or organization that challenges the authority of the party-state, aligning with the core agenda of the Xi administration, which seeks to revert to a totalitarian ruling style amid boiling and recurring social crises. By attributing feminism to external influences, the government seeks to undermine the legitimacy of feminist activism, portraying it as a threat to the established social order and the so-called socialist values to legitimize its repressive measures against feminist activists. The newly adopted stigmatizing narrative concerning

16. Hou 2012; Wei Zhang and Cheris Kramarae, “‘SlutWalk’ on Connected Screens: Multiple Framings of a Social Media Discussion,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 73 (November 2014): 66–81.

17. Zheng Wang, “Detention of the Feminist Five in China.”

18. Zheng Wang, “What Is ‘Foreign Political Power?’” [*hewei ‘guowai zhengzhi shili’*]. *Chinese Feminism* (blog), April 2, 2015, <https://chinesefeminism.org/2020/07/10/%e4%bd%95%e4%b8%ba%e5%9b%bd%e5%a4%96%e6%94%bf%e6%b2%bb%e5%8a%bf%e5%8a%9b/>.

feminism swiftly resulted in a crackdown on feminist organizations and individuals, subjecting prominent activists to heightened surveillance, social exclusion, and harassment by the Chinese authorities.¹⁹

The impact of the stigmatization of feminism reverberates beyond its immediate effects, permeating the feminist movement and instilling an atmosphere of apprehension and self-censorship. Individual activists and organizations find themselves vulnerable to being branded as “foreign forces” or threats to national security, generating a chilling impact to dampen open expression and impede the progress of feminist activism in China. In the subsequent sections, we use examples from social media to closely engage the two distinct trajectories observed within Chinese pan-feminist communities, exploring how they appropriate and recycle a variety of statist discourses, including the state-organized stigmatization of feminism and the sanitized forms of individualistic and nationalist feminism as examples of citational practices to foster awareness and facilitate debates regarding gender and sexual issues.

Counter-Appropriation as a Form of Deliberation: Political Satire as Resistance

As the case of the chained woman discussed at the beginning makes clear, the Chinese state has substantially upgraded its censorship machinery and developed more strategized and fine-tuned techniques to foster and advance discursive formations in ways that align better with its shifting agenda. Considering this challenging situation, parody and satire possess a subversive potency, serving as significant avenues for creative resistance to challenge prevailing nationalist discourses and establish an alternative space for engaging in debates over social issues beyond the limitations of conventional media platforms. They prove to be more effective in capturing the attention of a broader audience, facilitating the production and dissemination

19. Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

of information vital to fostering engaged social debates.²⁰ In countries like China, characterized by an entrenched authoritarian ruling system that has extended its reach to unprecedented levels, political satire has become an integral element and defining characteristic of its online culture where freedom of speech has been significantly curtailed to the extent that any direct criticism of political leaders carries severe repercussions.²¹ The effectiveness of satire lies in its ability to circumvent censorship mechanisms²² and its potential to kindle interconnected parodic expressions that could culminate in the formation of online movements subjecting those in positions of power to public ridicule and scrutiny.²³ Chinese netizens thus widely employ political satires and parodies, particularly when broaching sensitive political topics.²⁴ Like other “sensitive” subject matter, topics pertaining to feminism and gender equality that historically received conditional endorsement from the state are currently experiencing heightened scrutiny.

Remarkably, Chinese pan-feminist communities have tactically adopted parody and satire in response to the mounting pressure. In April 2022, the official Weibo account of China’s Communist Youth League Central Committee (CYLC) ignited reverberating controversy and outrage within these communities through a post condemning what it termed “extreme feminism” (*jiduan nvquan*) as a pernicious “cancer on the internet” (*wangluo duli*) that necessitated collaborative efforts to eradicate.²⁵ The post asserted

20. Sangeet Kumar and Kirk Combe, “Political Parody and Satire as Subversive Speech in the Global Digital Sphere,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 211–14.

21. Yang and Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China.”

22. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

23. Tang and Bhattacharya, “Power and Resistance”; Lee, “Surviving Online Censorship in China.”

24. Wu, “Discursive Strategies of Resistance on Weibo”; Regina Wai-man Chung and King-wa Fu, “Tweets and Memories: Chinese Censors Come after Me. Forbidden Voices of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre on Sina Weibo, 2012–2018,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 319–34.

25. Communist Youth League Central Committee, “Extreme Feminism Has Become an Internet Cancer” [*jiduan nvquan yicheng wangluo duli*], Weibo, April 22, 2012, <https://weibo.com/3937348351/4757566724249051>.

that the account had shared a series of images documenting significant events from the party's revolutionary history but was "unjustly accused of 'willfully ignoring women'" due to the absence of prominent female figures. Furthermore, the post alleged that the CYLC account editor had endured personal attacks and cyber violence from these "extreme feminists" that had crossed a "red line." This accusation was based solely on five selected comments and reposts, among thousands of other reactions, purportedly as evidence that "extreme feminism is increasingly rampant, with its toxicity growing more severe."²⁶ One of these comments simply stated that "there are no women in the first six pictures. Why did you choose images that failed to equally represent women, who also contributed to the nation's development?"²⁷ Another comment questioned the legitimacy of prioritizing "men" before "women" in the phrase "the equality between men and women" (*nannv pingdeng*), which is included in China's Constitution and has consistently served as the dominant official discourse when addressing gender-related matters. This post not only highlights CYLC's—and, by extension, the party's—resistance to criticism from pan-feminist communities and their reluctance to engage in constructive dialogues concerning gender representation, but also lays bare the systematic deployment of sovereign power to suppress dissent.

Instead of engaging in direct confrontation, many pan-feminist netizens responded to the state-backed posts in a strategic manner. In addition to formal critiques that questioned the legitimacy of the term *extreme feminism* and CYLC's reluctance to acknowledge its own mistake, the discursive strategy of counter-appropriation was deliberately employed. Netizens cited quotes from revered party figures such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai to bolster their arguments for gender equality and women's liberation while also provocatively questioning whether the CYLC editor would dare to label Mao and Zhou as proponents of "extreme feminism." This tactful approach

26. Communist Youth League Central Committee, "Extreme Feminism Has Become an Internet Cancer."

27. Communist Youth League Central Committee.

exemplifies the netizens’ creative resistance within the context of the state-orchestrated stigmatization of feminism and feminist movement that gained momentum in the latter half of the 2010s. By selectively invoking historical figures who are officially credited with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and held in high regard as esteemed leaders of the party, they not only managed to navigate potential censorship and suppression by the authorities but also safeguarded their feminist arguments from potential political backlash, such as being categorized as “foreign forces.”

As depicted in figure 1, an excerpt from Mao’s writings was shared by a Weibo user, highlighting his call for women’s political participation and his strong critique of the Confucian ideology of “virtuous mothers and good

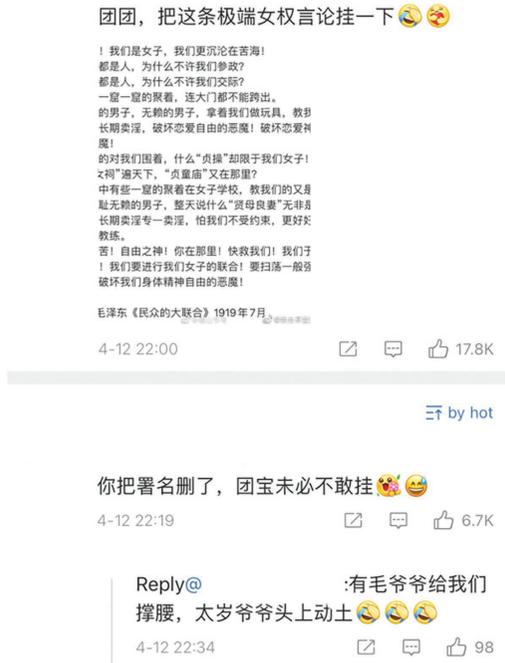


Figure 1: CYLC’s comment section.
 Source: Author’s own screenshot archive.

wives” (*xianqi liangmu*), which he referred to as “long-term prostitution.”²⁸ The user sarcastically urged “*tuantuan*” (the nickname of CYLC used by Chinese netizens) to pin up this comment from an “extreme feminist” (for public shaming), accompanied by laughing and heart-hugging emojis. In a comparably ironic tone, another user suggested that CYLC might actually agree with the feminist message if the signature were removed and the comment attributed to a different author. Responding in a similar vein, yet another user proposed that the CYLC account might consider pinning up the article as an example of “extreme feminism” due to its stance in support of women’s rights, if the name of Mao was removed. In a follow-up comment, the first user responded, asserting, “We have Chairman Mao’s support. (Who would dare to) ‘dig the soil on the head of Tai Sui?’” referring to a well-known Chinese idiom that describes a risky or audacious move that could potentially bring bad luck or trouble. Apparently, these users deliberately employed Mao’s statements as a politically safe means to push back the official discourse stigmatizing feminism and express their support for feminist ideas.

Correspondingly, a separate user (see figure 2) shared a concise remark attributed to Mao that critiques the traditional gender roles and norms in the feudal Chinese society, portraying them as symbols of women’s subjugation and bondage. Mao’s statement encourages women to establish a revolutionary army to liberate themselves from these gender-based limitations and to strive for their rights and equal status. In a provocative manner, this user challenged the CYLC Weibo account editor to consider the implications of this passage, further underscoring the inherent inconsistency of CYLC’s opposition to feminist ideas, as they align with the formal advocacy of the party’s founding fathers.

As stated previously, one of the major strategies adopted by the party-state in its recently organized marginalization of feminist communities involves insinuating their association with foreign political forces, aiming to “foment confrontation between men and women” (*tiaoqi nannv duili*) and disrupt the stability and harmony of Chinese society at large. This approach

28. Communist Youth League Central Committee.



Figure 2: CYLC’s comment section.
 Source: Author’s own screenshot archive.

follows a comparable pattern to the targeting of “class enemies” during the Cultural Revolution, Deng’s campaign against “spiritual pollution,” and the CCP’s long-standing portrayal of foreign hostile forces (often associated with capitalism) as antagonists to its socialist objectives.²⁹ The assertion of feminism’s connection to foreign forces carries substantial political implications within the current political and historical context of China.

Scholars have shown that the chilling effect of continuous online censorship is more salient when individuals are confronted with extensive censorship of the general public.³⁰ This effect is particularly evident in the suppression faced by high-profile #MeToo movement activists.³¹ As is shown

29. Hailong Liu, *Propaganda: Ideas, Discourses and Its Legitimization*.
 30. Yuner Zhu and King-wa Fu, “Speaking up or Staying Silent? Examining the Influences of Censorship and Behavioral Contagion on Opinion (Non-) Expression in China,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 12 (2021): 3634–55.
 31. Jing Zeng, “You Say #MeToo, I Say #MiTu: China’s Online Campaigns Against Sexual Abuse,” in *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, ed. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel

here, Chinese pan-feminist netizens have devised new strategies to counter-appropriate the statist discourses used by the authorities, such as the labeling of feminism as “fomenting confrontation” and “men-hating,” to mock their misogynistic remarks and patriarchal prejudice.

As illustrated in figure 3, a user adeptly appropriated the state’s logic of accusing feminism of inciting confrontation and turned it against CYLC’s public shaming of so-called extreme feminism. The user remarked, “Who is fomenting confrontation between men and women? Oh, it’s the CYLC. Hand-picking three comments out of ten thousand to specifically criticize.” Another user responded in a sarcastic tone, stating, “*This* CYLC has repeatedly expressed misogynistic and hostile views that promote gender antagonism!”³² Given that there is only one CYLC in the Chinese context, apparently these critiques are directed specifically at this party-led organization. These discursive exchanges underscore the disillusionment and dissatisfaction within Chinese pan-feminist communities toward CYLC’s persistent practices of stoking antagonistic views to foster a culture of gender hostility. The strategic employment of the language used by the state and the sarcastic reversal of its accusations serve as potent tools to expose the hypocrisy and sexism embedded within CYLC’s narrative. By deftly leveraging these tactics, Chinese pan-feminist communities not only navigate the pervasive censorship that has become increasingly menacing through the implementation of real-name registration requirements but also subvert the party-state’s efforts to stigmatize and subdue feminist voices.

The lack of responses to or acknowledgment of these deliberated inquiries from the official CYLC account and other media outlets, followed by their subsequent decision to deactivate the comment section on the

Loney-Howes (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 71–83, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15213-0_5; Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun, “Intersectional Digital Feminism: Assessing the Participation Politics and Impact of the MeToo Movement in China,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (October 3, 2021): 1176–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1837908>; Jing Xiong and Dušica Ristivojević, “#MeToo in China: How Do the Voiceless Rise Up in an Authoritarian State?,” *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 3 (September 2021): 490–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15213-0_5.

32. Emphasis added by the authors.

是谁挑起男女对立？哦，共青团哦😏上万个评论精选出来三条，专门发个批评，好大的格局

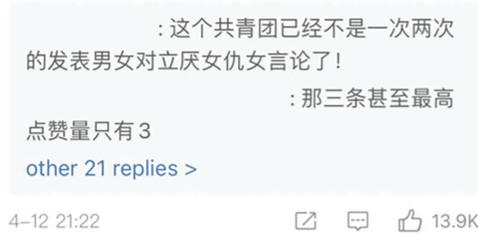


Figure 3: CYLC's comment section.

Source: Author's own screenshot archive.

pertinent Weibo post and maintain a deliberate reticence on the matter, serves as a self-evident indicator of the effectiveness of the parodic counter-appropriation strategy employed by Chinese pan-feminist communities. The Chinese authorities and affiliated media, bound by their own established narrative frameworks, find it politically advantageous to evade engagement with these acts of strategic counter-appropriation by Chinese pan-feminist communities in order to avoid the possibility of an excessively obvious weakening of credibility caused by the inherent self-contradiction arising from the tension between their misogynistic ruling agenda and their phony claim to support gender equality. In the following section, we explore the second form of counter-appropriation that is oftentimes unintentional and thus requires different approaches from the authorities to address it.

Counter-Appropriation as Promotional Engagement: From State Feminism to Pink Feminism

Following the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics, the state-driven nationalist fervor centered on Eileen Gu experienced a subsequent decline in influence. Nevertheless, the appropriative integration of women's issues

and gender equality has remained a fundamental component of official discourses since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The concept of "state feminism," initially developed in contexts of Scandinavian countries and subsequently of Western postindustrial democracies, refers to a form of feminism that is led or sponsored by the government, with the aim of promoting gender equality within the existing political and economic system.³³ Incorporating feminist agendas within the state apparatus, however, carries the risk of downplaying structural critiques of the patriarchal state, diminishing the transformative capacity of feminist movements, and reducing the changes they stimulate to symbolic gestures or superficial reforms.³⁴ It is important to contextualize this within the broader sociopolitical backdrop of the late twentieth century in postindustrial nations, which witnessed the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Characterized by its fervent advocacy for personal liberty, entrepreneurial freedom, robust private property rights, and unbridled market dynamics, neoliberalism seeks to transpose liberal sociopolitical tenets onto all societal spheres.³⁵ In essence, neoliberalism extends the social and political principles associated with liberalism to all aspects of social life, treating every façade of human society as a source of profit-making, encompassing even feminism. The rise of neoliberal feminism emphasizing personal choices and responsibilities and championing stable nuclear family structures has ultimately weakened feminism's transformative potential to bring down the heteropatriarchal system.³⁶ In this regard, some scholars argue that the term *state feminism* should be reexamined in the context of these changes—as with the rapid expansion of marketization logic, current

33. Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires, "From State Feminism to Market Feminism?" *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 4 (2012): 382–400.

34. Stetson, Dorothy McBride, and Amy G. Mazur, "Introduction," in *Comparative State Feminism*, ed. Dorothy E. McBride, Amy G. Mazur, and Dorothy MacBride Stetson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 1–21; J. Outshoorn and J. Kantola, *Changing State Feminism* (New York: Springer, 2007).

35. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

36. Catherine Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 418–37.

“feminist engagements with public policy agendas are increasingly mediated via private-sector organizations according to the logic of the market.”³⁷

Pivoting to the Chinese context, the research conducted by the feminist scholar-activist Wang Zheng on the phenomenon of state feminism provides a nuanced perspective by delving into the agency of feminists operating within the CCP during the Mao era.³⁸ She argues against perceiving state feminism as a unilateral imposition of women’s liberation by the state and suggests it should be seen instead as a strategic approach that occasionally mobilizes the inconspicuous efforts of feminists to navigate the patriarchal structure of the party. By shedding new light on the intricate dynamics within the state apparatus and its implications for feminist activism, Wang posits that state feminism in the Chinese context should be comprehended as a remarkable methodology of flexibility and pliancy rather than a top-down imposition by the overpowering state.³⁹ Concurrently, as the party’s ideological scaffold evolves from socialism toward a market-centric orientation with both characteristics of socialism and (neo)liberalism, its gendered discourses undergo recalibration as well.⁴⁰ This transition, replete with neoliberal inflections emphasizing individualistic and meritocratic achievements, positions Chinese state feminism in a liminal, yet instructive, juxtaposition with its Western counterparts.

Particularly telling of the confluence of state-driven feminism with individualistic nuances are the congratulatory remarks made by China Central Television (CCTV) News on International Women’s Day from 2021 to 2023. Through a series of prerecorded videos, the premiere mouthpiece of the Chinese state duly acknowledges the contributions made by Chinese women in their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives with respect and

37. Kantola and Squires, “From State Feminism to Market Feminism?” 383.

38. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism?’”; Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017)

39. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism?’”; Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State*.

40. David A. Palmer and Fabian Winiger, “Neo-Socialist Governmentality: Managing Freedom in the People’s Republic of China,” *Economy and Society* 48, no. 4 (2019): 554–78.

admiration.⁴¹ Additionally, women are celebrated as resolute individuals capable of pursuing their aspirations and effecting positive change across various industries and sectors.⁴² The remarks emphasize the importance of transcending societal definitions that may impede women's potential.⁴³ While these messages might be viewed as a positive portrayal of Chinese women in state media, the underlying narrative structure is anchored in a thinly veiled, individualistic interpretation of empowerment that exalts personal success stories without critically engaging with the issues of social barriers and systemic inequalities. These gendered and sexualized structural divisions, as Liu shows, are consistently reproduced and perpetuated by the party-state to harness and exploit women's biopolitical values for the purpose of engineering China's economic marketization under an unchallenged authoritarian grip.⁴⁴ The aftermath of this state-led narrative crafting is not confined to media outlets alone. The individualistic tone of feminism in China mirrors its marketizing transition, drawing parallels with Western neoliberal feminism. However, China's feminism is rooted in its unique historical, political, and structural roots, where gender disparities and market dynamics intersect within a fraught post-socialist backdrop, which is further intensified by the heightened ideological control during Xi's leadership.⁴⁵

A significant portion of Chinese pan-feminist communities, perhaps unintentionally, aligns with the state's recently revamped narrative. This discursive pattern merges socialist-nationalist themes with individualistic, market-driven tones and lacks self-evident satirical touches, serving as an

41. CCTV News, “[#They are mothers, wives, daughters and themselves#],” Weibo, March 8, 2023, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4877035513578376>.

42. CCTV News, “[Salute to the power of women!],” Weibo, March 7, 2023, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4876950445755441>; CCTV News, “#Women's Day Blessings#,” Weibo, March 7, 2022, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4744638760485388>; CCTV News, “#most beautiful her#,” Weibo, March 8, 2021, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4612611439594707>.

43. <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4744781399591730>

44. Petrus Liu, *The Specter of Materialism*.

45. Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?”

indication that many in the pan-feminist community may have internalized the state-sponsored sanitized version of feminism. The year of 2020 is seen by many netizens and media professionals as the “Year of Feminist Awakening,” as discussions pertaining to gender equality experienced a remarkable upsurge, reaching a far broader spectrum of audiences than before.⁴⁶ This shift might also be attributed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, along with the Chinese government’s mishandling of the crisis that sparked widespread criticism across various online platforms.⁴⁷

Among the various issues discussed by the pan-feminist communities, the scarcity of sanitary pads faced by female health-care workers, comprising two-thirds of the overall workforce who made enormous sacrifices to provide medical assistance to heavily impacted regions, emerged as a prominent subject. Numerous donation initiatives were launched subsequently by diverse groups and individuals, aiming to provide support for frontline female health-care workers. Among them, Liang Yu’s campaign, titled Sisters’ Action for Peaceful Pandemic Resistance (*jiemei anxin zhanyi xingdong*), attracted the broadest public attention, partially due to Liang’s accusation of ACWF’s appropriation of her campaign (see figure 4), which triggered significant public outrage and generated considerable attention.

After the pandemic situation improved, Liang established her own philanthropic team and initiated the Menstrual Safety Action. This project

46. Feika, “Douban Feminism, a ‘Feminism with Chinese Characteristics’ Takes Shape in the Seam” [*Douban Nüquan, Jiafeng Zhong Xingcheng de ‘Zhongguo Tese Nüquan’*], Initium Media, March 8, 2021, <https://theinitium.com/article/20210308-opinion-china-douban-feminism-awakens-or-failure/>.

47. Jiacheng Liu, “From Social Drama to Political Performance: China’s Multi-Front Combat with the Covid-19 Epidemic,” *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 473–93; Yingnian Tao, “Who Should Apologise: Expressing Criticism of Public Figures on Chinese Social Media in Times of COVID-19?” *Discourse & Society* 32, no. 5 (2021): 622–38; Chenchen Zhang, “Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age: Emotional Registers and Geopolitical Imaginaries in COVID-19 Narratives on Chinese Social Media,” *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022): 219–42; Jingxue Zhang, Minhui Yang, and Zhen Sui, “Virtual Care Facing the COVID-19 Outbreak in China,” *International Journal of Care and Caring* 6, no. 1–2 (2022): 275–81.

By embracing the party-state's discourse on gender equality and demonstrating unwavering loyalty, Liang received coverage from various state-owned media outlets.⁴⁹ She epitomizes the “equality between men and women,” the state feminism that the party seeks to cultivate and use for cultivating a “forward-thinking and progressive” image on the global stage. Resultantly, she rapidly rose to prominence as one of the most renowned pan-feminist influencers on Weibo, currently amassing nearly one million followers. Liang's take of gender issues closely resonates with the official narrative's embrace of the principles of individual-oriented feminism, including self-empowerment and self-centered narratives. In an interview about the “menstrual dilemma” faced by teenage girls in rural China for lack of access to sanitary pads, Liang attributed the problem to the profiteering motivation of sanitary pad companies and blames local schools for resistance against menstrual hygiene campaigns.⁵⁰ Apparently, she shunned away from the difficult conversation concerning China's structural issues of the urban-rural divide and underdevelopment in rural areas that could otherwise point at the party-state for its disregard for systemic failures in ensuring gender equality on the ground.

Liang's case is not isolated but rather reflects the prevailing anti-Western feminist, sociopolitical climate in China. She represents a new trend in state feminism as it converges, at times, with “pink feminism.” Originally derived from the label “little pink” (*xiao fenhong*), coined by male liberal-leaning Internet influencers to identify female nationalists—usually with a negative connotation—this term broadly encompasses individuals, particularly

2021, <https://pinerpiner.medium.com/%E7%BB%8F%E8%A1%80%E6%9F%93%E7%BA%A2%E6%97%97-%E8%AF%84%E6%A2%81%E9%92%B0%E5%85%A5%E5%85%9A%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6-14d0b22fb2e0>.

49. Yilun Cheng, “‘Sister’ Liang Yu: Speaking up for Women Is a Natural Thing to Do” [*jiemei’ liangyu: wei nuxing fasheng, shi yijian ziranerran de shi*], *Guangzhou Daily*, January 7, 2021, <https://huacheng.gz-cmc.com/pages/2021/01/07/79e1ab000b1948129e-aeb1242b75fedc.html>.

50. Yuelun Wang, “Looking Back on Women's Day: Has the ‘Menstrual Dilemma’ Been Solved?” [*funvjie huitouwang, ‘yuejing kunjing’ jie jue le ma?*], *Sohu News*, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/528272468_120392098.

women, who advocate nationalist feminism.⁵¹ The rise of pink feminism in the late 2010s is a result of Xi's stringent control over civil society, the rise of state and popular cyber nationalism in China, and Internet cleanup campaigns, which have silenced diverse feminist voices and prompted Chinese pan-feminist communities to adopt different strategies to make their voices heard. Some of them have allied with pink feminism for different reasons: as a narrative strategy to create more spaces for feminist discussion⁵² and a response to the chilling effect resulting from the party's intensified control over civil society during the post-COVID era, or acceptance of state feminism, or as a combination of all.⁵³

The party-state relentlessly exercises its power to distinguish between "real" feminism, which conforms to the sanitized ideological framework of gender equality, thereby obscuring the underlying structural inequalities through an emphasis on individualistic and entrepreneurial pursuits, and the "extreme" feminism that criticizes systematic gender inequalities rooted in heteronormality and cisheteropatriarchy. Consequently, pink feminism emerged as a new form of sanctioned feminism and is permitted with some leniency and tolerance within the incrementally narrowing space for public discussions. Promotional engagement with feminism, compared to the deliberate strategies discussed earlier, is not that "counter," as it can both conform to and confront state discourses. Given that civil societies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are under close scrutiny by the Chinese authorities, individuals and organizations must repeatedly map out

51. Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2018): 2162–85.

52. Angelica S., "Disconnected from Activists: The 'Extremes' 'Pinkness' and 'Sinking' of China's Pan-Feminism [Yu Xingdongpai Duanceng, Zhongguo Tese Fan Nvquan de 'Jiduan' 'Fenhong' 'Xiachen']," *WHYNOT*, 2021, <https://www.wainao.me/wainao-reads/fea-Mar-06-cyberfeminism-in-china-03292021>.

53. Jelena Timotijevic, "Society's 'New Normal'? The Role of Discourse in Surveillance and Silencing of Dissent During and Post Covid-19," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3608576>.

and navigate the unspecified and ever-shifting boundaries that are deemed “permissible” in the eyes of censors. Stuck in the jigsaw of (self)censorship and agential practices, this counter stance, more often than not, is not about resistance but assistance, not about challenging but cooperation.

Liang Yu’s philanthropic organization serves as a prime example of promotional counter-appropriation. It is precisely because of her appropriation of the officially sanctioned discourses and of her adoption of the mainstream framework to define her social activism that Liang’s organization could continue to operate and survive despite the growingly grim restrictions and draconian control. Additionally, by pledging allegiance to the CCP and demonstrating her nonthreatening nature and cooperation with the state, she has achieved remarkable success with her philanthropic endeavors. The *Beijing News*, a party-controlled newspaper, extensively reported on Liang’s efforts to promote the establishment of the “Sanitary Box Mutual Aid Box” at universities. This initiative, as the paper suggests, encourages college students who unexpectedly find themselves in need of menstrual supplies to support each other by taking a pad when necessary and replacing it afterward, and the ultimate goal of this project is to challenge the prevailing societal stigma surrounding menstruation in China.⁵⁴ While it is evident that Liang did not originate the idea and merely aided in promoting the campaign through her now highly influential Weibo account, she was credited as the “initiator” of the campaign in a subsequent article published in another official newspaper of the CCP.⁵⁵ The placement of mutual aid boxes of sanitary pads in colleges located in relatively well-developed areas in China is ostensibly a most politically insensitive undertaking related to gender inequalities that conforms to the rule set by the state. Moreover, Liang’s emphasis on students obtaining

54. Jun Wang, “Conversation with the Promoter of Sanitary Box in Colleges: Breaking down Menstrual Shame Helps Girls Build Self-Confidence” [*duihua gaoxiao weishengjin huzhuhe tuidongren: pochu yuejing xiuchi youzhuyi nvsheng jianli zixin*], *Beijing News*, October 27, 2020, <https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/160380023215481.html>.

55. Cheng, “‘Sister’ Liang Yu.”

consent from college authorities serves to further alleviate potential repercussions.⁵⁶ This proactive approach not only reduces the likelihood of conflicts but also allows college leadership to assume an active role in what appears to be a favorable decision. These factors contribute to the relative success achieved by Liang's program.

Of course, this approach to feminism is inherently flawed, posing a significant risk of diluting the transformative potential that feminism necessitates and ultimately reducing it to a mere rhetorical tool of the party-state. Despite these innate flaws, it is noteworthy that within the increasingly constrained space for direct dissent and criticism under Xi's reign, this unreflective approach shows promise for prospective discussions concerning the myriad challenges confronted by Chinese women. For instance, looking back three years ago during the height of the COVID outbreak, menstrual supplies were largely overlooked and considered nonessential in donations for frontline health-care workers, except for a few pan-feminist organizations and activists that recognized the importance of the items. However, after three years of reappropriation of the state-sanctioned form of feminism that has involved constant negotiation and heated public debates, aligning either unintentionally or deliberately with the framework approved by the party-state, the stigma around menstruation significantly decreased. Women's needs for menstruation supplies are no longer taboo and instead have started to be taken seriously and regarded as normal. Notably, following the devastating flood in Hebei in August 2023, there was a discernible rise in public attention toward fulfilling the menstrual hygiene needs of affected women, evidenced by substantially increased donation drives for sanitary pads.⁵⁷

56. Jun Wang, "Conversation with the Promoter of Sanitary Box in Colleges."

57. See, e.g., Qian Wang, "A Man from Zhuozhou Donates Sanitary Napkins after Evacuation and Receives Praise from Netizens: [I] Hope It Helps Affected Women" [*Zhuozhou Yi Nanzi Cheli Tuoxian Hou Juanzeng Weishengjin Huo Wangyou Dianzan: Xiwang Bangdao Shouzai Nuxing*], *Sohu News*, August 4, 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/708930806_120914498; Metro Times, "#Male University Student

As demonstrated through various examples, the remarkable resilience of Chinese pan-feminist communities lies in their adoption of multiple counter-appropriation strategies. These strategies, whether deliberate or not, whether laced with strategic sarcasm or genuine belief, serve as a lifeline, preserving a fragile yet vital glimmer of hope that heterogenous, vigorous, and potentially emancipatory feminist activisms will develop in the future, especially in the face of the stringent political environment in post-reform China under Xi's reign. While these future discussions may still undergo sanitization and (self) censorship, they nevertheless work to preserve the tinder, which might appear subtle and invisible yet serves as a solid foundation upon which the next movement may emerge and spread.

Conclusion

In this article we have presented a comprehensive examination of the discursive tactics devised and deployed by Chinese pan-feminist communities in response to the pervasive state intrusion, which we term *counter-appropriation*. These tactics entail strategic adaptation of or promotional engagement with the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from severe punitive measures. The resilience in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of the party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and subvert the entrenched gender inequalities and injustice that serve the state's long-term interests, as exemplified in the cases we present here, stands as a testament to the potency of collective resistance and the unwavering determination of feminist activism within the turbulent socio-political landscape.

Buys 100 Packs of Sanitary Pads to Support Zhuozhou#” [#nan daxuesheng goumai 100bao weishengjin zhiyuan zhuozhou#], Weibo, August 4, 2023, https://weibo.com/1389537561/Nd1PYp8zB?refer_flag=1001030103_.

However, it is essential to recognize that these counter-appropriation approaches are not devoid of limitations and may manifest in various conservative forms, such as nationalist, pink-washed, or elitist expressions, inadvertently reinforcing social control and perpetuating disparities. As our analysis foregrounds, the state wields omnipresent power to dictate the amplification and validation of specific voices while marginalizing collective grassroots movements that challenge entrenched cisheteropatriarchal structures in China. Simultaneously, Chinese authorities selectively endorse and elevate individuals who adopt nonthreatening stances and align with the sanitized “gender equality” narrative, thereby suppressing dissent and curbing the transformative potential of feminism. On this account, more engaged and context-specific analysis is imperative to develop robust understanding of these dynamics and lay the foundation for sustainable and transformative changes.