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ARTICLE



From “Non-governmental Organizing” to “Outer-system”—Feminism and Feminist Resistance in Post-2000 China

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ABSTRACT

In post-2000 China, both the frontiers and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance have changed, and this change embodies a move away from the “non-governmental organizing” path that characterized the development of feminism during the 1980s and 1990s. This article addresses this “paradigm shift” in Chinese feminism by examining the “outer-system” political stand of post-2000 feminism and their domains of action through performance art, philanthropic volunteerism, and cyberfeminist articulations. These novel modes of feminist protest in the absence of a formal organizational structure challenge our understanding of feminism as a process of “non-governmental organizing” in public space and warrant a cultural analysis to shed light on how feminism engages in cultural contestation and subversion, often in semiprivate and semipublic spaces, in order to develop new and alternative cultural patterns and interpretive frames.

Abbreviations CPPCC The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference WF The All-China Women’s Federation

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Question: You are a feminist and you are still quite young. Are you or do you consider yourself to be one of the young feminist activists in China today?

Answer: No, I am not one of them. I am a feminist, a scholar and a member of the Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). I put forward law proposals, focusing on how to bring about changes from within through changing governmental policies.

Interview with a Shanghai-based feminist scholar S

“I am a feminist from nowhere” (我是在野的女权主义者) (Zeng, 2016, p. 44). “If China one day allows more political parties to exist, I will set up a women’s party . . . I would like to be the Chairperson of the Women’s Federation so long as ten thousand people would vote for me.”

Ye Haiyan (Zhao, 2017, n.p.)

The two women cited above are obviously feminists in different ways. While the former resides within formal academic and political institutions and is engaged in making changes from within, the latter is a feminist of her own kind, giving no respect to the

system. This micro personal-level difference not only epitomizes the changing landscape in feminism and feminist resistance in post-2000 China but also provides a clue for us to understand this change.

For decades since the reform period began, bottom-up feminism in China has followed the path of non-governmental organizing in order to address women's issues and feminist concerns (Hsiung, Jaschock, Milwertz, & Chen, 2001; Milwertz, 2002; Milwertz & Bu, 2007; Wesoky, 2002). These women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), together with many other social organizations that blossomed under the relatively relaxed political climate of the early reform period, have become a symbol of the emerging "civil society" and hence a promising sign of democratic development in China (Brook & Frolic, 1997; Howell, 2003). Since the new millennium began, however, both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance in China have changed, and this change involves a move away from the "non-governmental organizing" path that NGO feminists had travelled during the 1980s and 1990s. While the women's NGOs from that time are still alive and active in their own ways, post-2000 feminism demonstrates a different political profile and new modes of action.

This article examines this "paradigm shift" in Chinese feminism by considering two sets of interrelated questions. Firstly, if the frontier of Chinese feminism has changed and "non-governmental organizing" no longer represents what the new feminism is, then where does the frontier lie now, what alternatives has post-2000 feminism developed, and how has the change come about? Secondly, if feminism in post-2000 China, especially in the 2010s, no longer follows the path of non-governmental organizing, then where and through what channels and in what forms does feminism(s) manifest its existence and struggles? In a way, the new feminism in China resonates well with the global trend of young feminist activism exemplified by, for instance, queer performance, the Femen movement,¹ Pussy Riot, and Guerrilla Girls in the United States (Channell, 2014; Rhyner, 2015; Rosenberg, 2016). This study elucidates the specific Chinese conditions for the rise of the new feminism and its implications in the Chinese context.

In the following, I will devote two sections to the first question and one to the second question, ending with a conclusion in which I will briefly reflect upon some of the theoretical implications involved in the understanding of post-2000 feminism in China. The study is mainly based on published sources, including academic works on Chinese feminism, online articles, web news, and blog posts. In the article, the terms "post-2000 feminism" and "new feminism" will be used concurrently to refer to the wide spectrum of feminist protest taking place over the last two decades, especially during the 2010s. Emerging in the post-2000 epoch, new feminism contains first and foremost a generational dimension. It is feminism of the new generation and feminism that springs out of the new generation. In talking about feminist generations specifically, however, the notion of "new feminism" has been mainly associated with the Feminist Five² and the groups of young action-orientated activists who played a central role in the series of feminist protest events that took place around 2012 (Fincher, 2016; Jacobs, 2016; Tan, 2017; Wei, 2015). But feminist protest in today's China extends across a wide spectrum, and not all active feminists are included in this "action-oriented" category. In this article, the term "post-2000 feminism" or "new feminism" refers to both the high-profile, action-oriented

Feminist Five and their associates and to other scattered feminist articulations and resistances in everyday life.

Non-governmental organizing and “embedded activism”—the legacy of the older generation

Bottom-up feminism in China emerged during the process of opening-up and economic reforms in the 1980s. Set in motion by the post-Mao Chinese leadership to spur economic development, the reforms soon resulted in a retrenchment of state control and growing spaces for societal and economic lives, which in turn catalysed the sprouting of non-state-initiated feminism. Post-Mao bottom-up feminism comprises two wings: one is the academic Women’s Studies in the form of research centres and teaching programmes (Du, 2001; Hsiung, 2001; Li & Zhang, 1994; Min, 1999), and the other is the project-based women’s NGOs (Howell, 2003; Milwertz, 2002; Milwertz & Bu, 2007; Zhang, 2009). The latter began to emerge during the 1980s but gained momentum in the aftermath of the UN Fourth Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 (Hsiung & Wong, 1998; Wang, 1997; Zhang & Xu, 1995). In both cases, the development has followed a “non-governmental organizing” path through which feminists set up organizations and institutions and leveraged these organized platforms to address gender issues, educate the public, provide services, support women in vulnerable situations, and, ultimately, create social change.

Non-governmental organizing, however, has never been a smooth, straightforward, or even process. Not all organizing attempts have given birth to an organization, and not all the organizations that sprang up have developed equally tangible or solid forms. Some of the Women’s Studies centres and institutes, for instance, existed only on paper, with “no office, no budget and no administrative staff” (Hsiung, 2001, p. 441; Du, 2001), while others did not manage to survive for long. Nevertheless, decades of tenacious organizing efforts have left a clear imprint on the organizational landscape of reform China. Never having existed and impossible to exist before, Women’s Studies societies, associations, centres, and institutes proliferated, while project-based women’s NGOs mushroomed across the country. Some of these NGOs, with funding from international donor agencies, have grown into routine, robust, and influential players of gender politics. For the sake of simplicity, post-Mao feminism following the “non-governmental organizing” path can also be referred to as NGO feminism.

While feminist organizing disrupts the state ideological and organizational monopoly on women’s issues, the relationship between NGO feminists and the state is a symbiotic one. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, the remarkable female individuals who rode the wave of non-governmental organizing were all formal state employees, as either university teachers/researchers or cadres from the state institution of women, the Women’s Federation (WF) and WF local branches. They were on the state payroll and enjoyed lifelong employment, which in Chinese is metaphorically known as having an “iron rice bowl”.³ Since the state did not pay them for running NGOs, these women simply moonlighted NGOs while performing their normal work duties (Du, 2001; Hsiung, 2001; Min, 1999). In doing so, they skilfully exploited their positions and the possibilities within the “the old socialist system” to the advantage of their NGO activities (Hsiung, 2001, p. 441). In the words of Li Xiaojiang, the pioneer of Women’s Studies in Chinese academia during the mid-1980s, “we were all parasitical to the old system”. And it is largely owing to this “parasitical relationship” that

many of the emerging Women's Studies programmes and NGOs at that time "could survive and develop" without "additional administrative cost, human and financial resources" (Hsiung, 2001, p. 441).

Thus, "an essential aspect of Chinese women's organizing ... entails a subtle choreography of exploiting opportunities, seizing new grounds, and floating with the current within as well as in-between Women's Federation spaces" (Hsiung et al., 2001, p. 12). In the non-governmental organizing process, post-Mao feminists had cooperated to various degrees with the Women's Federation, the state institution of women, and capitalized upon the resources and networks within the WF system. The Women's Studies movement, for instance, had strategically utilized the "intraorganizational relationship" (Hsiung, 2001, p. 440) with the WF in order to carve out a space for the popular Women's Studies programmes. Li Xiaojiang coined the term "two-route approach" to typify this feminist strategy of creating something new by taking advantage of the old system (Hsiung, 2001, p. 441). Post-Mao NGO feminists thus remained "non-governmental" in creating new organizational platforms, but the organizing process was premised on the condition that they were embedded in the state workplace system and cooperated with the party-state. Li and Li term this mode of feminist mobilization "embedded activism" (Li & Li, 2017, p. 57).

To stay "outer-system": the new generation and the changing frontier in feminism

When post-2000 feminists entered the central stage of feminist protest in China in the new millennium, they acted upon a different political stand to distance themselves from both state feminism and the "embedded activism" of NGO feminism. Although "embedded activism" was neither state-driven nor a part of state feminism, the young feminists saw "embeddedness" as a problem in itself and refused to take on this "heritage". They preferred to pursue their feminist activism on an independent and self-determining basis. This political stand can be better illustrated by the Chinese term *tizhi* (system 体制) and the concomitant *tizhinei* (inner-system 体制内)/*tizhiwai* (outer-system 体制外) divide. Unlike the English terms "state" and "government", which refer solely to the political system, *tizhi* (体制) connotes both state and government, the political system, and any other formal institutional structures, such as the economic system (经济体制), the educational system (教育体制), or the Civil Service system (公务员体制). Post-2000 feminists use *tizhi* to refer to all formally organized structures, including not only the Women's Federation and well-established women's NGOs but also affiliations to the formal labour market. They doubt the usefulness of these large structures for feminism and prefer to stay out of them, *tizhiwai* (outer-system 体制外). They regard themselves as truly "grassroots feminists", who have neither personal interests tied up with any formal organizational structures nor any obligations to them. As one activist proudly announced, "we don't play with the system any longer" (我们不和体制玩了) (Zhang, H, 2015).

In her book, entitled *Don't Be Quiet, Start a Riot! On Feminist Activist Performance*, Rosenberg writes about how transnational feminist protest cultures have "taken advantage of anarchist suspicions against capital and the state" (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 223). Global feminist anarchism "rejects the legacy of ready-made systems of thought in

order to make space for creativity” and is “anti-authoritarian and radically individualistic” (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 224). While bearing a great resemblance to global feminist anarchism, the “outer-system” political stand of post-2000 feminism reflects the overall changing conditions for feminism in China in two major respects.

Firstly, the political aspect. Over recent years, the space for political action and agency in China has been shrinking due to the harshening political climate and tightened government control over social organizations (Chen, 2016; Shi, 2016; Yuen, 2015). To prevent and discourage “civil society from participating in contention”, the party-state tries to channel “organizations into social services delivery” on the one hand and to punish “organizations that mobilize collective action” on the other (Fu, 2017, p. 501). To survive and act, feminists in post-2000 China must tone down their focus on organization-based modes of action and develop guerrilla-like tactics and “a form of network-based civil society” instead (Yuen, 2015, p. 56). Registering a social service delivery organization could be an option, but many feminists choose “simply to remain unregistered” (Deng, 2010, p. 187), fearing that such registration would be at the expense of their autonomy and independence. The anarchist “outer-system” political stance is thus a response by post-2000 feminists to the contracting political space and the alternative path they choose to travel to sustain their feminist struggles.

Secondly, there is the generational aspect. In post-2000 China, a new generation of women has come of age and entered society. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, people of this generation are generally referred to as the post-1980s or post-1990s generation or simply as “80ers” and “90ers” (Zhao, 2011; Rosen, 2009; Sabet, 2011; Yan, 2013). They are often described as being “self-determining” (Sabet, 2011, p. 549), self-assertive, and rebellious, having broad interests and high tech, “bolder than previous generations in pursuing career expectations” (Zhang, Ping, & Wang, 2011, pp. 67–68). In the same vein, young feminist activists of this generation are also portrayed as being “well-connected with the outside world, open to foreign ideas, and more willing than their predecessors to challenge the status quo” (Hu, 2016, n.p.). They “have a strong and independent sense of citizen subjectivity” (Zhao, 2016, n.p.), and they are “full of new and interesting ideas”.⁴

Belonging to the “one-child” generation, this is the first generation in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to grow up under the post-socialist market economy. Situated in this historical location, many young women have found themselves caught in a “mismatch” dilemma. As widely noted, one-child families, especially urban ones, have high expectations for their child and invest enormous resources in education to secure the child a bright future, whether it is a boy or a girl. Young women of the one-child generation are thus better educated than their mothers’ generation, apt to compete with boys on an equal footing, self-confident, and have high self-expectations (Wang, 2017a). On the other hand, China’s market development, coupled with the revival of traditional gender ideologies, has given rise to widespread gender discriminatory praxis and a sexist and misogynistic culture in the media and society (Fincher, 2014; Zurndorfer, 2015), telling women that being a woman is a disadvantage in itself. Since this “mismatch” both contradicts these young women’s self-pride and affects their self-realization, many of them have embraced “feminism as a plain fact of their daily life” (Zheng, 2016, p. 38) and

demonstrated a strong feminist impulse to act and react. They “have little tolerance for inequality”, and “won’t compromise” (Wu, 2015, pp. 36–37).

For young women of the new generation, the legacy of state feminism is an obsolete past out of their reach. Without having experienced the socialist women’s liberation movement initiated by the state, they “do not locate themselves in relation to this past”, nor do they “want to be associated with the official narrative of women’s emancipation” told by the Chinese state (Liu, Huang, & Ma, 2015, pp. 12, 14). They are critical of the Women’s Federation (WF) and doubt the role of the WF in feminism. As feminist blogger Voiceyaya points out, the WF as a state organization does more to follow the state’s line than to champion women’s rights. The WF cadres are state-employed civil servants. They have obligations to the state as they get their paycheque from it. She also criticizes the WF for monopolizing women’s issues and for being indifferent towards feminist initiatives from the grassroots (Voiceyaya, 2016). Other young feminists are disappointed by the fact that the WF, which is supposed to represent all women in the country, has never listened to their voices or tried to reach out to them.⁵ This sense of disappointment grows even stronger when they see how “the official discourse starts to contradict itself” by converging with traditional gender ideas and how the WF “labels unmarried women over twenty-seven years old as ‘left-over women’” and launches national campaigns to press them to get married (Liu et al., 2015, p. 12; Fincher, 2014). For these young women, the state is no longer a reliable friend, and they cannot see how the state system could do any good for feminism.

By the time this young generation of women appeared on the horizon of feminism, many of the women’s NGOs that had existed since the 1980s and 1990s had, after decades of development, become somewhat specialized and institutionalized. They “work with the government” and “try to influence government policy and law-making from within the establishment”, often through well-established NGO figures who “also hold government posts” (Li & Li, 2017, p. 58). Women of the new generation do not find this NGO model “reproducible” for them (Li & Li, 2017, p. 60), as they have risen from a social origin that is utterly different from that of the feminists of the 1980s and 1990s. The new feminists are younger, typically in their late 20s and early 30s, and they are mostly university students, i.e. young women still in education, postgraduates who work as volunteers for various philanthropic organizations, and young women with diverse social backgrounds and occupational statuses. Having neither “research findings based on field studies” nor research funding at their disposal, they “lack social capital, social networks, and professional qualifications within the system” (Li & Li, 2017, p. 58) and hence do not picture themselves as following the organizing path that feminists travelled during the 1980s and 1990s. Many young feminists also feel frustrated about the aloofness of established Women’s Studies feminists. They teach and discuss gender issues in the classroom, care about their research and publications, but “have nothing to do with hot topics” in society (Li & Li, 2017, p. 61).

Feminists of the new generation also care little about being part of the state work-place/payroll system and the formal labour market. In fact, many have rejected the prospect of making an affluent living by getting a decent job. In a study on youth culture, labour politics, and new idealism in China, Zhang shows that “China’s transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one ... has profoundly changed the landscape of youth employment”, resulting in a declining employment rate

and a rising number of unemployed among college graduates (X Zhang, 2015, p. 518). College-educated young people “have had difficulty securing full-time, lifelong employment” and hence “have been excluded from many privileged positions” (X Zhang, 2015, pp. 518, 522). In facing such a precarious labour market, where unemployment and underemployment have become common for the best-educated youth, many young women have turned away to seek an immaterial meaning of life, and have found it in becoming feminists. They cannot see how feminist activism can ever be compatible with a regular and much-regulated working life, in either the state sector or the capitalist economy.

Many young feminists were found to be active in cosmopolitan cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan, but post-2000 feminism is not only restricted to these geographical locations. A distinctive feature of post-2000 feminism is the participation of LGBTQ feminists, their “open defiance of heterosexual normativity”, and strong focus on body politics (Wang, 2017b, p. 178). The outer-system political stance is thus a declaration by these young women about who they are, where they come from, and how they position themselves in the chequered landscape of power and control. In a society that is (still) tightly organized and regulated, feminist activists insist on placing themselves “outside the control of the Communist Party” (Fincher, 2016, p. 86) and insist on the right to be “a free body”, able to define and involve themselves in what they think is important and meaningful on their own terms. With this outer-system standpoint, they push the frontline of feminism from within the organized channels to a position outside of them.

Performance art, philanthropic volunteerism, and cyberfeminism: the changing mode of action

Post-2000 feminism carries a more grassroots and oppositional edge, operating mainly through tripartite activities that can be abstracted as performance art, philanthropic volunteerism, and cyberfeminism. Relying on their individual commitment, networks, and ability to navigate through the media and cyberspace, the young feminist activists unleashed a movement that directly appeals to what Moyer calls “people’s power” (Moyer, 1987 cited in Li & Li, 2017, p. 61) and hence constitutes an “uncontrolled” feminist pressure that can spill onto the streets and make noises in public. As journalist Feng points out, in today’s China, “public attention is the main tool that women can use to fight for their rights” (Feng, 2017, n.p.).

Performance art

Performance art refers to feminist protest activities through body performance and behavioural art on the streets. Since the 2010s, especially around the year 2012, a series of feminist performance events unfolded throughout China. Examples of these include the “Occupy Men’s Room” campaign in Guangzhou, Beijing, Xi’an, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou, and the protest against Shanghai Metro company’s message on the company’s official microblog which singled out women’s “improper” style of dressing as the cause of sexual harassment on the metro. During the latter protest, two young women boarded a carriage on Shanghai Metro Line 2, wearing light clothes and holding

a poster saying: “I can be provocative without being harassed”. Additionally, feminist activists shaved their heads to protest against gender discrimination in higher education admissions; others circulated topless pictures of themselves to collect signatures supporting anti-domestic violence legislation; and some showed up on the street wearing blood-stained bridal gowns to draw public attention to the problem of domestic violence (Voiceyaya, 2016). To honour these innovative and eye-catching feminist activities, the Chinese media has designated 2012 as the “first year of Chinese feminist activism” (Wei, 2015, p. 281).

As a kind of “individualized collective action” or “deinstitutionalized tactics” (Wei, 2015, pp. 294–295), performance art actions were carried out by a small number of participants, sometimes “even a single individual” (Wei, 2015, p. 294). In Wei’s view, performance art is thus a carefully chosen survival strategy for reducing potential safety risks, given that the Chinese government tends to tolerate individual activists but “continue[s] to remain alert about civilian organizations and ... organizational activities” (Wei, 2015, p. 295). But one could also argue that performance art is not merely a survival strategy but exactly what post-2000 feminism is all about. Firstly, street performance neither requires nor relies upon large economic resources, and it is relatively easy to execute. This caters to the condition in which the young feminists find themselves. Secondly, performance art brings young, ordinary, and rank-and-file youth into the centre of feminist protest. One does not need an expert status or a membership to “qualify”; all that counts is a “strong and independent sense of citizen subjectivity” (Zhao, 2016, n.p.). Thirdly, as performance art can be arranged spontaneously, feminist activists can act and react promptly to an emerging issue.

Characterized by “openness, spontaneity, contingency, [and] criticality” (Wei, 2015, p. 285), the above-mentioned events of performance art opened up a new terrain of feminist protest and fashioned a novel mode of feminist resistance that speaks directly to the general public. By performing on the streets, the activists create a shocking, eye-catching moment and hence theatricalize “a provocation in public space” (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 219). And because they use body images with a strong visual effect, their message is simple and comprehensible to everyone. Moreover, by performing on the streets, young feminists create “news” material for the media and hence succeed in directing the media spotlight towards a problem which otherwise might be taken for granted. The problem of gender discrimination in the labour market and education, for instance, is not new. It has “existed ever since China began to embrace the market economy” (Li & Li, 2017, p. 61). When feminist activists shaved their heads to protest against gender discrimination in higher education admissions, they created novel news stories and turned an everyday problem into a dramatic news event (Li & Li, 2017, p. 61).

One of the resources young feminists capitalize upon when carrying out performance protest is their own bodies. Writing slogans on their bare skin and using nudity to transmit feminist messages, they appeared to be much more radical and “naughty” than the established and “well-behaved” NGO feminists. While feminist studies of nudity in general have theorized about how female bodies “are constituted within discourse, rules, norms, and institutions formulated and dominated by men” and hence have “an inherent potential to resist domination and power relations” (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003, p. 382), the use of the body in feminist protest in post-2000 China invokes multi-layered meanings. As an action strategy,

these young women “strike a powerful visual blow” among the public by launching “an absolute counterattack from a place (that normally is) impossible” (in the words of Professor Ai Xiaoming, in Shi, 2015). At the same time, they also take advantage of the market-driven sexist culture which both objectifies and consumes women’s bodies and bodily images to attract media attention. As Zheng Churan, one of the Feminist Five, explains: “if we don’t do it in this way [showing our bodies], the media won’t come and report us. Sometimes, it just works to show your legs” (Shi, 2015).

But the feminist messages underlying these young women’s bodies are also mediated through the shape of their bodies. None of these bodies match up to the image of a perfect female body often seen in media commercials. Some are “fat, ugly”, “with small boobs and armpit hair”, while others are “gender-fluid” with flat chests and masculine features (Jacobs, 2016, p. 829). By visualizing their “un-beautified and undisciplined bodies”, the activists “radiate pride about” their bodies, and this pride is “anti-male gaze, anti-commercialization and anti-objectification” in nature (Jacobs, 2016, p. 829; Hou, 2014; quoted in Jacobs, 2016, p. 829). At the same time, because they mostly represent the bodies of “single, sexually non-normative, and often child-free women”, the young feminist activists are also celebrating this image of women in opposition to the government’s glorification of heterosexual marriage as the basic cell of society and “the foundation of political stability” (Fincher, 2016, p. 87). Like the Guerrilla Girls in the United States, who “were not only gaining the attention of the masses in the streets, but also critiqued the norms of society that were often ignored” (Rhyner, 2015, p. 18), the post-2000 young feminists are contesting both the market-led objectification of women’s bodies and the traditional, feminine roles of wife and mother that the Chinese state promotes in order to sustain “a strong, paternalistic state” (Fincher, 2016, pp. 86–87).

Philanthropic volunteerism

Philanthropic volunteerism is another domain of activism for post-2000 feminists. While launching performance art on the streets, many known activists from 2012 have either set up and/or worked for philanthropic organizations. Wu Rongrong, one of the Feminist Five, for instance, was actively involved in several philanthropic organizations and served as a volunteer for these organizations for years. She has worked, amongst others, for the Beijing Aizhixing Institute (北京爱知行研究所),⁶ the Beijing Yirenping Centre (北京益仁平中心),⁷ and the Working Group on Citizens’ Health and Right to Education (公民健康状况与受教育权工作组).⁸ In 2014, she also set up a philanthropic organization called the Hangzhou Weizhi Ming Centre (杭州蔚之鸣)⁹ in Hangzhou, with Li Tingting and Zheng Churan, two more of the Five, as her coordinating partners (Li, 2015a). These organizations work to defend the rights of socially vulnerable groups and to combat discrimination against these groups, such as homosexuals and hepatitis B carriers. Some have a gender sub-section to deal with gender-specific issues. Thus, post-2000 feminism interweaves itself closely with the broad “rights defence” social activism from the grass-roots, and it is due to their active involvement in philanthropic activism that some of the well-known feminist activists are also referred to as feminist philanthropic personages (女权公益人士) (Li, 2015a).

Although they can be regarded as NGOs in general, these philanthropic organizations are fundamentally different from mainstream NGOs. On the one hand, many of them are, in a strict legal sense, illegal or quasi-illegal organizations (Deng, 2010; Saich, 2000), since they have bypassed the registration process to circumvent the state control of NGOs (Howell, 2007, p. 19; Yuen, 2015; Zeng, 2016). In doing so, they will neither be eligible to apply for foreign funds nor have patrons within the system to protect them. But, as non-existent organizations on the official registers, they also have no obligation to follow state dictates of what to do or not to do. On the other hand, many of these organizations are often self-proclaimed and loosely organized around one or a few individuals, operating in an emerging space which is typically “semipublic” and “semiprivate” (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 7).

Ye Haiyan’s organizations provide such an example. A self-proclaimed feminist, since 2005 Ye has set up several working offices of her own to help women and citizens in need. These include the China Grassroots Women’s Rights Centre (中国民间女权工作室), Hubei Provincial Women’s Health Service Centre (湖北省女性健康服务中心), and Duckweed Health Service Centre (浮萍健康服务中心). Apart from operating without legal NGO status, these “organizations” also do not have a formal office. They are located in her own tiny apartment and depend on the commitment of a number of volunteers for their daily functioning and activities (Zeng, 2016). With these home-based “organizations” as her platform, Ye Haiyan animates her feminist/social activism, launching a series of programmes to help women in vulnerable positions, such as divorced women, single women, sex workers, women exposed to domestic violence, elderly women, abandoned children, and children with disabilities (Ye, 2009). In a way, philanthropic organizations like these represent an innovative mode of action and social activism in which an individual or a small loosely networked activist circle takes the initiative to tackle gender discrimination and social injustice under the façade of an organization, without being bound to the formal organizational registration and obligations. Here, the activists *are* the organizations. The organizations live in them and operate through them.

Thus, many of these organizations adopt a philanthropic-laden name to avoid political sensitivity as well as to attract small-scale domestic donations in the Chinese philanthropic market, which has been expanding rapidly since the great earthquake in Sichuan in 2008 (Shieh & Deng, 2011). They can manage to survive, but their financial resources are very unstable. Working for these organizations warrants neither job security nor monetary payoff (Zhang, H, 2015). On average, a volunteer could be paid two or three thousand Yuan (equivalent to about 400 Euros) per month at best. Moreover, as police harassment is normal, these organizations run the risk of being forced to close at any time. At the core of these philanthropic organizations lies the spirit of volunteerism, social activism, and altruism. The young feminists who work for these organizations are a group of like-minded idealists with a burning desire for gender and social justice. When asked how she could keep working for philanthropic organizations for so little money, Datu (Giant Rabbit, the nickname for Zheng Churan, one of the Feminist Five) answered gently, “why not?” (Lee, 2016).

Cyberfeminism

Post-2000 feminists are “media-savvy”, acting diligently to make “use of the Internet and social media to advance their causes and connections” (Tan, 2017, p. 175; Yuen,

2015, p. 56). As Professor Wang Zheng notes, China in the post-2000 era witnessed “an online movement of feminist critique”, in which feminist activists use various online platforms to raise their voices, spread their messages, and organize protest activities.¹⁰ In describing how cyberspace has become a battlefield for feminism and feminist protest, the Feminism in China project explains, “[W]ith the main media controlled by the government and the market, feminists are marginalised and lack resources to access a wider stage where their voices can be heard”. Hence, like “most dissident voices in China, feminists have also found their way onto the Internet to pass on their message and mobilise other women for the feminist cause”.¹¹ Platforms like Sina Weibo, China’s biggest microblog, and video-sharing website Youku are the main windows of feminist articulation in cyberspace.

Cyberfeminism in post-2000 China consists of two streams. One contains online manifestation of the same feminist activism that has been active in street performance and philanthropic organizations. One such example is the Media Monitor for Women Network based in Beijing, which “was founded in 1996 to promote women’s communication rights and gender equality in the media” (Tan, 2017, p. 175). In 2009, the Network initiated a feminist e-paper called *Women’s Voice* with the purpose of commenting upon and analysing current events related to women’s rights and gender equality as well as to introduce information on international feminism.¹² The Feminism in China project describes *Women’s Voice* as “one of the most influential Weibo on gender issues with over 25,000 followers” which offers “general news concerning women, publications and reports as well as useful female-related links”.¹³ In 2010, the Network made its first appearance on social media, followed by the opening of its official Sina Weibo account, renamed as “Feminist Voices” in April 2011. In 2013, the WeChat public account, “Feminist Voices” also went into operation. As of now, the Network owns several websites and media accounts, including www.genderwatch.cn, www.china-gad.org, “Feminist Voices” Sina Weibo, “Fight back Equality to Grrls” Sina Weibo, “All About Domestic Workers” Sina Weibo, “Feminist Voices” WeChat public account, Gender Watch E-monthly, FeminisTV, and exclusive accounts on Youku, Yeeyan, and Douban websites. Their channel on Youku, i.e. FeminisTV, is said to have over 200,000 followers.¹⁴

Aiming to “promote gender equality in media and women’s communication rights”, the Media Monitor for Women Network conducts “research, training, advocacy, writing, media liaison, production of alternative media and resource development” (Media Monitor for Women Network, 2011, n.p.). This Network is also behind many of the street performance activities that young feminist activists carried out in 2012 and 2013. The Network provided these young activists with training and communication support, and maintained close contact with them both during and after the events.¹⁵ Professor Wang Zheng explains how the young feminist activists work with social media. They have a newsletter that “is circulated only by email to a group of subscribers”. The activists use this newsletter to communicate about when and where “to stage a protest”. On the day of action, they would wake up early, go to the place to perform, film it and get out before the police showed up. They would then publish the video online, so the news of their protests could spread quickly.¹⁶

Apart from the young feminists involved in the series of landmark protests in 2012 and thereabouts, a wide range of individuals and on-line groups have also been active in

using social media to air their feminist points of view. An attention-grabbing example of such individual-based cyberfeminism is again Ye Haiyan, known as the Hooligan Sparrow. Initially working as a karaoke lady and later as a sex-worker, Ye has led a precarious life outside the path that mainstream society would consider “normal”. This makes her a provocative person and a feminist of an unusual kind. While running her own philanthropic organizations to champion the rights of women and sex workers, Ye writes candidly about sex and her life as a sex worker on social media, engaging in “a wide range of sex activism” (Jacobs, 2016, p. 830) to defy social prejudices against sex work and sex workers. Going online in 2000, she published personal notes, essays, and short stories amounting to nearly 500,000 words and became a well-known online blogger for her unique style and insights, as well as her light and playful words.¹⁷ Ye Haiyan aroused a startling public sensation in 2013 when the news flooded the media that a school principal in Hainan had taken a girl pupil to a hotel room and molested her there. Angered and dismayed, Ye went to the school and posed in front of the school gate holding a placard which read: “School principal, take me to the hotel and leave the pupils alone”. This picture of her circulated quickly on social media, making her a symbol of the feminist outcry against sexism and the sexual exploitation of women and girls.¹⁸

Over the years, a number of feminist-minded online virtual communities and chat groups have flourished on social media. Whether with or without connections to the actual feminist activism on the streets, these online groups discuss gender issues, talk about episodes of gender and social discrimination, and hence have fashioned a vocal feminist environment in cyberspace. A quick random search, for instance, turns up at least 15 such online groups, with the earliest being set up in 2006 and the latest in 2014. The number of participants varies from 17 in the smallest to 35,989 in the largest, and they all have a self-evident group name like “Feminism”, “Feminist Association”, “My Feminist Friends”, “Women’s Rights and Interests”, “We Are All Feminists”, “Left Feminists”, “Women’s Prospect”, etc. While they have different profiles and focuses, all these online groups watch and comment upon the media and social affairs, document/expose covert or overt discrimination and abuse, and ridicule male chauvinist attitudes and views. Many of these feminist-minded netizens use “a home-made terminology of resistance” by talking “dirty” and sarcastically and using “vulgar words, humorous obscenities and double-entendres” (Jacobs, 2016, p. 823).

One example of such online feminist groups is the Baidu Feminist Post Bar, the birthplace of feminist culture on the Baidu search engine since 2007. The Post Bar has accounts on several social media platforms simultaneously, such as Weibo (<http://weibo.com/baidufeminism>), QQ (<http://t.qq.com/baidufeminismbar>), and WeChat.¹⁹ The first batch of microblogs was posted on 26 March 2013, and over the next two years or so, an average of 6.29 tweets were published every day, featuring feminist comments, sarcasm, and critiques of current hot topics (Yip, 2015). The public account on WeChat was established in July 2014, and so far has over 500 followers.²⁰ A post on Weibo, for instance, interprets the successful stories of two women entrepreneurs through a feminist lens. When talking about the factors contributing to these two women’s (Dong and Tao) business success, the post points out that they became able to step out and start their own business only after their husbands had passed away. The post further refers to one of the women saying that she would probably never have

achieved so much if her husband was still alive. “He would not allow me to move to another city to start my business,” says the woman (Yip, 2015). This “thorny” post reminds women, especially young women today, that marriage may not automatically work to the benefit of both members of the couple and that women must wrestle with the patriarchal power of their husbands in order to achieve career and economic independence.

Concluding remarks

In post-2000 China, both the frontier and landscape of feminism and feminist protest has changed, and this change entails a move away from the non-governmental organizing path that earlier NGO feminists had travelled during the 1980s and 1990s. Post-2000 feminism arose amongst a new generation of women. They have a strong aversion to gender discrimination, and when the organized space within the state’s grip shrank, they unleashed their protests outside the formal organizing channels.

They do not see the state as a friend of feminism and refuse to align themselves with it. They do not find the model of organized NGOs reproducible for them and pity the NGO feminists for being unresponsive to the pressing social problems of discrimination and injustice. They also downplay the prospect of finding a decent job on the labour market, finding it scarcely compatible with their idealistic pursuit of feminism. In adhering to this anarchic “outer-system” political stance, post-2000 feminists have pushed the frontline of feminism from within the organized channels onto the streets and constitute an “undisciplined” feminist pressure that appeals to “people’s power” and makes noises in public.

Post-2000 feminism manifests itself simultaneously in three major domains of action: performance art on the streets, philanthropic volunteerism, and feminist communication and articulation in cyberspace. Their goal is to change perceptions, create public attention, and put pressure on government policies using the leverage of public attention. In some cases, their protests seem to have had an impact on decision-making and resulted in a change in the law and public policies. In 2015, for example, China passed the first national law against domestic violence. This could be counted as one of the hard-earned results of feminism, because feminist activists have battled against domestic violence for years and made it one of their top priorities. The “Occupy Men’s Room” campaign raised the issue of the shortage of women’s toilets in cities. After this campaign, both the national government and several local authorities decided to increase the ratio of women’s toilets in cities. The broader social impact of post-2000 feminism, however, may lie in its appeal to the vast female population of the new generation. In facing “the severe demographic crises of an aging population and a shrinking workforce” (Fincher, 2016, p. 89), more and more Chinese women “are choosing to reject the traditional norms of heterosexual marriage and child bearing” propagated by the Chinese state (Fincher, 2016, pp. 89–90). Post-2000 feminist activists have hence “tapped into the broad discontent among Chinese women” (Fincher, 2016, p. 90). Recently, a feminist blog post kicked off a massive online discussion about the meaning of International Women’s Day for China. The post received more than 100 million visits, while “hundreds and thousands of young people joined” the discussion on how to continue feminist struggles. This unprecedented massive public attention to

feminism, in the words of Wang Zheng, testifies to “the existence of a rapidly expanding social force that is eager to be informed of feminist heritages as well as to get involved in feminist actions” (Wang, 2017b, pp. 177–178).

Post-2000 feminism warrants a paradigm shift in our understanding of Chinese feminism. Hitherto, studies of post-Mao feminism have focused on how women organize for change and how feminists pursue their interests through non-governmental organizations. Post-2000 feminism calls attention to “the development of alternative cultural patterns” and solicits a culture-oriented analysis to shed light on how feminists “change dominant cultural patterns and codes” through their spontaneous and provocative actions (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003, p. 380). At this point, post-2000 feminism exemplifies an active feminist engagement with culture and changing norms, because the young feminists are “politicizing everyday life and constructing new interpretive frames” when carrying out their body-based performance arts and cyberfeminism (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003, p. 380). In the sense of formal organization-building, the new feminism is perhaps nowhere to be found. In terms of cultural contestation, subversion, and everyday resistance, however, the new feminism is out there and everywhere.

Notes

1. For the Femen movement, see <https://femen.org/about-us/>.
2. The term “Feminist Five” refers to the five young feminists, Wei Tinting, Li Tinting, Wu Rongrong, Wang Man, and Zheng Churan, who were detained by the Chinese police in March 2015 for planning to distribute stickers about sexual harassment on public transport. Prior to 2015, especially in 2012, these young women had launched a series of performance art shows on the streets to protest against gender discrimination in education, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the shortage of women’s toilets in public places. The news of their arrest circulated quickly on the Internet and sparked a strong international hashtag campaign #FreeTheFive. The Feminist Five have thus become a powerful symbol of the “new feminism” and feminist resistance in post-2000 China.
3. The metaphor of “rice bowl” implies a job, as a job would secure one’s living and food, which is rice for most Chinese. To have a permanent job is called having an “iron rice bowl” because the “bowl” will never break.
4. See Ye Haiyan’s Weibo post “The Kids of Youth Feminist Activists”, <http://p.t.qq.com/longweibo/index.php?id=455771028824365>.
5. Personal communication with Feminist Li.
6. Beijing Aizhixing Institute is a Beijing-based non-governmental, non-profit AIDS prevention organization. Founded in 2002, the Institute carries out various AIDS prevention and control programmes to prevent the spread of AIDS among vulnerable and marginalized groups and to help people with HIV and AIDS. For more about this organization, see <https://twitter.com/azxing>.
7. Beijing Yirenping Centre is an independent, non-profit, and anti-discrimination philanthropic organization founded in 2006. The organization aims to “eliminate employment and educational discrimination against people infected with hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS and people with disabilities, and to promote the building of barrier-free facilities”. Three of the arrested Feminist Five had worked for this organization. For more about this organization, see <https://www.voachinese.com/a/yirenping-20150325/2694322.html>, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory/beijing-yirenping-center/>.
8. The “Working Group on Citizens’ Health and Right to Education” was established in January 2006. Its aim is to secure equal opportunities for education for citizens with

diverse health issues. The target of the working group was identified as hepatitis B carriers, HIV-infected persons, and haemophilia patients. For more about this institute, see <https://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2006/10/200610220005.shtml>, <https://www.douban.com/group/CHSER/>.

9. Hangzhou Weizhi Ming Centre is a non-profit philanthropic organization focusing on women's rights. Established in August 2014, the centre works to promote gender sensitivity/perspective in laws and policies regarding public space, employment, education, and domestic violence. It has initiated a series of campaigns to appeal for national domestic violence legislation and to influence court decisions on cases concerning gender discrimination and compensation for gender discrimination in employment. For more about this centre, see https://tieba.baidu.com/p/3798967319?red_tag=1041769581, <http://www.china-developmentbrief.org.cn/hire-7861.html>.
10. See Feminist in China project on <http://www.feminisminchina.com/virtual-force/> Retrieved 14 November 2017.
11. See note 10.
12. See Media Monitor for Women Network (2011). About Us. June 2. Retrieved 23 February 2018, from <http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/detail.jsp?fid=300074&cnID=200105>.
13. See note 10.
14. See Feminist in China project on <http://www.feminisminchina.com/virtual-force/> Retrieved 14 November 2017.
15. See Media Monitor for Women Network (2011). About Us. June 2. Retrieved 23 February 2018, from <http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/detail.jsp?fid=300074&cnID=200105>.
16. See Feminist in China project on <http://www.feminisminchina.com/virtual-force/> Retrieved 14 November 2017.
17. See Ye Haiyan on Baidu Baike. Retrieved 27 February 2018 from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8F%B6%E6%B5%B7%E7%87%95/5215242?fromtitle=%E6%B5%81%E6%B0%93%E7%87%95&fromid=4797653>.
18. See 校园性侵害案频发 “校长开房找我”照片走红 (Frequent sexual abuse on school campus, the “Headmaster, open a room with me” photo became popular). Retrieved 11 January 2018, from http://www.guancha.cn/society/2013_05_30_148060.shtml.
19. See <https://www.douban.com/group/baidufeminism/>. Retrieved 5 February 2018.
20. See https://tieba.baidu.com/p/4817813950?red_tag=1532879907. Retrieved 25 January 2018.

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