

# Fighting the Patriarchy: A Feminism with Chinese Characteristics

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the status and challenges of feminist movements in 21st century China. While the state has implemented laws and policies promoting gender equality, traditional patriarchal ideology persists in fostering discrimination against women. Through a socio-historical lens, the paper traces Chinese feminism from early 20th century reforms to current issues. It contends that the internet has enabled tech-savvy young activists to initiate theatrical protests against gender violence, catalyzing China's #MeToo movement in 2018. However, structural barriers inhibit working-class and marginalized women from speaking out. Moreover, censorship, online harassment, and anti-feminist rhetoric have stifled the movement's progress. Recommendations include public education campaigns to engage male allies, counteracting stereotypes that stigmatize feminists. Greater representation of women in the political sphere is required to enact substantive reforms protecting gender rights. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes interdependence and collective organizing as central tenets for Chinese feminism to overcome patriarchal constraints and achieve enduring social change.

**Keywords:** Chinese Feminism; Gender Equality; Gender Studies.

## 1. Introduction

China has achieved unprecedented growth in economy and politics from late 20<sup>th</sup> century to present. With the government constructing comprehensive legal frameworks for society, the country has made important stride in promoting gender equality. In urban areas, a large number of women start to pursue higher education and instigate an independent life. Both women and men are equal before the laws and female's rights are strengthened by legislation. After legal reform starting in the 1950s, the state abolished the traditional 'foot-binding' practice thoroughly and legalized divorce. Despite China has achieved significant progress in amending policies, it is challenging to implement them into concrete actions. Domestic violence, sexual offense and unbalanced payment for women still exists as major social issue in society. Hence, Chinese feminist are facing an intertwined problem which laws and policies provide women with socioeconomic rights, but ingrained prejudice and sexual inequalities still hold a dominant position in society. Although the presence of patriarchal problem have raised numerous women's awareness of their status quo, social movement doesn't become a phenomenal approach to alter the circumstance.

In the first week of January 2018, on Weibo, Qianqian Luo publicly accused her prestigious former Ph.D. professor Xiaowu Chen from Beihang University of sexual harassment. Her post soon went viral and generated thousands of reposts on China's social media platform. On January 11, Beihang University dismissed Chen. Three days later, the Ministry of Education revoked his honorary title of "Changjiang Scholar," an unprecedented action in Chinese academia. Luo's brave accusation motivated numerous women to voice their personal experiences of being harassed or harmed and show support for one another. On the heels of the #MeToo movement in America, activists initiated a new online campaign to combat the deep-rooted patriarchal oppressions they faced.

MeToo movement gave vulnerable, marginalized, and disabled women an opportunity to speak out for themselves through the Internet. National-wide solidarity among women pulled the campaign from an academic scandal into a major social event. #MeToo created a massive shock to an imbalanced power relationship, which held men in a superior position and women in the inferior one. The systematic harassment of patriarchal society against women is also a "harassment of power." When encountering sexual offenses, females are terrorized by the power their offender possesses and do not

feel that they can refuse this harassment. Worse, the majority ignored the victim's accusations when they are made against the perpetrator. The online rally brought these victims, who were caught between public criticism and perpetrator's retaliation, to the virtual stage where they could receive global attention and encouraged them to speak out for themselves. However, exacerbated cyber-victimization against sexual offense sufferers on online and offline activities had forced activists to realize they were not just fighting against the patriarchal society, but also challenging a toxic phenomenon. Consequently, China's social movement has lost its momentum of growth and remained silent. Thus, activists were caught up in a double dilemma where they needed to bear both misogynistic discourse and incessant prejudice. Furthermore, ingrained stereotypes and inequitable perceptions in society has created impenetrable glass-ceilings for females to achieve greater breakthroughs economically. Hence, feminists are striving to sever the ideological chains that impede women from attaining success. Therefore, this paper will first analyze the characteristics of 21st-century Chinese feminism, which provoke our reflection on promoting gender equity. Next, the paper will reveal key factors contributing to the challenges brought to bear on feminists. Finally, this essay will present practical solutions for current Chinese activists to unite, sustain, and promote their resistance against patriarchal suppression.

## **2. Policies V.S. Ideology: An Inequivalent Relation**

In the lately amended Women's Protection Law, China has pledged to boost women's empowerment by mitigating discriminatory actions in workplace and offering the right for equal remuneration. However, besides from the government's persistent endeavor for enhancing females' socioeconomic status, gender inequality remains as a prevalent issue on the microlevel. Nowadays, women are struggling to juggle their careers with motherhood, and myriads of them who choose to have children had to confront this problem with serious challenges. In addition to the high living expenses and education expenditures, an array of social barriers, including children's upbringing, have imposed career setbacks for Chinese mothers. Compared with their male counterparts, these hurdles create obligatory burdens for women because of the society's high requirement for women. In Chinese family structure, males are typically considered as the breadwinners while females play the roles of housewife. With the mounting cost of living, women are expected to shoulder the responsibility of both child-caring and working. Hence, not only does the father's absence in the family bring an unstable environment for children's growth, but also exploiting women's independence and freedom. Therefore, well-refined procedural justice is only a tip of iceberg without a supportive social atmosphere and detailed evaluating system.

Women's emancipation has remained as China's state policy to stimulate modernization. At the turning point of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the New Cultural Movement and May Fourth Movement pioneered a new Chinese culture, one in line with western standards of democracy and science. The progressive intellectuals strived to undermine the hierarchical society underpinned by Feudalism. Consequently, sexual liberation became a central topic during the prominent fight for equity and freedom. Different from Western feminism, which came into being with people's determined effort, the concept of gender equality was introduced by the government in China. After the Revolution of 1911, Chinese leaders perceived the issues of women's right as the vital leverage for human liberation. Thus, obstinate practices and feudal beliefs such as foot binding and child marriage were abolished immediately, but the majority was shocked by this sudden change and had difficulties to get accustomed to the new policy. Due to the fact that Confucianism had occupied the Chinese culture predominantly, people's mindset was influenced by its concept radically. In traditional Confucian outlook, woman was considered as a "weak, docile and reticent" figure. Thus, perceiving and treating women as the "inferior one" had influenced people's expectation for females drastically. Therefore, numberable women were mistreated by the society since Confucian philosophy was justified as an indispensable belief.

In Mao's socialist era, the Party abolished prostitution and had successfully enacted the Marriage Law to grant women the freedom to divorce and marry independently. During this period, the most widely-propagated feminist ideas were "women hold up half the sky" and "women and men are equal." In 1980s, the government instigated the "Reform and Open" policy, which allowed China to embrace the capitalist globalizations. However, socialist feminism has encountered severe backlashes as intellectuals associated femininity with domesticity and retracted women's participation in production and factory work. Fortunately, the United Nations convened the Fourth Women's Conference in China in 1995. This great meeting was a monumental moment in the growth of women's civic associations with gender issues. Furthermore, it provided feminists an opportunity to respond to the political backlashes they faced. Due to the relaxed political climate, well-educated activists utilized their connections with the government and academics to establish NGOs that aimed to help women in vulnerable situations.

### **3. The One-Child policy and Gender Equality**

To control the population boom and high fertility rate, the country implemented the "One-Child" policy in 1979. By restricting most families to a single child, the authorities argued that sexual inequality would become non-existent across China. Historically, Chinese society was deeply influenced by Confucian ideology which restrained women with feudal beliefs and conservative gender roles. Females were expected to be subordinate to her father in youth, her husband in maturity, and her son in old age under this belief system. However, the sudden restriction of one child per family made many families to be sonless and accept, reluctantly, the well-known propaganda slogan: "Having a girl is as good as having a boy." In urban China, daughters raised by a nuclear family were treated equally as boys since their parents treasured them regardless to sex. As the China Health and Nutrition Survey suggests, children in one-child households enjoyed significantly improved opportunities for education compared to children inside multiple-child households. In addition, no differences were found in years of schooling between only-child boys and only-child girls, while the gap between boys and girls inside multiple-child households remained significant. Thanks to the anti-natalist policy, many young girls born in 1980s were able to gain wide access to higher education and discovered in college that the shortcomings of Communist Party mottos on gender parity had become little more than window dressing. Those well-educated and nurtured offspring of China's one-child policy soon became the new generation of socially conscious activists who have challenged the current situation.

### **4. Early challenges and the Internet**

With the advent of the Internet and diverse technologies, scholars recognized the possibilities of promoting social change and raising public awareness via the Internet. Through online platforms, women were given the space to express their voices, circulate advanced perspectives and mobilize collective actions, regardless of socio-economic status. Local and nation-wide organizations built digital forums to convey and foster feminist deliberations. Hence, the young and rebellious and technology-savvy generation of feminists no longer considered themselves members of any particular NGOs and switched to a network-based civil society, one in which they initiated guerilla, theatrical actions to express their indignation. One significant example of such attention-grabbing politics is the well-known "Bloody Brides" demonstration. On Valentine's day in 2012, two women, Li Tingting and Wei Tingting, walked along the streets of Beijing's busy tourist districts in wedding gowns stained with fake blood. They chanted slogans like "Hitting is not intimacy, verbal abuse is not love," and distributed anti-domestic violence pamphlets and cards to passersby. Inspired by their successful action, feminists soon organized another awareness-gaining event, called "Occupy Men's Toilets." Their actions encouraged women who were queueing in a longline outside female's public restroom to use the less-occupied men's room for 10 minutes and equalized wait times for men and women.

Fortunately, the movement was approved and praised by the society. Additionally, many people seized this opportunity and sent letters to bureaucratic institution to propose legislation for improving restroom gender ratios. Finally, their advice was accepted and many cities have implemented concrete plans.

However, on March 6, 2015, five feminists were detained for distributing stickers about sexual harassment on public transport. The five women were dedicated to educate the public about issues such as gender violence and discrimination against people with HIV, which were problems that the society claimed to have solved. During the 37 days of custody, the women were subjected to near-constant interrogation due to their crime of “creating social instability.” Despite the news agencies’ attempts to avoid any report of the incident out of the domestic media spectrum, many local activists didn’t standby. They spread the news on foreign social media and made #FreeTheFive movement an international campaign which more than 1,100 people took the risky step of supporting a petition demanding the women’s release. Since holding offline protest and demonstration were difficult feminists utilized multiple online platforms to amplify their voices, spread information, and establish new organizations.

## 5. The #MeToo Outbreak: Powerful yet Fragile

Qianqian Luo’s courageous revelation inspired victims of sexual harassment, mostly young women from institutions of higher education, to utilize online platforms to expose the perpetrators. Notably, accusers in the high-profile cases received public attention instantly as the #MeToo hashtag has surged to over 4.5 million hits on Weibo. More than seventy universities nation-wide signed a joint letter calling for protocols to prevent sexual harassment on campus. In the early stage of the movement, colleges were the main battlefield. Subsequently, social pressure and ongoing protests helped bring about justice to the victims. China’s Ministry of Education has pledged to implement “institutional mechanisms” to prevent sexual harassment at universities and the country’s top legislative is considering adding protections against sexual harassment into the civil code. Due to the fact that most of the accusers didn’t claim themselves as feminists, they are considered as a pro-change group consisted of well-educated, middle-classed, or overseas individuals with privileged social statuses.

However, working-class and subaltern women’s prominent endeavors to promote this social movement shouldn’t be ignored. A survey conducted by an organization for female workers, Xiangyanghua, revealed that 70 percent of the 134 female workers suffered sexual harassment in the workplace. On January 23, 2018, a female employee from the Foxconn company published an article on the women’s labor-rights website *Jianjiaobuluo*. “If a sexually harassed woman worker protests, she is likely to be accused of being ‘too sensitive’ and ‘unable to take a joke.’” she wrote in the article. Foxconn was the largest technology manufacturer and one of the largest employers worldwide. However, it was difficult for the blue-collar females to fight back like the professional women due to their marginalized social position. Therefore, their effort should be supported with strong legislative actions. In 2012, the country passed the “Special Rules on the Labor Protection of Female Employees” to prevent sexual harassment, but workers rarely see its enforcement because female workers couldn’t receive full legal protections without explicit provisions in the labor laws.

The #MeToo movement initiated a powerful form of social change that was compelling enough to exert changes in legal system, changes that were otherwise difficult to achieve through administrative systems. The victims were able to denounce the perpetrators of sexual harassment and restrict the power holders by altering the status quo of gender inequality in a patriarchal society. Although the movement promoted the development of institutional supervision, protocols and appropriate legislation to protect women’s right, it didn’t establish a sexual offense prevention system, which would provide long-term safeguards for women. Two leading factors impede the formation of the protective mechanism.

First, in higher education, no university has implemented any practical procedure for combating harassment, despite promises made in response to social pressure at the height of the 2018 #MeToo allegations. Furthermore, the new Civil Code that went into force in 2020 needs to be more effective in pushing universities to take proactive steps because most sexual harassment cases were dealt by the Disciplinary Board, an administrative unit in government which acts as an extension of the National Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Thus, most of the cases were solved from a moral perspective of the behavior of the alleged faculty, and the punishment often involved disciplinary sanctions such as warnings, revocation of teaching titles, and expulsion from the party. What's worth to mention is that none of the penalties include judicial protocols.

Second, improvements in the policymaking and legal procedures have come at the cost of silencing grassroots activists working on the same issues. While some #MeToo accusations slowly affected the judicial system, none has created substantial results. Fleeting media and public attention in the cases was partly due to the state-led media efforts to inhibit discussions. The government's measures to silence opposing voices and distracting attention were proven after the Tangshan restaurant attack. On June 10, 2022, an attack at a barbecue restaurant was witnessed in the northeastern city of Tangshan: a woman and her friends were incessantly kicked and punched by a group of men after she rejected a sexual advance. Afterward, the surveillance footage of the attack was released and soon went viral online, which invoked an outcry. With many demanding punishments for the attackers, the government sentenced the ringleader of the attack to 24 years and other defendants to prison terms ranging from 6 months to 11 years. However, the press's explanation for the incident provoked national-wide indignation since the news agencies reported the attack as a mafia's assault rather than an exposure of rampant violence against women.

Furthermore, the anti-feminism forces exploited every approach to demonize feminism and stigmatizes the social movement relentlessly by intensifying gender tensions. The delegitimization instigates a digital oppression led by patriarchist and father-oriented haters. For instance, the notorious "human flesh search" is one of the common schemes they use to expose accounts' private information, such as addresses and ID information. Li Yuan, a former editor of the Wall Street Journal Chinese language website, constantly faced verbal bullying and badgering her for opinions. In the nastiest case, many assaulters even wished she would be gang-raped after she posted photos of her trip to India. Nowadays, Weibo is one of the most prominent social media platform which contributes to variegating women's images and opinions, but it does not mitigate the dominant position of patriarchal voices. Moreover, numerous media accounts on Weibo selectively report information about cases. This results in shifting the public focus from the cases of sexual offense itself to the female victims and their families. To illustrate this claim with evidence, researchers interviewed female victims from 152 cases associated with sexual assaults and suggested that the media's reports tend to present features about sexual attraction on female victims, despite the changing in narrative perspectives. Additionally, the content emphasized on the description of victims' appearances, ages and social status. Thus, these reports inclined to narrate in a "inverted pyramid structure" that disseminate messages that encroached unrelated personal information about the victims instead of revealing the concrete truth. Consequently, they aroused the majority's doubt and criticism against the victims, and imposing secondary injuries to sufferers as well as their family.

Feminists in China are facing a polarized situation: incessant sexual violence and exacerbate online adversity caused by cyberbullies which aggravates gender disputes. The dilemma reflects a harsh reality — feminists are still a stereotyped minority in the society as "well-educated women brainwashed by the 'western hostile power.'" ( On the demographic aspect, most activists are young, urban, and middle- or working-class women. Not only must they endure public censure, but also hostility from the older generation who view feminism as a rejection of traditional culture.

China's reform and open-up policy allowed women to acquire higher social status and financial independence. The 4<sup>th</sup> Survey on Social Status of Women in China published in 2020, said that about 97 percent of the 30,000 male and female respondents aged 18 to 64 nationwide agreed that women enjoy a more favorable social environment. However, the number of respondents was only a small

fraction of the country's total population, which is 1.412 billion. Thus, whether the survey is an accurate indicator of Chinese women's status quo needs to be supported and ascertained by further research.

## 6. What to do next?

Feminists must shift the discussion away from gender conflict which challenges the government's political interests to win broader social support. Male activists can help by shaping the public's perception of how feminism could benefit Chinese men. At the end of February, 2023 Fang Gang, a heterosexual gender studies expert who founded the anti-domestic violence China White Ribbon Volunteer project, stated that the course is not just aimed to raise men's awareness about gender-related issues, but also shed off traditional notions of masculinity that prohibit the showing of emotions mostly considered as "signs of weakness" in conservative norms. After witnessing the Tangshan Attack and videos of the Xuzhou Chained Woman, Fang emphasized his focus on gender violence associated with toxic patriarchy. Coincidentally, the course appears to be a strong response to the widely criticized "feminine morality" classes that underpins stereotypes and push women into submissive roles. In contrast, the project provides classes that cover various topics such as toxic masculinity, fatherhood, maternal care and gender-based violence. Fang's approach created a win-win situation in which gender equality campaigns can be sustainable under strict censorship, and motivate men to make contributions to the development of an equal and inclusive society.

On the other hand, female activists will continue their fight against the patriarchal regime with non-provocative campaigns. One optimal method is to convey informative knowledge to the targeted audiences including youngsters and children through digital platforms. Feminists can publish interactive articles that share the stories of prominent feminist figures in history which allows teenagers and students to identify with the goals of feminism. These positive stories would make them realize feminism's contribution to reshaping the country. Contemporary feminists have to raise the young generation's awareness in feminism and encourage them to enter the world of politics to make substantial changes. One major challenge for promoting feminism in China is the lack of participants in the political party. Second, it is crucial for women to realize that interdependency between women is the indispensable power to cultivate not only tolerance for differences, but also as "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic." Put in another way, women are taught to possess homogenous characteristics and ignore their differences or to view them as sources of suspicion rather than forces of unity. An exclusive feminism couldn't thrive and outweigh patriarchy because it is a collaborative resistance for all women. Although China's #MeToo movement have been a successful rallying cry for justice, most of the reports were centered around the pro-change group who are predominantly elites, middle-class people and activists. Consequently, the majority seldomly pay attention to the subordinated or marginal groups, which consist of low-income or disabled women. Therefore, both feminists and the state should co-operate to build an inclusive environment where every individual's strength, vulnerability and difference can be identified and accepted. The society shouldn't dismiss or deny anyone's effort to express themselves and speak up against unfair treatment. Unity is the only way to make feminism a cohesive force that promotes equality rather than exacerbates patriarchy.

In conclusion, Chinese feminists is facing an intricate challenge: not only do they need to promote gender equity but also sustaining it. Hence, they must confront negative labeling from online media and the society, then find ways to overturn the crackdown and shed light on the significance of gender equity.

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