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**Speak in Women's Way: Online Feminist Movements and Social
Media Impact of #MeToo China 2018**

Huang, Huanyu

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**SPEAK IN WOMEN'S WAY: ONLINE FEMINIST
MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT
OF #METOO CHINA 2018**

HUANYU HUANG

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Westminster for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

Since 2017, an online feminist movement sparking debates against sexual harassment has been launched on Twitter using the hashtag “MeToo”, soon going viral from online platforms to the offline world. Starting in the United States, the #MeToo movement has influenced more than 85 countries. Among these, #MeToo China stands out due to its distinctive developmental characteristics and context. This study aims to investigate women's narratives that emerged from #MeToo China in 2018, underlining the significance of these narratives and associated issues from a Chinese perspective in the context of the social media age. Through comprehensive and in-depth analysis and discussion, this study highlights two main findings. First, ordinary participants, who constitute a significant part of #MeToo China, construct narratives that challenge existing gender power structures, reassess gender issues, and break free from the chains of nationalism and collectivism. Second, the “black box” created by the censorship process of #MeToo China becomes an invisible power mechanism that continuously strengthens and guarantees the government's authority. The contribution and significance of this study lie in its filling the gap in #MeToo China studies by offering both a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the movement from a non-Western perspective. Additionally, it provides a distinctive perspective of the Chinese #MeToo movement within the academic context of East Asia and the Global South, offering valuable references for related research.

Key Words: #MeToo China, Sexual Violence, Feminist Narratives, Social Media, Censorship.

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This long and arduous four and a half years of my PhD journey has finally come to an end. Throughout this period, I faced numerous challenges and setbacks, but I also experienced immense joy, strength, and a profound sense of accomplishment.

During my doctoral studies, I lost two relatives and endured the global COVID-19 pandemic. My research was once at a standstill due to the global quarantine and international travel restrictions. Fortunately, I managed to overcome the obstacles and complete my research. This is not a complaint, as I know I am not alone in facing such difficulties. Rather, I am moved by the strength and resilience of humanity and our courage to overcome obstacles and keep moving forward no matter what. Suffering is not worth glorifying, but we who overcome it certainly are.

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This work is dedicated to all women who speak out for a better world: our voices will eventually resound throughout the world.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Introduction

Since 2017, an online feminist movement that sparked debates against sexual harassment and assault has been launched on Twitter using the hashtag "MeToo", and soon went viral from the online platforms to the offline world (France, 2017). Starting in the United States, the #MeToo movement has influenced more than 85 countries. Many have launched similar campaigns in their respective countries. Among these, #MeToo China stands out due to its distinctive developmental characteristics and context, which differs from Western #MeToo movements.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the feminist narrative that emerged from #MeToo China in 2018. It seeks to underline the significance of this narrative and associated feminist issues from a Chinese perspective within the global feminist discourse. The study's aim is accomplished through a two-phase research approach and provides answers to the following three core questions:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?
3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?
4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

This thesis primarily consists of two parts. Part 1 is "Theoretical Framework and Research Context". It presents the theoretical framework for this study, providing a solid foundation for the research that follows. It consists of three chapters, each outlining a segment of the theoretical framework.

Chapter 1, “Conceptualising Online Feminism Movements in the Social Media Age”, discusses the theoretical background of this study from a Western perspective. It summarises the main theories used in the study and points out limitations and the academic gap in the Western academic view when addressing #MeToo China issues.

Chapter 2, “Highlighting the Chinese Perspective: Social Movements, Feminism, Internet, and Censorship”, delves into topics of social movements, feminism, and social media from a Chinese perspective. It pays particular attention to the areas of the Internet and censorship in China. The relationship between Chapters 1 and 2 is explained, highlighting the unique focus and importance of Chapter 2. The current research gap is mentioned at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3, “From the #MeToo USA to #MeToo China”, provides an overview of the global #MeToo movement. Moving from a global scope to more localised views, from Western to Eastern discussions, and from broad issues to the study's specific focus, it offers readers context about the overall #MeToo movement from 2017 to 2018. This chapter also points out the gap in the global #MeToo research and the significance of this study in addressing them.

Part 2 is “The Methodology, Findings and Discussion”. It offers a detailed exploration of the research topic and the resulting outcomes. This part comprises six chapters.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology employed in this research. It provides an in-depth account of the two-phase research design, elaborating on the rationale behind the selection criteria—including the timeline, targeted social media platforms, sample selection in Phase 1, and recruitment of interview

participants for Phase 2. This chapter also addresses the ethical dimensions inherent in the study and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the research.

Chapter 5, marking the initial segment of the first research phase, provides an overview of communication trends in three core cases of #MeToo China as it emerged in 2018. It then utilises critical discourse analysis for sample evaluation, followed by an interpretation of the findings. The chapter concludes by underscoring the necessity of a subsequent thematic analysis of the samples.

Chapter 6, a continuation of the first phase, further explores themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the samples. It culminates with a summative view of the insights from both Chapters 5 and 6, directing the reader towards the first research question addressed in the Discussion Chapter.

Chapter 7, the core of phase 2, begins by showcasing thematic findings derived from 12 semi-structured interviews, explored using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. It then provides a comprehensive discussion of these findings, with special emphasis on the theme of “censorship”, setting the stage for Chapter 8.

Chapter 8 continues the discussion of thematic findings obtained through the analysis of interviews in phase 2, focusing on the theme of “censorship”. This chapter delves into the theme, contextualizing it within specific cultural and societal frameworks. Combined with the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7, this study addresses research questions 2, 3, and 4.

Chapter 9 is the discussion chapter of the study, aiming to answer the four core research questions and highlight the topics revealed in the research.

Finally, the Conclusion chapter summarises the entire study, consolidates the

responses to the four research questions, underscores this study's primary contributions, and suggests future prospects.

Part 1 Theoretical Framework and Research Context

Part 1 presents the theoretical framework for this study, providing a solid foundation for the research that follows. It consists of three chapters, each outlining a segment of the theoretical framework.

Chapter 1, "Conceptualising Online Feminism Movements in the Social Media Age", discusses the theoretical background of this study from a Western perspective. It summarises the main theories used in the study and points out limitations and the academic gap in the Western academic view when addressing #MeToo China issues.

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These three chapters together form the study's theoretical framework. The chapters that follow will explore each topic in detail.

Chapter 1 Conceptualising Online Feminism Movements in the Social Media Age

Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical background of this study from a Western standpoint. It reviews the theories shaping the initial part of the study's theoretical framework, highlighting the limitations and the gap in the Western academic approach when addressing the #MeToo China movement.

The chapter begins by organising the dominant theories in Western social movement studies and spotlighting the theoretical viewpoints employed in this research. It then traces the evolution of Western feminism and feminist studies, encompassing debates among different schools of thought. Postcolonial feminism stands out as the theoretical guide for this study. Following this, the chapter sheds light on topics concerning social media and online feminist movements.

Concluding this chapter, a summary of the selected theories and the resulting framework is presented. The limitations of Western-centric research approaches in examining the Chinese #MeToo movement are emphasised, drawing attention to the existing academic gap.

1.1 An Overview of Social Movements and the Chosen Perspectives for this Study

1.1.1 The Definition of Social Movements

Western social movements began in Britain in the mid-18th century, growing in significance throughout the 19th century across various European nations. The labour movement became the predominant form during this time, due to the influence of the Industrial Revolution on employment dynamics (Cole, 1948, p.15-18). Between the 1960s and 1980s, diverse social movements, such as the civil rights, feminist, and environmental movements emerged (West, 2004, p.265-268). Active primarily in the 1960s and 1980s, they became known as the new social movements (West, 2004, p.265-268). The 1990s saw the emergence of anti-globalisation movements, while topics like multiculturalism and gender politics garnered increased public attention (Eschle, 2004).

In the 21st century, movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" have emerged to protest economic inequality (OccupyWallSt, 2019). Simultaneously, the influence of the Internet and online platforms on social movements has grown, with representative online-initiated movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter (Hara and Huang, 2011). Some offline movements, such as the "Arab Spring", have also utilised social media to mobilise supporters and disseminate information (Robinson and Merrow, 2020)

In discussing the concept of a social movement, it's crucial to first differentiate it from terms such as collective action and revolution. Collective action refers to activities undertaken by a group to achieve a shared objective (Olson, 1971). A revolution is a highly coordinated political effort with widespread participation, aiming to take control and deeply reshape society based on a particular ideology (Skocpol, 1979).

Different scholars place varying emphasis on the definition of social movements. Scott and Marshall define a social movement as “an organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect”, emphasising political or social objectives (Scott and Marshall, 2015). Tilly characterises social movements as sequences of coordinated actions through which ordinary individuals collectively present demands to others (Tilly, 2019). He outlines three criteria for such movements: Consistent and organised claims directed at relevant authorities; actions, like strikes or rallies, that champion these claims; and participants demonstrating consistent worthiness, unity, number, and commitment (Tilly, 2019).

Diani describes a social movement as “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of shared collective identity” (Diani, 1992, p.1). This definition emerges from a synthesis of various scholarly perspectives. Meanwhile, Melucci underscores the distinction between traditional movements, which are tied to economic downturns and political demands, and new social movements in post-1960s that centre around cultural fairness and collective identity (Melucci, 1989, 1996).

In short, social movements can be described as organised and intentional actions led by persistent groups or organizations, aiming to accomplish specific aspects of social change (Melucci, 1989; Diani, 1992; McAdam, 2001; Scott and Marshall, 2015).

All three — collective action, social movements, and revolution — are viewed as out-of-system collective political actions, in contrast to in-system collective political actions, such as elections (Zhao, 2012). While revolutions aim for foundational changes in the political system, collective actions and social

movements typically pursue more specific, step-by-step changes in political or social systems (Goodwin, 2001).

Distinguishing between collective action and social movements, Diani sees social movements as organised, enduring social processes, whereas collective actions are specific cases within these processes (Diani, 1992). Melucci notes that in contemporary society, not all social movements have ambitious objectives, as some centre on individual rights and narratives (Melucci, 1989). Nonetheless, these are still considered social movements, with individual participation being the crucial element of collective action (Melucci, 1989). Tilly argues that social movements consist of multiple organised collective action events, whereas collective actions might be isolated and temporary behaviours, highlighting the distinction between the two (Tilly, 2019).

Furthermore, Zhao suggests that collective action, social movements, and revolution can evolve into one another. Social movements can stem from collective actions and may escalate into revolutions (Zhao, 2012). Some movements begin with revolutionary goals but might scale down to collective actions due to various reasons (Zhao, 2012). The lines separating these three are not definitive, so understanding the specific background and sociocultural context of each case is essential for accurate analysis and discussion in research.

1.1.2 An Overview of Dominant Theories and the Chosen Perspectives for this Study

Social movement research, rooted in mainstream Western academia, has a rich history spanning various theories and paradigms. Based on historical progression, the development of social movement research can be categorised

into three stages.

The first stage is from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. At this stage, research primarily centred on crowd psychology and social change theories (Huntington, 1996; Le Bon, 2000). Crowd psychology suggested that social movements stemmed from irrational collective actions, driven by emotions (Le Bon, 2000). Meanwhile, the social change theories argued that societal shifts, if not assimilated swiftly, could give rise to social movements (Huntington, 1996). However, these early theories attracted criticism for their inability to form a comprehensively applicable social movement theory, and they failed to explain why some societal grievances do not lead to social movements and, conversely, why some movements emerge without clear societal grievances (Wang, 2015).

The second stage is from the 1950s to the 1990s. Throughout this period, a multitude of social movements emerged in the West, prompting further research in the field. Within this context, the academia in the United States and Europe developed separate perspectives on social movement studies. In the United States, the representative theories became the Resource Mobilization Theory and the Political Process Theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977; Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020).

Resource Mobilization Theory examines the foundational elements and conditions for social movements, the motivations behind participants, and the mechanisms of a movement's success (McCarthy and Zald, 1973). This perspective sees participants as rational actors, suggesting that their level of engagement in a movement depends on the benefits they get and the costs they pay (McCarthy and Zald, 1973). McCarthy and Zald highlight that the rise in social movements during this period was not a direct result of escalated social conflicts (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Instead, they attributed it to an increase in resources accessible to those participating in the movement, and

they also believed that the amount of resources a movement can gather plays a growing role in deciding its size and success (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

However, this viewpoint faced critique, notably from McAdam. He argued that Resource Mobilization Theory magnified the significance of external resources, such as those from corporations and governmental entities, in the evolution of social movements (McAdam, 1999). He observed that major movements of the 1960s, such as the feminist and environmental movements, primarily relied on resources contributed by the participants themselves, not external sources (McAdam, 1999). He also pointed out that, corporate and government elites often block rather than help the progress of movements (McAdam, 1999).

Charles Tilly is a representative scholar in the political process theory. He introduced the “polity model”, describing the “population” as a structure made up of two types of people: those inside the polity (“members of the polity”) and those outside it (“challengers”) (Tilly, 1978, p.52-53). This model sheds light on the distribution of power in society and the interactions between various groups with power dynamics (Tilly, 1978, p.52-53). Often, due to political obstacles, the efforts of “challengers” to influence the government go ignored, and, to address this, they either strive to become part of the existing polity or opt to disrupt it, leading to the emergence of a social movement or a revolution (Tilly, 1978, p.52-53). In addition, as challengers typically lack essential political resources, they need to collaborate with other challengers or “members of the polity” (Tilly, 1978, p.52-53). These alliances offer the “opportunity” for challengers to initiate social movements (Tilly, 1978, p.55). Tilly also highlighted that the effectiveness of a social movement's mobilisation is based on two main factors: the quantity of useful resources the movement participants possess and their capability to transform those resources to benefit the movement (Tilly, 1978, p.78-81). Tilly held a critical perspective regarding the influence of digital media on social movements. He believed that media could affect the mobilization of a social

movement, but it cannot change the structure pattern and development process of a social movement (Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020).

McAdam also discussed the concept of “political opportunity” in his research. He posits that those who initiate social movements are often groups marginalized from a country's standard political processes (McAdam, 1999). As such, any social shift that can alter the existing political order can be a political opportunity for these groups. The ability to initiate a social movement hinge on whether these groups can grasp and capitalize on these political opportunities (McAdam, 1999).

Scholars have two primary critiques of the political process theory. Firstly, factors influencing social movements are not static or detached from history, but dynamic and rooted in the specific historical contexts (Zhao, 2012). The “political opportunity” concept also evolves over time. Thus, using a fixed theoretical model to explain all social movement phenomena is problematic (Zhao, 2012). Secondly, this model is grounded in the history of Western social movements. While Tilly acknowledged the effects of governmental authoritarianism on the progression of social movements in other countries, applying this model to non-western countries with particular historical contexts is difficult (Wang, 2015).

In Europe, the focus of social movement research diverged, with the predominant theory of the period being the new social movement theory. From a broader sociological lens, scholars delved into the evolution of social classes and the significance of culture, identity, and discourse in influencing the rise and evolution of social movements (Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 2011; Zhao, 2012).

Alberto Melucci, a key theorist in the new social movement theory, suggests that social movements encompass more than just large-scale, public protests

(Melucci, 1989). They also include everyday actions by individuals and groups. He underscores the role of collective identity creation within social movements, suggesting that movements rally supporters by fostering a collective identity, which remains dynamic and is continually shaped throughout the movement's lifespan (Melucci, 1989, p.30-36).

Additionally, Melucci explores the relationship between social movements and symbolic frameworks in the information age (Melucci, 1996). He points out that social movements in the modern information society are not just about contesting for economic resources or power, but more crucially, they address struggles over culture and meaning (Melucci, 1996, p.89-105). These movements challenge both the entrenched power dynamics and the existing narratives that underpin cultural understanding (Melucci, 1996, p.176-204). Participants in these movements aim to reshape this framework by introducing new symbols, tales, and narratives, crafting alternative accounts to describe societal truths (Melucci, 1996, p.176-204). At their core, these movements aspire to challenge established power and cultural frameworks, reevaluate dominant values, and create new narratives and structures (Melucci, 1996, p.348-357).

Tarrow also discussed the concept of symbolic action in his studies. He argues that social movements employ symbols and stories to rally supporters and share their messages, thus questioning the current culture and power dynamics (Tarrow, 2011). Movement participants craft and share stories that highlight the aims and reasons of the social movement, creating a shared understanding for those involved (Tarrow, 2011). Additionally, using certain symbols, movements also foster a sense of collective identity, helping individuals relate to broader communities and objectives (Tarrow, 2011).

In the third stage of social movement research, spanning the 1990s and later,

the new social movement theory perspective persisted. It merged with the research focus of American academia and evolved further (Zhao, 2012). During this era, beyond the existed mainstream theories, Snow and Benford introduced the frame mobilization theory to study social movements (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Snow, 2000). They argue that a “frame” is essentially an interpretive lens that sits at the heart of collective action, offering clarity and rationale for such actions (Snow *et al.*, 1986). To effectively rally people, the central participants of social movements connect a specific discourse system with the interests of particular individuals and groups, a process known as frame alignment (Snow *et al.*, 1986). According to Snow and Benford, there are four key processes of frame alignment in social movements: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation (Snow *et al.*, 1986).

In addition, William Gamson's idea of the injustice frame is worth noting. Gamson pointed out that the sense of injustice is essential in driving collective actions (Gamson, 1992a). When individuals feel they have been unfairly treated and that this unfairness can be addressed through collective actions, they are inclined to participate in social movements (Gamson, 1992a). The term “injustice frame” describes a recurring discourse pattern within a social movement (Gamson, 1992b, p.68-73). This frame offers participants a consistent explanation, making them perceive a particular situation as unjust, thereby uniting them under a shared action objective (Gamson, 1992a). Gamson also emphasizes that to privately accept an interpretation is not enough, it needs to be publicly acknowledged among the potential participants “for collective adoption of an injustice frame”(Gamson, 1992b, p.68-73).

When examining the unique context of this study and taking into account the aforementioned review of social movement theories, the research perspectives for this study are outlined as follows.

Firstly, while theories such as resource mobilization, political process, new movement, and frame mobilization are primarily developed within the historical context of Western social movements, they have inherent limitations. The concepts of “resources” and “opportunity” pertaining to social movements evolve with societal developments (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). In countries without well-defined social movement traditions and rules, frame mobilization theory might not comprehensively capture the specific details of certain cases. Thus, relying solely on Western-centric theories to explore this research is not feasible. The analysis needs to be rooted in the distinct socio-historical and cultural context of China's social movements.

However, as Tilly notes, no one has exclusive rights to the term “social movement”, allowing researchers to tailor theories to fit their specific contexts (Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020). Focusing on the #MeToo movement in China, both Melucci's perspective on movement participants utilizing symbols and narratives to confront dominant cultural and power structures, and Gamson's “injustice frame” align with this study's objectives (Gamson, 1992a, 1992b; Melucci, 1996). Additionally, Tilly's critical perspective on the influence of digital media on social movements offers valuable insights (Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020).

1.1.3 Online Social Movements

With the evolution of internet technology and social media platforms in recent years, many online social movements have arisen. These movements primarily revolve around two central themes. The first addresses political and economic issues, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street in 2011 (HISTORY, 2018; Anthony, 2021). The second pertains to social inequality, spotlighting

issues tied to race, gender, and sexuality. Notable instances include the #MeToo movement, initiated in 2017, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement which began in 2013 but gained heightened global prominence following the 2020 protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's death (France, 2017; Black Lives Matter, 2023).

Opinions on online social movements are varied. Some people believe that social media platforms enable campaigns without requiring formal organizations, and they facilitate real-time communication as well as ensuring rapid public awareness (Shirky, 2008). Moreover, online movements can rally individuals beyond geographical and time constraints, bolstering change potential (Shirky, 2008). For instance, during the Arab Spring, activists used Facebook to organise movements that transitioned from the online realm to tangible on-ground actions (HISTORY, 2018). Social media allows people to gather support, to promote their causes, and to build shared identities across different groups (Tufekci, 2017). Additionally, the cultural icon of social media, the hashtag, offers an approach to crafting narratives and shaping identities through replication and disseminating taglines (Mina, 2019).

Conversely, there are critics of online social movements. A common critique emphasizes these movements often have short-lived impacts and may not lead to real change (Tufekci, 2017). Tufekci points out that lasting social movements need a strong, united community formed over time through shared efforts, something online movements might not have (Tufekci, 2017). He compares the lasting success of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement to the short-lived results of the Arab Spring, highlighting the limitations of online movements in areas such as gathering support, leadership, and long-term impact (Tufekci, 2017).

A related criticism concerns “slacktivism”, a term describing superficial online support that does not transition into real-world actions (Cabrera, Matias and

Montoya, 2017). Individuals might mistakenly perceive their online engagements, such as clicking “agree” or “share” on social platforms, as meaningful contributions to a cause, even when such actions have negligible real-world implications (Cabrera, Matias and Montoya, 2017). Such similar critique surrounds the “fourth-wave” feminism. Guillard argues that people who engage with the feminist movement online often feel they have done enough, leading them to avoid participating in offline events or speaking out beyond their social media profiles (Guillard, 2016). However, it is important to note that these debates are rooted in Western contexts with mature social movement traditions and systems. In countries where offline movements are restricted or prohibited, starting movements through social media might be the only viable option.

Scholars have developed various viewpoints and theories around online social movements, including related social phenomena and controversies, to explore their patterns and inherent logic for further explanation and elaboration.

Bennett and Segerberg propose the concept of “the logic of connective action”, which represents a form of organisation based on digital media, and which contrasts with the more commonly concept, “the logic of collective action”, in social movement research (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). They argue that unlike traditional collective action, which relies on substantial organisational resources and strategies, the logic of connective action is more inclined to coordination through personalised sharing and digital media technology (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013). This approach enables individuals to participate in broader social movements by spontaneously sharing personal experiences, opinions, or information, without the need for a centralised organisational structure (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Furthermore, Bennett and Segerberg developed a typology to further categorise connective action based on different organisational forms of

networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.754-757). One form is entirely self-organised, exhibiting decentralised or leaderless characteristics, where digital communication technology acts as an “organisational agent” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.755). The other is a hybrid form between highly organised and highly self-organised networks, incorporating some organisational strategies but still rooted in self-organising principles (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.755-757). They argue that in traditional collective actions, participants often pay higher costs, and while digital technology can reduce these costs, it does not alter the fundamental dynamics of the action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013). However, connective actions—regardless of the form—rely on digital media and have the potential to impact and change the core dynamics of social movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Therefore, Bennett and Segerberg argue that connective action should be viewed as a new pattern, distinct from collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). This pattern not only changes how people participate in political and social actions but also profoundly impacts traditional political mobilisation and social movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). It is interesting to note how Bennett and Segerberg's ideas here contradict Tilly's views on the influence of digital media in social movements, as mentioned in Section 1.1, where he believes that while digital media can affect mobilisation methods in collective actions, it does not alter the overall pattern of social movements (Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020).

Bennett and Segerberg further summarise that this model can serve as an analytical reference for current research on collective action and social movements based on digital media, especially for those that traditional social movement theories cannot fully explain (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Trott's research serves as a reference for examining whether the framework

proposed by Bennett and Segerberg can be applied to specific social movement issues. Trott contends that the theory of collective action formulated by Bennett and Segerberg, which is based on research with large sample sizes, offers limited analytical utility for specific and complex ethnographically related research (Trott, 2018). Consequently, Trott expands upon the theory of connective action in her own work, adopting a feminist perspective and introducing two distinct concepts. First, she observes that friendship networks within feminist movements can act as a double-edged sword: they are crucial for initiating mass feminist movements via digital platforms and media networks, yet they also pose a risk to the formal organisational structures of these online platforms (Trott, 2018, p.127). Second, Trott introduces the notion of the “feminist manager”, defined as individuals who provide counselling to representative feminist activists or assist in managing their campaigns within the digital communication landscape (Trott, 2018, p.126). These “feminist managers”, with their extensive participation in feminist protests and social campaigns, leverage their experience to combine digital networks with the feminist community, increasing support and making it reach further (Trott, 2018, p126-128).

Trott’s view offers two key insights. Firstly, the theory of connective action by Bennett and Segerberg provides a structural framework for understanding how the self-organising pattern and digital networks shape social movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Trott, 2018). However, for specific aspects such as the complexity and dynamics in certain feminist movements, additional, more focused theories are needed alongside connective action to inform research and analysis. Secondly, Trott’s observations on the dual role of friendship networks in feminist campaigns and the role of feminist managers are valuable for analysing digital feminist activism cases (Trott, 2018).

This study views Bennett and Segerberg's theory as an evolution of traditional

social movement theory, offering a new perspective on the dynamics of digital activism that have emerged in recent years. This theory provides a theoretical pattern for analysing #MeToo China, especially through the lens of digital activism. However, since the theory is rooted in the social context of Western, crowd-enabled connective actions and primarily employs large-sample digital data analysis, its applicability has its limits. The social context of #MeToo China, along with the motivations and strategies of activists using digital networks in this context, differ to some extent. Thus, the theory's relevance is somewhat one-dimensional. Given the unique and complex nature of #MeToo China, as Trott suggests, it is necessary to integrate additional perspectives and theories into the research, to create a more comprehensive theoretical framework that allows for deeper exploration and discussion.

Besides the theories mentioned above, Cammaerts focuses on the gap between media communication and social movement studies (Cammaerts, 2012). Building on the political opportunity structure theory, he further developed the concept of mediation opportunity structure to interpret the intersecting issues of media and social movements (Cammaerts, 2012). The mediation opportunity structure is a conceptual framework comprising three parts: the media opportunity structure, the discursive structure, and the networked opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012). These components interact with each other, collectively influencing the relationship between activists/protesters and media dynamics.

Specifically, the media opportunity structure highlights the media representation of social movements and activists/protesters, and the dynamics between mainstream media and activists. Mainstream media often displays a negative bias in reporting on social protests and campaigns (Cammaerts, 2012). Additionally, it tends to overlook routine or mild demonstrations, instead prioritising coverage of “political violence” or large-scale social movements

(Cammaerts, 2012). This approach by the mainstream media, in turn, influences activists, leading them to adjust their protest strategies, either actively or passively, to attract media attention better and promote collective actions and movements (Cammaerts, 2012). The discursive opportunity structure primarily centers on “self-mediation”, which entails the opportunities individuals have through digital media to express their ideas, to document protest activities, and to advance the movement. This also includes the creation and preservation of symbols and discourses (Cammaerts, 2012). The networked opportunity structure, finally, pertains to the use of internet and media technology in protests and social movements. It emphasizes the role of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in facilitating people to participate in resistance actions and movements addressing a range of social issues (Cammaerts, 2012).

Cammaerts concludes that the mediation opportunity structure serves as a functional and pragmatic framework, which can either empower activists and protest movements or act as a barrier to them. Moreover, he emphasises the influence of the mainstream media's reporting attitude on how this structure is presented and evolves within a protest movement (Cammaerts, 2012).

Wong and Wright applied Cammaerts's framework to study the dynamics between various media types and the progression of the anti-national education (ANE) movement in Hong Kong (Wong and Wright, 2020). In ANE movement, activists obtained mainstream media support and furthered their protest objectives by employing a “hybrid media logic”, where strategies from both social and traditional media were intertwined and worked together (Wong and Wright, 2020). Wong and Wright also referenced Chadwick's theory of the hybrid media system to jointly elucidate the case (Chadwick, 2013; Wong and Wright, 2020). They observed that in this movement, the media opportunity, discursive opportunity, and networked opportunities were so significant that the

mediation opportunity structure could not fully encapsulate the dynamics involved (Wong and Wright, 2020). Chadwick's concept of hybrid media logic highlights that the integration and interaction between old and new media in contemporary political communication forms a complex hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). By integrating these theories, Wong and Wright introduced the “hybrid mediation opportunity structure” as an extension and development to more accurately describe the interrelation between media and activists in the ANE movement (Wong and Wright, 2020).

From this study's viewpoint, the mediation opportunity structure theory offers a distinct and adaptable framework for guiding the analysis of #MeToo China case, providing valuable insights into the dynamics between activists and the media. However, due to the framework's limitations in addressing more complex, intertwined issues, integrating it with other specific theories enables a more comprehensive analysis of movement phenomena within complex social contexts. The research by Wong and Wright exemplifies the effective combination of multiple theories to analyse social movements in the complex social context. While the protest traditions and cultural context in Hong Kong bear more resemblance to Western society than mainland China's context, their work still serves as a pertinent reference for examining social movements outside the Western framework.

Finally, Kavada and Poell's research on contentious publicness is also noteworthy. In their paper, Kavada and Poell introduce a new framework to guide research on public contention on social media, outlined through three conceptual “moves” (Kavada and Poell, 2021).

First, rather than the notion of “public”, Kavada and Poell propose “publicness”, a process of “making things public” continuously constructed by time, space, and materiality (Kavada and Poell, 2021). This process reveals a dynamic and

constructed character, dependent on the media's material base, the practices characterising media use, and the rules influencing media. Second, they shift focus from “counter” to “contention”, situating publicness within contentious politics and emphasising the analysis of online contention participation through the diverse times, locations, and connection ways (Kavada and Poell, 2021). Finally, Kavada and Poell assess the media's role in “contentious publicness” (Kavada and Poell, 2021). Moving beyond viewing media as a sphere for claims, they argue that social media shapes contentious publicity through materiality, space, and temporality, which are also influenced by these elements and their construction process (Kavada and Poell, 2021). By constructing these three dimensions, the framework of contentious publicness offers a paradigm for analysing the flows and dynamics of specific protest movements (Kavada and Poell, 2021).

The research on a political activism case of COVID-19 in China, conducted by Sun and Wright, serves as a practical application of the contentious publicness framework (Sun and Wright, 2024). They analysed a case where individuals engaged in a “relay race” to preserve an online article against censorship in China during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sun and Wright, 2024). They illuminate the dynamic flow of this online relay activism and its reshaping, influence, and development within time, space, and materiality dimensions (Sun and Wright, 2024). They also link certain features that cannot be captured within the framework of contentious publicness to alternative corresponding theories, providing a more comprehensive explanation of the findings. For example, Sun and Wright noted that activists tried to store stories on GitHub, while simultaneously, people in WeChat groups were doing the same, leading to some “repetition of labour” (Sun and Wright, 2024, p.16). To explain this phenomenon, they applied Bennett and Segerberg's perspective of “self-organizing connective action” (Sun and Wright, 2024, p.16).

The framework of contentious publicness, as presented by Kavada and Poell, provides a lens for understanding the role of social media in #MeToo China and its interaction with the movement process (Kavada and Poell, 2021). Yet, Sun and Wright's research indicates that such analysis often encompasses mixed features beyond the scope of a single theoretical framework. Therefore, while the various theoretical approaches outlined can partially guide the analysis of #MeToo China, they all possess limitations. Considering this study's characteristics, amalgamating specific theoretical insights to form a comprehensive framework that integrates Western perspectives with China's perspective will yield a more accurate and thorough theoretical foundation.

1.2 Using Postmodern Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism as a Theoretical Guide for #MeToo China Research

"Feminism" is a widely applied concept in gender studies and social practices. With studies in this field encompassing feminist movement practices, gender inequality, and power dynamics, the term has expanded to include multiple debated issues (Mitchell and Oakley, 1986). This section begins with an overview of feminism, covering its definition and historical development, followed by a discussion of the mainstream feminist theories and their associated debates. Building upon this foundation, this section integrates the specific context of this research, emphasises the selected theories central to this study, and analyses the advantages and disadvantages of addressing particular academic issues within the Chinese #MeToo movement. The objective of this section is to outline the 'feminism' aspect from the Western perspective, forming an integral component of the study's overall theoretical framework.

1.2.1 Overview of Feminism and its Historical Development

The concept of feminism is interpreted differently depending on the context. The *Cambridge Dictionary* offers a general definition, describing feminism as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Similarly, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology* defines it as

“... the system of ideas and political practices based on the principle that women are human beings equal to men” (Ritzer and Ryan, 2011).

Historically, the mainstream ideology of feminism took root in Western societies and later expanded to various parts of the globe (Scott, 1996). In the West, the origins of feminist ideologies trace back to the Enlightenment era in continental Europe, with female collective actions appearing in the United States by the mid-19th century (Scott, 1996). The evolution of Western feminism is typically categorised into “four waves”, producing diverse ideological branches such as radical, liberal, marxist, and postmodern feminism (Cochrane, 2013). Representative branches include radical feminism, liberal feminism, marxist feminism and postmodern feminism. In addition, postcolonial feminism has arisen, particularly among Western minorities and individuals in developing nations (Scott, 1996). Since the start of the 21st century, globalisation and the rise of social media have facilitated feminist movements in establishing global connections (Cochrane, 2013). Some feminist movements, initiated online within one country, have extended their reach to other countries via social media, achieving international impact (Zacharek, Dockterman, and Edwards, 2017; Watson and Watson, 2018). Within this framework, feminism is experiencing a new evolution.

Historical Development of Feminism

Western feminism is commonly believed to have its origins in Europe during the Enlightenment era, with this early phase often referred to as “early feminism” (Scott, 1996). Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill were key representatives in this period. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft 1759-1797, 1792) criticised Rousseau's view that women should please and be attached to men, arguing that women were as rational as men. Mary Wollstonecraft believed that women were considered inferior solely due to a lack of adequate education, which motivated her to advocate for equal access to education for women (Wollstonecraft 1759-1797, 1792). John Stuart Mill also advocated for equal suffrage rights in his work *The Subjection of Women* (Mill, 1878). During this period, the core issue was thus equality.

Since the mid-to-late 19th century, there has been the emergence and growth of several organised women’s movements, all striving for improved political, economic, and cultural equality and freedom. Based on their distinct activist goals across different generations, feminism from the mid-19th century to the present day is generally divided into four waves (Pruitt, 2022).

The first wave of feminism emerged in Britain and the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The primary objectives of feminists during this era centred on suffrage and educational rights. Additionally, there was a significant push to abolish various standards that perpetuated inequality between men and women (Pruitt, 2022). By the 1930s, this wave had achieved remarkable successes: women’s suffrage had been enshrined in law, and there were advancements in women’s educational and employment rights (Pruitt, 2022).

The post Second World War era witnessed the rise of various feminist movements across the globe, paving the way for the evolution and further advancement of feminist ideologies (Chen, 2002, p.53-59). A second wave of feminism, characterised by its significant momentum, surfaced between the 1960s and 1970s. By this time, feminist theories had undergone considerable development. Western feminists expanded their scope, addressing not just the enhancement of women's living conditions but also examining the underlying causes of the oppressed status of women (Chen, 2002, p.53-59). Seminal works from this period include Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1997) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1992). Scholars delved into the ways existing social systems shaped the roles of men and women, also examining the impact of these systems on gender relations and status. For example, Beauvoir argues that women are not inherently “women” from birth, but rather they are shaped into this role (Beauvoir, 1997). Dominant ideologies in patriarchal societies have historically influenced women to adopt male-centric values, relegating them to merely being men's “others” (Beauvoir, 1997). Also, Friedan highlighted systemic biases against women and called for them to challenge such constraints and defend their rights (Friedan, 1992).

The notions of “sex” and “gender” emerged during this period. Rubin introduced the concept of gender, describing it as “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin, 1975). Rubin believed that these “arrangements” overlay societal discourse and cultural constructs onto biological frameworks (Rubin, 1975). The concept of gender underscored the impact of social systems and cultural constructs in determining societal roles. The adoption of this perspective marked a shift in feminist thought. Rather than aligning with male benchmarks and values, feminism began to concentrate on liberating women from entrenched power dynamics (Chen, 2002, p.53-59).

The third wave of feminism spanned from the late 20th century to the early 21st century. During this era, feminists critically assessed the shortcomings of the second wave, and their focus shifted towards “micropolitics” and expanded to encompass issues of citizenship (Stacy, 2007). A prevalent debate arose around the possibility that second-wave feminism definitions might have overly centred on the experiences of white, upper-class women, potentially sidelining other groups (Stacy, 2007). Postmodern and postcolonial feminist movements emerged, challenging established feminist theories (Pruitt, 2022). The aim evolved towards fostering varied and diverse identities within the feminist discourse (Chen, 2002).

The commencement of the fourth wave of feminism and how it distinctly separates from the third wave remains debated (Shiva and Kharazmi, 2019). Generally, the fourth wave is perceived as pivoting towards the empowerment of women and combatting sexual violence by utilising digital tools like social media platforms (Abrahams, 2017). Cochrane also highlights that the fourth wave is defined by feminist movements rooted in digital technologies, particularly through the distinct use of social media and blogs (Cochrane, 2013). However, the discourse around this wave isn't without contention. Some consider it a continuation of the third wave, contending that fourth-wave feminists are merely employing new methods to address pre-existing topics and concepts. Some argue that defining the fourth wave is still premature, given its evolving nature (Shiva and Kharazmi, 2019). After the global impact of the #MeToo movement in 2017, some scholars believe it to be a significant part of the fourth wave of feminism because of its wide reach and enduring influence (Pruitt, 2022).

1.2.2 Theories and Debates of Western Feminism

Throughout the centuries-long evolution of feminism, a variety of feminist theories and branches have surfaced. In earlier periods, notable theories encompassed liberal and radical feminism, which were grounded in political movements, as well as Marxist and socialist feminism, rooted in Marxist theory. The third wave saw the rise of postmodern feminism, influenced by scholars such as Foucault. Postcolonial feminism emerged, deeply shaped by postcolonial theory and black feminism. Additionally, transfeminism grew out of queer studies, while lipstick feminism emerged to challenge the male gaze, particularly in relation to the second wave.

Liberal feminism, with its roots in 16th-century Britain and France, is based on four main principles (Meng, 2001; Tong, 2014). First, it points out that men and women, as rational beings, should be accorded equal legal and political rights (Tong, 2014). Second, it argues that traditional values limit women to family and private roles, and, to achieve equality, women need to break free from these constraints and participate equally in public life (Tong, 2014). Third, a key reason for women's disadvantages is the unequal educational opportunities they receive compared to men. Lastly, the responsibility of child-rearing hampers women's ability to compete on equal footing with men (Tong, 2014). As a solution, women should be able to choose whether to have children, and both genders should equally share domestic duties (Tong, 2014).

Liberal feminism has been criticised by some scholars, however. Postcolonial feminists point out that liberal feminism reflects only the values of middle-class, heterosexual white women, ignoring the impacts of differences in race, culture, or class (Mohanty, Russo and Torres, 1991; Hooks, 2000; hooks, 2015). Fraser believes that the equality pursued by liberal feminism is simply the equality for “meritocracy”, based on the view that women as independent individuals should

ultimately enjoy equal opportunities and rights with men to realise the true value of their lives, and the process of achieving equality is thus one of eliminating the obstacles that hinder women from obtaining such opportunities (Fraser, Bhattacharya and Arruzza, 2019). Fraser, however, argues that this is a class-centric vision: what these women want to achieve is equality with straight white men in the same social class, and their goal is thus of little benefit to the majority overwhelmingly suffering from gender oppression (Fraser, Bhattacharya and Arruzza, 2019).

Moreover, Fraser believes that liberal feminism inadvertently becomes a tool for capitalism. Earlier feminist movements, recognising cultural distinctions, shifted from material gender equality, leading to an unexpected alliance between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2013). This alliance arguably paved the way for a new capitalism model (Fraser, 2013).

Contrastingly, radical feminism has offered groundbreaking critiques of male-dominated societal systems (Meng, 2001). Willis suggests that this approach introduced the concept of patriarchy, identifying it as the genesis of gender oppression (Willis, 1984, p.91-118). Radical feminism points out that gender oppression is the primary and foundational source of all other societal oppressions, deeply embedded in patriarchal social and familial structures (Willis, 1984, p.91-118). Thus, the path to women's emancipation, and arguably to wider societal liberation, lies in breaking the patriarchy. However, some argue that radical feminism overly focuses on male-female divides and doesn't adequately address variations in female experiences due to class, race, and ethnicity (Li, 2018).

Both Marxist feminism and socialist feminism draw their foundations from Western Marxist theories. Bottomore believes that Marxist feminism identifies capitalism as the primary driver of female oppression. The discrimination that

relegates women predominantly to the private sphere is perceived as a consequence of capitalist choices (Bottomore, 1991). Consequently, the overarching aim of feminism, as viewed through this lens, should be to end class structures, thereby removing the root of women's oppression. Nonetheless, Marxist feminism has not been immune to critique. Hartmann, in her seminal work "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union", argued that Marxism tends to assimilate feminist concerns into broader class struggle narratives (Hartmann, 1979). This conflation, she argues, negates the unique nuances of feminist issues, overlooking the core essence of gender equality. Such an approach not only fails to address the central problem but also perpetuates the subordinate positioning of feminism within Marxist analyses, which are predominantly centred on class struggles (Hartmann, 1979). As Hartmann explains:

"...marxists failed to focus on the differences between men's and women's experiences under capitalism. They did not focus on the feminist questions -- how and why women are oppressed as women. They did not, therefore, recognise the vested interest men had in women's continued subordination" (Hartmann, 1979, p.3).

"Capitalist development creates the places for a hierarchy of workers, but traditional Marxist categories cannot tell us who will fill which places. Gender and racial hierarchies determine who fills the empty places" (Hartmann, 1979, p.13).

Based on these observations, Hartmann advocates for a more specific approach when intertwining Marxism and feminism. She underscores the necessity to acknowledge the collaborative roles of capitalism and patriarchy. Addressing gender inequalities, she asserts, demands confronting not just one, but both these intertwined systems (Hartmann, 1979, p.20-25). Using a socialist perspective, both capitalism and patriarchy need to be addressed in scholarly debates and societal actions. (Hartmann, 1979, p.25).

Furthering this critique, Sargent points out that although Marxist theory ties

patriarchy mainly to capitalism, real-world evidence shows that patriarchy continues in socialist societies, even those that claim to have moved away from capitalist systems (Sargent, 1986). Moreover, forms of gender oppression are diverse and have subtle complexities (Sargent, 1986).

According to Latting (Latting, 1995, p.831-833), postmodern feminism is a mix of poststructuralism and French feminism. Its core views can be summarised by two aspects. The first is that postmodern feminism challenges the grand narrative of rationality and denies all grand theories (Butler, 1999). According to this, there are no universal human rights, as all of these have historical and cultural perspectives and meanings. Postmodern feminism also argues that there is no single form of feminism, as women come from all different races, nationalities, and classes; thus, no type of feminism can represent all women (Butler, 1999). The so-called universal nature of the grand narratives is based on men's values and completely ignores the existence of women. These are thus meaningless to women, and only the recognition of multiple, micro-theories that give women value is valid (Meng, 2001).

Based on the influence of Foucault (2002), postmodern feminists also try to use ideas of power-knowledge and disciplinary gaze to discuss feminist issues (Li, 2018). There are two types of power, repressive power, and normalising power. Normalising power is everywhere, as it allows people to automatically meet the expectations of society (Leiden University, 2017). Knowledge is the product of normalising power: power creates knowledge, and knowledge, as a standard of normalisation, produces power (Foucault, 2002). Thus, postmodern feminists assert the need to challenge the oppressive power from patriarchal knowledge creation and to foster feminist insights that empower women (Li, 2018).

Foucault (2002) also believed that society requires people to follow the norms through the process of standardisation. He used the example of a prison to

show that everyone under threat of a disciplinary gaze must maintain self-discipline (Li, 2018). People are not only constrained by power but also adapt through self-discipline to align with societal expectations. This adaptation process, often unconscious, integrates individuals into the prevailing power structure (Foucault and Sheridan, 2019). Postmodern feminists use this idea to point out that a whole set of standardisations exists to discipline female behaviours; even if they are not directly supervised, women thus still self-restrain and self-supervise under the threat of this disciplinary gaze (Li, 2018).

In addition, postmodern feminism criticises liberal feminism and radical feminism for emphasising the physiological differences between women and men. It argues that women are not a physical but a cultural category, and they challenge all gender theories that derive meanings from the body (Ebert, 1991, p.886-904).

Postcolonial feminism emerged in response to the Western-centric focus of feminist discourse. It challenges the universalization and oversimplification of non-Western female experiences in traditional feminist narratives, asserting the need for feminist theory and practice to acknowledge and address global dynamics, including racial, class, religious, and ethnic power structures (Ebert, 1991, p.886-904). It highlights that Western-centric feminism overlooks the complexities shaped by colonial histories and global disparities that influence women's experiences (Luo and Pei, 2000, p.100-108).

Key scholars of postcolonial feminism include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and bell hooks. Spivak, in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", explores the challenges faced by marginalized groups, the "subaltern", in expressing their narratives (Spivak, 1988). She contends that Western discourse often misrepresents these voices, further deepening their marginalization (Spivak, 1988). Such misrepresentations, especially of women

from colonised and developing regions, result in double oppression: first, from their own societal structures and then, from misinterpretations within Western narratives (Spivak, 1988). Spivak urges those in positions of influence to truly listen to, rather than override, the voices of these marginalized groups (Spivak, 1988; Francisco, 2013).

Mohanty, on the other hand, critiques the homogenising tendencies of Western feminists when discussing third-world women's issues (Mohanty, 1984). She observes that Western feminists, at times, project their own experiences onto women from the global south, thereby erasing the unique challenges and contexts these women face (Mohanty, Russo and Torres, 1991). Mohanty advocates for deeper communication between Western feminism and feminism in the global south. This engagement would recognise diverse feminist strategies across various cultures and contexts and foster a more inclusive feminist alliance through critical and reflective dialogue (Mohanty, 1984; Mohanty, Russo and Torres, 1991).

bell hooks underscores the significance of narratives from non-white feminists and the concept of intersectionality in her work. She critiques the marginalisation of black women and other women of colour within mainstream Western feminist discourse, asserting that the experiences and concerns of non-white women hold equal importance (hooks, 2015).

Additionally, hooks advocates for an intersectional approach to address feminist issues. She contends that any discussion on gender inequality or efforts to combat gender oppression should factor in the intertwined influences of race, class, sexual orientation, and other dimensions (hooks, 2014). For hooks, feminism should be an inclusive global movement that transcends the boundaries of gender, race, and class, rather than catering solely to the needs of a particular group (hooks, 2000; hooks, 2014). She advocates for the

involvement of a diverse range of women—from various racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds—in feminist dialogues and practice (hooks, 2000). This inclusivity also encompasses men who are impacted by patriarchy. Moreover, hooks sheds light on the compounded oppression experienced by women of colour due to their race and gender, and she touches upon the specific gender-related challenges black women encounter within their own communities, often perpetuated by black men (hooks, 2015).

1.2.3 Pros, Cons and the Choice

From the above overview, the characteristics and debates surrounding major Western feminist schools are evident. In determining the appropriate theoretical lens for analysing the #MeToo movement in China, it's crucial to consider the respective focuses of each feminist school and assess their alignment with Chinese feminism.

While liberal feminism offers some insights that could benefit Chinese feminism, its discourse is largely rooted in the experiences of white, middle-class Western women, which may not be wholly applicable to the Chinese context. Radical feminism, with its focus on confronting gender oppression and destroying patriarchy, aligns in many ways with the aims of gender equality in China. However, Chinese gender issues intertwine with unique elements such as nationalism and cultural traditions. As such, radical feminism, which developed in the context of mature Western social practices of the 1960s, may not fully capture the complexities of the 2018 #MeToo movement in China.

Given China's socialist orientation, one might assume Marxist feminism to be the most fitting framework. This, however, isn't entirely accurate. On one front, as previously highlighted, the shortcomings of Marxist feminism become

apparent when applied to Chinese feminism. Even though the state has, to some extent, supplanted the traditional paternalistic authority, the changes under socialism have not deeply affected family dynamics in the private sphere (Li, 2016). Thus, gender oppression remains evident in family life and relationships due to enduring patriarchal norms (Li, 2016). Additionally, the Chinese #MeToo narrative revolves more around imbalances in power dynamics than class-based oppression. Thus, Marxist feminism does not offer an optimal lens for examining #MeToo in China.

Postmodern feminism holds vital relevance to the study of the #MeToo China in 2018. Firstly, its emphasis on the diversity of women's experiences and its resistance to overarching theories that generalise all women aligns with this study's focus on specificity, especially in understanding #MeToo from a Chinese perspective. Secondly, the importance postmodern feminists place on knowledge production and self-discipline can be applied to discussions surrounding #MeToo in China.

In essence, postmodernism's accentuation of diversity mirrors this study's commitment to recognising the uniqueness of the #MeToo movement within the Chinese societal context. With this foundation, the study delves into the women's narratives from #MeToo China, further analysing them through the perspectives of knowledge production and self-discipline.

Postcolonial feminism holds pivotal insights for Chinese feminist studies. Firstly, this branch of feminism underscores the significance of non-white women's experiences and intersectionality, which are crucial to Chinese feminism. The Chinese feminism viewpoint has differences from the main Western feminist narrative, which is mostly led by white feminist views. A review of prior sections reveals that while mainstream feminism perspectives offer some representation, they fail to adequately guide non-Western feminist practices or address specific

challenges like the censorship Chinese feminists confronted during the 2018 #MeToo movement in China. Postcolonial feminism brings these issues to the fore, providing a valuable framework for this study.

Secondly, postcolonial feminism highlights how mainstream feminism often misinterprets and overlooks the experiences of women of colour and those from third-world countries. This mirrors the challenges Chinese women face when their unique struggles are overshadowed by Western feminism discourse that often focuses only on “authoritarian governance”, thereby potentially muffling the genuine voices of Chinese women. The critiques by Spivak and Mohanty on this issue offer pivotal insights for Chinese feminist inquiries, particularly for studies like this one focusing on #MeToo China 2018.

Lastly, the discussion by postcolonial feminists about the two-fold oppression—stemming from both race and gender—faced by women of colour and those in third-world countries resonates with the issues of this study.

In summary, both postmodern and postcolonial feminist theories offer significant insights for this research. This study will merge postmodern feminist views on knowledge production and self-discipline with postcolonial feminist emphases on intersectionality. This combined approach will illuminate the potential dual oppressions while critiquing the sidelining of third-world narratives by dominant discourses, reinforcing the study's depth and breadth.

1.3 Social Media and Feminist Activism

1.3.1 Overview of Social Media

Social media encompasses the interactive online technologies that foster virtual

communities and network platforms (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p.241-251). These platforms enable individuals to share opinions and exchange experiences (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p.241-251). While the technology underpinning social media originated in the United States, its adoption has proliferated globally, driven by advances on the Internet and related virtual technologies (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). According to the latest visual ranking list from Statista's official website, as of January 2024, the top three popular social media platforms in the world are Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, closely followed by Instagram, TikTok, and WeChat (Statista, 2024). Twitter, now known as X, is ranked 12th. These rankings are based on the number of monthly active users for each platform, with the data sourced from the "Digital 2024: Global Overview Report" produced jointly by We Are Social, DataReportal, and Meltwater (DataReportal, 2024).

While identifying an exact definition for social media can be challenging due to its diversifying platforms, Obar and Wildman suggest some common features (Obar and Wildman, 2015). They categorise social media as a collection of "interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications" (Obar and Wildman, 2015, p.745-750). Central to these platforms is user-generated content, from text posts to videos and other visual data (Kaplan, 2012). Another defining characteristic is their ability to directly link users, thereby enabling the creation of online networks (Obar and Wildman, 2015, p.745-750).

Social media differs from traditional media in several significant ways, as highlighted by Roy (2016). Firstly, social media typically engages with a broader, less specific audience, whereas traditional media is often more focused on targeting a particular demographic (Roy, 2016). In terms of functionality, social media platforms boast diverse capabilities, in contrast to the more limited scope of traditional media (Roy, 2016). Moreover, the real-time nature of social media allows for swift updates on current affairs, while traditional media tends to

experience inherent delays, especially in news reporting (Roy, 2016). Additionally, while social media encourages interactions between users and content creators, the flow of information in traditional media is largely one-way (Roy, 2016). Lastly, erroneous information is more easily disseminated on social media platforms, making them more likely to spread fake news or misleading user data (Roy, 2016).

Wei and Ding conducted a comprehensive study on communication dynamics in the age of social media. They observed that societal shifts have driven the evolution of communication environments, marking a move from the era of mass communication to the age of social media (Wei and Ding, 2013). In the past, the focus of many academics was on the mechanisms of distributing information through media. In contrast, today's social media age sees the media primarily as a facilitator, where individuals not only share information but also shape its meaning (Wei and Ding, 2013). This change in the media landscape has also transformed its audience: from a uniform group of passive receivers to a varied population of active users and contributors (Wei and Ding, 2013). Consequently, communication has evolved from a one-to-many model to a more reciprocal many-to-many interaction, which has redirected the path of media research shifted towards social media and social network analysis (Wei and Ding, 2013).

In the global social media ranking mentioned above, Facebook notably stands out. Facebook, headquartered in the United States, primarily facilitates information sharing, instant online communication, and the creation of virtual communities (Facebook, 2023). Another noteworthy social media platform is Twitter, renamed X in 2023 following its acquisition by Elon Musk (Ivanova, 2023). Twitter/X has always been a preferred tool for activists and organisations due to its rapid and convenient internet communication capabilities and extensive global digital networks (Floreani, 2022). It offers two key features: the

“What's Happening” and hashtag, which allow users to quickly find information through keyword searches (X, 2024). Its user-friendly interface for commenting and sharing facilitates the swift and broad dissemination of information (Hosterman *et al.*, 2018). These attributes make Twitter/X a favoured platform for social activists and organisations to launch and spread online and offline campaigns (Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019a). The #MeToo movement and #BlackLivesMatter campaigns are prominent examples of its impact (France, 2017; Black Lives Matter, 2023). Facebook and Twitter/X have been blocked by the Chinese government since 2009, and to access them, Chinese users need to use a VPN to circumvent the network firewall restrictions (Barry, 2022).

1.3.2 Online Feminist Movements in the Social Media Age

Building on the discussions in Section 1.1 and 1.2, the development of the Internet and social media since 2000 has catalysed the emergence of online feminist activism. Women have used these digital platforms to disseminate gender equality information and initiated online feminist campaigns (Abrahams, 2017). This online feminist movement trend has evolved and diversified, addressing themes ranging from sexism and gender-based violence to women's health (Cochrane, 2013).

Several pivotal online feminist campaigns stand out. The #FreeTheNipple movement, initiated in 2012, advocated against societal biases towards female breasts, championing the autonomy of women's bodies (Shapiro, 2021). Following the 2014 Santa Barbara shooting in the US, the #YesAllWomen campaign surfaced. American women united to share their experiences with sexism and violence, urging society to recognise and combat entrenched misogyny and gender-related violence (Pearce, 2014). Additionally, the #MeToo Movement began in the United States in 2017 and subsequently expanded to

85 countries worldwide (Strum, 2017). It stands as a notably significant and iconic campaign among various online feminist movements (Strum, 2017).

Academic studies focusing on the development of online feminist activism trends offer a variety of exploration and analysis perspectives. In the book *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, Jackson, Bailey, and Welles conduct a comprehensive analysis of a series of online feminist campaigns based on hashtags, an indispensable element of online activism (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020). They discuss why Twitter has become an essential platform for historically disenfranchised groups, including Black Americans, women, and transgender people (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020). They note that these marginalised groups use Twitter hashtags to spread counter-narratives, to prevent political spin, and to build diverse networks of dissent (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020).

Trott, as mentioned in Section 1.1.3, combines the theory of connective action and the idea of “tyranny of structurelessness” to discuss the organisational structures of the feminist movement and proposes the concept of “feminist connective action” (Trott, 2018). In another paper, she uses social network analysis and discourse analysis to explore how the narrative of feminist hashtags is negotiated and constructed through discourse (Trott, 2021). She also highlights the limitations of digital networked feminism represented by #MeToo, noting that the voices of different types of marginalized groups are ignored and erased in such movements (Trott, 2021).

A series of studies focus mainly on social media and the #MeToo movement. Hosterman examines Twitter's role, noting it as an empowering platform for sexual violence survivors to share their narratives and receive support (Hosterman *et al.*, 2018). Xiong analyses the strategic use of hashtags by social movement organisations during the #MeToo period, underscoring the vital role

of platforms like Twitter in amplifying messages and mobilising collective action (Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019). Scharff delves into the interplay between digital feminist activities and neoliberal ideologies, asserting that online feminist campaigns, while transformative, have a nuanced relationship with neoliberal principles (Scharff, 2023).

Additionally, Quan-Haase and Mendes used a synthesis review approach to examine 788 studies on #MeToo between 2016 and 2019 (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). They found that only 22 papers explored the situation of participants on social media platforms such as Twitter/X and Facebook in the #MeToo movement (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Therefore, they emphasise the need for more research focusing on movement participants to understand their experiences related to the movement, thereby filling the academic gap in qualitative research that directly engages participants in the #MeToo movements (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Moreover, they highlight that despite being a global movement, research surrounding #MeToo lacks geographical diversity, primarily focusing on the Global North, thus calling for more cross-cultural research to understand this movement from diverse perspectives (Quan-Haase et al., 2021).

The research of Quan-Haase and Mendes holds significant reference value for this study, as their insights provide academic support for the research perspective and one of the original contributions of this study. The above-mentioned research on #MeToo mainly employs data network analysis to deduce the overall structure or internal logic of this feminist movement. However, as Quan-Haase and Mendes argue, such processes often overlook the specific individuals and their experiences within the movement. Presenting and understanding their voices, analysing, and learning from their experiences are also crucial. This academic gap in qualitative research perspectives needs addressing.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on #MeToo movements in the Global South, conducting various discussions and studies on cases in India, South Korea, South Africa, and South America (Dilip, 2022; Falkof, Phadke and Roy, 2022; Medrado, 2023). However, #MeToo research focusing on East Asia still requires further development, and the lack of geographical diversity in #MeToo studies still needs more attention to the Global South for improvement.

Under this academic context, the particularity of the #MeToo China case and the original contribution of this study have been proven and supported. First, in terms of academic geographical diversity, #MeToo China, as a case simultaneously included in the underrepresented geographical concepts of East Asia and the Global South, clearly presents its distinction from an academic research perspective. Furthermore, this research focuses on exploring the narrative, discourse, and significance of specific participants and their experiences in the movement, filling the academic gap in this qualitative research perspective.

Summary

This chapter primarily focuses on the Western theoretical foundation that underpins the first part of the theoretical framework of this study. It sequentially organises discussions on social movement studies, feminist theories, and debates on online feminist movements. The aim is twofold: to provide an overview of the Western theoretical background relevant to the research topic and to spotlight the primary perspectives employed in this study.

The first section outlines the definition of social movements and charts the three stages of social movement studies in the West. It then examines key theories,

assessing their alignment with the #MeToo China 2018 issue. Three central perspectives chosen for further discussions in this study, include Melucci's perspective on how movement participants use symbols and narratives to challenge dominant cultural and power structures, Gamson's "injustice frame", and Tilly's insights into digital media's impact on social movements (Gamson, 1992b; Melucci, 1996; Tilly, Castañeda and Wood, 2020).

Furthermore, the first section emphasises the challenges and gaps inherent in applying Western social movement theories to contexts outside the West. Mainstream theories, which are rooted in Western historical and sociocultural contexts, are not universal templates. As a result, they might not fully address the specific details of movements in countries with other ideologies and social activism histories. For example, concerning #MeToo China, established models such as the "polity model" or critical views on online slacktivism offer valuable but limited insights. The dynamics of social movements are ever-evolving, demanding context-specific analyses. This highlights the challenge: integrating specific Western theoretical insights with China's unique social context to provide a different, non-Western perspective on the #MeToo China movement.

Additionally, the first section reviews key studies on digital social movements and discusses their relevance to #MeToo China. Specifically, Bennett and Segerberg's theory offers a theoretical pattern for analysing #MeToo China through the lens of digital activism. The mediation opportunity structure theory provides a distinct and adaptable framework, offering valuable insights into the dynamics between activists and the media. The framework of contentious publicness, as developed by Kavada and Poell, helps understand the role of social media in #MeToo China and its interactions within the movement. However, while these theoretical approaches can guide the analysis of #MeToo China, they each have limitations. Therefore, this study opts to apply these core theories to the overall elaboration of core cases in #MeToo China, and to merge

specific theoretical insights to create a comprehensive framework that integrates Western perspectives with China's unique context in further analysis and discussion.

The second section begins by outlining the evolution of Western feminist practices and then provides a detailed analysis of the mainstream Western feminist theories. By comparing the main emphases and constraints of these theories, this study underscores the key perspectives chosen to inform this research: postmodern feminism and postcolonial feminism.

This section highlights the value of postmodern feminist theory's focus on the production of knowledge and self-discipline, in line with Foucault's concepts of power. Its emphasis on the diversity of women's experiences is also discussed for its relevance to this research. Moreover, postcolonial feminism aligns with Chinese feminism and the #MeToo China movement in terms of both practice and theoretical standpoints. Its focus on narratives from non-Western viewpoints and the twofold oppression faced by women in third-world countries are essential for this study. The second section also highlights the limitations of applying Western feminist theories to non-Western feminist movement issues.

The third section provides an overview of social media, emphasising its distinctive features and the ongoing debates surrounding it. Section 1.3.2 presents a concise overview of the online feminist movement, extending discussions from Section 1.1.3 and consolidating them here. Moreover, this section addresses the shortage of qualitative research perspectives in #MeToo studies and, more critically, the lack of geographical diversity in studies from the Global South. Thus, the distinction of the #MeToo China case and the original contributions of this study are both proven and highlighted.

To summarise, this chapter lays out the initial part of the study's theoretical framework from a Western standpoint, showcasing the specific perspectives adopted in this study, and highlighting the distinction of #MeToo China. This research underscores the necessity of integrating both Western and relevant Chinese theoretical insights, tailored to China's unique sociocultural background, to thoroughly examine the #MeToo China case. The Chinese theoretical perspective, forming the second part of this study's theoretical framework, will be elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 Highlighting the Chinese Perspective: Social Movements, Feminism, Internet, and Censorship

Introduction

Following the review of the core theoretical perspectives from the west in Chapter 1, this chapter will proceed to construct the second part of the theoretical framework of this study: social movements and feminism from the Chinese perspective, as well as the distinctive Internet and censorship context in China. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the unique aspects of social movements, feminism, and the Internet and censorship in China within the context of Chinese culture and society, including historical development and related academic studies. This chapter aims to provide views and practices centred on a Chinese perspective, supplementing the review of core theories predominantly shaped by Western perspectives. By doing so, this research will establish a more comprehensive and complete theoretical framework that combines both Western and non-Western viewpoints.

First, the historical development and social movement studies in the Chinese context are introduced. The chapter presents how to conduct social movement research in the Chinese context. Subsequently, this chapter introduces the historical development of Chinese feminism, discussing the differences between Chinese feminism and Western feminism. The third part highlights the Chinese Internet and censorship system. By introducing the emergence, development, and current state of China's Internet and discussing censorship, which is not unique but particularly distinct among related issues in China, the researcher emphasises the particularity of the Chinese Internet environment and its impact on the practice of various social issues. Finally, a summary is

provided, presenting the connection between this chapter's main points and research questions, and highlighting the existence of the research gap.

2.1 Social Movements in China

Since the onset of the 20th century, numerous social movements have surfaced in China, with the May Fourth Movement standing out as particularly significant. On 4th May 1919, Beijing students took to the streets, protesting the Shandong issue's resolution at the Paris Peace Conference, voicing their aspirations for national independence and liberation (Li, 2021). Led by students and intellectuals, this political movement was part of the global wave of revolution after World War I (Li, 2021). During World War II, many social movements spread across China, with the most significant being the revolution for Chinese national independence (Yin, 2020).

In 1949, following two civil wars, the Communist Party successfully took control, establishing the People's Republic of China and its central government. Throughout Mao's leadership, there were some collective actions across China, but the predominant ones were politically motivated by the government to promote societal and cultural transformation (Zhao, 2012). Noteworthy movements encompass the Land Reform from 1947 to 1952, the "Resist America and Aid Korea" campaign from 1950 to 1953, and the Rectification Campaign spanning 1957 to 1958 (Qianzan Research Institute, 2021). Moreover, the ten-year Cultural Revolution deeply affected Chinese society (Zhao, 2012).

In 1989, students initiated the Tiananmen Square Protest to demand freedom of expression and challenge government restrictions (Zhao, 2001). The Chinese government forcefully ended the protests, which drew international criticism (Zhao, 2001).

Transitioning into the 1990s, China embarked on market-oriented economic reforms, inducing societal shifts. Zhao contends that post-1990s collective actions bear three distinct features: smaller scale protests, resistance driven by economic concerns, and a shift in focus from the central government to local authorities (Zhao, 2012, p.1-3). Further, due to the variety of social ideas during this time, protests did not have the unified anti-system discourse like before 1989, keeping most demonstrations limited in scale (Zhao, 2001 and 2012, p.3).

Since the 21st century, China's collective protests witnessed new developments. Firstly, enhanced civic consciousness, coupled with the proliferation of NGOs, fostered the emergence of rights-centric movements (He, et al., 2015). Secondly, individual actions, such as “appealing to higher authorities for help”, began manifesting as collective actions (Yu, 2007). Lastly, since 2012, a group of young feminists had initiated a series of feminist campaigns, calling for gender equality through street performances and online protests, adding a new dimension to collective actions (Mimiyana-a, 2021). Zhao argues that these changes come from both improved education and wider internet access, as well as government policies (Zhao, 2012, p.4-5). He points out that the Chinese government's approach, which has not integrated social movements into an institutional framework like Western societies but focuses on stability maintenance, might not only remain ineffective but potentially lead to a large-scale anti-system movement in forthcoming times (Zhao, 2012, p.5-7).

Research on social movements in China can generally be categorized into two streams. Some scholars emphasize the introduction of Western social movement theories, applying them directly to the study of social movement issues in China (Lin and Zhao, 2008; Wu, 2013; Liu and Lin, 2017). In contrast, another group selectively references Western approaches, aiming to adapt

them by integrating China's social background and specific social movement issues, ensuring a more localized research context in China.

Among the scholars dedicated to studying localized social movement issues in China, Zhao Dingxin and Yu Zhengrong stand out. Zhao, drawing from the theory of state-society relations and Weber's legitimacy theory, contextualizes these within the Chinese societal context (Zhao, 2001, 2005, 2016). He then explores Chinese social movements from the point of "China's state-society relations and government legitimacy" (Zhao, 2001, 2005). Notably, through an examination of the Tiananmen Square Protest, Zhao detailed that during the 1980s in China, an authoritarian government dominated, and the foundation of national legitimacy rested on moral and economic performance (Zhao, 2001). Moreover, the evolution of mid-level organisations beyond government control was limited. This unique state-society dynamic, compounded by societal conflicts and people's feelings of uncertainty from economic reforms, culminated in the 1989 student movement (Zhao, 2001).

Subsequently, Zhao refined his theory, highlighting that ideology, procedural fairness, and government performance constitute the three pivotal sources of state legitimacy (Zhao, 2016). Within a specific state-society relationship framework, state legitimacy profoundly impacts social movement dynamics (Zhao, 2005, 2016). In China, government legitimacy primarily derives from moral and economic achievements (Zhao, 2012). Should the government curb a social movement that surpasses legal thresholds, participants and the public might vehemently respond, questioning the government's rationale from a moral standpoint (Zhao, 2001, 2013). Thus, the process of social movements in any country is tied to its ability to institutionalise widespread social inequalities (Zhao, 2012). Countries adept at institutionalising these conflicts experience fewer radical movements. Conversely, even minor societal campaigns can escalate into major events (Zhao, 2012).

Furthermore, considering the internet and social media's influence on social movements, Zhao argues that while social media reduces collective action mobilization costs, it escalates governmental network management expenses (Zhao, 2012). This dynamic inevitably shapes social movement progress. Nevertheless, for movements that cross national borders, Zhao contends that their spread is less about the internet's communication strength and more about the universality of the issues they underscore (Zhao, 2012).

Yu Zhengrong, on the other hand, focuses on the rights protection movement in China (Yu, 2007). He champions a subaltern research approach, advocating for a departure from traditional top-down perspectives (Yu, 2010). Instead, he stresses understanding the logic of subaltern political operations from within the subaltern society's structure (Yu, 2007, 2010). Yu also introduces the concepts of "rigid stability" and "stability of resilience" to elucidate China's socio-political structure (Yu, 2010). He argues that rigid stability refers to an inflexible political system in a society, leading authorities to exhaustively use resources to retain dominance (Yu, 2010). Over time, this might become unsustainable, resulting in a political implosion and a breakdown of social governance order. On the contrary, the stability of resilience offers a framework promoting conflict resolution through enhanced social governance (Yu, 2010).

Both Zhao and Yu provide a macro-level framework for studying China's localised social movement issues. Yu's approach hinges on his sociological studies on the collective actions of the workers (Yu, 2007, 2010). Zhao does not treat the perspective of state-society relations and state legitimacy as a universal research framework. Instead, he highlights the importance of initiating a problem-focused methodology, merging it with specific theoretical frameworks (Zhao, 2005, 2012, 2016). Nevertheless, Zhao's insights on China's state-society interactions and the performance legitimacy of the Chinese government

offer valuable perspectives for this study.

2.2 Feminism in China

Different from the development trajectory of Western feminism, Chinese feminism evolved from a prolonged silent period in ancient times to a significant rise in modern times (Meng and Dai, 1989). Meng and Dai point out that ancient Chinese society's patriarchy suppressed women through various means, including the use of conceptual systems (Meng and Dai, 1989, p.12). For instance, the ancient patriarchal society transformed the “Yin and Yang” concept from a cultural ideology to a power dynamic between women and men (Shen, 2016). In this dynamic, men were considered dominant, and women were subordinate, leading women to submit to the traditional cultural system's patriarchal authority (Shen, 2016). Such cultural symbolic systems acted as a historical control mechanism, hindering the potential awakening of Chinese women to their historical culture and preserving the legitimacy of patriarchal culture (Meng and Dai, 1989, p.12). This continued until the early 20th century.

Chinese scholars typically categorise the development of Chinese feminism by the 20th-century Chinese historical timeline. Specifically, they segment it into the following periods: the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (1890-1949), the New China era (1949-1978), the reform and opening up phase (1978-2012), and the recent decade marked by youth feminist movements (2012-present) (Li, 2016; Shen, 2016; Mimiyaana-a, 2021).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Industrial Revolution in the West and the Sino-British Opium War led to the introduction of Western ideologies in China. These ideas played a role in spurring the Revolution of 1911 and the New Culture Movement (Meng and Dai, 1989). Encouraged by Western

revolutions and ideological shifts, male intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao began to actively champion societal values such as freedom and democracy (Edwards, 2008). These ideals encompassed notions of women's liberation, including gender equality and the right for women to be educated (Edwards, 2008).

During this time, leaders in feminism and revolutionary movements, such as Qiu Jin, emerged in Chinese society. Qiu Jin established a newspaper advocating for women's education, aiming to help them achieve economic and political autonomy (Edwards, 2008). She also participated in the movement against the Qing government, hoping to achieve gender equality in the political and social aspects of a newly established nation (Edwards, 2008). Whether driven by male intellectuals or female activists, the women's liberation movement of this period was closely connected with the overarching theme of national liberation (Shen, 2016). Shen points out that what differentiates Chinese feminism from the Western feminism is its initial inclusion in the narrative of nationalism (Shen, 2016).

After the foundation of the new Chinese government in 1949, Chinese women experienced marked improvements in their status and living conditions (Wang, 2019). Successive laws and policies, addressing issues like equal pay, marital autonomy, and gender equality, were enacted (Wang, 2016). Notably, the *Marriage Law* of 1950 affirmed the equal standing of men and women within marriage, building upon the women's rights movement from the May Fourth era (Wang, 2016). Wang emphasises that socialist state feminists, primarily the two generations of female communists involved in China's national liberation revolution, actively championed gender equality (Wang, 2016). With their influential roles in government, they advocated for legal reforms and the establishment of women-focused institutions (Wang, 2017 and 2019). Feminists such as Deng Yingchao and Cai Chang were instrumental in founding

the National Women's Federation (Wang, 2019 and 2021). Additionally, these leaders boosted female employment, leading to an unparalleled female employment rate during this time (Wang, 2021).

Yet, Meng and Dai note a discrepancy: while women appeared to gain equality with men, deeper issues persisted (Meng and Dai, 1989, p.30-31). Women's status, they argue, shifted from being subordinate to individual men to a symbolic national collectivity that took precedence over individual identities (Meng and Dai, 1989, p.30-31). According to them, women's equality came at the cost of their individuality (Meng and Dai, 1989). Wang also acknowledged that, even though feminists achieved many of their rights through their own efforts, their progress had to be framed within the context of collectivity and often involved attributing credit to male leaders (Wang, 2017 and 2021). Wang concluded that the socialist movement needs to proceed alongside the feminist movement. Otherwise, any male-led social movement will inadvertently result in reinforcing the systems of power imbalances (Wang, 2021).

Li further observes that, since the advent of feminism in 20th-century China, national identity has consistently overshadowed gender identity. This is a key distinction between Chinese and Western feminist movements. In this era, a heightened sense of nationalism often cast “feminine” attributes in a negative light, stifling the development of female self-awareness (Li, 2016). During this time, the strong emphasis on nationalism meant that aspects associated with “femininity” were often perceived negatively, subsequently hindering the development of female self-awareness (Li, 2016). The influence of nationalism has been present since the early 20th century. In the present, men have begun using nationalism as a means to enact gender-based violence against Chinese feminists (Lv, 2021).

After the reforms initiated in 1978, Chinese feminism saw new changes and

developments. On one side, driven by the market economy and the trend of globalisation, there was a noticeable diversification in women's lives and a renewed awakening of female consciousness. However, market liberalisation also brought about new gender-related challenges, such as an expanding gap in employment and wages between men and women (Shen, 2016). Li highlights that the issue for Chinese women in this era was to separate “self” from “collectivity” and “society”, and “woman” from the slogan “men and women are the same”(Li, 2016, p.22). The question was how women should re-establish their position and further pursue individual growth in the context of post-colonial globalisation (Li, 2016).

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, marked a significant point for Chinese women's international presence (Li, 2019). At the conference, the Chinese government declared that gender equality would be a fundamental national policy (Li, 2019). This conference also promoted the legalisation of NGOs in China, bringing in Western feminist concepts such as female empowerment and gender equality (Shen, 2016, p.8). These not only offered new discourse resources for Chinese feminists but also contributed to the development of Chinese feminism studies (Li, 2016; Shen, 2016, p.8).

Furthermore, in alignment with the conference's theme, the government introduced policies to address the gender gap issues, easing the decline in the living conditions of women since market liberalisation (Li, 2016). However, Li points out that while this interaction allowed Chinese feminism to align with global trends, it also led Chinese feminists to the context of international post-colonisation (Li, 2016, p.27-28).

Since 2012, a group of young feminist activists have emerged, most of whom were university students. Using performance art in public spaces, they

conveyed their calls for gender equality, drawing media and public attention (Mimiyana-a, 2021). Notable activities from this period include the “Occupy the Men's Room” protest in 2012 and the “Resist Toxic Spring Festival Gala” letter campaign by Feminist Voices in 2015 (Mimiyana-a, 2021). During this period, campaigns by young grassroots feminists appeared to bring new developments and opportunities to feminism in Mainland China (Mimiyana-a, 2021). However, the situation soon changed. In March 2015, five young feminists, known as the “Feminist Five”, were arrested, causing the feminist movement to lose its offline public sphere (Mimiyana-a, 2021). On 9th March 2018, both the Weibo and WeChat public accounts of Feminist Voices, a prominent online feminist platform in China, were permanently banned (Mimiyana-b, no date). Under such circumstances, the Chinese #MeToo movement spontaneously emerged in 2018, attracting significant attention.

After #MeToo faced extensive censorship in China, activists began reflecting on the past decade's feminist campaigns. They observed that offline protests had transitioned from neutral issues to more political ones, resulting in increased official oversight and restrictions (Zhao, 2015). Hence, a reevaluation of their approach was necessary. Moreover, those protests did not receive any support from official women rights organisations, such as the Women's Federation, showcasing the marginalised status of young feminists (Zhao, 2015). Lastly, since 2017, as the offline public space has been compressed, the Internet has emerged as an alternative space for feminist movements. Despite its constraints, the online space has become the primary battlefield for Chinese feminist movements, especially considering the subsequent progression of #MeToo in China (Lv, 2021).

In summary, today's feminists in China fall into three main groups. The first is the “academic group”, made up of scholars affiliated with women's federations and academia, and next are the feminist NGOs centred on social action (Shen,

2016, p.16). The third group consists of younger feminists leading online feminist movements and disseminating feminist information. The first two groups often collaborate and align with the principles of socialist state feminists working within the governmental system to shape relevant policies (Li, 2016). These feminists can be labelled as the second generation since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Their focus is on addressing gender discrimination through policy measures (Shen, 2016, p.16). The younger feminists, meanwhile, represent the third generation. While they try to voice their demands through feminist campaigns, their impact on the decision-making process is limited, placing them in a more marginalised position (Shen, 2016, p.16).

Feminist research in China, primarily evolving since the 1980s, has been deeply influenced by Western feminist studies. Tong categorises the growth of Chinese feminist studies into three stages: from the 1980s to the 1990s was the descriptive phase, concentrating on showcasing women's issues; from the 1990s to 2000, there was an emphasis on theorising these issues from a feminist standpoint; and since 2000, the focus has shifted to the localisation of women's studies (Tong, 2008). Tong identifies the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 as a pivotal moment, enabling Chinese feminist studies to gradually develop their own frameworks (Tong, 2008).

Wu emphasises that a central consideration for feminist research in China has been the localisation of feminist studies (Wu, 2018). Some scholars interpret localisation as pinpointing the connections between Western theories and specific issues in Chinese society (Wu, 2018). Others argue that Western feminist perspectives and analytical frameworks must be debated and reinterpreted within local contexts to yield research genuinely grounded in Chinese society (Du, 2001).

Li identifies two main features of localised feminist research. Firstly, it's an attempt to find a distinct voice in the Chinese context, a female narrative striving to locate its identity from the broader narrative of nationalism(Wu, 2018). Secondly, unlike Western patterns, feminist studies in China have preceded the feminist movement(Li, 2016). Li also points out the limitations of Western feminist theory. She criticises the "teaching" attitude of Western feminism towards non-Western gender issues, believing it to be a postcolonial perspective (Li, 2016, p.63-64). Thus, Li proposes that localised feminist research should sidestep an overly uniform nationalist perspective while also being cautious of falling into the perspective of postcolonialism (Li, 2016, p.56-57).

Building on this, Wu highlights that the task for Chinese feminist studies is not to pit localisation against the West, especially not from an ideological stance which might damage academic autonomy (Wu, 2018). Instead, Wu advocates a more viable approach rooted in diversity, pluralism, and inclusivity, ensuring the research remains internationally engaged while aligning with China's sociocultural evolution (Wu, 2018).

In recent times, several female scholars have contributed a range of local-centric works on women's studies. Meng and Dai have explored Chinese women's writings, spotlighting overlooked elements from past centuries (Meng and Dai, 1989). Song examined the interaction between Western ideologies introduced to China and Chinese feminists during the late Qing Dynasty (Song, 2016). Dai approached her research from an intersection of film critique and feminism (Dai, 2004). Meanwhile, Li, Wang, and Shen have predominantly explored the chronological progression of Chinese women and feminism(Li, 2016; Shen, 2016; Wang, 2016).

Since the emergence of #MeToo China in 2018, research on this movement

has gradually begun to surface. Depending on the chosen perspective, theme, and entry point, these studies can be divided into three categories.

First, some Chinese scholars analyse the movement from a broad and quantitative perspective. For instance, Li and Cho utilised Bennett and Segerberg's views of connective action as theoretical guidance to investigate #MeToo China (Li et al., 2020). They emphasised the importance of personalised actions in mobilising connective movements and the communication technologies that enable individual activists to advance social movements, even within an authoritarian sociopolitical context (Li et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Zeng applied the theory of connective action in her analysis of #MeToo China. Unlike Li and Cho's research, her focus was on exploring how a global movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence emerged and evolved within an authoritarian society, thus highlighting the nature of feminist activism across various cultures and platforms (Zeng, 2020).

The second type of research focuses on the theme of "empowerment". Scholars view #MeToo China as part of the broader Chinese feminist empowerment process and employ qualitative or mixed methods to examine this issue. Han Xiao applied Allen's theory of the synthesis of power in her paper to explore the relationship between empowerment and discourse in #MeToo China (Han, 2021). She argues that feminist empowerment in #MeToo China centers on online storytelling and its associated discourse, which she views as a constructive process for the future development of feminist empowerment in China, notably highlighting its sustainability and potential to mitigate risks (Han, 2021). Lin and Yang investigate the various manifestations of female empowerment and the outcomes achieved through empowering women in #MeToo China (Lin and Yang, 2019). They point out that China's feminist empowerment challenges the existing power structures to some extent; however, they do not delve deeper into this perspective (Lin and Yang, 2019).

The third type of research involves conducting targeted analyses of #MeToo China by selecting specific cases or topics as entry points. For example, Ling and Liao study the case of Liu Yu's criticism of #MeToo China as a "big character poster", highlighting how participants in this debate deconstructed the dominant homogeneous discourse on interpretations of sexual harassment and advanced discussions on feminist politics (Ling and Liao, 2020). Han and Liu conducted case studies on two celebrity sex scandals, finding that although the #MeToo hashtag was blocked, there were alternative methods for people to engage in and spread online public discussions about gender inequality issues (Han and Liu, 2023). However, they also note that while this approach has increased the visibility of gender issues and the development of the digital feminist agenda, it fails to contribute to real collective action due to mainstream media shifting public attention from structural gender issues to blaming the negative effects brought by foreign powers (Han and Liu, 2023).

Furthermore, Lin explores the "Chinese characteristics" of #MeToo China from a localized perspective by adopting He-Yin Zhen's feminist theoretical framework (Lin, 2023). She argues that #MeToo China consists of a series of social movements, each highlighting "nannü" (man/woman) and "Zhong Yong" ("being moderate") as distinctive "Chinese characteristics" (Lin, 2023). Additionally, Sun examines the discussion surrounding #MeToo China on an overseas Chinese website, offering insights into the online gender narratives of diasporic Chinese netizens (Sun, 2020). Huang and Sun investigate the transnational politics of specific #MeToo issues in their paper (Huang and Sun, 2021).

The studies discussed above provide diverse academic perspectives on the #MeToo China issue. Zeng, Li, and Cho's research analyse the overall patterns of #MeToo China as a digital feminist movement and its characteristics within

an authoritarian political and social context, offering valuable academic references for understanding the movement from a social movement studies perspective. The work by Han, Lin, and Yang has enriched feminist empowerment research within the context of #MeToo China.

However, these references primarily provide structural and symbolic insights rather than delving deeper into specific issues within #MeToo China. For instance, while Lin and Yang acknowledge Chinese women's empowerment as a challenge to the existing power structures, they do not explore this in depth. Han makes an insightful observation that female empowerment within #MeToo China is centered around online narratives. The specific details of these narratives merit further exploration.

In the third type of research related to #MeToo China, although researchers have explored the movement through various specific perspectives, their studies also exhibit limitations. For instance, Ling and Liao focused on Internet debates initiated by elite intellectuals, and Han and Liu concentrated on cases involving celebrity sex scandals. These cases, while significant, represent only a small portion of #MeToo China which largely comprises narratives and cases from ordinary participants.

Lin specifically emphasised the “Chinese characteristics” of #MeToo China in her research, providing a valuable reference for researchers. However, her exploration of these characteristics could have been more in-depth, and the interaction between characteristics of Chinese feminism and decolonial feminism theories from the Global South is also limited.

Therefore, it is evident that there is a literature gap in #MeToo China studies—a need for both comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the movement from a non-Western perspective. From the perspective of this study, the voices of

ordinary participants, who constitute a significant part of #MeToo China, have not been fully represented or explored. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a more in-depth exploration and analysis of the narratives of these ordinary participants, focusing especially on those who were involved in three particularly critical and influential #MeToo cases¹.

Specifically, what narratives have participants of #MeToo China created, and what features have these narratives shown? What is the relationship between these narratives and social media? These issues require further discussion and study.

2.3 Internet and Censorship Strategies in China

From the beginning of its construction, the situation of China's Internet has been different from that of most Western countries. Since the first access to the Internet in 1994, the Chinese government has dominated the construction and development of the Internet in China rather than appointing academic research institutions or other large companies (Barmé and Goldkorn, 2014). In other words, China's Internet is state-owned, which is owned by the Chinese government. Any newly established website must first obtain an ICP license from the government's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), equivalent to an information service and website operating licence; otherwise, any of its activities is illegal (Barmé and Goldkorn, 2014). In addition to MIIT, the government has also established a series of departments to regulate China's Internet society, including the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and the Cyberspace Administration of China (Gov, 2022).

In this context, the Chinese government not only has ownership of the Internet

¹ The details of three particularly critical and influential cases will be thoroughly introduced in Chapter 3.

but also controls its access routes, so private enterprises and individuals are only allowed to own the right to rent broadband and manage websites rather than Internet entities (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.1). As a result, the structure and attributes of the Chinese Internet were different from those of the Western Internet from the very beginning.

Based on the above background, Herold identified four main characteristics of China's cyberspace: “government-allowed”, “its quasi-separation from the rest of the World Wide Web”, “the relative youth of its users”, and “the general wildness encountered on many websites”. Particularly notable in the context of the Internet and censorship in China are the first two characteristics (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.2-5). The “government-allowed” Internet implies that the Chinese government does not need to “gain” control of the Internet but is already in a dominant position to allow or disallow any activities online (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.1). In contrast, governments in the United States and Europe often need to enact legislation to empower themselves to interfere with the Internet. In China, however, control and interference over the Internet are considered “default rights” (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.1-2).

“Its quasi-separation from the rest of the World Wide Web” refers to the Chinese Internet formed under the control and regulation of the central government. It is not completely connected to the Internet in other parts of the world but is half-linked and half-separated (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.1-4). The Chinese government has adopted a series of measures to block access to many “foreign websites” so that Chinese netizens have no access to view them or to use related services. The most well-known method is the “Great Firewall of China (GFW)”. In addition, there are three other main ways, including setting up a keyword blacklist, “the coercion of multi-national technology corporations”, and enforcing netizens to register with their real names (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p.2-4).

Against the backdrop of this Internet policy environment and social context, Roberts conducted a comprehensive study on the Chinese Internet censorship system, discussing various aspects of Internet censorship in China. She outlined the three main censorship mechanisms—fear, friction, and flooding—and elaborated on how these mechanisms are implemented in China's censorship practices.

First, Roberts defines “fear” as a mechanism that prevents the dissemination of information through threats and punishments, such as imprisoning the censored individuals. This approach makes media or individuals aware of the negative consequences of obtaining and disseminating information, thereby achieving the purpose of censorship (Roberts, 2018, p.45-52). However, this mechanism also has various shortcomings. For example, it may increase public awareness of the importance of censored information, leading to more active efforts to seek and produce such content (Roberts, 2018, p.52-53). Additionally, when this type of censorship arouses public resentment, it can decrease support and trust in the authorities (Roberts, 2018, p.52-53).

Furthermore, Roberts argues that in the information age, the Internet-based dissemination of information has increased the costs of fear-based censorship (Roberts, 2018, p.54-56). On one hand, the emergence of social media allows the public to obtain and disseminate information more widely without the filtering traditionally imposed by media, necessitating that the government, which initially only needed to restrict and censor traditional media, now incurs higher costs to censor social media and broader social groups (Roberts, 2018, p.54-56). On the other hand, social media also provides broader channels for people to search for specific information and resources when they realise that censored information is important (Roberts, 2018, p.54-56).

The second mechanism, as explained by Roberts, is “friction”, which achieves the purpose of censorship by increasing the costs associated with obtaining and disseminating information (Roberts, 2018, p.56-60). Specific approaches include limiting the accessibility of certain websites and obstructing the availability of particular data and news, thus affecting the transmission of information (Roberts, 2018, p.60-66). Additionally, deleting or hiding specific information, filtering searches, and blocking keywords are all methods of implementing friction (Roberts, 2018, p.60-66).

The advantage of this mechanism is that it is less easily observed and therefore easier to explain away or ignore (Roberts, 2018, p.71). For example, the public may not be aware of certain social incidents because authorities have blocked news reports and deleted online discussions. Another instance involves the collection of inaccessible data, which can obscure the true intentions behind censorship. Roberts found that increasing the cost of accessing information can significantly impact the transmission of information (Roberts, 2018, p.71-76). Therefore, compared to “fear”, “friction” allows the government to achieve censorship effects at a lower cost (Roberts, 2018, p.71-76). Roberts further argued that the role of friction mechanisms has been strengthened in the Internet age. Due to the operational characteristics of the Internet, the public sometimes cannot determine whether the blocking of information is due to algorithmic errors or deliberate actions by censors. As a result, friction-based censorship is obscured by the complexity and technicalities of the Internet (Roberts, 2018, p.76-80).

However, she also noted that this approach to censorship would be challenging to implement in situations where incidents occur rapidly and are highly visible to many people. When information is already being disseminated quickly, limiting reporting and blocking discussions can be counterproductive, making the public more aware that the government is actively suppressing and

censoring information (Roberts, 2018, p.72).

The last censorship mechanism, “flooding”, involves releasing a large amount of information that either benefits the government or serves as a distraction from negative and sensitive information, thus making it more difficult for people to find accurate data (Roberts, 2018, p.80-81). This strategy is more concealed and thus less likely to attract public attention and resentment than friction; moreover, its low execution cost makes it particularly suitable for censoring social media, which disseminates information on a large scale in the Internet age (Roberts, 2018, p.81-89). The underlying logic is to lessen the impact of sensitive information by overwhelming the public with numerous unrelated information sources, requiring individuals to spend more time and energy filtering and obtaining specific data. Roberts notes that friction and flooding are often used interchangeably in authorities’ censorship practices (Roberts, 2018, p.81-89).

Specific to China's situation, Roberts believes that the Chinese government's censorship practices have evolved from the highly fear-oriented censorship of Mao's era to a greater reliance on friction and flooding mechanisms, particularly in the context of the current information age (Roberts, 2018, p.94-112).

Roberts pointed out that the Tiananmen Square Protest marked a turning point in the Chinese government’s censorship strategy (Roberts, 2018, p.94-103). Considering market economic expansion and international development plans, the government shifted its focus to minimise international political backlash (Roberts, 2018, p.94-103). However, fear-based censorship is still occasionally employed. For example, in 2015, the “Feminist Five” were arrested, and one activist then abandoned the offline feminist movement to find “softer” ways for feminist expression (Zhi, 2015). Additionally, Huang Xueqin, a core activist in #MeToo China, has been arrested and detained until now (Aisha and Wang,

2023).

These instances illustrate that due to the high costs of implementing fear-based censorship, authorities have opted for targeted punishment of influential activists and opinion leaders to censor effectively. This approach has affected feminist activities in China, causing offline movements to decline after 2015 and pushing #MeToo China in 2018 to primarily develop online.

In today's digital age, the Chinese government predominantly employs friction and flooding mechanisms. Friction is facilitated by "government-allowed" Internet control, enabling direct control over media infrastructures such as mainstream and social media platforms (Roberts, 2018, p.104-112). Authorities restrict website access, block sensitive topics, delete posts and discussions, and filter search engine results (Roberts, 2018, p.104-112). One of those representative tools is the Great Firewall of China (GFW), which restricts information flow by limiting access to external websites (Roberts, 2018, p.162-165). However, GFW's restrictions are not entirely effective; using VPNs, people can bypass it to access broader information (Roberts, 2018, p.162-165). On social media, people employ various strategies to mitigate the risk of post deletion, topic blocking, and account suspension. Roberts describes this interaction between the public and Internet censorship as an ongoing "cat and mouse game" (Roberts, 2018, p.162).

Roberts notes that while the cost of circumventing the firewall is relatively low, not many people in China regularly "jump out of it" (Roberts, 2018, p.163-177). Those who do are often well-educated individuals with stable information access and political expression needs (Roberts, 2018, p.163-177). However, she also highlighted cases where friction mechanisms fail to effectively censor information and can even produce the opposite effect.

According to Roberts, there are two conditions where individuals are more likely to invest time and money to access blocked information: the first occurs when the blocked content or platform is highly valued by them; the second happens when censorship is suddenly implemented, disrupting users' habits and making them aware of the censorship, thereby motivating them to seek ways to access the blocked information (Roberts, 2018, p.183). When people cannot find alternatives in an accessible Internet environment to maintain their usual information consumption habits, they will be inclined to invest in methods to regain access to the blocked content or platforms (Roberts, 2018). Moreover, if authorities abruptly impose censorship to control the dissemination and discussion of specific social issues, it can also heighten people's awareness and drive them to find ways to access the censored information.

Hobbs and Roberts further developed this view in their study. By examining the Chinese government's 2014 blockade of Instagram, they explored how increased Internet censorship could paradoxically lead to greater information access for certain groups (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). They argue that censorship of specific information might encourage accustomed users to learn how to bypass censorship, not only continuing their access to blocked information but also broadening their access to long-blocked sites such as Google and Facebook (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). It's important to note that these individuals' initial intention is to maintain their routine information consumption habits. In this case, the Great Firewall (GFW), as a tool of friction, ended up having the opposite effect than what the government anticipated—instead of reducing, it actually increased public access to and engagement with certain information (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018).

Therefore, this may suggest that the effectiveness of the friction mechanism is not stable, and public attitudes towards censorship are not static. While people may become accustomed to daily friction and cease seeking wider information,

continuous expansion of censorship inevitably leads to a narrowing scope of accessible information, impacting their information needs. Under these conditions, even those without specific political expression needs or sufficient education may participate in resisting information restrictions and censorship, either consciously or unconsciously. This dynamic interaction between censorship and the public offers valuable insights for understanding specific cases like #MeToo China in an environment of widespread Internet censorship.

In addition to the friction mechanism, flooding is another censorship strategy widely used by the Chinese government (Roberts, 2018, 201-209). In today's internet-saturated environment, there are two primary approaches of deploying information floods in China. The first method involves the government controlling mainstream media to release significant amounts of official information during critical times, such as specific social events, to steer public discourse (Roberts, 2018, p.201-209). The second method employs the “Fifty Cent Party”, internet commentators hired by the government to shift and distract public attention from sensitive topics by posting positive comments on online platforms (Roberts, 2018, p.210-215). Roberts suggests that the use of information floods serves not only as a response to immediate incidents but also as a long-term strategy to shape citizens' political views (Roberts, 2018, p.215-217).

In summary, Roberts argues that the Chinese government has maintained porous censorship in mainland China by employing a combination of friction and flooding mechanisms, supplemented by adaptable response measures, thus ensuring the longevity of its authoritarian rule in the digital age (Roberts, 2018).

In addition to Roberts' comprehensive and analytical framework on Chinese censorship strategies, King and Pan offer a critical perspective on the

copyright purposes of the Chinese government (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). They test two theories about the government's censorship targets through a quantitative analysis of large-scale, multi-source censorship data (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). The first theory posits that Chinese government censorship aims to suppress dissent by deleting comments critical of the government and its leaders. The second suggests that censorship targets collective expressions of opinion that could potentially incite social mobilisation and collective actions (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013).

Through their research, King and Pan discovered that the primary aim of censorship is to restrict content that could lead to social mobilisation and collective actions, rather than content that directly criticizes the government (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). They found that if many people discuss the same topic on social media—whether critical or supportive of the government, and regardless of whether the topic is directly related to the state—as long as it involves collective action, it will be censored (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). Thus, the real objective of the Chinese government's censorship is to curb the potential for collective actions.

To further test this theory, King and Pan conducted an experiment in reverse-engineering censorship (King, Pan and Roberts, 2014). By randomly posting different texts on multiple social media platforms and observing which were censored, they demonstrated that China's censorship strategy primarily targets content likely to inspire social mobilisation, focusing on preventing any collective social actions (King, Pan and Roberts, 2014). Whether the content criticises or praises the government appears less relevant. Additionally, through analysing a large sample of email data, King and Pan revealed how the Chinese government employs numerous individuals (the "Fifty Cent Party", as previously mentioned) to post misleading comments on social media to distract the public and shift the discussion topics (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). This method

underscores the government's strategy of maintaining its power structure by controlling information that could lead to actual collective actions (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017).

In summary, King and Pan's research offers another perspective on China's censorship strategies, underscoring the government's vigilance and concern over potential collective actions (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014, 2017). This viewpoint complements Zhao's insights on the government's attitude and strategy towards grassroots social movements, as discussed in Section 2.1, and provides a valuable reference for understanding the extensive censorship in the #MeToo China movement.

In addition, Earl and Maher's retrospective study on digital suppression is noteworthy. They reviewed existing research on digital repression and developed a systematic framework to explore its role and impact on protests, social movements, and activism (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Digital repression encompasses government strategies that increase the costs of protest and social movements through digital means (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Earl and Maher argue that digital media possesses a dual nature: while it provides crucial tools for activists and social movements, it also offers new ways for authorities to monitor and suppress (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Digital repression varies widely, ranging from direct suppression of individual activists to using digital tools to bolster traditional repression efforts and developing information strategies that disrupt and weaken the impact of protests (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Earl and Maher emphasise the influence of digital repression on various social and political processes and encourage scholars to consider its multifaceted effects in their research (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). This perspective provides a theoretical reference for analysing the role of social media in #MeToo China in this study.

In summary, this section reviews China's internet and censorship strategies, highlighting core research theories and their relevance to this study. Roberts' theory of the three primary censorship mechanisms provides a comprehensive framework to explore Chinese censorship strategies. King and Pan's research elucidates the purpose of censorship in China and its connection to collective actions, while Earl and Maher's work sheds light on the dual and diverse nature of digital suppression, emphasising the importance of continuous monitoring.

However, the application of these guiding framework theories to specific cases, and whether these cases reveal any unique characteristics, remain areas for further consideration and practical analysis. In the context of this study, given the widespread internet censorship during #MeToo China, questions about the impact of this censorship on the movement and its influence on the narratives of #MeToo participants are crucial. These questions demand deeper exploration, particularly through the lens of the guiding theories.

2.4 Social Media in China

2.4.1 Overview of social media in China

The emergence of the Chinese Internet was accompanied by the rise of social media in China in the mid-1990s. In 1994, shortly after the country was connected to the Internet, the National Intelligent Computer Research and Development Centre opened the Dawning BBS, the earliest social media platform in China (Tan, 2017, p.20-25). A BBS is a platform for text-based discussion based on present topics. This emergence allowed Internet users to communicate separately from the mass media, coming together and communicating interactively; from this point, networking awareness began to accumulate in China (Tan, 2017). According to Lai (2019), the development of

Chinese social media from that point can be divided into two periods, however, the “Web” period and the “Mobile Internet” period.

In the first period, the main forms of social media were various BBS, such as Tianya and Maopu. A BBS works rather like a salon, with the focus on the group rather than individuals. Subsequently, blogs appeared, and the identity of the individual contributor began to be highlighted (Tan, 2017). After 2005, SNS emerged in China; representative platforms for this mode include XiaoNei and Douban (Lai, 2019). Tan demonstrated that, although blogs provided a platform for people to express their opinions, they required too much time for daily maintenance; as ordinary people were inclined to adopt tools that allowed them to share information more easily with family and friends, this promoted the rapid rise of SNS (Tan, 2017, p.20-25). In this period, during the movement from BBS to SNS, Chinese social media underwent a transformation from a community model to a more specific model of daily networking. Consequently, both communication between people and content was transformed into social contact, focused on different people, and the network formed by these interconnections began to develop further (Lai, 2019).

With the rise of Apple systems as well as the birth of Twitter, the Mobile Internet period developed, bringing social media into a new era. The Internet thus developed from simply a web-linked computer network to a network of interpersonal relationships (Lai, 2019). During this period, although Twitter was not permitted in China, a Chinese firm developed a similar social media platform, Weibo, which has since developed into one of the most popular platforms in China (Tan, 2017, p.20-25). In 2011, WeChat, a social media platform based on the concept of “relationship chains”, was born, and in 2012, WeChat launched a new function, the “GongZhongHao”, which returned to the model of one-to-many communication (Lai, 2019, p.20-21). Due to the development of strong networks and considerable influence, Weibo and WeChat have since become

the backbone connecting the government, companies, and ordinary users in terms of content consumption. In 2016, Douyin (Tik Tok), a video platform, was launched; it soon became very popular, suggesting that China has entered a new period of “video social media” (Lai, 2019, p.20-21).

Social media has also become more visible. Videos, including live shows and short videos, have become one of the most popular forms of social media, offering high interactivity (Lai, 2019). Tan notes that with the popularisation of the concept of “networking”, extensive social contact has become a mainstream trend (Tan, 2017, p.20–25).

2.4.2 Mainstream Social Media Platforms in China

The current mainstream social media platforms in China include WeChat, Weibo, QQ, and Douyin (TikTok). WeChat, developed by Tencent in 2011, started as an instant messaging platform but has evolved into a comprehensive social media platform over the past decade. Users can chat with friends, share text, photos, and other files, and engage in real-time voice interactions. Additionally, WeChat's built-in community feature, “PengYouQuan” (equivalent to the “Moments” function), allows individuals to post content, photos, and videos, sharing their daily experiences (WeChat, 2023). The “GongZhongHao”, a public account set up by individuals, entities, or communities to post public articles, offers a semi-open platform for discussions between content creators and readers. As a social media platform, WeChat combines functionalities of WhatsApp, Facebook, and blogging tools, attracting a vast user base. As noted in Section 1.3.1, as of January 2024, WeChat is ranked sixth worldwide among social media platforms and first in China. This ranking is based on the latest visual ranking list from Statista's official website, which cites the 'Digital 2024: Global Overview Report' produced jointly by We Are Social, DataReportal, and Meltwater (DataReportal, 2024; Statista, 2024).

QQ, also a product of Tencent, is an instant messaging platform first introduced in 1998 (QQ, 2024). Initially inspired by ICQ, an American instant messaging service, QQ quickly gained popularity in China and was the leading social media platform for quite some time. After more than two decades of enhancements, QQ now supports instant messaging (text, voice, and video), email services, QQ Space, and group chats (QQ, 2024). QQ Space facilitates semi-closed social interactions akin to SNS platforms. While the functionalities of QQ and WeChat have converged over time, WeChat's user base has significantly surpassed that of QQ (Statista, 2024).

From the standpoint of functionality, WeChat's design is more streamlined than QQ's, simplifying its operation to reach a wider audience (Hoho, 2017). While QQ's functional design emphasises entertainment, WeChat concentrates on social interaction, encompassing both private chats and office networking. This distinction gives rise to variations in their target demographics and revenue strategies (Ma, 2018). QQ primarily caters to teenagers, using a plethora of entertainment features as its profit source. In contrast, WeChat's target audience comprises adults of all age groups, addressing their desires for professional networking and public discussions. Consequently, WeChat's revenue primarily stems from advertising, echoing a model akin to Facebook (Ma, 2018).

In terms of information dissemination, there are clear distinctions between WeChat and QQ. While both platforms have a semi-closed "PengYouQuan" ("Moments") — meaning interactions are limited to accepted friends — the "GongZhongHao" feature on WeChat broadens its communicative reach. All followers can access articles shared through these public accounts, without needing a direct link to the article's author (Ma, 2018).

The WeChat public account platform frequently showcases articles that garner more than 100,000 views, granting certain posters substantial influence outside the platform itself. A prime example is the KOL, MiMeng (BBC, 2019). Her articles, often surpassing 100,000 views on her WeChat public account, have been shared across various social media platforms, ensuring a broad spread (BBC, 2019). Thus, WeChat does not place overly restrictive barriers on content dissemination.

Weibo is a social media platform that provides information sharing, dissemination, and access, which was founded in 2009. Its main function is to provide a public platform for content sharing, social networking and public discussions (Weibo, 2023). Weibo is similar to Twitter/X in that it also has the Hashtag and Trending functions, allowing fast acquisition and dissemination of information. What is different is that Weibo has no word limit for one post, offering the “Headline Blog” function. Thus, users can choose to create long weibo with more than 140 words or to write shorter headline blogs (Weibo, 2023). In addition, users can set their accounts private on Twitter/X, but Weibo does not have relevant functions. Weibo users can choose whether they display some or all of the content on their account, but other users can still view their profiles, historical portraits as well as other information.

On Weibo, users can view “weibos” posted by others and access their accounts without needing to follow them (Li, Chen and Huang, 2012). Additionally, users can engage with one another directly through “repost”, “comment”, and “like” functionalities. These features position Weibo as a social media platform primed for public discussions. An advantage of this is that events can quickly gain traction and draw significant public attention on Weibo (Cao, 2012). However, since Weibo users cannot lock their accounts, the platform is more susceptible to the effects of hate speech and online aggression.

In recent years, more people have used Weibo as a platform for speaking out and defending individual rights (Huang, 2018), such as highlighting cases of social issues that judicial procedures have not resolved. Many of these appeals have garnered support and assistance. However, some individuals criticise those using Weibo as a rights defence tool, alleging that they threaten and influence the decision-making of authorities (Cao, 2012; Huang, 2018).

Lastly, Douyin stands as one of the most popular social media platforms in China (OOSGA, 2023). Despite its official launch as recently as September 2016, this short video social media platform has experienced rapid growth within a short span of time, amassing a substantial user base in mainland China, second only to WeChat (OOSGA, 2023). Primarily, Douyin serves as a platform for recording and sharing short videos. Users have the flexibility to create videos ranging from 15 seconds to over a minute, which can then be readily edited with lip-syncing and special effects. Subsequently, these finalised videos are shared on the Douyin platform, with other users allowed to contribute comments (BBC, 2020a). In comparison to conventional video production platforms like YouTube, the standardized 15-second video duration and online editing functions reduce the complexity and expense associated with video creation, thereby significantly encouraging user engagement. The overseas version of Douyin, Tik Tok, also has significant influence around the world. Despite successive restrictions in Europe and the United States, TikTok still boasts 1,562 million monthly active users worldwide as of January 2024 (Statista, 2024).

There is a big difference between Douyin and its overseas version Tik Tok in terms of social movement issues. Although it was not born for a long time, TikTok was quickly used to discuss and act on political issues. For example, “Black Lives Matter” and “LGBTQ+” issues both have related hashtags and campaigns on Tik Tok (Fanbytes, no date). However, this situation did not

happen in Douyin at all. The big data recommendation model used by Douyin and the marketing strategy that encourages live-streaming sales made the platform present an atmosphere of information overload, pan-entertainment, commercialization and depoliticization (Lin, 2019). The Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018 did not raise any discussion on Douyin.

The four social media situations developed above show that WeChat and Weibo have wider user coverage and more concentrated social functions. Public discussions are facilitated by these social media platforms, and both WeChat and Weibo disseminate information widely and effectively, gathering people together and facilitating public discussions about social issues. QQ and Douyin are relatively more narrowly focused on entertainment, making them more apolitical; they focus on entertainment functions rather than public sphere functions.

However, despite the differences in these social media platforms, they all face the same issue of censorship by the Chinese government. Since 2000, the Chinese government has issued a series of censorship policies to filter and control information on the Internet (Bristow, 2010). After the Xinjiang incident happened in 2009, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter/X have been blocked by the Chinese government and they have been unable to access until now (Cruchbase, 2009). After 2012, along with maintaining full control of all types of traditional media, including magazines and television, the Chinese government strengthened its censorship and control of social media (Denyer, 2017). WeChat and Weibo, as mainstream social media platforms, thus receive particularly strict supervision (McDonell, 2017). On WeChat, sensitive words are blocked, and all chat records are monitored; similarly, on Weibo, sensitive topics are banned, and people cannot obtain any information on such topics even by using keyword searches (McDonell, 2017). During the #MeToo China in 2018, the hashtag “MeToo” was blocked many times, and content posted by

participants was repeatedly deleted on Weibo and WeChat. Chinese people have thus begun to avoid using sensitive words and information as much as possible in attempts to have more relaxed public discussions, which may explain to some extent why Douyin and QQ remain focused on being highly entertaining and apolitical.

Summary

This chapter describes the second part of the theoretical framework for this study, focusing on the theory and practice of social movements, feminism, censorship and social media from a Chinese perspective. First of all, through a review of historical development, academic research, and core topic debates, this chapter aims to construct a theoretical framework rooted in the specific historical context of China. On one hand, this study emphasises the interaction between the localised perspective and the research topic, serving as a core theoretical support for subsequent in-depth analysis and discussion. On the other hand, the Chinese and Western perspectives complement each other, together forming the comprehensive theoretical framework of this study.

Specifically, the first section reviews the history of Chinese social movements and localised studies, highlighting Zhao's research perspective on China's state-society relations and government legitimacy derived from performance (Zhao, 2001, 2012, 2016). While his theory aligns with Western scholars in some respects, its broad application is limited. Nevertheless, his emphasis on China's unique state-society relations, government legitimacy characteristics, and the flexible use of theories for case analysis offers valuable insights for this study's discussions. As such, this research will integrate the perspectives of Western social movements from Chapter 1 with Zhao's research perspective, tailored to the Chinese social context.

Section 2 reviews the history of feminist social practice and academic research in China, discussing the distinctions between Chinese and Western feminist practices. Compared to the diverse feminist ideologies in Western societies, China's unique historical background has given rise to two primary feminist types. The first, socialist state feminists are primarily concentrated in government agencies and academia. They advocate for the advancement of feminism by participating in the establishment of regulations. However, they often champion feminist demands through roundabout strategies, which can limit the progress and influence of specific issues. The second category consists of young activists emerging since 2012. Using performance art and social media, they initiate online feminist campaigns. They also participated in #MeToo China 2018, while they were not its initiators, and most participants do not fall under this category. The main challenge for these feminists is that, while their campaigns can attract societal attention, their influence on policymakers remains minimal. Their efforts also lack endorsement from the first feminist group, relegating them to a marginalised status.

Feminist research with a Chinese lens must first discern the influence of the dual narratives of nationalism and collectivism on women's issues and narratives. Also, when adopting an intersectional research perspective, scholars should be wary of confining themselves to Western viewpoints. Thus, this research will merge the feminist theories introduced in the first chapter with Chinese feminist theories and perspectives. This integration will underscore the distinct conditions of Chinese feminist practice and guide the core analysis and discussions of this research.

Section 3 reviews and underscores the key theories related to internet and censorship strategies in China. Roberts' theory of the three primary censorship mechanisms offers a comprehensive framework for exploring Chinese

copyright strategies. King and Pan's research elucidates the purpose behind China's censorship, while Earl and Maher reveal the dual and diverse nature of digital suppression. These foundational theories will be applied to analyse issues surrounding #MeToo China and censorship in subsequent chapters.

Section 4 outlines the status of Chinese social media, setting the theoretical groundwork for analysis and discussions in the following chapters.

Secondly, through a literature review, this chapter highlights the current academic gap in #MeToo China studies as noted in Section 2.2, which points to a lack of investigation into specific narratives of ordinary #MeToo China participants from a non-Western perspective, thereby emphasising the distinction of #MeToo China and the significance for conducting comprehensive and in-depth research.

Thirdly, this chapter presents the emergence and refinement of the research questions for this study, facilitated by a comprehensive literature review. Specifically, in Section 2.2, by examining existing studies related to #MeToo China, this study identifies a significant academic gap and underscores the necessity for further in-depth investigation. This analysis leads to the formulation of the first and second research questions:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?

In Section 2.3, by reviewing and summarising the core research on censorship in China, this study underscores the importance of integrating guiding theories with corresponding research issues for investigation. Consequently, the third and fourth research questions are formulated:

3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?

4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

In conclusion, this chapter emphasises a distinctive Chinese research perspective, integrated with selected Western theoretical views, to construct the theoretical framework of this study. It also reveals existing literature gaps and the necessity for further research, underlining the uniqueness of #MeToo China and the importance of conducting comprehensive and in-depth research. Lastly, the four core research questions of the study are highlighted following the literature review.

Chapter 3 From the #MeToo USA to #MeToo China

Introduction

Since 2017, an online feminist movement that sparked debates against sexual harassment and assault has been launched on Twitter by using the hashtag “MeToo”, and soon went viral from the online platforms to the offline world (France, 2017). Starting in the United States, the #MeToo movement has influenced more than 85 countries. Many of them have initiated similar campaigns in their own countries, including the United Kingdom, France, India, Pakistan, and China (Strum, 2017). Before delving into the specific research analysis section, it is necessary to provide readers with an overview of the global #MeToo movement as a contextual introduction to this research.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the inception of the #MeToo movement in the USA and its global spread. It then details the progression and specific challenges faced by the #MeToo movement in China. Following the review, a comparative discussion of the characteristics of #MeToo in China and #MeToo in the West further reveals why #MeToo is so distinct. The summary section elucidates how the four research questions of this study were progressively identified and refined through the establishment of the academic framework, the review of prior academic research, and the identification of research gaps, in addition to the comparative discussions of the #MeToo movement in China and in the West.

3.1 The #MeToo Movement in the USA

The way most people know about the #MeToo movement is via a tweet from American actress Alyssa Milano in 2017:

“...If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Milano, 2017).

After this call, the hashtag “MeToo” went viral on social media platforms, and those online discussions gradually developed into an online feminist movement. In fact, the hashtag “MeToo” was formed earlier than 2017, and this online movement experienced much preparation before it became enormously influential (Ohlheiser, 2017).

The term "MeToo" was initially proposed by social activist Tarana Burke on *Myspace* in 2006, as she hoped to use this term to express sympathy and support for women, especially women of colour, who suffered from sexual violence (Shugerman, 2017). Moreover, in October 2017, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* reported on dozens of women accusing Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault, which caused widespread discussions in the United States and even the international community (Kantor and Twohey, 2017). In the context of the constant exposure of the Weinstein case, Alyssa Milano tweeted this famous tweet using the hashtag “MeToo” and pushed the #MeToo movement to spread through the world later on 15 October 2017 (Milano, 2017). Thus, to be precise, the starting point of this movement should be traced back to the campaign of Tarana Burke in 2006, and the key factor that prompted #MeToo to be echoed immediately is the Weinstein case which has shocked the whole American society.

In addition, the online feminist movement, which uses the hashtag to mobilise people on social media platforms, has already existed before the #MeToo movement. For example, in 2013, German women called on Twitter to use the hashtag “aufschrei” which means “cry out” in German, to share experiences with everyday sexism, and initiated an anti-sexism feminist campaign (Drüeke

and Zobl, 2016). In 2016, thousands of Russian and Ukrainian women posted their personal stories about sexual harassment and sexual assault on social media, using the hashtag “IAmNotAfraidToSpeak” (Davies and Evdokimova, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that the #MeToo movement is not out of thin air, but an inevitable result of continuous actions and efforts that feminists have made in a long period.

In the USA, the #MeToo movement has wide-ranging impacts on many spheres of society. After #MeToo was posted on Twitter, it was used more than 200,000 times within 24 hours (Sini, 2017). Subsequently, some people created relevant hashtags, such as #HowIWillChange, which was the hashtag some men use to reflect on inappropriate behaviours they did to women in the past, to respond to #MeToo and promote the dissemination of anti-sexual violence ideas (Cashin, 2017).

The #MeToo movement affected Hollywood firstly. After the Weinstein case, many Hollywood stars were accused of sexual harassment and assault. The famous actor Kevin Spacey was accused of sexual harassment by multiple men (Nordyke, 2017). Affected by these allegations, Netflix, the producer of House of Cards, announced that they would delete and remake all the scenes of Spacey in the season six, and terminated the cooperation with him in film and television production (Stanhope and McClintock, 2017). Also, John Lasseter, a well-known animator, publicly apologized and resigned from the Disney Animation Studios after being anonymously reported that he sexually harassed employees for a long period (Kilday, 2018). In the beginning of 2018, more than 300 actresses, screenwriters, producers, and executives in the entertainment industry jointly launched the “Time's Up” campaign to raise funds to help women who have been sexually abused to stand out (Lang, 2018). They also collectively dressed in black at the Golden Globe Awards Ceremony early in 2018, appealing to people to pay attention to sexual harassment in Hollywood

and other workplaces (Lang, 2018).

Apart from Hollywood, the #MeToo movement has also brought influence on other spheres of American society, including the government and official agencies for legislation and policy setting, sports, the Internet industries and higher educational institutions.

In the government and official agencies, a lot of women spoke out about their experience in support of #MeToo and pushed some political figures to resign after being accused of sexual misconduct. In late 2017, Congresswoman Jackie Speier proposed the *MeToo Congress Act (MeToo and Employee Training and Oversight on Congress Act)*, which aims to improve the legislative process of sexual harassment and assault complaints, as cases of sexual violence would take years to be filed by the legislature under the original procedure (Davis, 2017). The *MeToo Act* ensures that the entire procedure is shortened to a maximum of 180 days, and blue-collar workers, interns and temporary workers can also be protected by this bill (Davis and Rhodan, 2017).

In the Internet industries, Travis Kalanick, the former Uber CEO, was sued by Susan Fowler and others for his negative act of enabling the sexual harassment and misogyny culture in the company and eventually resigned (Carrie, 2017). In sports, Larry Nassar, a former USA Gymnastics doctor, was accused of sexual assault by Rachael Denhollander, a lawyer and former gymnast (Correa, 2018). In court, more than 150 women stood out as witnesses and talked about their suffering experiences. As a result, Larry Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison, and the executive team of the American Gymnastics Association resigned (Correa, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that the #MeToo movement has also affected the higher education. The University of California system has been criticized for a long

time due to repeated reports of sexual harassment on campus (CBS News, 2017). In early 2018, UC Irvine removed their millionaire patron Francisco J. Ayala from the school records and scholarship programs because he was accused of sexual harassment by multiple people (Pearce, 2018). This case triggered a chain reaction. Several professors resigned after being accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour, which was described as a milestone of the anti-sexual violence movement at the University of California (Pearce, 2018). In addition, to appeal to the public's attention to the issue of harassment in STEM discipline, BethAnn McLaughlin launched the #MeTooSTEM movement, calling on the National Institutes of Health to cancel funding for any researcher who has committed the crime of harassment (Smith, 2018).

Through the review above, it can be seen that #MeToo has brought about a wide impact on American society. Behind this large-scale influential movement, it shows some typical characteristics of #MeToo USA.

First of all, the political system of the United States enables mutual supervision among official departments. In the #MeToo movement, the special status of the US Federal Court has ensured that responses to survivors and the trial process of the allegations are guaranteed. Second, the legislation on sexual violence in the US legal system is relatively complete. In the past thirty years before the #MeToo movement, the US courts have already regulated the illegal standard to judge a "sexual misconduct behaviour" in the workplace through multiple cases (Billie, 2020). After #MeToo USA, the relevant regulations have been supplemented and improved again.

Furthermore, people's voices are more likely to be valued and responded in #MeToo USA, because of the long-term traditions of the social movement and the vigilance and attention on sexual violence in American society. After standing out and sharing their experiences, those people not only gained

widespread support from the public, but also got opportunities to initiate further campaigns with the public, such as the "Times Up". The "Me Too" theme website, which aims to help women who suffered sexual violence to defend their rights, was also established after the movement (MeToo, 2020).

Finally, social media played an essential role in the #MeToo movement in the USA. These platforms not only promote the rapid spread of discussions but also make it possible to mobilise a large number of people in a short time (such as a petition signed by ten thousand people in two days). All of these characteristics contribute to this phenomenal online feminist movement which spread from the United States to the whole world.

3.2 Global #MeToo — #MeToo Movements in other countries

The #MeToo movement, which started in the United States, has also triggered similar online feminist movements in other countries around the world. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, more than 85 countries worldwide have launched the #MeToo movement under their own cultural and social context. Among them, the United Kingdom, France and Italy in Europe, Canada in North America, and India and Pakistan in Asian countries are relatively representative, which will be introduced in the following details.

Soon after the #MeToo movement started, several sexual harassment cases were reported in the European Parliament and the Brussels office of the European Union (Schreuer, 2017). As a result, the Parliament convened a meeting in response to the #MeToo for possible measures to solve problems of sexual violence against women (Schreuer, 2017).

In the UK, women working in the British Parliament began to speak out about

their experiences of sexual harassment on social media. More than 30 male parliamentarians have been accused of sexual misconduct, including Defence Minister Michael Fallon and de facto Deputy Prime Minister Damian Green (Rayner, 2017). Both resigned after the allegations (Murphy, 2017). Additionally, after being accused of sexual harassment, Labour MP Carl Sargent lost his position as Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children in the Welsh Government and subsequently committed suicide at home (Swinford, 2017).

In Canada, French-speaking communities use the hashtag “MoiAussi” to initiate their feminist movement (Tarnopolsky and Etehad, 2017). When the campaign started, the number of helpline calls received by the rape and women's crisis centres increased significantly, 553% higher than the usual level (Tarnopolsky and Etehad, 2017). During the *#MoiAussi* movement, a lot of celebrities, including singers, actors, and political parliamentarians, were accused of sexual misconduct. Under such circumstances, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a public speech at the World Economic Forum in early 2018, calling on people to pay attention to the issues presented by the series of social movements such as *#MeToo* and “*Time’s Up*”, and to take measures for changes (Trudeau, 2018).

In addition, the case of sexual crime allegation in the Swedish Academy is particularly worth noting. Since November 2017, 18 women have accused Jean-Claude Arnault, the husband of academy member Katarina Frostenson, of sexual harassment and assault from 1996 to 2017 (Wiman, 2018). Arnault was also accused of violating the Nobel Prize confidentiality by revealing seven winners of the Nobel Prize in literature before the official announcement (Henley, 2018). When dealing with this case, academicians who were responsible for the winner selection were divided on whether Katarina Frostenson should be removed from the committee. Later, the Academy decided not to expel Frostenson (Brown, 2018). As a result, seven members resigned to protest

against this decision and the Nobel Prize selection in literature could not be progressed due to these empty seats (Brown, 2018). Consequently, the Swedish Academy postponed the selection until 2019, which caused the most significant impact on the Nobel Prize in recent decades. In October 2018, Jean-Claude Arnault was convicted of rape and sentenced to two years in prison (Henley, 2018).

Apart from those countries that made progress, when the #MeToo movement came to Italy and France, it encountered resistance and opposition. In Italy, although women use the hashtag #*QuellaVoltaChe* (“TheTimeThat”) to initiate the campaign, their voices have not received the attention and responses they deserved (Siri, 2017). When actress Asia Argento was reported to be sexually harassed by Weinstein, she encountered widespread criticism. Many people questioned whether Argento's experience was true as she did not report Weinstein immediately (Desta, 2018). However, after being accused of sexual misconduct by actor Jimmy Bennett in 2018, Argento was quickly expelled by *The X Factor Italy* (Desta, 2018). Thus, the international community criticised Italy for its double standard when dealing with sexual misconduct cases, and for its negative response to the #MeToo movement (Siri, 2017).

In France, #MeToo aroused an intense social debate. Some supporters used the French hashtag #*BalanceTonPorc* (“DenounceYourPig”) to encourage people to disclose the names of the sex offenders (Donadio, 2017). At the same time, however, some other people, including some feminists, did not support this social movement. In January 2018, the *daily Le Monde* published an open letter co-signed by actress Catherine Deneuve and 100 high-profile women from the art, medical and business industries, criticising #MeToo for having gone to the extreme (Safronova, 2018).

In the letter, these elite females argued that sexual freedom must include the

freedom that makes others feel uncomfortable (Safronova, 2018). Flirting and sexual assault should not be confused. Deneuve said that she would pay attention to whether her salary was at the same level as that of men, but she would not be traumatised by a man who “has physical contact with women” on the subway, though it was a crime (Safronova, 2018). In addition, people who signed the open letter believed that the way that #MeToo used social media to speak was an injustice because a series of public trials hindered the expression of different views, which made #MeToo movement a “witch-hunt”, resulting in the totalitarian atmosphere in the Internet age (DW, 2018). These arguments also echoed some of the backlashes aroused in the international community. Opponents believed that there were false allegations, in which innocent people were wronged and punished (Stephens, 2017). Also, how to define the difference between normal contact and sexual violence was an issue, as the vague definition of sexual misconduct had made many people pay a heavy price for a simple touch or flirting text messages (Dalmia, 2017).

This letter received criticism from feminists in various countries. French politician Marlène Schiappa, who was committed to gender equality, said that some content of this letter was “shocking and even wrong” (Bilefsky and Peltier, 2017). She stated that sexual assault was a crime, and criminals would be sentenced to a maximum of four years in prison and a fine of 75,000 euros in France (Bilefsky and Peltier, 2017). Thus, it is reasonable for women to report, and they should not be ashamed. Feminist historian Christine Bard believed that the “freedom” defended by these people was only the freedom of men, which was used to minimise and legitimise this violent behaviour (D’Zurilla, 2018). Also, some feminists believed that it was because Deneuve was a privileged white woman that she would use such a frivolous attitude to evaluate the sexual harassment that other women experienced on the subway without considering their feelings (D’Zurilla, 2018).

Thus, it is evident that while the initiation and subsequent development of the #MeToo movement in some European countries share similarities with the United States, their influence and progress have not been as extensive. The resistance to the #MeToo movement in France and Italy is particularly significant. The debate in France may be attributed to its liberal feminism tradition; however, the negative attitude toward the movement in Italy, a country that shares Western values and possesses a modern democratic political system, is more challenging to decipher. This observation raises the question of whether a country's ideology and political system can accurately reflect its level of progress in addressing gender inequality issues.

Apart from the Americas and Europe, the #MeToo movement also had an impact on some Asian countries. In India, #MeToo received enthusiastic responses (Lawrato,2017). Participants began to introduce regulations against office sexual misconduct behaviours, and they require men to clear the boundaries of inappropriate sexual behaviour (Lawrato,2017). In Pakistan, the rape and murder of a seven-year-old child in early 2018 led to the mobilisation of #MeToo and promoted the passage of a bill (News Desk, 2018). This bill stipulates that anyone who sexually assaults minors will result in fourteens to twenty years in prison and a fine of one million rupees (News Desk, 2018).

In summary, the spread and popularity of the #MeToo movement on a global scale have brought a series of influences. First, a series of resignations was triggered by the allegations, and it has begun to change the gender power structure in the workplace to some extent (Stone and Vogelstein, 2019). Half of the people who take the vacant positions are women (Stone and Vogelstein, 2019). Secondly, this movement has promoted the improvement of laws in many countries, and the living conditions of women have changed (Stone and Vogelstein, 2019).

Moreover, this global #MeToo movement has brought about progress in social thoughts of gender equality to some extent (North, 2019). This viewpoint may still need further discussion and research, as discussions on social issues regarding gender discrimination, feminist movements, and gender equality are still full of criticism and backlash, according to a series of reports and research on the “post-MeToo” period. For example, Haas found that the judgment and criticism of victims after #MeToo became more common than in the period before this campaign, according to a survey conducted by The Economist in September 2018 (Haas, 2018). Also, according to Harvard Business Review (2019), after #MeToo, the issue of gender equality has received a lot of doubt and backlash. Some women believed that #MeToo did not change gender inequality but made their situation more challenging in the workplace (Harvard Business Review, 2019). Some people, including men and women, said that they would hire fewer women in the future to avoid possible troubles. It still takes time for people to measure what long-term changes and influence have brought from the #MeToo movement in the global context.

Nevertheless, within the scope of this research, it becomes apparent that the #MeToo movement in China warrants further exploration. This is not only due to the distinctive features of #MeToo China that set it apart from the movement in most Western countries, but also because of its underrepresentation within the global #MeToo discourse. The subsequent two sections will provide a comprehensive introduction to #MeToo China and delve into a discussion surrounding the movement in the Chinese context.

3.3 The #MeToo Movement in China

Before the #MeToo China movement officially started, there was a public allegation regarding sexual violence appeared in China. In May 2017, a report

was posted on Weibo announcing a sexual assault allegation relating to a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy (BBC, 2017). The graduate student stated that she was raped by her tutor's father while studying at the BFA (BBC, 2017). At the time, the incident caused considerable sensation and discussion on Weibo. Nevertheless, the case was deemed to be isolated, and the victim had not intended to promote it, meaning subsequent developments were not substantial.

On 1st January 2018, Chinese academic Luo Xixi, who was in the USA at the time, reported via WeChat that she had suffered sexual harassment by her former supervisor Chen Xiaowu at Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Chen, 2018). In her article, Luo explained that the #MeToo movement had inspired her to speak out; she also encouraged others to stand up for girls who were continuing to suffer sexual assault (Chen, 2018). This case is widely considered to mark the official beginning of China's #MeToo movement. Afterwards, there were people from numerous Chinese universities, including Peking University, Nanchang University, and the Communication University of China, stood up to expose the sexual harassment or sexual assaults that they had suffered (Lu, 2018).

Among these cases, the allegation of Shenyang in Peking University is particularly worthy of attention. In April 2018, some alumni of Peking University posted an article on social media, exposing that Professor Shen Yang raped Gao Yan, a former student from Peking University, and caused her suicide in 1998 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). After this public accusation, Nanjing University, where Shenyang worked, dismissed him (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). However, when undergraduate student Yue Xin asked to disclose details of the investigation, she was suppressed by the executive group of the university. In this period, some people argued that the #MeToo movement was dominated by foreign powers and aimed at attacking

male elites in China (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019).

After the #MeToo accusations were initiated in higher educational institutions, it spread to various spheres, such as NGOs and media industries. On 23rd July 2018, a female named Huahua posted a long article saying that Lei Chuang, the founder of YIYOU Charity liver centre (YIYOU, 2018), raped her while she participated in hiking activities organised by the charity in 2015 (Huahua, 2018). On 27th July, the Weibo user “@不要怕不要怂” (literally translated as “@Do not be afraid”) posted an article alleging Deng Fei, the founder of the charity campaign “免费午餐” (literally translated as “Free Lunch”) , sexually harassed her (Koetse, 2018), resulting in a further round of discussions and debates on Weibo.

On 26th July, the Weibo user @麦烧同学 (literally translated as “@MaiShao”) posted a screenshot of a blog with the hashtag “我也是” (“MeToo” translated in Mandarin) and “米兔” (“Rice bunny”) (MaiShao, 2018). This blog was forwarded from the “Moments” on Wechat. The original author of this blog, Xianzi accused Zhu Jun, a famous TV shows host in CCTV, of harassing her in the CCTV dressing room in 2014 (MaiShao, 2018). This article received thousands of “reposting” and comments, as well as considerable discussions on Weibo, and this topic, with its hashtag, rushed to the top of the “Trending” list on Weibo in a very short time (Chen, 2019). Subsequently, relevant weibos, comments and discussions were deleted or blocked. On 15th August, Zhu Jun denied the accusation and announced that he would sue Maishao and XianZi (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). This case has been the most famous case in the #MeToo China.

#MeToo China also implicated the religious and sports spheres. In the sphere

of religion, Supervisor Shi Xianjia and Shi Xianqi at LongQuan Temple submitted a report to the relevant governmental department, exposing a series of illegal activities committed by their abbot, including sexual assault (Zhu, 2018). On 26th July, Weibo's user @孙孙向你扔了只狗 (literally translated as "@SunSun throw a dog to you") reported that she was sexually harassed by her badminton coach, former world champion Liu Jianjun when she was 14 (Sun, 2018). After September, the momentum of this movement gradually decreased.

Based on the timeline above, the process of #MeToo China is generally divided into three stages. The first stage is from January to April 2018, represented by the case of Luo Xixi. The second stage is from April to July 2018, represented by the case of Gao Yan at Peking University. In the first two stages, exposure to cases of sexual harassment and assault was concentrated in higher education institutions.

MeToo China's development process on social media. Beginning with Luo Xixi's case in January, the level of public attention and discussions on #MeToo shifted from high to low. By early April, the intensity of discussion and the dissemination trends resulting from a series of sexual harassment cases in higher education institutions had gradually subsided. It was not until the exposure of Gao Yan's case in April that a second wave of attention and discourse surrounding #MeToo was sparked.

Moreover, between Luo's case in January and Gao's case in April, discussions surrounding the movement remained confined to higher education, implying that only specific groups engaged in #MeToo discussions, which consequently limited the impact of #MeToo China. Following this, the exposure of Gao Yan's case in April garnered significant public attention due to its association with

Peking University, a renowned top-tier institution in China, thereby amplifying the influence of #MeToo in the country. Considering these two factors, it becomes apparent that while cases from January to July primarily transpired within higher education institutions, they can be divided into two distinct stages.

The third stage spanned from July to September 2018 and was characterized by the case of Huahua in NGOs and charities, as well as Zhu Jun's accusation in media industries. During this stage, the influence of the #MeToo movement expanded beyond higher education institutions and academia to encompass other sectors. Numerous instances of sexual violence were exposed within NGOs, charities, media industries, and sports, and #MeToo China began to garner wider attention and discourse within Chinese society.

However, at this stage, government censorship started to intervene in the #MeToo movement, impacting public discussion and the revelation of further cases. While the authorities did not overtly express support or opposition toward #MeToo China, social media platforms and internet companies within the state-owned internet system, along with government-managed official media platforms, commenced deleting #MeToo-related posts and discussions, as well as blocking related hashtags and accounts. Consequently, after September, discourse on the #MeToo movement gradually diminished and eventually subsided. Although new cases have occasionally emerged, large-scale internet discussions similar to the three stages in January, April, and July have not occurred again. This marked a temporary conclusion to #MeToo China.

Nevertheless, after a year of the process, #MeToo China still made some progress. According to the #MeToo China Archive, there were more than 50 public accusations presented on Weibo or WeChat in 2018 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Most people who were accused of sexual violence accepted the investigation by authorities. Some of them were banned from

academic research or dismissed by companies. Students and alumni of various universities co-signed an open letter to request for the establishment of a sexual harassment prevention and control system in higher education institutions (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019).

Furthermore, there have been positive changes in the law. In 2018, the *Civil Code* updated articles on sexual harassment (Xinhua, 2018). In March 2019, the representative of the National People's Congress submitted a proposal named *Prevention of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, Universities, and Public Transportation*, which was subsequently established (Yang, 2019). In August 2019, the Supreme People's Procuratorate began to establish the national sexual crime database (Xinhua, 2019).

3.4 Why is #MeToo China distinctive?

So, why is #MeToo China distinctive? Following the literature reviews, the introduction, and discussions in the first three chapters, three key points emerge, underscoring the uniqueness of #MeToo China and highlighting the need for further exploration and research into this movement within the Chinese context.

First of all, #MeToo China displays significant differences from #MeToo movements in other countries, which makes it distinctive. The entirety of the #MeToo China movement unfolded primarily on social media, without transitioning to a larger-scale offline movement as observed in other countries. From its inception to its conclusion, Weibo remained the central platform for #MeToo China, characterising it as an online feminist movement against sexual violence in China.

Furthermore, compared to other countries, #MeToo China experienced strict online censorship by the authorities. Although gender issues are generally depoliticized and perceived as less sensitive in the Chinese context, following the exposure of Zhu Jun's case and the subsequent widespread societal concern, the authorities still intervened in the #MeToo movement, initiating censorship and control of related speech. All discussions related to #MeToo, including articles and comments, were either deleted or rendered inaccessible. Hashtags for #MeToo, both in Mandarin and English, as well as the accounts of some activists who used these hashtags, were also blocked.

As mentioned above, #MeToo China, from beginning to end, was a movement that could only be initiated and conducted online, while the space for participants to express their opinions on the internet was also repeatedly constrained and limited. Under such circumstances, #MeToo China, which lasted intermittently for an entire year, achieved some results but also left a sense of uncertainty among Chinese feminists and #MeToo participants regarding their situation in 2018. This confrontation with censorship is a key aspect that sets #MeToo China apart from similar movements in other countries, particularly those in Western nations.

Thirdly, from the perspective of academic research, the #MeToo movement in China differs significantly from its counterparts in the West, in terms of the topics and perspectives chosen by scholars.

In Western academia, the #MeToo movements have been widely studied since their emergence in 2017, with scholars examining various perspectives. Notably, issues of race and class and their relevance to the #MeToo movements are key research angles for Western scholars. For example, McBride investigated the marginalised communities within the #MeToo movement, discussing measures to protect their safety and rights (McBride, 2019). Camus critiqued the

movement as “celebrity feminism and clicktivism”, arguing it does not benefit most women (Camus, 2019). Additionally, Lucarini explored the relationship between people's attitudes towards accusers and the timing of crime reporting by these women (Lucarini *et al.*, 2020).

In China, research on #MeToo presents various perspectives. Some Chinese scholars analyse the movement from a broad and quantitative perspective. Li and Cho utilised Bennett and Segerberg's views on connective action as theoretical guidance to investigate #MeToo China (Li *et al.*, 2020). Zeng focuses on exploring how a global movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence emerged and evolved within an authoritarian society (Zeng, 2020). Han Xiao applied Allen's theory of the synthesis of power in her paper to explore the relationship between empowerment and discourse in #MeToo China (Han, 2021).

Other scholars conduct targeted analyses of #MeToo China by selecting specific cases or topics as entry points. For example, Ling and Liao study the case of Liu Yu's criticism of #MeToo China as a “big character poster”, highlighting how participants in this debate deconstructed the dominant homogeneous discourse on interpretations of sexual harassment and advanced discussions on feminist politics (Ling and Liao, 2020). Lin explores the “Chinese characteristics” of #MeToo China from a localised perspective by adopting He-Yin Zhen's feminist theoretical framework (Lin, 2023). Additionally, Sun examines the discussion surrounding #MeToo China on an overseas Chinese website, offering insights into the online gender narratives of diasporic Chinese netizens (Sun, 2020).

From the above discussion, it is clear that research on #MeToo China has a distinctive focus compared to that in the West. While some scholars start from a broad perspective on digital social movements or adopt theories of female

empowerment, their research often leads to discussions on authoritarianism and censorship. Moreover, Chinese scholars pay closer attention to issues within the socio-cultural context, whether it's "big-character posters" or "traditional feminist ideology". Additionally, there is a notable lack of focus on race and class in #MeToo China research, which are significant concerns among scholars in the West. On one hand, these differences distinguish #MeToo China from the mainstream #MeToo research narrative from a Western perspective, imbuing it with unique Chinese characteristics. On the other hand, as explained in Chapters 1 and 2, these studies also expose an academic research gap, underscoring the need for more comprehensive and in-depth qualitative research from non-Western perspectives. Together, these factors contribute to the distinctiveness of #MeToo China.

Finally, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, while there has been increasing focus on the #MeToo movements in the Global South in recent years, research specifically focusing on East Asia, including #MeToo China, still requires further development. The lack of geographical diversity in #MeToo studies calls for greater attention to regions within the Global South. In this academic context, the distinctiveness of #MeToo China is emphasized. Situated within the underrepresented geographical areas of East Asia and the Global South, #MeToo China distinctly stands out from an academic research perspective.

Ultimately, the uniqueness of #MeToo China underscores the value and originality of this study. By focusing on exploring the narratives of specific participants and their experiences within the censorship in #MeToo China, this study fills an academic gap by providing a comprehensive and in-depth qualitative research perspective, and it highlights distinctive narratives and characteristics of the movement, enriching our understanding of #MeToo China from a Global South perspective.

Summary

This chapter begins by exploring the #MeToo movement in the United States, detailing how it expanded from an online feminist movement within a single country into a globally influential feminist movement. Subsequently, in the context of this study, the chapter shifts focus to the #MeToo movement in China, discussing its emergence, development, and accomplishments. It concludes by examining the distinctiveness of China's #MeToo movement.

In summary, this chapter provides an overview of the global #MeToo movement as a contextual introduction to this research. It highlights three distinctive aspects of #MeToo China, thereby underscoring the significance and original contributions of this research and facilitating a clearer understanding of the research subject before moving into the detailed analysis.

Following the first three chapters and the discussions above, this study identifies four research questions:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?
3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?
4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

Overall, this study aims to investigate the narratives created by participants of the #MeToo China, as well as the interaction between these narratives and internet censorship, to deepen the understanding of #MeToo China from a Global South perspective. Part 2 will elaborate further on and specifically

present the research process and findings.

Part 2 The Methodology, Findings and Discussion

Building on the foundation established in the preceding sections, Part 2 offers a detailed exploration of the research topic and the resulting outcomes.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology employed in this research. It provides an in-depth account of the two-phase research design, elaborating on the rationale behind the selection criteria—including the timeline, targeted social media platforms, sample selection in Phase 1, and recruitment of interview participants for Phase 2. This chapter also addresses the ethical dimensions inherent in the study and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the research.

Chapter 5, marking the initial segment of the first research phase, provides an overview of communication trends in three core cases of #MeToo China 2018. It then utilises critical discourse analysis for sample evaluation, followed by an interpretation of the findings. The chapter concludes by underscoring the necessity of a subsequent thematic analysis of the samples.

Chapter 6, a continuation of the first phase, further explores themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the samples. It culminates with a summative view of the insights from both Chapters 5 and 6, directing the reader towards the first research question addressed in the Discussion Chapter.

Chapter 7, the core of phase 2, begins by showcasing thematic findings derived from 12 semi-structured interviews, explored using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. It then provides a comprehensive discussion of these findings.

Chapter 8 continues the discussion of thematic findings obtained through the analysis of interviews in phase 2, focusing on the theme of “censorship”. This

chapter delves into the theme, contextualizing it within specific cultural and societal frameworks. Combined with the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7, this study addresses research questions 2, 3, and 4.

Chapter 9 is the discussion chapter of the study, aiming to answer the four core research questions and highlight the topics revealed in the research.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

This study aims to investigate women's narratives that emerged from #MeToo China in 2018, underlining the significance of these narratives and associated issues from a Chinese perspective in the context of the social media age. The study's aim is accomplished through a two-phase research approach.

In Phase 1, an analysis was conducted to outline the overall trend of #MeToo China in 2018. This was followed by the selection of three core cases for further scrutiny. The rationale behind the choice of these core cases is elaborated in Section 4.2.2. Purposive sampling was utilised as the method for sample collection, and both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) were conducted as analytical tools to examine the material. The specific design details and the reasons for not exclusively selecting one method are detailed in Section 4.2.2.

Phase 2 research employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, with RTA continuing to serve as the analytical tool for examining interview transcripts. Fifteen participants were initially included, but three subsequently dropped out, resulting in a total of twelve interview samples.

Ethical considerations and security issues associated with the interview process in Phase 2 are addressed comprehensively in Section 4.2.4. Both research phases are predominantly qualitative in nature and utilised NVivo as the analysis tool.

Through this two-phase research, the study provides answers to four research questions:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?
3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?
4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

This chapter first establishes and expounds upon the methodological framework, followed by a detailed explanation of the research design process. It concludes with a brief discussion of the ethical considerations pertinent to this study and a summary of the chapter.

4.1 Methodology Framework

4.1.1 Qualitative Research

As a mainstream methodology of social sciences research, qualitative research has been interpreted by many scholars since its development. According to Bryman (Bryman, 2016), qualitative research is a distinctive research strategy that is different from quantitative research in many aspects, which can be

refined into three particularly noteworthy features:

"an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research; an epistemological position described as interpretivist; an ontological position described as constructionist..." (Bryman, 2016, p.375).

Through these features, researchers can locate the methodology they need to employ.

For the nature of qualitative research, Flick provides another perspective. Flick believes that before the definition of qualitative research being summarised, many methods have been widely used in social sciences research (Flick, 2007). "The label 'qualitative research' is used as an umbrella term for a series of approaches to research in the social sciences" (Flick, 2007, p.3). Therefore, although, qualitative research can be summarised into the following typical features: "...uses text as empirical material (instead of numbers), starts from the notion of the social construction of realities under study, is interested in the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study...", it cannot be described as a general definition (Flick, 2007, p.3). In the process of study, researchers often select particular "research programs" (Flick, 2007, p.4), combining specific methods and theoretical frameworks for research.

In this study, both the research objectives and questions are deeply qualitative. Following a two-phase research approach, the research process begins with an exploration of narratives from blogs and diaries created by the participants of #MeToo China. The process is then expanded upon with in-depth, semi-structured interviews that further explore the narratives of Chinese feminists after three years of the Chinese #MeToo movement.

Clearly, this study places emphasis on "words" over "numbers", and focuses

more on specific individuals than on quantitative totals, indicating a more inductive approach (Bryman, 2016, p.375). Rather than seeking to confirm an existing theory through empirical findings, this study aims to discover new insights rooted in established theories. In particular, it seeks to investigate whether any novel Chinese feminist narratives emerged from and following the specific #MeToo China 2018. Hence, employing a qualitative research approach for this study is both logical and appropriate.

Qualitative research offers advantages and disadvantages. Feng (2017) identifies the benefits as flexibility, diversity, and less methodological constraint, while the limitations primarily involve a relatively small and subjective sample size. However, many social phenomena and related issues are complex, dynamic, and distinctive. Quantitative research focuses on “uniformity” for the convenience of statistical analysis, which makes its understanding of complex and changeable social issues too “superficial”, “static”, and “simplistic” (Feng, 2017). On the contrary, the flexibility and diversity of qualitative research methods are compatible with the complexity and variability of social issues.

Malterud believes that sample size in qualitative research should be determined according to the research purpose, the sample's specificity, the theoretical framework, and the particular research strategy, rather than merely relying on the number of samples that can be analysed to assess research quality (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). He introduced the model of “information power” to measure sample size through five dimensions that impact information power, thereby helping researchers judge whether more or fewer samples (or participants) are needed (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). The core idea of “Information power” is that, according to Malterud, “the larger information power the sample holds, the lower N is needed, and vice versa” (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016).

The measurement standards of these five dimensions are study aim, sample specificity, established theory, quality of dialogue and analysis strategy (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). Specifically, first, whether the study aim is wide or narrow will affect the required sample size (or the number of interview participants). A study focusing on very specific or rare experiences tends to limit the number of eligible participants and, thus, the sample size (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). Second, regarding the sample specificity, the dense sample specificity requires fewer participants as they provide highly specific information or experiences that have not been described before, enhancing information power.

Third, the use of established theory will also affect the sample size. The research using a specific theoretical framework can reduce the required sample size. On the contrary, those studies without a confirmed theoretical background need to build their own theoretical framework from the beginning, so a more significant number of samples is needed to ensure sufficient information power (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). In the context of #MeToo China in 2018, the particularity of the research topic and the specificity of the theoretical framework enable this research to obtain sufficient information within a limited sample size and to make original contributions to this issue on the academic level.

Fourth, the quality of dialogue is strong or weak also matters. The better the conversation the researcher can have with participants, the more information the researcher can get. In Phase 1, all the analysed texts are sourced from content generated and shared by participants on social media platforms within the core cases of the 2018 #MeToo China. These texts were created and disseminated during the dynamic progression of online debates and movement development. These primary materials hold significant value, being both highly precious and irreplaceable. In Phase 2 of this study, although the interview time

set by the researcher was initially 45 to 60 minutes, the records showed that the average interview duration was between 60 and 90 minutes, which meant participants were willing to provide more information for the research. It reflects the strong quality of the interview dialogue.

Finally, whether the analysis strategy is focused on one case or cross-case will also affect the sample size. Malterud believes that cross-case analysis needs more samples to enrich the information power, while research focusing on one case for an in-depth analysis of narratives does not (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). This study focuses on #MeToo China 2018, with two-phase research on stories from the participants. Thus, it is “a project heading for in-depth analysis of narratives”.

In summary, this research aims to investigate a highly distinctive issue in a specific socio-cultural context, with a precise objective and a particular constructed theoretical framework, conducting an in-depth analysis of narratives. Therefore, the conditions of this study match with Malterud, Siersma and Guassora's “high information power” module, which can not only make up for the disadvantage of qualitative research but also make the most of its advantages, to establish this research with high quality.

4.1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Since the 1990s, discourse analysis has established itself as a new discipline (van Dijk, 1998; van Dijk, 2011). Bryman suggests that discourse analysis is not merely a research method but encompasses various research paradigms (Bryman, 2016). In Anglo-American linguistics, the focus of discourse analysis lies on the interaction of spoken language, leading to the development of conversation analysis (Creswell, 2018). In contrast, critical discourse analysis

has its roots in the discourse theory of post-structuralism (Fairclough, 1992). Within this broad framework of discourse analysis, there's a diversity of theories and methods specific to particular research paradigms, as well as a range of research concerns.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Among paradigms included in the discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is distinctive. It is distinctive because of its “critical”, “problem-oriented” and “interdisciplinary” features (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). According to Bryman, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is rooted in the theoretical approach of Foucault:

“...who sought to uncover the representational properties of discourse as a vehicle for the exercise of power through the construction of disciplinary practices, such as individual subjectivity and the operation of rules and procedures that enable the construction of disciplinary practices that facilitate the construction of the self-disciplining subject” (Bryman, 2016, p.540).

Critical discourse analysis follows the critical traditions of classical Marxism and Western Marxism of the Frankfurt school. According to Fairclough (1992) and Wodak (2001), critical discourse analysis has three principles. Firstly, it focuses on social issues. Second, the discourse is the place where society, culture, and social power relations are generated and reproduced: it is historical and should be examined in a specific context (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Thirdly, a discourse structure displays and strengthens the relationship between power and dominance in society, and it needs not only to be described but also to be explained (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

Therefore, the purpose of CDA is to reveal the ideological meanings contained in the text, especially the prejudices, discriminations, and distortions of the fact

that people take for granted, and further to explain the social conditions of these meanings and their role in power conflicts (Xin, 2005). Moreover, this problem-oriented principle leads to the use of interdisciplinary theories and methods for social problem analysis reflected through language (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). It is worth mentioning that different discourse analysts use different terms to describe the idea of “different disciplines”. Van Dijk tends to use “multidisciplinarity” to emphasise the multidisciplinary joint research required by CDA, while Fairclough tends to use “transdisciplinarity” to emphasise the dialogue between CDA and other disciplines (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1995). Wodak advocates the use of “interdisciplinarity” to emphasise the application of theories and methods of other disciplines in CDA (Wodak and Meyer, 2001; Wodak, 2018).

The predecessor of critical discourse analysis is critical linguistics, which has had a significant impact on academia, and it also exposed its limitations in emphasising too much lexical and grammatical analysis (Wodak and Chilton, 2005). To further improve the theory of critical linguistics and highlight the essential role of critical language analysis in critical social sciences, Fairclough put forward the theory and method of critical discourse analysis in *Language and Power* (Fairclough, 2013). Currently, the leading methodological theories of critical discourse analysis include the socio-cognitive approach represented by van Dijk (van Dijk, 2011), the dialectical-relational approach described by Fairclough (Fairclough, 2010), and the discourse-historical approach represented by Wodak (Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach, which is also called the socio-cultural discourse analysis, is based on the three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1992; Zhao, 2013). The three dimensions of this model refer to the analysis of (spoken or written) texts, analysis of discourse practice and analysis of discursive events as instances of socio-cultural practice (Fairclough, 1992).

First, the analysis of text refers to the linguistic analysis of content, which mainly focuses on coherence and discourse transformation in vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and text organisation. Secondly, discourse practice is a bridge linking text and socio-cultural practice (Fairclough, 1992). This dimension focuses on the production and interpretation process and explains the interaction between text and society (Fairclough, 1992). Finally, the socio-cultural practice focuses on social analysis. It situates discourse within the relationship between ideology and power, revealing how these elements intervene in discourse in various ways, and how discourse can serve to defend, criticise, or reconstruct them (Fairclough, 1992). The text lies in the discourse practice, and the discourse practice is in socio-cultural practice (Ai, 2004).

In line with Fairclough's perspective, language can be explained as a manifestation of social practice with three levels of significance (Fairclough, 2013, p.18-19). Firstly, language is a component of society rather than being external to it. Secondly, language constitutes a social process (Fairclough, 2013, p.18-19). Lastly, language involves a process of social constraint influenced by other societal conditions (Fairclough, 2013, p.18-19). Thus, people need to observe components in the text from which discourse can be distinguished.

Based on the three-dimensional model mentioned above, Fairclough proposed three steps of critical discourse analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 1995, p.97). Description means the researcher needs to describe features of the structure of a text, and analyse it from the aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and text organisation; Interpretation refers to the interpretation of the relationship between discourse and the process of discourse production, distribution, and consumption (Fairclough, 1995, p.97-102). Explanation involves clarifying the relationship between the communication process and its social context (Fairclough, 1995, p.97-102).

In summary, it is the description of the text, the interpretation of discourse practice, and the explanation of the social practice (Fairclough, 1992, 1995).

Furthermore, the part of discourse practice mainly examines the intertextuality and metaphor in the discourse. Intertextuality refers to the fact that the current text is filled with fragments of other texts, and it is regarded as the transformation of the past, which means existing customs and texts, into the present (Fairclough, 2010). The metaphor draws on the common experience of the audience. Therefore, it reflects the evaluation and attitude of the text producer to reality. When people express things through a specific metaphor, they construct reality in a specific way (Fairclough, 2010). Fairclough believes that the analysis should start from the perspective of social cognition and focus on intertextuality in discourse.

Unlike Fairclough, van Dijk directly introduces the social-cognitive perspective into critical discourse analysis. He values the role of social knowledge and beliefs in text reading and comprehension, and advocates explaining the sociality of discourse from a cognitive perspective (van Dijk, 2011). In his perspective, there is no direct determining relationship between discourse and context, but an intermediate layer between them (van Dijk, 2011). This layer is a personal and social cognitive system composed of knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies. That is to say, in the process of discourse production, subjective cognitive factors play the role of communication between discourse and context (van Dijk, 2011).

Van Dijk combines discourse studies with media studies. He believes that discourse and news are the products of society (van Dijk, 1988; van Dijk, 2006). The news is also ideological discourse because it expresses and confirms the social and political attitudes of its producers (van Dijk, 1988; van Dijk, 2006). Therefore, if people ignore their social and cultural factors, they cannot

understand mass communication and news (van Dijk, 2006; van Dijk, 2013). Van Dijk conducts the discourse analysis of news texts. The framework of analysis consists of two parts, the text, and the context. The first part will be a systematical analysis of the structure of various news discourse, while the second part is an exploration of cognitive and social factors in the text structures (van Dijk, 2006; van Dijk, 2013).

Similar to van Dijk, Wodak also attaches importance to the role of cognitive factors in discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). The Discourse History Analysis (DHA) proposed by Wodak interprets the relationship between discourse and social structure from a cognitive perspective, combined with anthropological research methods (Wodak, 2011). Different from other CDA paradigms, DHA considers history as a discourse structure in the process of interpreting discourse and integrates the social and political backgrounds, as well as the historical resources embedded in discourse events. (Wodak, 2011). Thus, the three-dimensional perspective of themes, discourse strategies and language forms to observe potential dynamics.

The formation and development of DHA theory were influenced by the linguistic philosophy of Habermas, and Foucault (Yang and Wang, 2019). Habermas' philosophy provides a theoretical basis for DHA's three-dimensional critical model (Forchtner, 2011). The first dimension of this concept is the criticism within the text (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). The second one is the use of discourse strategies for social diagnosis and criticism. DHA finds the fallacies in sociopolitical discourse by analysing the potential fallacy arguments in the expression patterns of the actors, which include discriminatory and prejudiced discourse, thereby achieving the intention of criticising and transforming society (Wodak *et al.*, 2009; Wodak, 2011). The third dimension involves historical discourse and context. Through forward-looking and retrospective criticism of society, the aim is to change the status quo (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001).

The discourse theory of Foucault, including orders of discourse and the relationship between discourse and power, also had an impact on discourse historical analysis. Foucault believes that discourse is subject to some procedural controls and restrictions initially in every society (Foucault, 1971). The “exclusion” from outside the discourse constructs the forbidden language, the distinction of “crazy” and the will of truth (Foucault, 1971). The procedure from the discourse itself controls the production of discourse. In addition, by determining under what conditions the discourse should be used, the people holding discourse are restricted and regulated, which also diminishes the subject of speech (Foucault, 1971). The function of these procedures is to eliminate the power and danger of discourse and to control its instability (Foucault, 1971). Thus, Foucault believes that discourse is not inherently free; society constantly seeks to regulate it through various procedures to maintain stability and prevent the emergence of chaotic discourse (Foucault, 1971, 2002). Wodak agrees with this viewpoint and supplements it (Wodak, 2009). She believes that even disorderly words will eventually be systematically connected to the social structure, and thus, there is order in disorder (Wodak, 2009).

Secondly, regarding the relationship between discourse, power, and knowledge, Foucault believes that changes in discourse remain superficial and cannot effectively deconstruct power (Foucault, 1971, 2002). However, power and knowledge have an interactive relationship: power is constructed on the basis of knowledge and, in turn, shapes knowledge (Foucault, 2002). Wodak (Wodak, 2009) believes that when discourse exercises power, it transmits the knowledge necessary for both collective and individual consciousness. This knowledge forms the foundation of specific discursive and non-discursive actions, which, in turn, influence and shape reality (Wodak, 2009).

The CDA paradigms provided by Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak can guide

specific critical discourse analysis practices. However, the focus of these three paradigms differs. Van Dijk's social-cognitive framework is mainly used to analyze news structure in news reports, and discussions related to cognitive psychology (van Dijk, 1988, 2006; Ni, 2013). Wodak's DHA framework focuses more on analysing political discourse from the perspective of historical and social context. It aims to analyse positive self-representation and negative other-representation in discourse, thereby clarifying the attitudinal tendencies of political discourse (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2001; Yang and Fu, 2018). Fairclough's three-dimensional model is widely used to analyse news reports and politician speeches. Additionally, it is increasingly applied to other texts, such as conference panel discussions and online show conversations, making the scope of analysis relatively broader (Tang, 2015; Qiao, 2022).

The text samples in Phase 1 come from the original blogs and diaries of core participants in the three selected cases. These texts are neither news reports with a rigorous framework nor topics related to cognitive theory, nor are they political texts in the traditional sense, such as European anti-Semitic discourses. Therefore, van Dijk's paradigm and Wodak's DHA framework cannot effectively match the samples in Phase 1 of this research. In contrast, Fairclough's three-dimensional model emphasises discourse practice in a specific social and cultural context, which aligns with the subject of this study.

Consequently, this study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyze samples from the core participants of three selected cases in #MeToo China 2018 during Phase 1 of the research. Specifically, the language features of the text are described in terms of intertextuality, narrative structure, and ways of expression. In terms of discourse practice, the interaction process and practice of discourse are analysed by combining the specific cases corresponding to specific samples. Regarding social practice, samples are

explained in conjunction with the social and cultural context.

Critical Discourse Analysis in China

In China, the focus of critical discourse analysis (CDA) research has evolved over time. In the early years, scholars concentrated more on Western political discourse, with most texts being in English (Zhao, 2013). In recent years, the analysis of Chinese political and media discourse has gradually increased. Researchers are now integrating CDA with Mandarin text analyses to pursue more localized studies within China (Chen and Li, 2012; Zhao, 2013). Online discourse has also emerged as a subject of study. Tang employed Fairclough's intertextuality analysis to understand media discourse in self-produced online shows (Tang, 2015). Chen and Li studied the "Yihuang self-immolation event", amalgamating traditional media news reports, local government announcements, and social media snippets for a comprehensive discourse analysis (Chen and Li, 2012).

The Internet, as a medium, especially in China, facilitates the genesis of unique discourse types. The production and assimilation of these discourses differ from the mainstream narratives of traditional media. The prominence of this discourse, set against the backdrop of digital culture, beckons for a deeper examination from a sociocultural perspective using CDA (Zhao, 2013).

In this study, methods employed by several Chinese scholars, including those mentioned above, are referenced to analyse samples through critical discourse analysis. Wu uses Fairclough's framework to analyse the social media phenomenon "Pan coin" (潘币), offering a step-by-step analysis reference (Wu, 2017). For online texts that are fragmented and lack a clear structure, Wu focuses on the core parts for analysis, emphasising the dynamic process of

discourse interaction and discussing discourse within a macro context (Wu, 2017).

Also, Peng (Peng, 2020) uses Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyse the promotional video 《后浪》 (“Hou Lang”, referring to the younger generation in Mandarin), showing how to deal with unconventional texts. Rather than emphasising grammar and words, Peng pays more attention to the overall framework of the online text and its emotional expression when dealing with speech combined with images (Peng, 2020). In addition, Xin provided a reference on how to deal with Chinese texts in an English paper in her research of Xinhua News Agency (Xin, 2018). On the one hand, she extracts keywords and core sentences, using direct translation and interpretation to analyse the details of the text (Xin, 2018). On the other hand, she conducts discussions through the overall grasp of the theme and structure of samples, thereby reducing the possible subjectivity of the text brought about by a lot of translation. In brief, this study incorporates Wu's analysis steps, Peng's methods, and Xin's approach to analysing Mandarin texts in research written in English in Phase 1 critical discourse analysis (Wu, 2017; Xin, 2018; Peng, 2020).

In summary, as mentioned above, samples for CDA come from the original blogs and diaries of core participants in the three selected cases. Compared to news reports and political speeches, these samples are not the typical text types targeted in general CDA research. Thus, this study combines Chinese and Western perspectives: on the one hand, Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used as the overall guiding framework; on the other hand, this study incorporates insights from Peng, Wu, and Xin's research on specific analysis practices in the Chinese context to jointly guide critical discourse analysis in Phase 1.

The purpose of CDA in this phase is to explore the discourse dynamics within the core texts created by #MeToo key participants in the three selected cases. The findings reveal these dynamics and highlight noteworthy themes, which guide the subsequent thematic analysis. Phase 1 utilises both CDA and Reflexive Thematic Analysis for in-depth exploration. This approach is further explained in sections 4.1.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis and 4.2 Research Design: Two Phases of Research in this chapter. An overview of #MeToo China and the CDA process is presented in Chapter 5.

4.1.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis originated as a widely employed analytical method in psychological research. Unlike grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis is better categorised as an analytical "method" rather than a "methodology" (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). In recent years, researchers in the fields of social science and humanities have increasingly adopted thematic analysis in qualitative research.

Currently, two distinct types of thematic analysis methods offer specific techniques, strategies, or conceptual frameworks to guide researchers employing this approach. The UK's National Centre for Social Research has elucidated a strategy known as "the Framework approach" for conducting thematic analysis (Clark et al., 2021). This involves the researcher establishing themes and subthemes, usually forming clusters of concepts such as "Ethnicity critique" and organising them into a designated matrix table (Clark et al., 2021). Subsequently, the researcher fills the table's cells with fragments of interview samples based on their relevance to the respective themes and subthemes, facilitating further analysis. This methodological step places significant emphasis on maintaining the participants' original language as much as

possible (Clark et al., 2021). According to Ritchie, the Framework approach is particularly suited for “organising and synthesizing data” (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Another approach for thematic analysis, which is also the approach conducted in this study, comes from studies of Braun and Clarke. Their approach is also the current mainstream strategy to guide researchers in carrying out the thematic analysis (Clark et al., 2021).

According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis can be perceived as “a cluster of methods” grounded and employed in accordance with various “conceptual models and research values”(Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Irrespective of the specific TA method employed, they all share these common characteristics:

“Theoretical flexibility...procedures of coding and theme development; the possibility of inductive and deductive orientations to analysis; and the possibility of coding for both manifest meanings...and latent meanings...” (Braun and Clarke, 2021a)

These characteristics, along with the flexibility they provide, align well with the aim of sample analysis in this study, particularly the capacity to encode the surface-level themes conveyed by the samples and to uncover and encode the underlying themes concealed within them.

Braun and Clarke have categorised thematic analysis into three "schools": coding reliability, codebook, and reflexive (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Among these, coding reliability thematic analysis is typically employed when the theme is predetermined at the early stage of sample analysis. Moreover, the comprehension of these “themes” is more aligned with the research-related "topics" rather than being solely based on the inherent theme meanings. This thematic analysis involves a sequence of steps including hypothesis formation

based on theory, construction of a coding framework, performing experimental hypothesis, and ultimately theory refinement or creation, making it more “scientifically descriptive” (Braun, 2023).

Codebook thematic analysis represents the intermediate type between coding reliability and reflexive thematic analysis. This method analyses samples through a predefined coding framework or codebook, with topics in this framework generally predetermined (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Braun and Clarke note that the framework analysis advocated by Ritchie and Lewis is a type of codebook thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021a).

The last approach “school” of TA, also the approach used in this study, is reflexive thematic analysis, which Braun and Clarke developed. They believe that this TA approach is distinctive because it emphasises the importance of the “researcher's subjectivity as an analytical resource” in the research, as well as their “reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation” (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Additionally, reflexive thematic analysis boasts broader applicability, suitable for both experimental and critical data, as well as accommodating both deductive and inductive analysis processes. This flexibility stands as another advantageous aspect of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Nowell also believes that the high flexibility of RTA is an advantage because it allows this method to be applied to various studies and to provide rich and detailed data (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

In RTA, themes are the “outcomes” derived through the process of coding and theme development, rather than being the “evidence” of preconceived concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Braun and Clarke present a six-step approach for conducting RTA, which involves:

“1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3)

generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report” (Braun and Clarke, 2021b).

However, Braun and Clarke also emphasize that this six-step process serves as a guideline rather than an inflexible sequence that researchers must adhere to strictly (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). They acknowledge that the strength of RTA lies in its adaptability to various research contexts, allowing it to be tailored to specific investigative situations (Braun and Clarke, 2021a).

Consequently, in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this study, the researcher adhered to the core steps proposed by Braun and Clarke for conducting reflexive thematic analysis. The content presented in this thesis mostly encompasses three key components. Firstly, there are the coding books, provided in the appendix of this thesis. The second one is the finalized themes resulting from the process involving generation, integration, refinement, and definition. Lastly, there are discussions of the analysis results, combining the identified themes with relevant specific excerpts from the collected samples.

There are two primary reasons for employing reflexive thematic analysis following critical discourse analysis in Phase 1. Firstly, as discussed in the section 4.1.2, the samples from Phase 1 take the form of personal mediums—blogs and a personal diary—rather than adhering to a fixed structure like news reports or political speeches. Utilising CDA to examine the core texts provides researchers with an overview of the discourse dynamics underlying the texts created by #MeToo China participants. While utilising CDA to examine the core texts allows researchers to gain an overview of the discourse dynamics underlying the texts created by #MeToo China participants, the distinctive themes that emerged from this analysis prompts a deeper exploration of the samples. The goal is to uncover themes embedded within these narratives and underscore the issues that emerge from them. Consequently, this study has

opted to apply an additional analytical method to the same set of samples for a more in-depth analysis.

Secondly, the high flexibility and extensive applicability of reflexive thematic analysis render it suitable even for more personal-style texts such as blogs and diaries. These features of RTA are also in alignment with the requisites of this study. Therefore, after the CDA in Phase 1, RTA was selected to further scrutinize the samples.

Moving on to Phase 2, this study involved semi-structured interviews, the results of which manifested as interview transcripts. Building on this foundation, RTA was again chosen as the method for sample analysis. On one hand, this decision is rooted in the widespread use of thematic analysis for studies involving interviews. On the other hand, mirroring Phase 1, the attributes of RTA harmonize seamlessly with the demands of Phase 2 research.

In summary, the choice of reflexive thematic analysis for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 serves several key purposes. Firstly, it ensures a strong coherence between the analytical methods selected for the two phases and the research objectives. Secondly, this approach guarantees an appropriately comprehensive and profound exploration of the samples in both phases. Lastly, the consistent use of this analytical method across both phases contributes to uniformity and coherence in the results of sample analysis.

4.2 Research Design: Two-phase Research

To thoroughly investigate the research topic and address the four research questions, this study is structured into two phases.

In Phase 1, there is first an overview of the three core cases of #MeToo China, including the timeline and a general trend description. Subsequently, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) are carried out. The rationale behind the choice of the three core cases is elaborated in Section 4.2.2. In this phase, purposive sampling is conducted as the sample collection method. Specifically, the sample selection criteria were to select first-hand materials related to the three core cases, including blogs and a diary of key participants, as well as blogs of other relevant participants. Ultimately, a total of twenty-one samples that met these requirements were collected.

All samples were selected from the #MeToo China Archive. The #MeToo China Archive was compiled by a group of self-organised volunteers to preserve as many Internet text records as possible about #MeToo China in the context of this online feminist movement encountering massive Internet censorship in 2018. This archive collected and organised all 52 cases of #MeToo China in 2018, including blogs of survivors/key participants, blogs of relevant participants, and related reports.

Both CDA and RTA are used as analytical tools to examine the materials. First, six samples drawn from key participants (i.e., the core person in the case, the one who spoke out for her case) were analysed using CDA. Subsequently, all twenty-one samples collected in this phase (including the six core samples mentioned above) were further explored using RTA. The sequential application of these two methods on the same sample set revealed the development process of Phase 1 research, as explained in Sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3.

Phase 2 research employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, with RTA continuing to serve as the analytical tool for examining interview transcripts. Fifteen participants were initially included, but three subsequently dropped out, resulting in a total of twelve interview samples.

Ethical considerations and security issues associated with the interview process in Phase 2 are addressed comprehensively in Section 4.2.4. Both research phases are predominantly qualitative in nature and utilised NVivo as the analysis tool.

Through this two-phase research, the study provides answers to the following four research questions:

1. What narratives were generated by participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?
3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?
4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

4.2.1 Social Media Platform Selection

In Phase 1 of this study, the selection of WeChat and Weibo for sample collection is underpinned by several significant factors. Firstly, these two social media platforms were chosen due to the distinctive nature of the samples found within them. As described in the literature review in Chapter 2, WeChat and Weibo stand as the prevailing social media platforms in China. Both boast substantial user bases, firmly positioning them among China's most popular platforms (Statista, 2024). These platforms' extensive and active user communities facilitate wide and effective dissemination of information, fostering collective engagement and enabling public discussions on social issues.

Furthermore, WeChat and Weibo were selected as they were core platforms in the emergence and progression of #MeToo China. As documented by #MeToo

in China Archives (2019), the #MeToo movement in China encompassed 52 publicly discussed and reported cases. These discussions and reports were often initiated when activists implicated in the cases posted blogs alleging instances of sexual harassment or assault on social media platforms. Among these cases, 25 were shared on WeChat. Another 20 cases were posted on Weibo. The remaining 9 cases were presented on alternative platforms, such as traditional media, although these garnered relatively limited attention and discussion due to the restrictions of the platforms (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019).

Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that WeChat and Weibo served as the primary battlegrounds for the #MeToo movement in China. Thus, the selection of WeChat and Weibo as the platforms for sample collection in Phase 1 is both logical and well-founded.

Aside from Weibo and WeChat, another platform referred to in this study is the data analysis platform ZhiWeiData. It is an Internet business intelligence service platform that mainly provides data analysis, policy research, and strategic consulting services to Internet companies, higher educational institutions, and the public (ZhiWeiData, 2024a). One of its functional branches, called “ZhiWeiShiJian”, provides data analysis of Internet communication trends and influence indices of socially significant events, presenting them in publicly accessible visual data charts (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). Through cooperation with mainstream Internet companies, the platform has access to data on relevant social media platforms.

According to the platform, a particular social event will be included in the database if it meets the following criteria: reaching a high transmission volume in a short time, maintaining a certain level of circulation over the long term, or sparking widespread discussion on social media (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). The

platform calculates the influence of events based on their dissemination effectiveness on online media platforms. For example, the influence calculation for the Weibo platform is determined by the number of followers, activity, and volume of interaction on the Weibo account (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). Regarding WeChat, it is determined by the average number of readings and “likes” of historical articles on WeChat’s official accounts (ZhiWeiData, 2024b).

Based on this, the data analysis results provided by ZhiWeiShiJian ensure the authenticity of their sources and the objectivity of the analysis. Thus, they can offer relevant visual results and research references to researchers in need. However, these visual charts also have certain limitation. For example, several cases of #MeToo China in 2018 were initially included in the database, and the original source of a specific data point could be accessed by the link provided on the information page when clicking the data point. However, due to several rounds of large-scale Internet censorship since late 2018, much of the source data that could have been accessed through the chart was deleted. As a result, researchers can explore analysis results and obtain an overview of the communication trend of the #MeToo case but cannot explore the data further, such as accessing the data source page and viewing the comments and reposts under the original blogs.

In Phase 1 of this study, it is necessary to introduce the overall communication situation of the three core cases before delving into the specific sample analysis. Due to the difficulty and limitations of data access and collection in this study, as explained above and in Section 4.2.4, the researcher decided to use the public data analysis results presented by ZhiWeiData as a reference to introduce the overall situation of the three core cases, rather than making this data collection and analysis part of the analytical process of this study. All chart data employed in this study have received authorization from ZhiWeiData.

4.2.2 Phase 1 Research Design

First, the sample collection timeframe is confined to a specific period: from 1st January 2018 to 1st January 2019, for Phase 1 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). The reason for selecting this time frame is rooted in its significance. 1st January 2018, denotes the inception of #MeToo China, as it marked the first case of sexual misconduct exposure on social media. After November 2018, while sexual violence cases continued to be disclosed on social platforms, they no longer constituted a sustained, extensive, and prolonged online movement as previously observed. Consequently, this study has opted for a one-year duration to enable a more focused and thorough investigation into the dynamics of #MeToo China.

Secondly, regarding case selection, this research focuses on three core cases for Phase 1 analysis. Given that there are a total of 52 cases within #MeToo China, analysing all of them is impractical due to the substantial amount of text. Additionally, some of these 52 cases lack subsequent development, sufficient public attention, or online discussions, and some have only one or two relevant texts. Compared to the three core cases selected for this study, the significance, characteristics, and research materials provided by these other cases are relatively limited. Therefore, this study chose to analyse three core cases that not only exemplify the #MeToo movement but also hold substantial research value for Phase 1.

Last, for the details of sample collection, all samples were gathered from the *#MeToo in China Archives 2018.1-2019.7* using the purposive sampling method. This archive was compiled by a team of Chinese volunteers to preserve as many Internet text records as possible about #MeToo China, in light of the massive Internet censorship faced by this online feminist movement in 2018 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). It collected and organised all 52

cases of #MeToo China in 2018, including blogs of survivors, their supporters, and related reports.

In this phase, the study focuses on the narratives created by the core participants in three selected cases. Thus, when screening the text samples from the #MeToo China Archive, the study prioritised texts directly produced by participants or first-person narrative records as first-hand materials, rather than third-person reports. Ultimately, a total of twenty-one samples were collected. These include blogs and a diary from three key participants and blogs from other relevant participants, as well as two text records presented from the first-person perspective of the key participant in the third case.

Regarding the three selected cases, the first one centres around Luo Xixi, who accused her former supervisor, Chen Xiaowu, of sexual harassment. Luo detailed her experience in a lengthy Weibo blog, demanding legal accountability for Chen's actions (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Choosing this case is supported by two primary reasons. Firstly, Luo's case marked the inception of China's #MeToo movement on 1st January 2018 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Her brave stance prompted a wave of women to share their stories using the “MeToo” hashtag, uniting against gender discrimination and sexual violence.

Therefore, Luo's case played a key role in sparking the entire #MeToo China movement. Moreover, unlike many other cases that remained unresolved or faded away, Luo's case progressed consistently with her sustained efforts and ongoing activism. In contrast to cases where initial participants withdrew after their content was deleted, Luo continued to speak out. Thus, considering these reasons, Luo's case emerges as a highly suitable choice for analysis.

The second core case is Huahua's case. She accused Lei Chuang, founder of

the YIYOU Charity Liver Centre, of sexually assaulting her during a hiking activity in 2015. YIYOU Charity Liver Centre is an NGO dedicated to the rights of vulnerable hepatitis B-affected individuals. Consequently, this accusation garnered significant attention upon its emergence on social media (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019; YIYOU, 2021). Huahua's case distinguishes itself through three notable characteristics.

First, it expanded the #MeToo movement beyond academia to broader societal spheres. Prior to this case, the #MeToo movement primarily revolved around higher education institutions. However, Huahua's disclosure extended the movement's reach to various areas. Second, this case revealed an uncommon dynamic. Unlike cases involving students against teachers, some of Lei Chuang's male friends formed a support group for him, leading to a clash with Huahua's supporters. This interaction introduced unique narrative elements. Thirdly, Huahua shared her personal diary on social media, recording her experiences throughout the case's duration. This distinctive feature adds depth to the analysis. Consequently, considering these traits, Huahua's case is a valuable selection.

The third case centres on the media industry, where Xianzi accused renowned television host Zhu Jun of sexual harassment (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Several factors validate the choice of this case. Mainly, Xianzi's case marks a crucial point in China's #MeToo movement, causing substantial impact and sparking extensive conversations both on the internet and in real life (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019).

Moreover, the influence of government censorship extended comprehensively across #MeToo China from this case onward. The “我也是” (“MeToo” translated into Mandarin) hashtag and all the related discussions were banned on WeChat

and Weibo, and relevant posts were swiftly deleted. This marked a turning point where #MeToo participants sought creative means to evade censorship, reflecting the movement's adaptability.

Finally, after #MeToo China 2018, Xianzi continued to engage in discussions on various feminist and anti-sexual violence social issues, becoming an influential figure among #MeToo participants (Xianzi, 2024). Her ongoing engagement underscores the importance of her case. In sum, these reasons collectively support the selection of Xianzi's case.

In summary, this research focuses on three core cases of #MeToo China 2018 for Phase 1 analysis, utilising purposive sampling as the method for sample collection. Both CDA and RTA methods were employed to examine samples, resulting in the analysis of twenty-one collected samples. Specifically, the six of twenty-one texts sourced from the three key participants—Luo Xixi, Huahua, and Xianzi—constitute the critical discourse analysis samples. These twenty-one texts, encompassing blogs and a diary, created by participants in the three selected cases on WeChat or Weibo, form the samples for the reflexive thematic analysis. The texts from accused individuals are not included in the research.

4.2.3 Phase 2 Research Design

Phase 2 involves semi-structured interviews. The researcher took on the role of interviewer, selecting participants from those involved in the three core cases of #MeToo China 2018. Because of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, this study carried out interviews online and recorded audio, which were later transcribed into written transcripts. On average, each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using

reflexive thematic analysis to yield comprehensive insights. The outcomes of this analysis are then detailed and discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

In this phase, when selecting interview participants, this study initially defined the scope based on whether the participant was connected to the three core cases. It's worth noting that during the participant search and screening process, it became apparent that most participants involved in the core cases were also engaged in the broader #MeToo China movement, which added significance to the interview materials.

The screening criteria for participants were established with three main rules. Firstly, interviewees needed to have participated in any of the three core cases, either by sharing their own experiences, supporting others who spoke out, or engaging in discussions. Secondly, participants should still be actively concerned about gender issues related to sexual harassment and assaults. Lastly, the safety and well-being of interviewees had to be ensured, so that participating in the interview would not endanger their security or freedom.

This study did not impose restrictions on gender, age, or professional background since the primary focus was on exploring the narratives of #MeToo China, and the key criterion was whether someone was part of the movement.

Also, considering the diverse influence of #MeToo China, it was natural that participants came from varied backgrounds. The information on age, gender, or professional background was collected from participants to draw a general portrait of the interview group in this study.

Given these conditions, the initial plan was to interview 12 to 15 individuals, averaging around 4 to 5 per case. This study successfully reached the target of 15 interviews, though two participants withdrew due to personal concerns.

Another interview took place in a noisy environment (chosen by the participant), leading to an unusable recording. The interviewee later admitted that the effect was intentional to protect himself from any risk. Based on ethical considerations and the ethical regulations followed by this study, the researcher decided to respect the interviewee's wishes and therefore did not use this sample. Ultimately, the study obtained twelve samples. These samples were then categorised by gender, age, and professional background to form a general portrait for interviewees. Details are discussed in Chapter 7.

4.2.4 Ethics and the Impact of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

The ethical considerations of this study highlight three points. First, interviews between the researcher and participants could potentially be subject to monitoring if they involved sensitive topics that could conflict with government censorship regulations. Second, a small number of participants might be under government surveillance due to their involvement in offline social movements. In such cases, both the researcher and the participants might face risks and mental stress. Third, even if there are no restrictions or risks to their personal safety, potential interviewees may refuse to participate for various reasons or withdraw during the interview process.

After conducting all interviews, the first and second risks were found to be low. All interviewees have personal freedom and are actively engaged on social media. Some remain involved in discussions about gender-related matters, while others share their daily lives online. In addition, this study took protective measures to mitigate potential risks. The researcher ensured that interview participants were not in situations where their freedom was restricted or their daily lives were monitored. Prior to conducting interviews, participants were fully informed about the entire process, the future use of the interview materials, and

the potential for research publication. Interviews were only conducted after obtaining informed consent from participants. Finally, all participants remained anonymous to minimise the risk of their personal information being disclosed.

Concerning the third risk, the recruitment of interview participants experienced several challenges. Some potential participants, such as the #MeToo China archive team, did not respond, and some others were unreachable, complicating the recruitment process. Additionally, two participants withdrew from the interviews for personal reasons. They did so without any official warnings or security threats, in line with their right to opt out as stated in the consent form. Also, one participant chose a noisy café for the interview, which made the audio recording unusable for analysis. This interviewee admitted to deliberately choosing a noisy place to disguise his voice, a decision made freely and without any external pressure or threats to his safety.

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted this study, particularly the interviews conducted during its second phase. Firstly, due to safety and health concerns posed by the pandemic, the ethics approval for this study took nearly nine months, much longer than usual, which slowed down the study's progress. Secondly, global lockdowns and travel restrictions forced a shift from initial in-person interviews to online interviews. Lastly, internet censorship was strengthened in China during the pandemic, causing the loss of contact with potential interviewees and complicating the interview process, as mentioned above.

Despite these challenges, the researcher made every effort to conduct interviews. Once ethics approval was obtained, concentrated and intensive interviews were swiftly initiated. While online interviews didn't have the advantage of building trust through face-to-face interactions, the researcher put in significant effort to establish a connection with participants and collect

valuable interview data. Moreover, despite losing contact with some potential interviewees, the researcher successfully completed 15 interviews, obtaining 12 samples. Given the worldwide pandemic situation, the researcher's determination to overcome difficulties and carry out this second-phase study is also noteworthy.

Summary

This chapter outlines the methodologies utilised in this study along with their theoretical underpinnings. It subsequently details the specific approach taken in the two-phase research design, addressing ethical considerations, challenges faced, and methods employed to overcome them.

Basically, this study employs a two-phase research design to address its core questions. Phase 1 focuses on text materials generated by participants of #MeToo China in 2018, analysing the themes within these texts and the narratives they convey to answer the first research question. Phase 2 involves semi-structured interviews with selected participants to explore their retrospective narratives of #MeToo China in 2018, shedding light on underlying themes for answering the second research question. The overall two phases of research provide findings and insights to address the third and final question regarding censorship and social media. Critical discourse analysis and reflexive thematic analysis are the two analytical methods used to deeply explore the collected samples. Subsequent chapters will present the analysis results for each phase. Chapter 5 will showcase the critical discourse analysis findings, while Chapter 6 will present the reflexive thematic analysis findings, both from Phase 1. Chapters 7 and 8 will explore the Phase 2 findings derived from reflexive thematic analysis.

Chapter 5: Phase 1 - Critical Analysis of Three Core Cases from #MeToo China 2018

Introduction

In Phase 1, six key samples from three core cases are initially subjected to critical discourse analysis. This is followed by a reflexive thematic analysis of twenty-one samples associated with these three cases. This chapter presents the results of the critical discourse analysis from Phase 1. It begins with an overview of the communication trends of the three core cases, detailing their specificities in social media discussions during #MeToo China 2018. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the six samples from key participants in the three core cases using a three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary.

5.1 An Overview of Three Core Cases

5.1.1 The Timeline and General Situation

The Case of Luo Xixi

Luo's case was the starting point of the #MeToo China 2018.

On 1st January 2018, after 12 years of silence, Dr Luo Xixi posted an article on Weibo, reporting Chen Xiaowu, her former supervisor as well as a professor in the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, sexual harassment of female students. This Weibo article immediately caused an uproar on the Internet. On the same day, Chen Xiaowu responded to this allegation in an interview with the Beijing Youth Daily, saying that he had never committed any violation of the law or relevant discipline.

On 2nd January, Luo Xixi posted the second article on Weibo, citing the victim's testimony and recordings and third-party evidence supporting the existence of a pregnant girl, and refuting Chen Xiaowu's denial. After that, the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics post a statement on its official Weibo stating that the school had set up a working group to investigate and verify whether Chen Xiaowu had any sexual misconduct during his academic and teaching work. In addition, the school suspended him from his work.

On 11th January, Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics noticed the processing results on its official Weibo, stating that the university had confirmed that Chen did harass his students and had sexual misconduct. Therefore, the university had dismissed all his duties and cancelled his teaching qualifications. On 12th January, Luo Xixi post an article on Weibo to thank all those who participated in progressing the case.

On 14th January, the Ministry of Education of China announced the punishment results against Chen Xiaowu to the public: Chen's "Yangtze River Scholar" title was revoked, and related funds were withdrawn. Luo forwarded the online report announcing the results. On 17th January, Luo Xixi forwarded another report about the story of her case and wrote: "This case should be brought to an end now. I hope my life can return to peace. Thank you for all your attention. I will continue to do my best to speak up for the vulnerable student community" (Luo, 2018). By this stage, the case of Luo Xixi's accusation of sexual harassment against Chen Xiaowu can be considered concluded.

Luo was not involved in the other #MeToo cases that followed, but she would repost discussions on issues related to gender violence in solidarity with other girls who spoke out. After Luo's case finished, more cases appeared. Hers is like a spark, starting a prairie fire on the Chinese mainland. From January to October in 2018, women and men in middle and higher education institutions

continued to speak up to expose various gender violence committed by teachers against students. Discussions around the issue of anti-sexual harassment on campus have been flowing on social media for a long time. Nonetheless, these discussions were limited in education institutes and academia until July 2018, when Huahua's case emerged.

The Case of Huahua in NGOs

On 23rd July 2018, Huahua published an article in her “Moments” on WeChat, saying that she was sexually assaulted by a well-known charity founder Lei Chuang while participating in a hiking event three years ago. This article was subsequently screened by netizens and posted on Weibo, which immediately aroused public debate. On the same day, Lei Chuang replied in his “Moments” on Wechat that he acknowledged the facts in Huahua's article and was willing to bear related criminal liabilities. Also, Lei said that he was considering confessing to his misconduct and would no longer be the head of YIYOU Charity.

Later in the same day, Lei posted a statement through the media, saying that he and Huahua were in a romantic relationship. Huahua published an article against this statement. She refuted Lei's description, stating that “there was not any relationship” and claiming that she would reserve the right to pursue legal proceedings against Lei Chuang's words. A relevant insider who had participated in the hiking activity also confirmed this fact.

On 24th July, the official website of YIYOU charity liver center issued an announcement stating that Lei Chuang's duties would be revoked and the head of YIYOU would be changed. In addition, YIYOU would also carry out gender awareness training and introduce anti-sexual harassment rules. On the same day, Huahua accepted a joint interview with multiple media. In the interview,

she said that her purpose was to hope that Lei Chuang and others like him would stop hurting more girls. In addition, she wanted to contribute to the discussion of “anti-sexual harassment” in NGOs.

Ultimately, Huahua did not file further lawsuits against Lei Chuang. As there were no more updates, discussions around the case gradually diminished after 29 July. According to ZhiweiData, Huahua's case lasted five days and twenty-two hours (ZhiweiData, 2023). Nevertheless, Huahua's case, as a starting point, promoted further voices and discussions of the #MeToo movement in many fields of Chinese society. In November 2018, Huahua released her diary: “Survivor's Diary: Living with Scars in One Hundred Days” on Weibo, presenting a first-hand narrative from the unique perspective of survivors herself. Huahua, as one of the core activists in #MeToo China, has continued to be active on social media, supporting other girls to speak up, including Xianzi, who was the core activist in the third representative case.

The Case of Xianzi in Media Industries—the Peak of #MeToo China

On 26th July 2018, Xianzi posted a long article on WeChat “Moments”, accusing Zhu Jun of sexually harassing her in the CCTV dressing room in 2014. A screenshot of this article was then forwarded to Weibo by Maishao, which quickly drew extensive attention and became the top trending topic on Weibo. Two hours later, Maishao's Weibo post was blocked. On the same day, all discussions related to this case, including trending topics containing “Zhujun” and “Xianzi”, along with posts and relevant discussions, were deleted and blocked on the Weibo platform.

On 27th July, the day after the case was revealed, Xianzi was interviewed by Caixin, where she detailed Zhu Jun's sexual harassment case, including the

process and the official pressure she faced subsequently. She pointed out that not only did the police refuse to file her case, but they also contacted authorities in her hometown of Wuhan to pressure her parents. As a result, this 2014 sexual harassment case, despite being reported, remains unresolved. The Caixin report sparked widespread online discussion and was quickly disseminated, although it and similar reports were soon deleted.

It is worth reflecting on the role of Caixin in this context. When Xianzi's case came to light, Caixin was the first mainstream media to report on it. Not only was its reporting the quickest, but its willingness to cover "sensitive" topics also stands out compared to other silent media. A similar situation occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Guli, 2020). Under the direction of a deputy editor, two reporters and a photographer from Caixin conducted investigations and interviews in Wuhan during the lockdown, continuing to report on developments even though these reports were later censored (Guli, 2020). It appears that, compared to other media, Caixin have somewhat greater degree of freedom.

This situation has also attracted attention from some individuals. Western media tend to believe that because Caixin is a bilingual economic news website in Chinese and English, most reporters are inclined towards freedom of speech and democratic concepts, thus considering it a "liberal media" in China (Guli, 2020). In mainland China, there has not been any public media discussion about Caixin's particularity. Online, netizen discussions about the reasons "why Caixin is more free" (or whether it is part of "foreign power") tend to be baseless and vague speculations, such as attributing it to a powerful political or economic background (Zhihu, 2020). It is important to note that Caixin has not received any favorable treatment regarding censorship, despite its consistent and persistent reporting on sensitive and controversial societal issues, whether due to its liberal media' perspective or its strong political background. Both its

reports on #MeToo China and the Covid-19 pandemic were censored or blocked within a short period.

Cammaerts argues that the media can shape the public agenda through selective reporting and discourse practices (Cammaerts, 2012). For example, controversial and violent protests are more likely to be covered by mainstream media than regular campaigns, which aligns with Caixin's approach to reporting #MeToo China cases (Cammaerts, 2012). Although the cases of Luo Xixi and Huahua were also significant and influential, Caixin did not report on them. The media's quick response to the Xianzi case is likely due to Zhu Jun's prominent status as a host on CCTV, the official media outlet of the Chinese government at the time, giving him greater social influence than the accused in other cases and thus attracting more public attention and discussion. Cammaerts also points out that not all mainstream media always serve the interests of authorities (Cammaerts, 2012). Mainstream media can support social movements, especially feminist movements and anti-war protests (Cammaerts, 2012). This perspective may explain Caixin's ongoing reporting on controversial and sensitive issues in mainland Chinese society.

Nevertheless, further research is needed to provide more specific answers regarding Caixin's unique position and its reporting criteria. In the context of this study, although Caixin's reporting helped to spread awareness of the Xianzi case, its overall impact on #MeToo China 2018 was limited. News reports related to Xianzi's case were deleted or blocked following official intervention and censorship. Over four years, as the process of Xianzi's case grew increasingly pessimistic, few mainstream media outlets in mainland China reported on it. Most of the time, Xianzi posted updates on her case through her Weibo accounts, aligning more closely with Cammaerts' concept of self-mediation (Cammaerts, 2012). Additionally, although Caixin had a preference for certain #MeToo China cases, this did not affect the participation of #MeToo

China activists. Those involved in less influential cases did not resort to more radical approaches to attract attention or seek support from well-known mainstream media.

Back to the process of Xianzi's case, on 15th August, Zhu Jun commissioned a law agency to issue a statement, claiming that the sexual harassment allegations against him were fake as well as the relevant information. Also, he would sue Xianzi, Maishao and the media that published this series of fake news. On 20th August, Xianzi responded that "I hope more victims will stand up, and I also hope that Zhu Jun can sue us as soon as possible so that the judicial process can intervene more quickly." On 24th August, Xianzi posted a weibo and claimed that a stranger had threatened her over several phone calls. On 25th October, the case of Xianzi against Zhu Jun was accepted by the People's Court of Haidian District in Beijing. The case of Xianzi is still processing in the present.

Since 2018, Xianzi has continuously updated the progress of her case through her Weibo account “@弦子和她的朋友们²” (@Xianzi and her friends). In addition, Xianzi also uses Weibo to establish contact with women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted, accompanying them to the police station to submit criminal reports and assisting them in seeking justice.

On 25th May 2021, after Xianzi posted an article on Weibo about the progress of her lawsuit against Zhu Jun, her Weibo account was blocked for 365 days. Additionally, content posted before 2020 was no longer accessible on her Weibo account.

On 25th October 2021, the verdict of the first trial was announced. Xianzi lost

² @弦子和她的朋友们 (@Xianzi and her friends) : <https://weibo.com/u/6640656158>.

the case due to insufficient evidence. When she tried to post the appellate paper on another Weibo account, it was immediately deleted, and this alternative account was also blocked.

On 10th August 2022, the second trial of Xianzi's case was held. The court determined that the evidence submitted by Xianzi was insufficient to prove that Zhu Jun had sexually harassed her, thereby upholding the original verdict. Xianzi lost the case (Xiaoshan, 2022). After the trial, she expressed her gratitude to the supporters outside the court and encouraged people to continue their efforts to oppose gender-based violence (Xiaoshan, 2022). This marked the conclusion of one of the most influential cases in #MeToo China in 2018.

5.1.2 The Trend Flow of Core Cases on Social Media

After reviewing these three core cases of #MeToo China 2018, this section introduces the overall communication trends of these cases, based on visualization charts from ZhiWeiData. As explained in Section 4.2.1, ZhiWeiData is an Internet business intelligence service platform (ZhiWeiData, 2024a). One of its functional branches, "ZhiWeiShiJian", provides data analysis of Internet communication trends and influence indices of socially significant events, presenting them in publicly accessible visual data charts (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). Through cooperation with mainstream Internet companies, the platform has access to data from relevant social media platforms.

According to this platform, a particular social event is included in the database if it meets the following criteria: achieving high transmission volume in a short time, maintaining circulation over the long term, or sparking widespread discussion on social media (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). The platform calculates the influence of events based on their dissemination effectiveness on online media

platforms. For example, on Weibo, influence is determined by the number of followers, activity, and volume of interactions on the Weibo account (ZhiWeiData, 2024b). For WeChat, it is determined by the average number of readings and “likes” of historical articles on WeChat’s official accounts (ZhiWeiData, 2024b).

Based on these criteria, the data analysis results provided by ZhiWeiShiJian ensure the authenticity of their sources and the objectivity of the analysis. Thus, they offer relevant visual results and research references for researchers. There may be some doubts about the authenticity of the platform’s data on #MeToo China, considering the large-scale Internet censorship in 2018: has the data analyzed by the platform been replaced by the government?

This is highly unlikely. First, from an economic cost perspective, recoding data is more expensive than simply blocking or deleting it. If censorship can be achieved through blocking and deletion, the government has little incentive to spend more on replacing the data. As Roberts highlights, censorship is costly for the government and can affect the operations of related companies, resulting in negative economic consequences (Roberts, 2018, p.24-26). Therefore, it is more practical for the Chinese government to block text on social media platforms directly rather than replace the extensive databases behind them.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Chinese government controls the Chinese Internet, giving it the power to comprehensively censor online content. According to Roberts, one of the most frequently used censorship mechanisms is “friction”, which achieves censorship by restricting data access (Roberts, 2018, p.56-60). In the context of #MeToo China, when discussing “blocking” and “deleting”, the more accurate term is “inaccessibility”. When the government makes text on social media platforms “inaccessible” to the public,

it achieves censorship without needing to alter the database further.

Regarding ZhiWeiData's data collection, the platform has an official partnership with Weibo and WeChat, granting it access to these platforms' databases. When texts become "inaccessible" to the public, this does not mean the database is inaccessible to ZhiWeiData. Additionally, ZhiWeiData presents quantitative charts that provide overall trends without including specific attitudes or positions. In other words, ZhiWeiData offers quantitative data analysis rather than in-depth interview reports, which makes it reasonable that their data analysis results have not been blocked or made inaccessible.

However, these visual charts also have particular limitations. For example, for #MeToo China 2018 cases included in the database, their text sources of a specific point could be accessed via a link on the information page. Due to several rounds of large-scale Internet censorship since late 2018, much of the sources accessible through the chart has been deleted. As a result, researchers can explore analysis results and obtain an overview of the communication trends of the #MeToo cases but cannot delve deeper into the data, such as accessing source pages and viewing comments and reposts under the original blogs.

In Phase 1 of this study, it is necessary to introduce the overall communication trends of the three core cases before delving into specific sample analyses. Given the difficulty and limitations of data access and collection, as explained in Section 4.2.4, the researcher decided to use the public data analysis results presented by ZhiWeiData as a reference to introduce the overall situation of the three core cases rather than making this data analysis part of the study's analytical process. All chart data used in this study have received authorisation from ZhiWeiData.

According to ZhiweiData, all trending cases have an overall "Event Influence Index (EII)", which is an indicator to refer to the online communication effectiveness of a single case, based on data of social media and other online media on the entire Internet (Zhiwei, 2024b). The specific calculation method of EII, according to Zhiwei (2024b), is to add up spreading effect data on social media and online media, and to do the normalisation operation to obtain EII ranging from 0 to 100 (Zhiwei, 2024b). The overall statistical results of these three cases and their detailed comparisons are presented below.



Figure 1 EII - Luo Xixi's Case



Figure 2 EII - Huahua's Case



Figure 3 EII - Xianzi's Case

It can be seen from Figure 1, 2 and 3 that the "Event Influence Index" of these three cases are all above 50, which is higher than the index of most trending cases. Among them, the EII of Luo's case is 68.0, which is higher than 69% of general cases and higher than 71% of social issues. In Huahua's case, the EII is 66.5, which is higher than 64% of general incidents and 66% of social issues. The EII of Xianzi reaches 61.0, which is higher than 31% of public events and 34% of social issues. All of them have shown powerful communication effectiveness.

Specifically, according to Figure 1, 2 and 3, the communication influence index of Weibo and WeChat is generally higher than that of other online media. There are three reasons. First, those core activists chose Weibo or WeChat as their main voice channel. Secondly, compared with other online media, Weibo and WeChat, especially Weibo, because of the timely communication feature, their spreading scope and efficiency are far greater than that of online media (Chen, 2020). Finally, as mainstream social media platforms in China, Weibo and WeChat have massive user groups, which has also contributed to the increase in the communication influence index.

In addition to the general influence index, Zhiweidata also presents the multi-platform communication trends of each case. The results are shown below.



Figure 4 The Multi-platform Communication Trends - Luo Xixi's Case

Figure 4 shows the integrated communication trends of the multi-platform throughout the process of Luo's case. The overall trend has two peak points. The first was on 2nd January, the day after Luo Xixi publicly accused Chen Xiaowu of sexual harassment. The second was on 12th January, when Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics announced on Weibo late at night on 11th January, confirming that Chen Xiaowu did sexually harass students, and the university would carry out a series of dismissal measures. In general, the trend flow of Luo's case followed the progress of exposure, investigation, and handling of the result. As a complete anti-sexual harassment case, the disclosure at the beginning and the outcome at the end generated the most trending discussions.

Furthermore, the comparison of communication trends on each platform is also

worth noting. From the second, third, and fourth small figures, we can see that their communication trend line is consistent with the overall trend line, whether it is Weibo, WeChat, or other online media. The difference is that media communication on Weibo and WeChat is significantly higher than that of other online media platforms. Both the number of media reports and the scope of their communication influence are more extensive on Weibo and WeChat. Weibo and WeChat, as media platforms used by activists of the first case in #MeToo China, have carried more information and influence than other platforms.

In Luo Xixi's case, because she focused on using Weibo to speak out and promote the progress of her case from beginning to end, the multi-platform communication trend comparison chart shows that the peak positions of the communication trend curves on Weibo, WeChat, and other online media platforms are consistent. However, the comparative outcomes of trends differ in the Huahua and Xianzi cases.

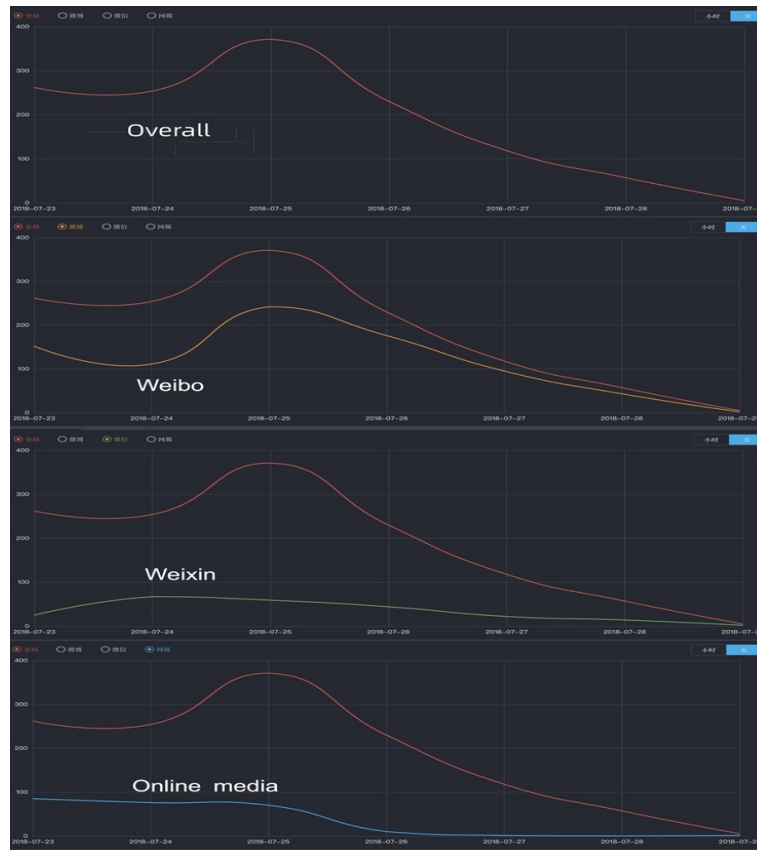


Figure 5 The Multi-platform Communication Trends - Huahua's Case



Figure 6 The Multi-platform Communication Trends - Xianzi's Case

It can be seen that the trend fluctuation curve of each platform is not consistent with the overall trend curve. Specifically, in Figure 5, the propagation trend curve of WeChat (24th July) peaked before that of Weibo (25th July) in Huahua's case. In Xianzi's case (Figure 6), the peak points of the WeChat curve also preceded the Weibo curve. In short, these charts show a communication trend from WeChat to Weibo in both Huahua and Xianzi's cases.

The presentation of this trend can be elaborated on two levels. First, it is related to the strategies chosen by the two core participants in these cases. Huahua and Xianzi initially shared their experiences on WeChat “Moments”, motivated primarily by an intent to support other women rather than to engage in an organised social movement. Once their posts were forwarded to Weibo and gained widespread attention, their main communication platform shifted to Weibo. For Huahua, this shift occurred because Leichuang, the person she accused of sexual assault, distorted the facts on a public online platform, prompting her to reclaim her voice through more public social media (Huahua, 2018). For Xianzi, after her case was exposed, Zhujun immediately denied the accusation and accused Xianzi and Maishao of defamation, which sparked greater discussion (Xianzi, 2018). Consequently, the controversy expanded to question the credibility of well-known media professionals and the legitimacy of #MeToo China. Thus, Xianzi moved from WeChat to Weibo, created a Weibo account, and has since continuously updated the progress of her case there.

Furthermore, the flow of communication trends from WeChat to Weibo in Huahua and Xianzi's cases illustrates how social media shapes “contentious publicity” through materiality, space, and temporality, as proposed by Kavada and Poell.

Materiality in the Chinese context can refer to the material features of WeChat

and Weibo, as discussed by Sun and Wright (Sun and Wright, 2021). WeChat's "Moments" is a semi-public platform where only people who have added each other as friends can see each other's posts. To forward a particular article, users need to take a screenshot and post it on their own "Moments" to reach a broader audience. This limits the promotion of spreading #MeToo China cases. For example, Huahua works in the NGO industry, so if her article is only spread within her friend circle, the audience is limited to her relatives and friends, alumni, and people who work in NGOs.

In contrast, Weibo is a fully public platform. By simply registering a Weibo account, users can view content through keyword searches or the Trending list. People do not need to "add each other as friends" to comment on and spread content, which expands the range of communities that can be mobilised. Therefore, the material features of Weibo can better encourage participation in #MeToo discussions, thus advancing the movement.

Temporality is reflected in Huahua and Xianzi's actions to switch from WeChat to Weibo. The instant and rapid communication on social media not only shapes the dynamics of online debate but also affects the direction of communication (Sun and Wright, 2021). After publishing their articles, Huahua and Xianzi quickly received responses from Leichuang and Zhujun. When these individuals denied the accusations, Huahua and Xianzi transitioned to Weibo, creating accounts and continuing to speak out, further expanding the discussion on their cases and related social issues. This immediacy reshaped their roles from supporters to activists of #MeToo China, thus altering the communication trajectory of their cases.

Spatiality, as described by Kavada and Poell, is an interactive, constructive process to "make things public" (Kavada and Poell, 2021). They argue that this process is continually shaped by users, platforms, and their interactive

relationships. From experience sharing on the semi-private platform of WeChat to contentious conversations on the fully public platform of Weibo, the narratives and practices of #MeToo China participants were constructed and amplified through expanding dissemination and discussions, becoming more powerful and contentious. These conversations, in turn, reshape the nature of spatiality in this context, transforming it into a battleground against sexual violence and structural power inequalities.

In addition, some unique features presented by the trend chart of Xianzi's case are also worth noting. It can be seen from Chart 1 that the EII of her case reaches 61.0, which is higher than 31% of public events and 34% of social issues. Compared to Luo and Huahua, the data of Xianzi's case is not distinct and has not as much influence as the previous two cases.

In fact, however, the online discussion about Xianzi's case lasted for 92 days, much longer than Luo's and Huahua's case. Also, according to #MeToo in China Archives records (2019), when Xianzi posted articles on social media on 26th July 2018, accusing Zhu Jun of sexual harassment, this topic, as well as the “MeToo” hashtag, immediately rushed to the top one on “Trending” of Weibo. According to the rules of Weibo (2023), only topics that have received significant attention and massive discussions in a short time appear on the top one in trending. In addition, the influence of Zhu Jun, as an iconic celebrity in China, and Xianzi's continuous speaking on social media, also contribute to this case attracting more wide attention and discussions. Thus, there is an apparent discrepancy between the chart data and the actual situation.

According to #MeToo in China Archives records (2019), discussions began to be deleted the day after Xianzi's exposure on the Internet. Weibo accounts related to #MeToo were also restricted for a while. Compared with its attitudes towards the first two core cases, Weibo adopted a more restrictive strategy to

suppress public discussions regarding Xianzi's case. On the surface, this may be related to Xianzi's actions after the case was exposed. Since 2018, she has continued to update the progress of her case on Weibo and participate in discussions on various social issues related to gender violence. However, at a deeper level, this situation is clearly related to censorship strategies. The relationship between Weibo as a social media platform and the government's censorship strategy, as well as the specific manifestations of the government's censorship strategy in the context of #MeToo China, are discussed in the following findings and discussion chapters.

5.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

In this section, critical discourse analysis is employed to explore the core texts from three selected cases. Specifically, the analysis is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, combined with the perspective of gender discourse in the Chinese social context (Fairclough, 1992; Tong, 2003). As introduced in Chapter 4, this study prioritised texts directly produced by participants or first-person narrative records as first-hand materials, rather than third-person reports. Six samples are analysed in this CDA stage: five blogs and a diary from three key participants, to further explore the underlying discourse dynamics.

5.2.1 The Case of Luo Xixi in higher education institutes

Throughout the progression of the entire case, Luo Xixi posted three long blogs and seven short weibos on Weibo (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Four of these weibos were reposts of official announcements from the higher educational institutions involved, while the other three were brief updates on the case progress. The three long blogs, written by Luo Xixi, are more significant than the weibos. The first long blog exposed Chen Xiaowu's sexual

harassment. The second blog was a counterattack by Luo after Chen Xiaowu denied the accusations. The third blog is a summary written after the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics announced the investigation results and punishment measures against Chen Xiaowu. In this blog, Luo expressed gratitude to those who helped her during the process and called on women to be brave and self-empowered. The following analysis focuses on these three long blogs, posted at different key moments, and conducts a critical discourse analysis.

The title of the first blog is “我要实名举报北航教授,长江学者陈小武性骚扰女学生”, which literally translates to “I want to accuse Chen Xiaowu, the Professor and Changjiang Scholar, of sexually harassing female students”. This blog was published on January 1, 2018, and it is the first official public text of #MeToo China 2018.

First and foremost, three phrases in the title are particularly noteworthy. First, “实名举报” literally means using one's real name and identity information to publicly expose individuals or group's illegal behavior against individuals, the public, or society. Second, “长江学者”, literally translated as Yangtze River Scholar, is an important academic award jointly established by the Chinese Ministry of Education and Li Ka Shing, a Hong Kong entrepreneur and philanthropist. This award is regarded as one of the highest honours in Chinese academia. Third, “性骚扰” means sexual harassment.

In general, if a person chooses to “实名举报”, it signifies a willingness to take greater risks to verify the authenticity of the report and emphasise its seriousness. Using a real name means disclosing the reporter's actual information, which may expose them to retaliation from the accused and

potential violations of their privacy. Therefore, the term “实名举报” is generally associated with serious and negative cases by the public.

“长江学者” (Yangtze River Scholar), also known as the “Chang Jiang Scholars Program”, as explained above, is a significant award in the Chinese academia (Hongganji, 2019). This award is competitive because scholars who win it receive not only generous bonuses and research funds but also more support from the government for research resources (Hongganji, 2019). Thus, in China, academic researchers who receive the Changjiang Scholars Award are typically well-known researchers with outstanding academic achievements.

It is very unusual that “长江学者” (Yangtze River Scholar), a title with positive connotations of power and reputation, is juxtaposed with two negative phrases, “实名举报” (real name reporting) and “性骚扰” (sexual harassment). The power dynamic presented here is contradictory: a famous scholar with power fails to bear corresponding social responsibilities and instead commits illegal behaviours. Moreover, a professor who is supposed to educate students being accused of sexually harassing them contradicts the usual expectations of the role of an educator (Zhang and Zou, 2020). Some scholars point out that there is a structural power imbalance in the relationship between educators and students in higher educational institutions: educators have more power and resources, while students are in a more passive and vulnerable position (Naylor and Mifsud, 2019; Zhang and Zou, 2020). This imbalanced power relationship did not seem to be recognized before. Luo Xixi chose this controversial title to attract widespread social attention and discussion, bringing the issue into public view.

Furthermore, from the dimension of text analysis, aside from the discussion on

the title mentioned above, the first blog can be further explored through the intertextuality and modes of expression. First, there are two places in this blog that create intertextuality with other texts. The first place is at the beginning of the text. When Luo Xixi mentioned the #MeToo movement in the United States, she quoted Alyssa Milano's famous tweet: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Subsequently, Luo expressed her own reaction to that tweet:

“我在心里对自己说了一声‘me too’。然后深呼吸一口，开始这一天。” (I said 'me too' to myself in my heart. Then I took a deep breath to start the day.)

It is evident that when Luo says, “Me too”, it generates intertextuality with Alyssa's tweet.

The second place occurs in the middle of the blog, where Luo describes how she gathered several students who might have been sexually harassed by Chen Xiaowu to discuss the issue of making a public accusation:

“单凭我一个人的匿名证词肯定是不够的，于是我把这几个疑似被性骚扰的女同学拉了个群，起了个挺文艺的群名‘Hard Candy’。源于之前看过的一部少女萝莉血腥报复性犯罪分子的同名电影‘水果硬糖’。”

(My anonymous testimony was definitely not enough, so I created a group with the female students who were suspected of being sexually harassed and gave it a rather literary name, 'Hard Candy'. It was inspired by a movie I had seen before, 'ShuiGuoYingTang', about a teenage girl taking bloody revenge on a sexual criminal.)

As Luo said, the name “Hard Candy” comes from the movie *Hard Candy*. According to AllMovie (2005), this movie tells the story of a young girl taking revenge on a sex criminal. By using this word in the group name composed of several female students, Luo not only allowed the text to generate intertextuality with the movie but also further extended the meaning of the word.

In this movie, the heroine does not present herself as a victim when communicating with the male role who is a paedophile. On the contrary, she presents herself as a counterattacker. The girl no longer appears as “the other”, objectified and stared at by the male, but as the subject to dominate the development of the narrative. In the same way, when Luo decided to use this phrase to define herself and other victims of sexual harassment, she was deconstructing the word “victims”. According to societal stereotypes, victims are often perceived as weak, passive, and lacking in power. However, encountering sexual violence does not always mean that women have to play the role of victims. Women can also be active, tough, and powerful, as well as being counterattackers to defend their rights. Therefore, this phrase presents the deconstruction of the former discourse and the construction of a new discourse.

Regarding the modes of expression, this blog has a clear and organised narrative structure. Luo Xixi shared her experience by detailing the timeline from when she first saw someone anonymously exposing Chen Xiaowu’s behavior, to when she shared her own experience and contacted other victims, and finally to when she publicly reported Chen Xiaowu after obtaining sufficient evidence. As the offline reporting process encountered obstacles, Luo chose to publicly expose the complete case on social media to further advance its progress.

At the beginning of the blog, Luo explained her initial motivation for speaking out, setting the tone for the entire piece. She mentioned that in October 2017, she saw someone anonymously expose Chen Xiaowu’s sexual misconduct. She then realised that even after many years, Chen Xiaowu continued to sexually harass female students. Therefore, she decided to unite the victims and report Chen Xiaowu.

Subsequently, she elaborated that after obtaining testimonies and evidence

from victims, she reported Chen Xiaowu offline at the end of 2017 but encountered various obstacles in the process, such as threats from Chen:

“有证词，有录音，有第三方证明陈小武借贷封口怀孕女生，我觉得是时候把这个人渣彻底打倒了。于是，我联系北航校友会的会长，要求其牵线北航学校领导，我要实名举报陈小武性骚扰手下女学生的事实！…但是后来，事实证明我太过于乐观。陈小武开始在知乎上大规模删帖了，并且给女生B 打电话施压了…”

(There are testimonies, recordings, and third-party evidence that Chen Xiaowu borrowed money to make a female student have an abortion. I think it is time to defeat this scumbag completely. So, I contacted the president of the Alumni Association of the University and asked him to connect with the university's leadership group. I wanted to report the fact that Chen Xiaowu sexually harassed his female students! ... But later, it turned out that I was too optimistic. Chen Xiaowu began to delete posts on Zhihu on a large scale and called B (one of the victims) to put pressure on her...)

From this, Luo introduced the third part of her explanation: why she chose to expose the matter publicly on social media on 1st January 2018:

“如何在性骚扰发生前对潜在骚扰者构成震慑力，如何在被骚扰中勇敢对骚扰者说 NO，如何在被性骚扰后取证自保，这才是我们需要关注的地方。美国对女性儿童的保护也是在各种血泪中从无到有一点一点进步来的。如果我们中国要有个开端，可否从本应该最有保护意义的校园展开？而我曝光这些，就是想做个开端。”

(... How to deter potential harassers before sexual harassment occurs, how to bravely say NO when being harassed, and how to collect evidence and protect oneself after being sexually harassed, this is what we need to pay attention to. The protection of women and children in the United States has also been gradually improved from zero. If we in China want a beginning, can we start from the university campus, which should be the most supportive and safe place? I expose these things to make a beginning.)

Thus, based on the timeline, Luo demonstrated her actions from offline to online through a layered narrative logic. This narrative allows the public to understand the complete development of the case clearly. Moreover, this description is more credible as it is based on real identity information and provides many details. Additionally, Luo included some literature citations at the end of the blog.

All of this significantly increased the objectivity and credibility of her experience, successfully gaining public attention, support, and discussion, promoting the

case's progress, and achieving her initial purpose of speaking out.

At the end of blog, Luo Xixi also called on more students with similar experiences to speak out:

“我曾和师弟师妹说过，无论怎么样，我都会给他 / 她们一个交代。除了向北航纪委，向公众实名举报，我还会向中纪委、教育部举报。所以，我的师妹们，不要害怕，受了性骚扰，我们要勇敢地站出来，说No!”

(I have told my juniors that no matter what, I will give them a result. In addition to reporting to the university, I will also report to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Education. So, my juniors, do not be afraid. If you are sexually harassed, we must stand up bravely and say No!)

This call seems consistent with the criteria for censorship mentioned by King and Pan in their research on Chinese censorship: a call to take action (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). According to King and Pan, the Chinese government is more likely to censor content that seems to mobilise people rather than content that merely criticises the government (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). However, this blog was not blocked. It may be because, in this context, Luo's call was not an appeal for collective action but for more people to come forward with evidence to support the case's progress. Additionally, Luo's case was the first #MeToo case in China. Although the resolution of her case inspired many to speak out about their experiences and expose sexual violence in higher education, it was still viewed and handled more as an isolated incident rather than as the starting point of a feminist movement when it came to light in January 2018.

The second article posted by Luo Xixi is titled “陈小武：你敢说没持续性骚扰女学生？没乱纪？”，which literally translates as “Chen Xiaowu: Do you dare to say that you do not sexually harass female students continuously? No misconduct?”. This blog was posted to counter Chen Xiaowu's denial of all

sexual harassment allegations. In this second blog, Luo Xixi primarily refutes Chen Xiaowu's denial from two aspects. Firstly, she presented screenshots of chat records (with the victims' private information hidden) as evidence to prove the authenticity of Chen Xiaowu's sexual harassment. Secondly, she displayed a screenshot of a chat record in which a victim chose to withdraw from exposing the case due to threats and pressure from Chen. This evidence disproves his denial of the allegations: if he did not sexually harass students as he claimed, why did he privately use various means to coerce the victims into silence?

The second blog has some similarities with the first one. First, the way it forms the title seems to use the same strategy as the first blog, aiming to attract wide public attention and discussion, although the second one is more like “shouting over” rather than a monologue. The title of this blog is a strong rhetorical question directed at Chen Xiaowu's denial of his misconduct. Second, like the previous one, this blog also narrates through a very organised structure, clearly presenting the public with details about how the process develops.

The difference is that the second blog directly presents screenshots of evidence accusing Chen Xiaowu of sexual harassment, as shown below:



Figure 7 Testimony from One of the Sexual Harassment Survivors

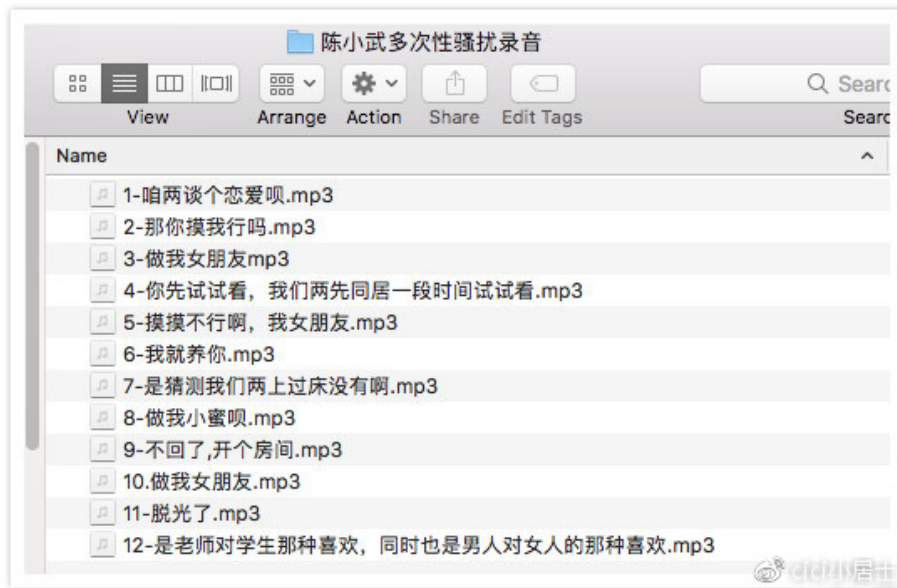


Figure 8 Screenshot of Multiple Sexual Harassment Recordings of Chen Xiaowu Provided by Another Survivor

Figure 7 shows the testimony against Chen Xiaowu from one of the sexual harassment survivors, which is part of the evidence Luo Xixi submitted to the investigation team at Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Figure 8 presents a series of screenshots of audio recordings provided by another anonymous accuser. These recordings are named according to their key content, specifically Chen's sexually harassing remarks. In particular, No. 7, “是猜测我们两上过床没有啊” (Guess whether we had sex before), No. 11, “脱光了” (Be naked), and No. 12, “是老师对学生那种喜欢, 同时也是男人对女人的那种喜欢” (It is the kind of love that a teacher has for a student, and also the kind of love that a man has for a woman), are all apparent examples of sexual harassment.

Luo Xixi explained the evidence she had obtained in her first blog. However, Chen Xiaowu's denial of the accusations changed her strategy, prompting her to release some of the evidence directly to the public. This action, in a sense, also reflects a transformation of the identity from a silent victim to an outspoken

counterattacker.

The content of this article is a powerful refutation with rich arguments, contrasting sharply with Chen's evasive attitude. In this context, the initially unequal power relationship between Chen and Luo has shifted. Under the tutor-student structure, Chen had significant influence over Luo's graduation and academic career, while Luo was powerless. After being forced into silence about the sexual harassment and bullying, she lost her voice even further. However, the situation reversed after twelve years. By telling her story and publicly exposing Chen's misconduct, Luo gained widespread public support, thereby empowering herself. By encouraging more survivors to speak out, Luo led others to deconstruct the "victim" discourse, helping other women achieve self-empowerment. Meanwhile, as the case progressed and the charges against him were gradually confirmed, Chen lost the dominant power he once held. Consequently, the initially unequal power relationship was deconstructed by the survivors' voices and the discourse behind their narratives.

The title of the third blog is “自我觉醒的女性更有力量”, which literally means “self-awakened women are powerful”. This article was published on 12th January 2018, after the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics announced the investigation results of Chen Xiaowu's sexual misconduct and the resulting punishments. These included the cancellation of his teaching qualifications and position, the revocation of his qualification as a postgraduate supervisor, and the withdrawal of his title as a Yangtze River Scholar along with related funds. Following the announcement, Luo declared on Weibo that the case had achieved a satisfactory result and then wrote this blog as a summary. The highlight of the third blog is that it has been blocked on Luo Xixi's Weibo, while the other two blogs remain accessible. The following is a screenshot of the original blog post:

自我觉醒的女性更有力量

cici小居士 | 2018-01-12 04:08:22 | 举报

阅读量 : 42396

善良和勇敢是你我最美的姿态！

几个受害人，一位女记者，一位女律师，组成的联盟。

我们取得阶段性胜利了！

感谢女生E，你的知乎首发帖，你的勇敢。

感谢女生B，你的信任，你的聪慧。

感谢女生D，你的坚持，你的元气满满。

感谢女生A，你是我们的开心果。

感谢后来加入水果硬糖群的女生F，她刚做了妈妈，让我们祝福她的小公主。

感谢记者黄雪琴，行动力超乎想象，你打心底里关心我们每一个人。

感谢律师万淼焱，专业正义有策略，你是我们坚实的后盾。

自我觉醒的女性更有力量！

最后，

我们会持续跟进北航性骚扰防治机制的落实和执行。

愿每位女性，

善良和勇敢是你我最美的姿态！

Figure 9 The Third Blog Written by Luo Xixi

This is a relatively short article. The main content of this article is to express gratitude to those who provided various forms of support and help in progressing the case, and to call for the self-awakening and self-empowerment of more women:

“几个受害人，一位女记者，一位女律师，组成的联盟。我们取得阶段性胜利了！感谢女生E，你的知乎首发帖，你的勇敢。感谢女生B，你的信任，你的聪慧。感谢女生D，你的坚持，你的元气满满。感谢女生A，你是我们的开心果。感谢后来加入水果硬糖群的女生F，她刚做了妈妈，让我们祝福她的小公主...自我觉醒的女性更有力量！...愿每位女性，善良和勇敢是你我最美的姿态！”

(A coalition of several victims, a female journalist, and a female lawyer. We have achieved a significant victory! Thank you, Girl E, for your brave first post and your

courage. Thank you, Girl B, for your trust and intelligence. Thank you, Girl D, for your persistence and wisdom. Thank you, Girl A, for bringing us joy... Self-awakened women are more powerful!... May kindness and bravery be the most beautiful qualities in every woman, for you and for me!)

Considering the specific content, the main theme of this blog is similar to the previous two, which is to encourage women who have suffered sexual violence to speak out and achieve self-empowerment through self-awakening. So why was this blog blocked?

King and Pan point out that the purpose of censorship by the Chinese government is to reduce the probability of collective action by cutting off social connections when such action occurs or is expected to occur (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). Therefore, whether people communicate on the same topic on social media or express any motivation for collective action, such as protests or joint letters, these expressions may be censored because they have the potential to incite collective action (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). Whether the theme is about criticising or praising the government or is related to the government is actually unimportant.

In Luo's third blog, two points may have triggered censorship. The first is her mention of a "coalition", as she stated, "a coalition of several victims, a female journalist, and a female lawyer. We have achieved a significant victory". This can be seen as an expression about collective action to some extent. The second point is Luo's call for women to achieve self-empowerment through self-awakening at the end of the blog. Similar to the previous "stand up and say no!" message, this can also be viewed as a call to action. While the earlier call was in the context of progressing the case, this call targets a broader female community. Although the purpose of this blog is not to incite any specific social movement, because it has the potential to generate collective action, it has been censored to prevent the potential for such actions.

Regarding the discourse practice, it can be seen that the three blogs written by Luo Xixi present some common features. First, all three blogs are long texts with detailed descriptions of personal experiences, providing sufficient information and making them convenient for dissemination on social media. Second, all blogs were posted on Luo's Weibo account, facilitating rapid dissemination and widespread attention. Weibo also reaches diverse and extensive social communities. Finally, all blogs were posted at key points in the case's process and effectively promoted progress, ultimately achieving a satisfactory result.

This discourse practice can be further analysed using Cammaerts' mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012). From the perspective of discursive opportunity structure, Luo gradually constructed and disseminated a narrative of anti-sexual harassment and self-empowerment by sharing her own experiences, those of others, and a large amount of case-related details. This successfully shaped her image as a counterattacker, thereby attracting public attention and support, which smoothly promoted case progress. Regarding the media opportunity structure, Luo's primary strategy in this case was self-mediation (Cammaerts, 2012). Although she also forwarded relevant media reports, she interacted more with the official investigation team of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. In Luo's case, social media provided instant interaction and wide dissemination opportunities, allowing her to quickly share information and mobilise supporters (Cammaerts, 2012). Finally, regarding the networked opportunity structure, Luo's gathering of other survivors with similar experiences through the WeChat group "Hard Candy" can be seen as a small-scale network mobilisation, which undoubtedly played a positive role in advancing the case (Cammaerts, 2012). Through this mobilisation, Luo successfully collected enough evidence to accuse Chen Xiaowu and defend their rights.

In short, the dynamics in this discourse practice can be considered an incomplete presentation of the mediation opportunity structure. It is aligned with the characteristics proposed by the mediation opportunity framework (Cammaerts, 2012). However, it differs from the practices commonly presented in Western social movements, as the activist focused more on her case than on initiating specific collective actions offline or online, and her call was more of a mild suggestion rather than an explicit call for specific collective actions.

Finally, regarding social practice, these three texts highlight two main issues. First, through her three blogs and the exposure of her case, Luo reveals the structural power imbalance between tutors and students in higher educational institutions. Second, through the construction of female narratives, Luo deconstructs the existing "victim" discourse and emphasizes the importance of women's self-empowerment. By urging women to think beyond the victim's mindset to defend their rights, the traditional stereotype of "silent and passive female victims" is challenged, and a new narrative of empowered women emerges.

5.2.2. The Case of Huahua in NGOs

According to the #MeToo in China Archives, Huahua posted three original texts on social media during the entire process of her case (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). The first one is a blog accusing Lei Chuang of sexual assault, which was posted on the "Moments" of WeChat on 23rd July. This blog was then forwarded to Weibo, attracting widespread attention and discussion. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the exposure of this case contributed to expanding the #MeToo China movement from higher educational institutions to various fields of society. The second text is a brief statement refuting Lei

Chuang's public statement, in which he denied the accusation of sexual assault and described his relationship with Huahua as romantic. The third text is Huahua's diary, which records her personal feelings from the first day of the case's exposure to the 100th day. Considering the length of the texts and the amount of information, this study mainly focuses on analysing Huahua's first blog and her diary.

The first blog did not have a title because Huahua's initial motivation was simply to share her experience in “Moments” as a response to the #MeToo wave unfolding in higher education at the time. From the perspective of expression, this blog adopts a reminiscence narrative style, lacking a highly organised structure and appearing more private and informal. The narrative tone of the entire blog is calm, in contrast to Luo Xixi's blog, which is direct, aggressive, and inflammatory. Moreover, Huahua's blog contains many self-blaming narratives. For example, when Huahua remembered the experience that she was sexually assaulted, she wrote:

“..在当时的在我看来，我自己要为这件事负责。雷闯是个好人，那肯定是我的问题，是因为我是个不好的女孩子，这种事情才会发生到我身上。”

(In my opinion at that time, I should be responsible for this experience. Lei Chuang is a good person. Thus, it must be my problem. It is because I am a bad girl that this kind of thing happened to me.)

Also, when Huahua re-examined the incident that happened three years ago, she wrote:

“...哪怕这件事情已经过去三年，我依旧认为，我有错。”

(Even if this incident has passed three years, I still believe that it was my fault).

It is common for survivors who suffered from disasters, especially sexual violence, to blame themselves for guilt. According to Zhang, there is a cognitive tendency in psychology called “just-world belief”, which refers to people's

willingness to believe that the world is fair, and that good begets good, and evil leads to evil (Zhang, 2018). Thus, survivors of sexual violence may wonder whether they are not good enough, thus suffering from the terrible experience, which leads to self-blaming (Zhang, 2018).

However, beyond the “just-world belief”, there are more specific reasons for the existence of “self-blaming”, which is rooted in the particular context (Zhang, 2018). From the perspective of social practice, the view of “self-blaming” is constructed by a society with a misogyny culture and history, from which women are often regarded as sexual resources, thus being repeatedly reminded of the “sexual morality”, which causes the idea of “slut-shaming” and “self-blaming”. If the “slut-shaming” reflects men's misogyny, then the “self-blaming” is from women's self-abhorrence (Ueno, 2018). As a discourse from both the constructed cultural, the historical society and the real world, misogyny constructs men's cognition of women and women's cognition of self (Ueno, 2018). The “self” that lives under this cognition will also reproduce it, thus further strengthening and consolidating this discourse in the socio-cultural and historical context (Foucault, 1971; Fraser, 2020). Thus, through continuous reproduction, the discourse of misogyny eventually becomes part of an indestructible cultural narrative system, a structural existence (Foucault, 2002; Ueno, 2018).

In addition, this blog has noteworthy aspects regarding the practice of discourse. As mentioned earlier in this section, after Huahua's blog was transferred to Weibo, it immediately garnered widespread concern and discussion. Although the content includes self-blaming descriptions and personal feelings, this narrative can also evoke empathy, as people expressed support and sympathy for Huahua. Thus, this blog did achieve Huahua's original goal: to expose Lei Chuang's sexual misconduct and to help prevent future victims. In contrast to the positive and powerful discourse with female subject consciousness from

Luo Xixi, Huahua's blog presents a narrative of spontaneous support and mutual help among women.

This narrative is also presented in Huahua's diary. The title of her diary is “幸存者日记:与伤痕一起共生的一百天”, literally translated as “Survivor's Diary: Living with Scars in One Hundred Days”. Although it was a symbiosis with "scars", in the diary, Huahua also recorded many companionships from friends and family. For example, her friend accompanied her back to the hotel where she was sexually assaulted to search for self-healing. Also, Huahua's mother has always been supporting her during and after the case. These texts all present a straightforward narrative that comes from the mutual support between women.

Additionally, there are two specific points in her diary worth noting. The first one is a sentence she wrote when describing sexual assault survivors:

“...metoo 可能是我的 ICU, 我幸运活下来了, 但是这个生存质量到底怎么样呢?”
(The #MeToo might be my ICU, I was lucky to survive, but how is the quality of life after that?)

This sentence reminds people that the #MeToo movement may have insufficient care for specific people.

The second one is a paragraph written by Huahua after she was chatting with Xianzi:

“...站出来的人想要表达的绝对不仅仅是控诉, 我们在讲述这段经历的时候, 是在重新找回尊严和价值感。我个人很难忘的一个时刻, 是接受采访那天, 很多女性围坐在一起的那个时刻。我很感激我收获了这样的宝贵的关注和凝视。”

(People who stand up want to express more than an accusation. When we talk about our experience, we are regaining our dignity and sense of value. A personally unforgettable moment for me is the moment when many women sat together on the

day of the interview. I am grateful for such precious attention and gaze that I have got.)

Two things can be learned from this narrative. First, for some #MeToo China participants, sharing their experiences may be more meaningful than formally lodging a complaint. Second, the significance of their voices lies in being heard and seen, not just in the outcome of their case.

Huahua's diary was shared on Weibo 100 days after she publicly accused Lei Chuang. Since the diary text was deleted soon after, it did not receive as much forwarding and attention as the first blog (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). From this, it can be seen that both the text and the discourse practice are more inclined toward self-expression rather than public appeals and rallies. Regarding social practice, the text presents a constructive discourse emphasizing the significance of sharing experiences and providing emotional support among women.

5.2.3 The case of Xianzi in media industries—the peak of #MeToo China

In 2018, Xianzi wrote a long blog and a series of short weibos following the exposure of her case. As introduced in Section 5.1.1, many of these posts were deleted shortly after being posted. Additionally, since opening her Weibo account in 2018, Xianzi's account has been repeatedly blocked and censored. The #MeToo China archive has attempted to preserve most of the long texts, but records of the short weibos still need to be completed. Thus, considering the length of the text, the completeness of the information, and its consistency with the texts of the first two cases, the following analysis focuses on the first long blog posted by Xianzi, which is also the most widely disseminated and influential text in her case.

From the perspective of text analysis, several places in this blog generate

intertextuality with other texts. First, at the beginning of the blog, Xianzi quoted a sentence from the book 《房思琪的初恋乐园》 (Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise): “人类历史上最大规模的屠杀，是房思琪式的强暴”，which literally translates to “the largest massacre in human history is being raped like Fang Si-Chi” (Lin, 2017).

The novel Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise tells a tragic story: Fang Si-Chi, a middle school girl, was sexually assaulted by her teacher, Li Guohua, and fell into a toxic relationship, and eventually caused her to develop a mental disorder, while the teacher committed this crime was not punished (Lin, 2017). Xianzi quoted this sentence to start her discussion on #MeToo China. She then said:

“...今晚看到很很多女生站出来陈述自己的遭遇，我觉得确实应该做个记录，告诉大家，虽然很多人因为幸运，并不曾遇到，但我们是生活在这样一个世界的。”

(...Tonight, I saw many girls standing up to talk about their experiences. I think it is necessary to make a record to tell everyone that we do live in such a world, although many people have never encountered such a thing because of luck.)

What she expressed is that many women have experienced various forms of sexual violence. However, they often not only fail to receive help and support due to the unequal power relationship with the offender but also have to endure oppression from the outside world, just like what the Fang Si-Chi in the novel encountered. The extent of the negative impact of such experiences is as severe as experiencing the massacre. Here, Xianzi's text creates intertextuality with this quote from the novel.

Subsequently, when sharing her experience of reporting after being sexually harassed, Xianzi quoted two sentences that policemen said to her in 2014 when she asked for help from them. The first one is:

“朱军对这个社会有很大正能量。” (Zhu Jun has much positive energy for this society)

The second one is:

"你是一个女孩子，这件事被别人知道、被媒体利用，最后会伤害到你。" (You are a girl. If this case is known by others or used by the media, it will eventually hurt you)

These quotes create intertextuality within the text and reflect a consideration of the text's objectivity. Additionally, the intertextuality adds new meaning to the quoted sentences. Viewed in isolation, these two sentences may not have distinctive features. However, placed in the context of Xianzi's story, their logical and emotional irrationality becomes apparent. As a survivor of sexual harassment, it is legitimate for Xianzi to call the police and take legal action. However, the police did not help her defend her rights; instead, they persuaded her to remain silent, citing concerns about her reputation. The consideration of women's reputation appears to be a form of protection. However, it is actually a form of suppression. By silencing the survivor to maintain social order, what is truly being preserved is the stability of a gender order in which women's legitimate rights and demands are consistently ignored.

There are two narratives in Xianzi's blog that are worth discussing from the way of expression. First, when discussing that she lowered the criteria for men because of the sexual harassment experience, Xianzi wrote:

“我才后知后觉自己不应将女性摆在这么低的位置上---没必要因为没受到伤害就感激涕零，我们身体的主人只有自己，不可侵犯。”

(I realised later that I should not put women in such a low position---there is no need to be grateful for not being hurt. The only master of our body is ourselves, which is inviolable.)

Xianzi expressed disagreement with the conventional social narrative that society applies different standards to men and women, with women more frequently subjected to judgment. This narrative is rooted in the patriarchal discourse of traditional Chinese culture, in which men—whether as fathers,

husbands, or sons—become the “rules” that women must obey and follow (Meng and Dai, 1989a).

Second, when summing up her own experience and the reason for participating in #MeToo China, Xianzi wrote:

“虽然‘没做错’这件事并不高尚，但我觉得想对每个曾经受到伤害的人说，我们没做错。” (Although the matter of 'we did nothing wrong' is not noble, I think it is still necessary to tell everyone who has been hurt that we did not do anything wrong.)

By repeatedly emphasising “we did not do anything wrong”, Xianzi challenges narratives of “victim-blaming” or “self-blaming”, which is also mentioned in the analysis of Huahua's text above. By denying them, Xianzi challenged the stereotype and discrimination towards people who suffered from sexual violence and people who bravely spoke out their stories.

Regarding the discourse practice, Xianzi's blog was originally posted in WeChat “Moments”, and then Maishao forwarded the screenshot to Weibo, where it quickly spread and attracted widespread attention and discussion. The terms “Xianzi” and “Zhu Jun” reached the top of the trending list that day (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Subsequently, the censorship mechanism was activated, and the text and discussions about Xianzi's case were deleted and blocked. In response, Xianzi opened a Weibo account to communicate directly with the public (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). As introduced in Section 5.1.1, she has continued to update the progress of her case, speak out on gender-related social issues, and provide help to sexual violence survivors for their cases (BBC, 2020b).

The censorship of Xianzi and Maishao's Weibo posts reflects the “friction” mechanism mentioned by Roberts in her research (Roberts, 2018). The purpose of censoring posts is to prevent this topic from being more widely

disseminated and discussed. Xianzi experienced multiple instances of censorship, as her efforts to speak out on Weibo and assist sexual violence survivors might be seen by authorities as a form of mobilisation (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). During the two trials of Xianzi's case, many people gathered outside the court to support her, and Xianzi's Weibo posts were also frequently blocked and censored during this period.

Additionally, the process described above can be interpreted through the perspectives of digital media and self-organising connective actions mentioned by Bennett and Segerberg (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Xianzi directly updated the public on her case's progress through her Weibo account, reducing communication and dissemination costs since mainstream media reported less on her case after her posts were repeatedly censored. Xianzi's social media activities built a supportive social network, where people spontaneously organised actions, such as gathering outside the court to support her, without the need for traditional organisational structures (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Regarding social practice, three points can be raised here. First, this blog reveals the systematic patriarchal oppression of women's rights in the Chinese social and cultural context. Moreover, Xianzi criticised the existing "victim-blaming" or "self-blaming" narrative and further challenged the misogynistic discourse underlying such narratives (Spivak, 1988). Finally, while Xianzi's activities did not result in large-scale collective actions due to censorship, the dynamics presented in this process reflect the characteristics of digital activism in the non-Western and highly censored Chinese Internet context, similar to the case of Luo Xixi.

Summary

This chapter starts with an overview of the general situation of three core cases. Subsequently, the overall communication trend has been described and discussed. The communication trends of various media platforms show various characteristics. The peak of the communication trend line of Luo's case is consistent with the key nodes of the case's development process, while Xianzi's case does not show the same flow on the media communication trend because of censorship. In addition, the social media communication trends of Huahua and Xianzi's cases both show a communication flow from WeChat to Weibo, which illustrates how social media shapes contentious publicity through materiality, space, and temporality (Kavada and Poell, 2021).

The results of critical discourse analysis present some distinctive points. First, the process of Luo Xixi's case and the practice of Xianzi reflect the features of digital media activism that are different from traditional social activism. In the process of Luo's case, the discourse opportunity structure, networked opportunity structure and media opportunity structure were interconnected and interacted with each other, jointly advancing the progress of her case (Cammaerts, 2012). In Xianzi's case, her practice embodied the features of digital media and self-organising connective actions (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Although the cases of Luo Xixi and Xianzi did not develop into formal protest activities, they promoted the emergence, dissemination and discussion of more #MeToo China cases, thereby promoting the overall development of the #MeToo China movement.

Furthermore, the texts of the three core cases revealed the inequality power relationship in gender violence, challenged the existing misogynistic discourse that oppresses women in various ways, and called for the reconstruction of female discourse, emphasising self-empowerment and supportive relationships

among women (Ueno, 2018).

The texts of the three core cases all highlighted the structural unequal power relationship in gender violence, which prevents survivors from successfully defending their rights. Both Luo and Xianzi deconstructed the stereotyped victim image and called for women's self-awakening and self-empowerment. Huahua's narrative presents the "self-blaming" and "slut-shaming" narratives. The production and reproduction of this systematic misogynistic discourse are inseparable from the construction of historical and cultural systems (Meng and Dai, 1989; Ueno, 2018). She highlights a re-construction of a supportive and empowering discourse of women. By telling her story, Xianzi challenged the "self-blaming" and "victim-shaming" narratives and pointed out the issue that women are the subaltern, and their voices and demands can be ignored under the existing gender order (Spivak, 1988). The alliance based on the deconstruction of the existing discourse, self-empowerment and re-construction of female discourse may promote the improvement of women's conditions.

Finally, after the analysis and discussion of core samples using CDA, some themes appeared repeatedly in the analysis, highlighting the necessity of further examination of these themes. Thus, the researchers chose reflexive thematic analysis to further explore these frequently appearing themes. The following chapter presents the specific finding details.

Chapter 6: Phase 1 - Thematic Insights from the Three Core #MeToo China Cases

Introduction

Following the results of the critical discourse analysis, this study proceeded with a reflexive thematic analysis to further explore the recurring themes in Phase 1. As explained in Chapter 4, all samples were gathered from the #MeToo in China Archives using the purposive sampling method. This archive was compiled by a team of Chinese volunteers to preserve as many Internet text records as possible about #MeToo China, in light of the massive Internet censorship faced by this online feminist movement in 2018 (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). It collected and organised all 52 cases of #MeToo China in 2018, including blogs of survivors, their supporters, and related reports.

In this phase, the study focuses on the narratives created by the core participants in three selected cases. Thus, when screening the text samples from the #MeToo China Archive, the study prioritised texts directly produced by participants or first-person narrative records as first-hand materials, rather than third-person reports. Ultimately, a total of twenty-one samples were collected. These include blogs and a diary from three key participants and blogs from other relevant participants, as well as two text records presented from the first-person perspective of the key participant in the third case.

These samples were analysed using the “Six-Step Approach” guideline recommended by Braun and Clarke, as detailed in Chapter 4 (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). NVivo was used as the analysis tool for theme coding.

This study identified the following core themes:

1. Victims;
2. Blame;
3. Voices.

Details regarding these core themes and their associated sub-themes are compiled in a codebook, which is included at the end of this thesis. For further details, please refer to “Appendix 1: Thematic Analysis Codebook of Materials (Articles, Blogs, and Weibos) from Three Core Cases of #MeToo China in 2018”. The following section will be a detailed analysis and discussion of these core themes.

6.1 Theme 1 - “Victims”

When people talk about the “victim”, the concept always automatically points to an identical image that is “hurt” or “suffered”, whether in the Western or non-Western context (Lazard, 2020; Itō, 2021). This phenomenon involves two issues. First, how do people view images of the “victim”, as well as depicting and constructing them in news reports? Second, how do victims view themselves as “victims”, and whether they accept or oppose this kind of “victimhood” (Lazard, 2020)? From the analysed samples, activists mainly present ideas and arguments regarding the theme “victim” from the perspective of victims. They started by identifying and acknowledging their own victimhood. From there, activists attempted to deconstruct previous images and narratives by challenging stereotypes.

6.1.1 Being a “victim”

“Being a victim” is the first recurring theme in the text of the three activists. They presented their awareness of their 'victim' identity and views on the impact of

this identity on themselves and others.

“I used to be one of those silent victims” “Many years later, I regretted that I chose not to stand up because I wanted to get my degree; otherwise, there would not be so many other victims” (Luo, 2018).

“This summer, in July 2018, I learned that there were other victims who were interns/volunteers from Lei Chuang's organization, although they were reluctant to disclose details to the public for various reasons. However, I knew that there would be more victims in the future if I did not do something, which was things I could not tolerate at all” (Huahua,2018).

“People know too little about the real lives of survivors. Stories of sexual assault are certainly more than just sexual assault. However, if there is no healing, in the end, sexual assault can be the undercurrent of the entire life of someone. Suddenly, there will be fewer choices for this person, and she becomes someone who cannot hold anything in her hands” (Huahua,2018).

“At first, I felt that photo was disrespectful, and I subconsciously thought he (the photographer) was wrong to photograph me as a ‘victim’. At that time, I thought that if this was a female photographer taking the picture, she might not have photographed me like that, and she might have made me extra powerful. Then, after the photographers left, I realized that I was indeed a victim. Why did I keep trying to deny it? In this case, I was the helpless one. The power difference between (Zhu Jun) and me was huge. In this case, it is not about whether your body is controlled but about the fact that you are not recognized as an individual. You feel that you are not equal to him as an individual who exists socially” (Xianzi, 2018).

As shown above, it is clear from the descriptions of the three activists that they all have an accurate self-perception of the identity of the “victims”, although their attitudes vary.

For Luo, accepting herself as a “victim” was natural, while Huahua had to take more time to accept this identity. For Huahua, admitting that she had been sexually assaulted was very difficult, and she even tried to rationalize this issue, which was common among victims (Huahua, 2018). According to Lazard, the victim image was often associated with feelings of helplessness and passivity

(Lazard, 2020). For some survivors, admitting to being a victim is tantamount to placing oneself in a context of disempowerment (Lazard, 2020). In addition to violating the victim's integrity and dignity, the unequal power relations between the perpetrator and the victim can also place the victim in a voiceless position.

As a person working in media industries, Xianzi, unlike Luo and Huahua, clearly understood what it meant to be a victim, while she explicitly refused the gaze from media brought by this identity. She was more concerned with the image of herself constructed by the media and its impact on public perception than with accepting or not accepting the fact that she was a victim. In her subsequent descriptions, Xianzi acknowledged her victimhood and further identified the negative meanings attached to it: inequality and lack of recognition.

It is worth highlighting that while attitudes towards “being a victim” are different, all three activists emphasised the relevance of victims to their voices. In particular, Luo and Huahua, who had no intention of speaking publicly at first, were determined to expose perpetrators of sexual violence due to the constant emergence of new victims. Specifically, the will to stop the perpetrators from continuing their crimes and the willingness to protect other girls from suffering the same pain, made them choose not to remain silent but to speak out. Compared to the clear demands and political positions of activists in the #MeToo campaign in Western societies, Chinese activists are neither familiar with the context of social movements nor in a society where political demands can be discussed. The original reason that they chose to speak out is the simple sense of women helping each other, which made these voices distinctive.

6.1.2 Deconstruct the “victim”

Following the self-awareness of “victims”, activists started to challenge and deconstruct this concept and the image built from it.

“At first, Huahua avoided talking about Lei Chuang to journalists: ‘We did not need to hear how Lei Chuang reached this point. ‘ Now she talks about Lei Chuang because she tries to break some stereotypes. Huahua is worried that she will be misinterpreted as a lamb and Lei as a lion” (Xiao, 2018).

“In the past, I might (could) say that the case had no result, but I did not regret it because I lived well. However, now I can say that it is fine to admit that Zhu Jun has actually hurt me, and I can also acknowledge that I am a weak and helpless person compared to him. It is because I have admitted this issue that I can tell myself not to give up” (Xianzi, 2018).

“...Girls who come forward one after the other are collectively exonerating the victim group, which is much more powerful than someone saying ‘it’s not your fault” (Huahua, 2018).

“You are great. I’m so glad that you have persisted in hiking for more than 20 days to reach the destination. You deserve the most precious love and the warmest sex in the world. I like you” (Huahua, 2018).

“...I looked overweight in the photo. My hair was messy, but my face, my legs, and belly were all full of vitality. I took the photo after I exposed Lei Chuang. I was definitely not the girl who was sexually assaulted, but a girl who was running free.....Finally, I was actually a little unsatisfied for what I said to my 20-year-old self. I want to say thank you, and I do not blame you at all” (Huahua, 2018).

“It’s okay. While it is not a noble thing to say, ‘we did not do anything wrong’, I still want to say to everyone who has been hurt that we did not do anything wrong” (Xianzi, 2018).

From the narratives above, it is clear that activists tried to challenge the stereotype and to deconstruct the original negative conception of “victim” consciously. As Huahua said, the image of relations between the perpetrator and the victim is often compared with the relations between the beast and the

lamb in media. The construction of this image is unhelpful against sexual violence but will send a wrong message that this type of case is accidental and not common. However, cases of sexual violence are so common that they have sparked the #MeToo movement around the world.

Furthermore, this construction of the powerful perpetrator and the weak and silent victim also reinforces the associated stereotypes. It is not only men who are vicious, or psychologically distorted, or who have had an unhappy childhood and therefore want to take revenge on society, that will commit sexual violence. Any man can become an offender, whether he is a celebrity or an ordinary person, a stranger, or a friend of the victim. Also, the victim is not just a silent and vague symbol. Behind the widespread cases of sexual harassment and assault are unequal power relations, which are nurtured by the society with systemic and structural sexism. To emphasize the particularity of the images of perpetrators and victims is to avoid the real crux of the problem, which is the pervasive narrative of discrimination and bullying of women.

It is for this reason that the first step in changing this situation is to break the “victim” stereotype and deconstruct the victim narrative. As Huahua and Xianzi expressed in their subsequent content, suffering such injuries does not mean that the survivors are unable to continue their lives. On the contrary, it is important for survivors to see and recognize their resistance and persistence in the fighting process, which has been unequal from the beginning. Rather than accepting “the fate as the ‘others’”, it is necessary to defend one's own will and values (Xiao, 2018).

From “being a victim” to “deconstruct the victim”, activists actually regained the dominance of building their image of victim. To acknowledge victimhood is to address women's suffering rather than minimising it. Deconstructing the image of victim is to regain the right to speak and construct a narrative from a female-

based perspective.

6.2 Theme 2 - “Blame”

6.2.1 Self-blaming

There are many descriptions regarding blaming presented by activists, including self-blaming and blaming others in their daily lives. The followings are descriptions of “self-blaming”.

“At that time, I thought it was all the result of my choice that I hiked alone with Lei Chuan, and I should be responsible for this issue. Lei Chuang is a good person. Thus, it must be my problem. It is because I am a bad girl that this kind of thing happened to me.....Even if this incident has passed three years, I still believe that it was my fault” (Huahua, 2018).

“I dreamt that Lei Chuang scolded me on Weibo and that he told me to apologise to his children. I woke up quietly and found my pillow soaked with tears” (Huahua, 2018).

“I kept thinking about this thing afterward. Did I have any responsibility for it? Should I have said ‘no’ to him from the beginning? Should I have told him that I did not feel well and would leave? However, I did not do anything at that time because I am afraid of him” (Xianzi, 2018).

“They just felt that on the occasions when Zhu Jun was there, I acted like I was a weak and pretty little girl, and that was why Zhu Jun did this thing (sexual harassment) on me. Literally, some girls thought it was my fault, and I believed it as well in a period” (Xianzi, 2018).

As discussed in Chapter 5, self-blaming stems from a male-dominated misogynistic narrative and women's misogyny (Ueno, 2018). The former is the social discipline for women, while the latter is the self-discipline internalised from the former's discipline. It can be seen from the descriptions of activists that it is hard to escape this context completely, although they are feminist enough

to resist narratives of “victims” actively. It is also worth mentioning that when Huahua talks about her dreams, she is describing a common misogynistic narrative in the East Asian context: blaming women for the destruction of other's families (Ueno, 2018). Some people may argue that this narrative is worldwide and belongs to a part of the overall patriarchal power relations, but the East Asian region of the background is clearly strengthened, as East Asian women may suffer from being cast aside and scolded by the whole society if they are suspected of destroying other people's families (Yi, 2013., Wei, 2021).

In east Asia, or specifically in China, the concept of “family” is fundamental. The so-called family refers to the patriarchal governance order established by the state machine at the grassroots level and the successive power structure between father and son (Meng and Dai, 1989). This order contains absolute control of a man over his wives and children. When women are accused of destroying other people's families, the accusation does not mean that women break any relationship but offend the governance order established by men as the supreme rulers (Meng and Dai, 1989). Therefore, in the context of sexual harassment cases, women as victims will be blamed for affecting the stability of the perpetrator's family.

Moreover, as long as men hide in the shelter of the “family”, they can escape blame. In an unspoken cultural narrative, men who have a family are already successful ones who own private property, including wives and children. So, how can be possible for a successful man to plunder women who are treated as sex resources? Therefore, this contradiction is transferred to the blame on female victims.

6.2.2 Victim-blaming

Following the discussion above, the texts below have shown the “victim-blaming” from others and how this narrative relates to the “self-blaming” of activists.

“It is clear that the perpetrator of the harassment did something wrong, but why should the harassed person be subjected to moral judgment!” (Luo, 2018)

“Many people will probably take a magnifying glass to see how many points Huahua could get in this sexual assault process and whether she behaved like a ‘perfect victim’. When reading that ‘she froze up’, these people might be unsatisfying and raise ‘constructive’ feedback. For example, why didn’t she use the lamp to hit his head? Why didn’t she scream for help? Why didn’t she headbutt him? How can a man understand the human language ‘NO’?” (Xiao, 2018)

“Some friends whom both knew Huahua and Leichuang said, ‘You were able to make this work only because Lei Chuan had the conscience. If he did not admit it, you are nothing.’ Some of the friends were distressed by Huahua’s case: ‘That’s enough. Have you got the justice you wanted? Lei Chuang has nothing now’” (Xiao, 2018).

“I was told to consider that Zhu Jun, as the host of the Spring Festival Gala, and CCTV as the official media of the government, had a huge ‘positive influence’ on society. I should not break the public impression of them. I was also told that ‘they’ had sent colleagues to Wuhan to inform my parents, both of whom worked in the government, of this issue. If I cared about my parents’ feelings, I should not expose this case further” (Xianzi, 2018).

It is evident that this “victim-blaming” narrative is constructed and completed by the collective narrative of a group of people and the entire society. The presupposed position is to rationalize the perpetrator’s behaviour. Thus, Lei Chuang was rewarded for admitting the facts of his crime, but Huahua, as a victim, was criticised because her resistance is not “good enough”. The victim is presented as the subaltern in this conversation.

6.3 Theme 3 - “Voices”

“Voices” is the most frequently repeating topic in the articles of the three core cases. Although activists have suffered much criticism and abuse in the process of exposing the case and contributing to the #MeToo China progress, speaking out the “voice” is still the core demand for activists, their supporters, as well as many #MeToo China participants. According to the analysis result, there are two specific aspects regarding “voices”.

6.3.1 To be heard and to present

The first aspect is voices to be heard and present, according to the narratives of activists shown below.

“Then it occurs to me that, actually, I just want to prove that I am a human being and I have the right to speak. I am not just a name on the dossier. It's not what the voice is but the fact that I can speak out matters. If you don't have your voice, you don't exist” (Xianzi, 2018).

“If possible, make your voice heard in whatever way you can. If the voice cannot be heard in the public sphere, at least you have to let the person who hurt you hear your voice” (Xianzi, 2018).

“I always feel that the 'existence' of people depends on how they own feelings and that feelings come from the connection between people and things around them. However, when I grow up, I feel this connection is cut away, and we have to confine ourselves to small circles.....After 26th July, with the long blog which told my story about being sexually harassed by Zhu Jun, the most significant change that came to me was that everyone suddenly heard my voice. I was connected to this society in a way that I had not got used to it” (Xianzi, 2018).

As Xianzi mentioned above, when advancing her case through the judicial process in 2014, what she felt most deeply was that she was forced to remain silent, and her existence was deliberately ignored. Therefore, after exposing her case to the public in 2018, Xianzi repeatedly emphasized the necessity of

“letting your voice be heard” in a series of articles she wrote.

Xianzi argues that only the voice heard matters. She believes that speaking her voice is the way to connect with the world. Only when the voice is heard can the personal isolation from the world be broken, and a real connection can be established. In addition, voices can prevent people from being dehumanised. By telling their own stories, speakers rebuild themselves from a “name on the file” and an ambiguous symbol back to an individual in the social level.

“I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that the media and individuals who have communication resources will continue to convey powerful voices and images of people who spoke out. I believe that 'powerful people' are the glory of this society and that we can share this glory and move forward together with these people” (Huahua, 2018).

“MeToo, at least, would give people a real sense of the ‘patriarchal society’, in which sexual harassment and sexual assault happened too frequently and intensively, almost everywhere. It has to be shaken, to be changed, and to be destroyed” (Huahua, 2018).

“Although I don't know what is 'useful', I believe it is meaningful that every girl speaks out about the sexual violence she has suffered, telling everyone how common this violence is, to make society aware of this issue” (Xianzi, 2018).

Further than being heard, voices in this campaign are also expected to present. Here, “to present” refers explicitly to show things that have not been presented in the public domain, but that have existed for a long time, such as the widespread sexual violence and the suffering caused to survivors by this violence. In this context, “voices to present” refers to a narrative expressed through voices. Although it sounds absurd that “sexual violence can bring pain to people” still needs to be presented, it makes the issue no longer invisible but has been squared up. Meng and Dai describe the impact of this female narrative as “rising to the surface of history” (Meng and Dai, 1989).

6.3.2 To support and self-empowered

The second aspect of “voices” is to support other women and achieve self-empowerment, which rather than the meaning emerging from activists' texts, is better considered as the clear demands that activists would like to raise from their texts. The details are shown below.

“Self-awakened women are more powerful!” (Luo, 2018)

“I hope that my article will help more people to write their own stories. I hope that when you share your experiences, you will feel support and help from other people. I look forward to the #Metoo campaign in NGOs to promote the foundation of anti-sexual harassment regulations” (Huahua, 2018).

“Why would I write this article? To be honest, I just wanted to support my sibling, who also shared her experience on WeChat. I thought it would be lonely if only her article was seen, but what I wrote can be a response to her” (Xianzi, 2018).

“Today, I still believe that people who stand up want to express more than just accusations. When sharing our experience, we are trying to rebuild our dignity and sense of value” (Huahua, 2018).

“I would like to say to all my friends who have similar experiences that we need to hang in there. In this process, we will meet some soft and kind people. We must remember them and use the strength they bring to us to resist the devouring darkness. To ‘dispel the darkness with warmth’, this is the way the world runs, and each of us must empower ourselves to send out our flame” (Xianzi, 2018).

“...Every individual is alive. The ‘masses’ are not a lifeless word, and they deserve to be protected... When you make your voice heard, you are no longer just a victim, you make yourself empowered” (Xianzi, 2018).

Regarding voices to support women, it is consistent with the demands of the #MeToo movement in the West. Similar to Milano (2017), who wrote a tweet calling for everyone to share their experiences at the beginning of #MeToo USA in 2017, activists in #MeToo China shared their stories on social media

platforms in 2018. They not only tried to show the public how magnitude of the sexual harassment issue but also to show solidarity with survivors who have similar experiences, no matter whether they spoke out or remained silent. When people said, “Me too”, what they were really saying was, “We are all the same, so you are not alone, and we will stand together”. Such a common discourse connects survivors.

From the “voices to self-empowered”, the particularity of Chinese women’s narratives is presented. Before the establishment of the new Chinese government in 1949, feminist narratives were covered by nationalist revolutions, while after 1949, gender equality progress was made in the name of the central government. As mentioned in Chapter 2, narratives of Chinese women have been affected by the dual narratives of nationalism and collectivism for a long time.

Therefore, the voice of #MeToo China, which Chinese women spontaneously promoted, was given this particularity. It is not only an expression to others but also speakers themselves. Although in the preceding discussion, the voices that can be heard are considered meaningful, the act of speaking out has significance in itself for activists and participants in #MeToo China. It is self-empowering to connect with the world by having voices heard. However, stopping being silent and speaking out is also a way of self-empowerment for defending the right to speak. Compared with Western feminists, Chinese feminists, who live under the Chinese patriarchal system, have to take more time to explore their own narratives.

Summary

This chapter explores the core themes and associated narratives drawn from

samples of three representative cases from #MeToo China 2018. It further discusses the underlying issues within these narratives. Two primary insights can be summarised from this examination.

Firstly, the narratives provided by activists, particularly when broaching the themes of “victim” and “blame”, illustrate their transformation from being passive victims to proactive activists who challenge victim narratives. This progression uncovers the power dynamics underpinning these narratives, which seem to justify the actions of the perpetrators by placing undue blame on the victims. Such dynamics not only fortify the dominant discourse but also perpetuate the underlying power hierarchies. Within these continuously regenerated imbalances, women remain subordinated and oppressed.

Secondly, the emphasis on ensuring voices are both heard and “seen” is vital. The manner in which these voices are acknowledged is crucial. Significant disparities exist depending on whether a group's narrative is directly presented to the public, disseminated via a platform, or modified by organizations and institutions prior to public release. The way a narrative is relayed can influence public perception considerably. In a landscape filled with power imbalances, actions taken by those in dominant positions on behalf of the powerless often result in double oppression. Hence, for marginalised groups, raising their voices and ensuring their true and clear representation to the public becomes essential in gaining back control and fighting against these challenges.

In conclusion, by summarising the analytical findings of Chapters 5 and 6, it becomes evident that through the strategic use of specific symbols and shared thematic narratives, Chinese women utilised social media platforms to spearhead the online #MeToo movement in China. Throughout this movement, they crafted a narrative that not only deconstructed dominant narratives of sexual harassment but also challenged the deep-rooted power relations

supporting such narratives. Voicing their experiences emerged as both a tool for self-empowerment and a direct challenge to existing power disparities. These dual roles symbiotically shaped the primary narrative of Chinese women's experiences during #MeToo China in 2018.

Chapter 7: Phase 2 - Reflecting on #MeToo China: Thematic Insights from Interviews Three Years On

Introduction

Following the above Phase 1 research around three core cases in #MeToo China 2018, This chapter presents the analysis results of samples obtained from the semi-structured interviews in Phase 2. Specifically, this chapter continues to use the reflexive thematic analysis method to analyse interview samples and discuss the themes that emerged from them.

In Phase 2 research, data collection was conducted using one-on-one online semi-structured interviews. Twelve samples have been collected. These semi-structured interviews set up four core questions, based on which adjustments and additions were made according to the personal backgrounds of participants. The process of interviews was relatively smooth, and there were no interruptions or other risk situations that were previously supposed. The translation and use of interview samples follow the methods conducted in the former chapters.

This chapter begins with an overview of the semi-structured interviews conducted in Phase 2. The outcomes of these interview samples are provided in a structured format. Following this, the core themes identified and emerging from the analysis are explored in greater detail. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main insights drawn from the discussions.

7.1 An Overview of Phase 2 Research Results

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the research in Phase 2 involves 12 semi-structured

interviews. The researcher took on the role of interviewer, selecting participants from those involved in the three representative cases of #MeToo China 2018. Because of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, this study carried out interviews online and recorded audio, which were later transcribed into written transcripts. On average, each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. The data obtained from the interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to yield comprehensive insights.

The screening criteria for participants were established with three main rules. Firstly, interviewees needed to have participated in any of the three core cases, either by sharing their own experiences, supporting others who spoke out, or engaging in discussions. Secondly, participants should still be actively concerned about gender issues related to sexual harassment and assaults. Lastly, the safety and well-being of interviewees had to be ensured, so that participating in the interview would not endanger their security or freedom. It's worth noting that during the participant search and screening process, it became apparent that most participants involved in the core cases were also engaged in the broader #MeToo China movement, which added distinctiveness to the interview materials. Given these conditions, the initial plan was to interview 12 to 15 individuals, averaging around 4 to 5 per case. This study successfully reached the target of 15 interviews, though two participants withdrew due to personal concerns. Another interview took place in a noisy environment (chosen by the participant), leading to an unusable recording. Ultimately, the study obtained twelve samples.

There were three potential ethical risks in the process of recruiting interview participants. First, interviews between the researcher and participants could potentially be subject to monitoring if they involved sensitive topics that could conflict with government censorship regulations. Second, a small number of participants might be under government surveillance due to their involvement

in offline social movements. In such cases, both the researcher and the participants might face risks and mental stress. Third, even if there were no restrictions or risks to their personal safety, potential interviewees might refuse to participate for various reasons or withdraw during the interview process.

After conducting all interviews, the first and second risks were found to be low. All interviewees had personal freedom and were actively engaged on social media. Some remained involved in discussions about gender-related matters, while others shared their daily lives online. Additionally, this study took protective measures to mitigate potential risks. The researcher ensured that interview participants were not in situations where their freedom was restricted, or their daily lives monitored. Prior to conducting interviews, participants were fully informed about the entire process, the future use of the interview materials, and the potential for research publication. Interviews were only conducted after obtaining informed consent from participants. Finally, all participants remained anonymous to minimize the risk of their personal information being disclosed.

Concerning the third risk, the recruitment of interview participants experienced several challenges. Some potential participants, such as the #MeToo China archive team, did not respond, and some others were unreachable, complicating the recruitment process. Additionally, two participants withdrew from the interviews for personal reasons. They did so without any security threats. Also, one participant chose a noisy café for the interview, which made the audio recording unusable for analysis. This interviewee admitted to deliberately choosing a noisy place to disguise his voice, a decision made freely and without any external pressure or threats to his safety.

In addition, the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the recruitment of interview participants. Firstly, due to safety and health concerns posed by the pandemic, the ethics approval for this study took nearly nine

months, much longer than usual, which slowed down the study's progress. Secondly, global lockdowns and travel restrictions forced a shift from initial in-person interviews to online interviews. Lastly, internet censorship was strengthened in China during the pandemic, causing the loss of contact with potential interviewees and complicating the interview process, as mentioned above.

Despite these challenges, the researcher made every effort to conduct interviews. Once ethics approval was obtained, concentrated and intensive interviews were swiftly initiated. While online interviews did not have the advantage of building trust through face-to-face interactions, the researcher put in significant effort to establish a connection with participants and collect valuable interview samples. Moreover, despite two participants withdrawing from the interviews and one audio recording being unusable for analysis, the researcher successfully obtained 12 samples.

This study did not impose restrictions on gender, age, or professional background, as the primary focus was on exploring the narratives of #MeToo China, with the key criterion being whether someone was part of the movement. However, information about the gender, age, and professional background of the interviewees was still collected and summarised to depict a general portrait of the interview participant group. The summary revealed the following four features of the interview participants.

First, regarding the gender distribution of the interview participants, the majority are female, followed by one male and one non-binary participant. It is important to reiterate that the researcher did not intentionally select any specific gender group when recruiting interview participants. The gender distribution is based on the identity options chosen by the participants themselves. This pattern aligns with the female-centric characteristics of #MeToo China.

Secondly, the primary age range of interview participants falls between 21 to 35, with those aged 26 to 30 making up half of the total participants. There were no participants younger than 21 or older than 50. It should be noted that the ages represented are from the time of the interview, not from their initial involvement in #MeToo China. The interviews took place from October 2021 to March 2022, whereas #MeToo China started in 2018, a three-year difference. However, the age distribution still indicates that those aged 18-35 are the predominant group in the core cases of #MeToo China.

Third, the professional backgrounds of the interview participants are diverse compared to other criteria. The largest group of participants come from higher education institutions and the media industry, which together account for half of the total. Three participants work in NGOs and government departments. It's worth noting that #MeToo China began in higher education institutions, spread through NGOs, and gained national attention with cases in the media. This progression of #MeToo China matches the distribution of participants' professional backgrounds.

Finally, the information on the professional backgrounds also highlights that, despite the varied backgrounds of the participants, their professions are largely within sectors that require academic qualifications. Whether they work in higher education, government departments, media, finance, or the legal sector, these industries are typically categorised as “middle-class industries” (Zhu, 2020; Hayes, 2023). Additionally, the average educational attainment of the interviewees is at least a bachelor's degree. In summary, the primary portrait of the interview participants can be described as: people (mainly women) aged 18-35, with a good education, from the middle class.

In preparation for the interviews, this study developed a structured outline

comprising four core interview topics, each with its related specific questions. As an ethical consideration, this outline was shared with participants for confirmation prior to the interviews. The four core topics included:

1. The Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018;
2. Reflecting on #MeToo China after three years;
3. Discussions on social media;
4. Insights into the censorship system.

The comprehensive interview outline, available in both Mandarin and English and including specific questions for each of the four core topics, can be found in an appendix at the end of this thesis. For further details, please see “Appendix 3: Semi-structured Interview Outline”. The subsequent two sections present and discuss the results derived from the analysis.

7.2 Themes of Overall Perspectives

By employing Reflexive Thematic Analysis on the samples, this study identified the following core themes:

1. Significance and Limitations
2. Injustice Frame
3. Knowledge Production
4. Social Media
5. Censorship

The details regarding these core themes and their associated sub-themes are compiled in a codebook, which is included at the end of this thesis. For further information, please refer to "Appendix 2: Thematic Analysis Codebook for

Samples from 12 Online Semi-structured Interviews with #MeToo China Participants".

Due to the setting of NVivo, the core themes in the codebook are presented in alphabetical order. However, this study will address the thematic analysis results sequentially, transitioning from a broader perspective to more specific topics. Specifically, this section will discuss the theme of "Significance and Limitations", which present overview perspectives reflecting on #MeToo China. The subsequent section will explore the three core themes: "Injustice Frame", "Knowledge Production" and "Social Media". Given its distinct nature, the theme of "censorship" will be elaborated upon in Chapter 8.

7.2.1 Significance and Limitations of #MeToo China

Though they were part of the same #MeToo China movement in 2018, interview participants have diverse reflections on it. Three years on, their perspectives can be grouped into two categories: the significance and the limitations. Starting with the significance, participants expressed the following views:

"When I look back on 2019, I think the occurrence of #MeToo China was a wonderful moment. It was like a feminism pod suddenly bursting, causing its seeds to scatter everywhere, and then they sprouted everywhere" (A11).

"I think it is a process of the collapse of the utopia constructed by society. It is when you find fairy tales are fake that you start to live as a real person" (A1).

From A11's perspective, a primary impact of #MeToo China is the broadening reach and acceptance of feminist ideas. What once were topics limited to academia or the efforts of a few activists have become mainstream discussions in mainland China. This has sparked unprecedented dialogues on the subject, with both positive and negative views holding value.

The terms “utopia” and “fairy tale” that A1 used to describe the “world” she used to live in are worth noting, as they reflect the views of Meng and Dai, as mentioned in Chapter 2—a “fake equal environment” that contemporary Chinese women inhabit.

After the People's Republic of China was established, the government introduced a series of laws and policies to improve women's living conditions, enhance women's status, and promote gender equality (Wang, 2019). At first glance, it seems that gender equality has been achieved in China. However, as Meng and Dai argued, this is only “fake equality”, and more profound problems still exist (Meng and Dai, 1989, p. 30-31). Chinese women have gained equality at the cost of sacrificing their individuality, becoming a symbolised atom of a symbolic collectivity, and adhering to the dominant national and cultural narrative (Meng and Dai, 1989, p. 30-31). The status of women has only shifted from being subordinate to individual men to being part of a symbolic national collectivity that takes precedence over individual identity (Meng and Dai, 1989, p. 30-31).

In A1's context, she described living in an environment steeped in the same narrative since childhood, which is full of misogynistic and disciplined views towards women. Although she would feel “something is wrong”, there were always people telling her, “Everyone does it, so it is right”. When #MeToo China happened, she realised that what she felt was wrong, was indeed wrong. “As long as you behave the same as everyone else, you can be happy” is a fake fairy tale, and the so-called “everyone does it, so it is right” world is also a “fake utopia” built on suppressing women's personalities and depriving them of their rights and power.

Therefore, A1 highlights the significance of #MeToo China for awakening her

self-consciousness. She considers it a universal influence that not only people who actively participated in the campaign but also people who just witnessed it can benefit from the influence of #MeToo China. They all believe that the significance of #MeToo China is to provide many women with a new perspective on gender issues. For the first time, women found a sense of “subjectivity”, allowing them to feel their integrity as a subject, not just part of a mainstream male narrative.

Moreover, several participants expressed the view that #MeToo China is still an ongoing process:

“#MeToo China may be the only visible social movement in the current Chinese society, and it has continued from 2018 until now. Everyone has insisted on expressing themselves within the framework of #MeToo, which is amazing. This also gave me the confidence to adhere to feminist actions” (A10).

“Every time a new case occurs, I feel that #MeToo China is still ongoing, and everyone's resistance is included in this movement. Therefore, I do not strongly feel that the movement is over, but it is a sustainable process. While women are still suffering from sexual violence, the #MeToo movement will continue” (A6).

This sentiment echoes Burke's statement in her 2018 speech, “MeToo is a movement, not a moment” (Burke, 2018). Through this declaration, she emphasises the importance of sustained effort.

According to Tilly, social movements are historical and should be viewed as a long-term process rather than isolated events (Tilly, 2019). Social movements can gradually become an essential political force in modern society through continuous mobilisation, protest, and organisation (Tilly, 2019). Additionally, Tarrow pointed out that the sustainability of social movements comes from their ability to continuously adapt and respond to the social environment (Tarrow, 2011).

As articulated by the participants, the struggle against sexual harassment and assault is ongoing. As long as there exists an imbalance in power dynamics oppressing women, there will be people who continue to speak out, fight for, and promote the development of gender equality. This reflects the sustainability of social movements pointed out by Tilly and Tarrow. This continuous mobilisation and struggle not only make the #MeToo China movement a long-term process but also give increasing significance to issues such as feminism and gender equality in the social and cultural context of China.

Regarding the limitations of #MeToo China, participants expressed the following views:

“I think many people still do not pay attention to #MeToo because they are not the group that suffers sexual violence. Alternatively, they look at the movement from a seemingly neutral perspective full of bias because they cannot empathize with women's experiences” (A12).

“Only women's attention to this issue has increased, but men have not. They do not care about this and may even think that this movement is a symbol of extreme feminism” (A6).

“If #MeToo becomes a norm, it can only mean the social and legal system is terrible, leading #MeToo to become a way for everyone to find justice. However, #MeToo also has its destructiveness. The concept of #MeToo may also be misappropriated maliciously” (A7).

Participants highlighted two primary concerns regarding #MeToo China. Firstly, they felt its impact, while significant among women, remains limited overall. In Western contexts, #MeToo has received responses from all genders, but in China, many men seem to have overlooked it. As hooks points out, feminism is not just for women; it addresses issues affecting both men and women, as both can be oppressed under a patriarchal system and can be victims of sexual

violence and gender discrimination (Bell. Hooks, 2000). Thus, confronting patriarchy requires collaborative efforts from everyone. Deconstructing patriarchy benefits not just women, but also liberates men. In the future, Chinese feminists might need to educate not just women, but also men about the importance of gender equality, encouraging them to join the movement.

Secondly, participants expressed concerns about the potential misuse of the #MeToo China label. They worry that the movement could be co-opted for unrelated causes, detracting from its core message. Moreover, the visibility of #MeToo China has led some to question the fairness of the judiciary, as more people might choose to voice their concerns on social media, seeking public support, rather than following traditional judicial routes.

7.3 Themes of Specific Issues

Injustice Frame

Throughout the interview process, some participants mentioned gender inequities they had experienced in the past or how #MeToo made them aware of such injustice feelings, as shown below:

“I think I have an intuition that something is wrong. Whether it is between men and women or minorities, there is a kind of injustice. However, many times, I do not know how to express it. When #MeToo China emerged, I felt my feelings were expressed” (A1).

“I think in the past few years, everyone has gradually realised that many things they took for granted are actually wrong, or at least there are some problems. Some women who were originally male-oriented also realized that they could also become a victim, as they could avoid it no matter how well they behaved. If you try to be the kind of good girl that people define, you will find that you will never be able to become the one” (A3).

Participants believed that it was through #MeToo China that they first recognised many of the ideas and narratives they had taken for granted were problematic. Many beliefs and concepts they had held since childhood were incorrect. Consequently, participants became aware of gender injustice issues. Encouraged by the progress of #MeToo China, they began to resist in various ways:

“When you find a group of people resisting a specific issue, you will realise that you have suffered similar injustices, although the specific content is different. Then, you will be willing to pursue fairness and justice” (A1).

“Now, I have begun to be cautious about things that others impose on me. It is not limited to gender issues, but also includes reflections on traditional Chinese filial piety and considerations of the entire environment” (A3).

These descriptions from participants highlight an injustice frame derived from patriarchal narratives (Xu and Li, 2019). In the context of traditional Chinese culture, both the concept of “good woman” and “filial piety” are symbols of the patriarchal cultural order (Xu and Li, 2019). The so-called “obey your father at home and follow your husband when you get married” constructs an unequal power relationship in which women are always oppressed and inferior (Xu and Li, 2019). Patriarchy continuously strengthens the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed through this narrative and, consequently, realises the continuous reproduction of this injustice frame (Tang, 2013). For people who point out the existence of this injustice frame, it is not only an awakening of self-awareness but also the beginning of resistance to this narrative. By jointly recognising the existence of an injustice frame, people mobilise for collective actions and contribute to the initiation of a social movement (Gamson, 1992a).

Knowledge Production

Most participants believed that #MeToo China brought extensive knowledge production. Specifically, it can be divided into three aspects. First, some participants believe that the direct impact of #MeToo China is to popularize common sense about sexual harassment and assault issues.

“I think this movement has given many people the courage to break the silence and speak out about their experiences. It has also educated many people on what sexual assault is, what rape culture is, and why we should support victims” (A10).

“I think this movement has brought awareness to feminism. After #MeToo China, when some boys do something that offends girls, they will be noticed and told, ‘This is wrong’. Also, everyone starts re-examining their own boundaries and behavioural norms” (A12).

Based on the above description, #MeToo China not only popularises fundamental knowledge about gender issues but also offers methods to identify sexual misconduct. More broadly, it promotes the dissemination of feminist awareness.

Additionally, some interview participants believed that the survivors who spoke out in #MeToo China engaged in a unique form of "knowledge production" by sharing their personal experiences.

“To a certain extent, the narratives of these survivors who openly tell their stories provide a paradigm. After they explain the entire legal process of defending their rights, others can have a rough idea of what to do if they encounter similar things and what kind of development process there will be” (A6).

“I think what is important about #MeToo is that it makes the message about sexual violence visible and important. #MeToo has greatly enriched people's common sense about the negative and untrustworthy aspects of sexual harassment and assault. The victims' narratives actually fill in the content. It is the victims' narratives that reshape everyone's common sense. Moreover, this knowledge is produced by the victims themselves, using their own experience” (A7).

According to the participants, it's evident that #MeToo offers both a theoretical and practical framework concerning sexual violence. This framework is shaped by the personal narratives and experiences of survivors of sexual harassment and assault, a form of knowledge production borne out of pain. For a long time, people have tended to avoid talking about sexual harassment and assault because of its distressing nature. However, public sharing from survivors has disrupted this silence. By sharing their personal experiences, these survivors not only bridge the information gap on such matters but also provide a practical guide on how to address and respond to instances of sexual harassment and assault.

Finally, some participants specifically mentioned knowledge production as narrative construction.

“When #MeToo came out, you discovered that some concepts could encompass many feelings or that we are creating some concepts to express our feelings. Looking back, I have always felt that there was a lack of a way to express ourselves. Now, there is a narrative and a topic that connects everyone. I think MeToo has had a great impact” (A1).

“When certain words or concepts are mentioned repeatedly, I think everyone begins to change their understanding of many concepts in the past slowly. I think the narrative of female subjectivity is indeed slowly returning. Everyone finds that they can have more narrative to express feelings, and those feelings are valuable” (A11).

Based on the above details, by sharing their stories, #MeToo participants create a female narrative together. This narrative is different from the usual male-dominated stories and offers a new way to challenge the existing power balance.

Social Media

The researchers primarily explored the influence of social media on the #MeToo

China movement and its participants. Concerning its role, some participants felt that social media gave ordinary people a place to speak out and broadened the reach of information, thus propelling the movement forward:

“I think Weibo is mainly like an amplifier. For example, if you share something on WeChat Moments, no one else will notice except your friends. However, if you post it on Weibo, many people may repost and comment on it. Your case will then attract the public attention. So, Weibo is equivalent to an amplifier” (A12).

“If there were no social media, it would be difficult for you to speak out personally under any circumstances. Social media had developed #MeToo China to such a large scale at that time, which must have been a critical condition for this movement” (A9).

Some participants think that social media is primarily a profit-driven platform. For the #MeToo movement, it's merely a tool for expression. While social media can amplify discussions on trending topics, it can also limit them:

“Weibo is a platform for capital, and it wants to make money. The more sensitive topics you talk about, the happier it is. However, who made it (censorship) happen? If something needs to be deleted, this is not determined by Weibo, but by the will of a higher system” (A2).

“This is a social media, and its essence is to retain as much traffic and click-through rates as possible. So, whether it is promoting some public issues or expanding the discussion of hot topics, it is profit-seeking. I think social media does not represent the position of a person or something; and it is just a tool. I do not think the platform is the most responsible party when defining censorship responsibilities. They are responsible for the censorship but not the most crucial party” (A3).

“Because of the social media channel, #MeToo China has gradually developed into an online feminist movement, affecting everyone who uses social media. This movement got the start, but what happens next? Weibo may not play a role in assisting you throughout the process” (A9).

From the above discussions, it can be seen that there is a duality in the role of social media in #MeToo China, which can be interpreted through Tufekci's view on the dual impact of digital platforms on social movements (Tufekci, 2017).

Tufekci believes that social media can amplify the voices of individuals and small groups, reduce the cost of organisation, and quickly mobilise large-scale protests (Tufekci, 2017, p.3-48). As A12 noted, Weibo can amplify individual voices so that information originally circulated within a small group can attract wider public attention. Moreover, social media can facilitate communication, allowing people to gather quickly (Tufekci, 2017, p.3-48). As A9 mentioned, Weibo provides a platform for #MeToo participants to speak out, enabling women to share their stories directly in the public sphere and attract broader attention and discussion.

However, Tufekci emphasized that social media also has limitations. These platforms are owned by private companies, and their algorithm design and operational decisions often prioritize commercial interests over social responsibility (Tufekci, 2017, p.132-163). Additionally, social media are vulnerable to government surveillance and censorship (Tufekci, 2017, p.132-163).

As participants discussed, Weibo is a private company, but the state-owned Internet makes it subject to government policies. Therefore, although Weibo commercially pursues traffic and click-through rates, it remains subject to censorship regulations regarding sensitive topics. Moreover, Weibo's algorithms and operational decisions prioritize platform and commercial interests over social responsibility. As a result, it is not a platform that Chinese feminists and relevant participants can trust for sustainable, long-term use in the anti-sexual harassment and gender equality movement.

Summary

This chapter begins with an overview of Phase 2 research, detailing the semi-structured interview process. It also presents the comprehensive results derived from the interview samples. From this overview, a group portrait of the interview participants emerges, characterised as “people (mainly women) aged 18-35, with a good education, from the middle class”.

Following this, the chapter discusses the core themes derived from the analysis results, accompanied by related samples. The theme of “Significance and Limitations of #MeToo China” encapsulates three key points:

1. The impact of #MeToo China is the broadening reach and acceptance of feminist ideas and provides many women with a new perspective on gender issues to rediscover female subjectivity.
2. As long as there is an imbalance in power dynamics oppressing women, people will continue to speak out for their rights. This continuous mobilisation and struggle not only make the #MeToo China movement a long-term process but also give increasing significance to issues such as feminism and gender equality in the social and cultural context of China.
3. #MeToo China has its constraints, evident in its limited scope of influence and the impact the movement might have on standard rights protection avenues.

The discussion of specific themes emphasises three points:

1. The injustice narrative emerging from #MeToo China encourages Chinese women to join the movement.
2. The knowledge production and narrative construction undertaken by

participants continue after the movement, supporting Chinese women in reshaping their subjectivity, deconstructing entrenched narratives, and challenging dominant unequal power dynamics.

3. Social media plays a dual role in the #MeToo China movement. On the one hand, it provides participants with a platform to speak out and a channel to quickly spread information, which promotes the development of #MeToo China. On the other hand, it is subject to government policies and censorship. Due to its algorithmic design and business strategies, social media, especially Weibo, prioritises platform interests over social responsibility. As a result, it cannot be relied upon in the long term to support Chinese feminists and relevant participants in promoting the gender equality movement.

Chapter 8 “Black Box”: Online Censorship and Resistance in #MeToo China

Introduction

Following the discussions on the first four core themes in Chapter 7, this chapter delves into the fifth and final core theme, “censorship”, as it emerged from and was summarised from the interviews. This chapter begins with a brief review of censorship in #MeToo China 2018. Subsequently, under the theme of “censorship”, different reflections from interview participants are divided into three sub-themes for further interpretation. Following this, there is a specific discussion on the definition of “輿情” (public opinion monitoring) and its meaning in the Chinese context. Finally, these discussions are summarised, and a conclusion is provided.

8.1 Censorship in #MeToo China 2018

Since the #MeToo movement took place in China in 2018, online discussions and activities (both online and offline) on feminist issues have been accompanied by Internet censorship and surveillance. It is worth noting that this scrutiny of feminist issues did not exist from the beginning, and the intensity of its scrutiny was not extensive and comprehensive from the beginning. In early 2018, when Luo Xixi publicly accused Chen Xiaowu of sexual harassment and actively posted opinions and updates about the case on Weibo, her actions were not censored³. However, at that time, the report from *People's Daily* had already begun to use euphemisms to lead the public to believe that this sexual harassment case in one of the most famous Chinese universities was only an

³ Her third blog as mentioned in Chapter 5, which was posted at the successful conclusion of her case, became inaccessible afterward.

“extreme example”:

"...the reason why public opinion is so concerned, of course, is that it is an extreme case...a healthy teacher-student relationship is still the mainstream, and excellent university teachers are the vast majority..."⁴ (Gui and Xinhua News, 2018)

After that, with the further spread and growth of the influence of #MeToo China and the high popularity of the Internet discussion trend, corresponding regulation and censorship were followed as well (Ngo, 2018). It was Xianzi's case that was the divide for the entire #MeToo China. Before her case, Internet censorship mainly focused on restricting searches for the #MeToo keyword and deleting related reposts and comments about #MeToo cases (Ngo, 2018). However, after Xianzi's case came to light, Internet censorship intensified, encompassing large-scale measures such as blocking all related topics, deleting discussions, and blocking the Weibo accounts of related individuals. (Feng and Wong, 2021).

The development of censorship from partial to comprehensive can be explained by the insights of King and Pan. They argue that the purpose of the Chinese government's censorship is not to suppress critical speech against the government but to cut off any speech and behaviour that has the potential to form collective action and social movements (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). In the early stage of #MeToo China, although Luo's case triggered widespread discussion on the Internet, it was still limited to higher educational institutions. Thus, the censorship strategy was relatively subtle at this stage.

Before and after the exposure of Xianzi's case, the wave of #MeToo China extended from higher education to various fields of society. Cases related to #MeToo continued to emerge, with more and more people participating in

⁴ This sentence is translated literally from: "...舆论之所以如此关注，固然有个案的极端性...健康的师生关系是主流，并且优秀的高校教师是绝大部分..."

#MeToo China in various ways. After the exposure of Xianzi's case, the discussion of the #MeToo topic on the Internet reached its peak. The situation of many people gathering to discuss the same topic on social media platforms was perceived by the government as a challenge and a sign that a social movement was about to occur (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). To eliminate this possibility, a comprehensive censorship mechanism was launched.

The theme of #MeToo China is about fighting sexual harassment and sexual assault, which is both legally and ethically justifiable. However, for the government, it is not the primary concern.

Moreover, soon after Xianzi's case came to light, Liu Yu, a well-known scholar of Chinese political sociology, posted an online article, criticising #MeToo China as another form of the "big-character poster" movement, which would lead to the emergence of "miscarriage of justice" (Liu, 2018). After this article was published, public opinion regarding #MeToo China suddenly divided into two factions, one group of people insisted on supporting #MeToo China, and the other group, began to accuse behaviours of Chinese feminists of provoking gender opposition (BBC, 2021). In addition, some people accused participants of initiating #MeToo China as a deliberate act directed by "foreign power" (BBC, 2021; DW, 2021a).

This incident reflects another censorship strategy of the Chinese government: distracting public attention and guiding public opinion through purposeful social media posts to achieve the goal of censorship (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). It is normal for Liu, as a scholar, to publish critical discussion articles. However, after her online article was posted, binary opposition camps suddenly appeared on the Internet. A group of people misinterpreted the theme of #MeToo China's anti-sexual violence as "causing gender opposition", thus triggering a large-

scale debate and quarrel. This shift redirected the focus from anti-sexual violence to “gender opposition” and even “foreign power” and “nationalism”. This process exemplifies the government's censorship strategy.

In addition, from an overall perspective, the Internet censorship that #MeToo China encountered in 2018 also reflects the Chinese government's censorship mechanism, as summarised by Roberts: Friction and Flood (Roberts, 2018). The keyword blocking, deletion of related discussions, and inaccessibility of related blog posts that #MeToo China experienced throughout the process are manifestations of friction (Roberts, 2018). This censorship mechanism aims to increase the difficulty of obtaining information about #MeToo and hinder the dissemination of #MeToo discussions (Roberts, 2018). The flood mechanism is mainly reflected in the later stages of #MeToo China (Roberts, 2018). It achieves censorship by posting a large number of posts on other topics to distract the public's attention and divert the focus of Internet discussions away from #MeToo (Roberts, 2018).

In short, the Internet censorship that #MeToo China experienced in 2018 reflects the comprehensiveness, continuity, and adaptability of the government's censorship strategy. By maintaining the friction and flood mechanisms, the government adjusts the intensity of censorship based on its assessment of the development and influence of #MeToo and its potential to become a large-scale social movement (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014, 2017; Roberts, 2018).

8.2 Three Sub-Themes of Censorship

In 2018, interview participants all experienced censorship in their participation in #MeToo China. Three years later, censorship remains a frequent theme in

the interviews. On the one hand, gender-based violence continues to be a persistent and unresolved issue in Chinese society. As a result, people continue to come forward to accuse sexual violence, triggering new rounds of social discussions on gender-based violence and legislative advancement (DW, 2021b). On the other hand, their cases and the corresponding online discussions continue to be deleted, blocked, and suppressed (Wang and Song, 2022). Against this backdrop, reflections from twelve interview participants on the theme of censorship are organized into three sub-themes below.

Negative Attitudes

Participants who held a negative attitude towards online censorship made judgments from the aspect of the suppression of freedom of speech, as shown below:

“When the censorship thing comes up, it actually adds to the sense of taboo in society. It's actually a statement that these topics are unwelcome or unacceptable to mainstream society” (A1).

“In order to support Xianzi (the activist involved in one of the core cases of #MeToo China), I have been blocked two Weibo accounts. I think they (referring to the authority) just do not want us to speak” (A5).

“We talk about gender inequality in a very restricted way. If everyone censors themselves, the topic can't be openly and transparently discussed in a real way” (A9).

When individuals use the Internet and social media as “netizens” and “users”, they are in a vulnerable position, and they may experience the most direct censorship. Internet platforms, more specifically social media such as Weibo and WeChat, provide users with a public platform for expression and communication. “Deleting someone's comments” and “freezing someone's account” give people the same impression as “covering someone's mouth and

not letting them speak". Thus, the most immediate impression the censorship leads to is the suppression of freedom of speech.

However, is "the suppression of freedom of speech" the correct answer? Another participant, who also has a background in higher education institutions, provided some references for this question.

"I think these social media are essentially profit-seeking. On the one hand, of course, they hope that the discussion of these social issues can have a certain degree of public attention and dissemination so that the platform can make a profit. On the other hand, they are worried that those discussions are too hot and popular, thus leaving control of the platform and having a greater impact on society, which will lead to being held accountable by the government supervision departments. Therefore, these online platforms set up a system of self-censorship so that they can take measures if something happens to reduce the hot topic discussions before anything is out of control" (A3).

This view echoes the discussion in the first part of this chapter regarding the Chinese government's censorship strategy and further explains the relationship between government censorship and social media.

First, from the general public's perspective, the result of this censorship is the suppression of freedom of speech and individual rights, which manifests a functioning system of power relations. It is a production mechanism that forces individuals and organisations to conduct self-censorship, thereby constantly generating new relations of domination and subordination. It embodies what Foucault calls governmentality (Foucault, 2002; Fraser, 2020). This power relationship and production mechanism have never been dissolved despite the continuous iteration of technology and the entry of people into the digital age.

However, from the government's perspective, its censorship has a more profound logic. As discussed earlier, on the one hand, the government maintains governing stability through a systematic and continuous censorship

mechanism (Roberts, 2018). On the other hand, the decision to conduct large-scale censorship was based on the developing trend of #MeToo China, as well as its increasingly extensive influence and social appeal (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). Thus, censorship is not simply because gender issues are "unwelcome" or due to Xianzi's political danger. Gender issues and Xianzi personally are not significant to the government. What the government cares about is the extensive discussion focused on this issue and the mobilisation and appeal brought by Xianzi.

Furthermore, although social media are private companies, they are still subject to government policies and censorship mechanisms in the context of the state-owned Internet (Tufekci, 2017). Weibo provided an online public space for #MeToo China. However, it was fined 44 times, totaling 14.3 million yuan, by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) because "information prohibited by laws and regulations from being disseminated repeatedly appeared on the platform" (Sohu, 2021). As a for-profit Internet company, it is reasonable for Weibo to prioritize platform and commercial interests over social responsibility (Tufekci, 2017).

The interview participants further provided interpretations of the role of social media in the context of censorship:

"You asked me what role social media played in this kind of censorship? Just Weibo and WeChat? They are colluding! They are colluding with the official system" (A4).

"At that time, I heard complaints from all my friends. Many people were traumatised by their accounts suddenly being terminated by Weibo. They had precious archives stored on Weibo and friends they could only reach through Weibo, which disappeared in a second. Although I have never had my account terminated, I thought it was horrifying" (A11).

According to Earl, Maher, and Pan, social media can provide important tools for

social movements and activists, but it can also provide avenues for government surveillance and repression (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Governments issue directives for social media platforms to conduct censorship, or use these platforms directly to suppress protests by distracting attention and creating chaos (Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022). Social media is controlled by or cooperates with the government and becomes part of the censorship system. Weibo provided a platform for the development of the #MeToo China movement. However, it was also subject to government regulation and censorship strategies, thus becoming a part of the government's censorship system.

In addition, participants have also obtained individual feedback through their experiences in their daily lives and social activities related to the #MeToo movement. They have concluded further results obtained from the position of staying in this power production mechanism. Participant A6 and A7, who used to be a #MeToo China activist and now works in departments of the government, described the ubiquitous censorship and “輿情” (the public opinion monitoring) work that made them feel that people were not being treated as real human beings.

“Did you know that? In fact, this type of censorship department responsible for public opinion regulation exists everywhere in government agencies. It feels that now the regulation of “輿情 (the situation of public opinion)” has become a part of the daily work of all organizations, institutions, and enterprises in China. No matter what your specific work is, and whether you are doing creative artwork or mechanical manufacturing work, you must put public opinion monitoring first” (A7).

“There will be two or three rounds of censorship. The first round is a machine review, and then the machine will vote for the second round for something that it does not feel it has the means to clarify. The second round is a manual review. However, the manual review does not assign only one person to review the content but may assign both A and C. If A decides that the content is ok and passes it, and C thinks that the content is not appropriate and doesn't pass it, then it will go to the next person. If the next person determines that this content is not appropriate, A might get some repercussions, ‘Why did you pass it?’ So, they generally review it very strictly and do not give it a pass

if they can” (A6).

When discussing their “propaganda model”, Herman and Chomsky mentioned that for-profit companies could carry out large-scale and successful "dehumanization campaigns" when promoting corporate profits through media promotion (Herman and Chomsky, 2008). The description above shows that not only profit-oriented enterprises can carry out large-scale dehumanization actions against the public, but also government agencies that are not for “profit-making” can do it. It is political management duties and data metrics that drive their "dehumanization campaigns" from the public (Herman and Chomsky, 2008).

Neutral attitudes

Participants neutral on #MeToo China and internet censorship viewed the issue mainly from two perspectives. They believe that #MeToo China is a relatively “fortunate” movement, whether viewed from a horizontal perspective of social context or a vertical perspective of historical context. From a horizontal perspective, women's rights and gender equality are the few issues that can be discussed publicly in a country where many political issues cannot be discussed. Women are not the only ones suffering. Many more people do not even have a chance to speak out. From a vertical perspective, during the decades after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there has not been such a large-scale feminist movement against sexual violence as #MeToo China (Wan, 2020). As the participant A2 believed, although the censored #MeToo movement is like “people dancing in shackles”, at least those people have been given space and freedom to dance. The following is a dialogue between the researcher as the interviewer and A2:

A2: “I think in this domestic social context, it is apparent what can be discussed and

what cannot be discussed. Issues of Tibet and Xinjiang are definitely not allowed to be discussed, and many other political-related issues are blocked. Under these circumstances, within this limited space, we can still talk about #MeToo and even start an online women's movement. I feel very satisfied.”

Interviewer: “The issue of women's rights is also political.”

A2: “I do not think the topic of women's rights is so ‘political’ in China. People stand up to fight sexual harassment and awaken women's awareness. No one wants to subvert the state through this movement. Of course, censorship is inevitable. However, are there any social issues discussed in China that will not be censored? Compared to other issues, I believe #MeToo China has been in a better position. Although the space for public discussion regarding feminist issues is getting smaller, it is better than nothing. I feel like it is a lot like dancing with shackles. At least you have the freedom and space to dance.”

This view can be understood in conjunction with Jiang's article on Chinese people's dissatisfaction with the “censorship” labelled by the West (Jiang, 2012). According to Jiang (2012), Generation Y, who grew up in a society with the rapid development of the economy and Internet technology, is generally dissatisfied with the “censorship” label that Western media has put on China. Compared with their previous generations, more freedom and opportunities have been given to the Chinese people to pursue their goals and enjoy life, and they are satisfied with this limited freedom (Jiang, 2012). As a result, the Western media's criticism of China's suppression and censorship system is considered as a stereotype rather than the truth. Ying argues that the so-called “relatively freedom” that these people are given, is a freedom on the economic and consumerism level, which is still far from freedom in the widespread sense (Jiang, 2012).

This view also coincides with that mentioned in Guo and Wang's research. When discussing the video “Younger Waves”, which was created by Bilibili, a famous video-sharing and social media platform, to convey the authority's discipline to the younger generation, Guo and Wang pointed out that the state claim that young people have more freedom today. However, this freedom is

just a “freedom to consume” (Yang and Wang, 2021). It is difficult to say whether it is the freedom that the younger generation expects and demands, because it sounds more like a value that induces people to consume more (Yang and Wang, 2021). Some people have also criticised this video. They believe that what has been depicted in the video is not real nor representative of young Chinese people (Xiao, 2021).

Returning to #MeToo and censorship, we can see that this illusion of “people having freedom” is caused by the inducement of the official narrative. It is not easy for people to be aware of the difference between so-called consumerist freedom and other freedom in everyday life. Only when people encounter difficulties or are in a situation where their fundamental rights are not guaranteed will they realise the irrationality of the whole censorship system. This statement is not to accuse people of being paralyzed by consumerism or politically insensitive. On the contrary, it emphasises that people who have grown up in this context need to realise that fighting censorship often requires more effort and cost. Rather than saying that they are “neutral” about censorship, people have to accept its existence and hope they will not be stuck in a “disempowerment” position one day.

In addition, participant A11 mentioned the influence of collectivism on censorship issues:

“I think China is a country with a very deep tradition of collective governance, so a lot of individual suffering gets categorised into a certain type of group issue at the level of the central government's perspective. If your suffering belongs to the migrant workers group, the government will feel that this group is very large in number and has a great impact on China's economic development, so it has to be addressed as a priority. But if your suffering is categorised as an issue for, middle-class, highly educated urban women, the government will feel that the number of people in this group is in fact relatively small, and therefore not an issue to be prioritised at the moment. So, the suffering of specific individuals, in this collectivist context, is not specifically taken care of” (A11).

She believes that the collectivist governance tradition can explain why participants in #MeToo China have faced suppression and censorship when speaking out and defending their rights. She argues that women are not specifically targeted. Instead, at the governmental level, issues faced by the female group are not deemed a top priority. If other groups with similar backgrounds raised an issue, they might encounter similar scrutiny. Additionally, she argues that while the government does not dehumanise individuals, it cannot address and solve the concerns of specific individuals one by one, given China's vast population. Based on group classifications, collective governance is the chosen strategy of the government.

The perspective of this participant, who has a professional background in government, sheds light on two aspects. First, the elevation of collectivism over individualism is not solely a historical tradition but also a governance strategy adopted by the Chinese government. This aligns with King and Pan's view again that specific groups and issues are not the primary concern for the government censorship strategies; instead, speeches and actions that have the power to mobilise people are (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014).

Secondly, under the rules of collectivism, women pay the price by having their individual narratives overshadowed by collective ones. Although women constitute half of the population, their challenges and demands are not prioritized when issues are ranked by group importance. As a result, women still occupy a subordinate position.

“I Do Not Consider it as an issue”

There is one more attitude regarding censorship in #MeToo China, which is

from participant A8, who works in legal industries. She offers a unique perspective on #MeToo China. Initially, in early 2018, she disagreed with using the #MeToo slogan to characterise the online movement in China. She believes the 2018 campaign should primarily be a movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence, aligning with a politically correct stance. She expressed:

“From the beginning, I did not want to call this series of activities as “#MeToo”, because it might be associated with “foreign power”. I insisted that this was an anti-sexual harassment campaign that seemed more objective and just. Our lives have always been censored, and we live in such a society. I think this is something that everyone needs to accept. All the victims of sexual violence who came to me for lawsuits want to win the case. Then we would win the case. Why should we shout out, so everyone knows?”

Furthermore, this participant considers it imprudent for many #MeToo activists, especially those led by Xianzi, to persist in sparking expansive online discussions after the extensive internet censorship of #MeToo China in 2018. She shared:

“One of the important reasons why Xianzi lost her case was that before the trial started, she called a group of people to support her outside the court. I saw that they had set up several WeChat groups to organise this rally. Under such circumstances, she definitely made a terrible impression on the judge before going to court. They would suspect whether she would incite an illegal assembly and try to impact justice.”

It is difficult to comment on the idea that supporters gathered outside the courtroom will impact the justice of the trial. Many famous court cases in contemporary western society have attracted large numbers of supporters. Of course, this could also be a difference between the Chinese and the Western legal system. However, it is worth noting that from her reflection, A8 assumes that social campaigns initiated by activists have a more significant negative impact on sexual harassment cases than government intervention.

Nevertheless, this participant holds positive views about #MeToo China. She

believes that, historically, #MeToo China is just a segment of the broader history of Chinese women's fight against sexual harassment. This movement was not a spontaneous occurrence but evolved from the cumulative efforts against sexual harassment over many years. Thus, she anticipates that similar movements will continue to emerge in the future.

This participant has a complex attitude toward MeToo China. On one hand, she feels pride in the emergence of this movement, viewing it as a milestone that Chinese feminists have achieved after years of sustained effort. On the other hand, she strongly opposes using #MeToo as a slogan and leveraging online collective actions to advance the movement. She feels that such actions challenge the government's authority and could lead to the movement's downfall. She is in agreement with the censorship system and its workings and criticises other feminists who attempt to utilise what she refers to as “Western collective action approaches”. In summary, the interviewee wishes for Chinese feminist activists to work within the parameters set by the government, striving to meet their objectives through self-censorship, “dancing with shackles”.

8.3 “Black Box” ——“輿情”⁵ and the Vague “Red Line”

“Black Box” in the familiar context refers to the flight recorder used to investigate flight accidents. In 2017, Shiori Ito, a representative activist of the #MeToo movement in Japan, wrote a book about her experience of being sexually assaulted and the complicated process of defending her rights. The book's name is *Black Box* (Itō, 2021). She describes the scene of sexual assault as a “black box” in the book. She believes that what many victims of sexual assault

⁵ The direct translation of “輿情” is public opinion. However, in the context of Chinese society, the meaning of “輿情” is different from public opinion. It is more accurate to translate “輿情” as “the public opinion monitoring”.

have experienced is that sexual violence happens in a private space, cut off from the outside world. People, generally, are not willing to mention this topic, which also makes it difficult for victims to defend their rights (Itō, 2021). Moreover, when Ito, the first survivor in Japan to publicly accuse sexual assault and a journalist, began to investigate the investigation agency and judicial system, she found vast and unknown loopholes in the whole system. It was when she discovered those issues that they were first time known by the public (Itō, 2021). Thus, she called it a more extensive “black box”.

In this study, “Black Box” comes from participants' descriptions of the government's “舆情”. They believe that the standard and policy of the “舆情” are vague and unpredictable. Even people who participate in censorship work cannot know how the actual “舆情” standard and regulation are defined and progressed. Participants referred to this as a “black box” in this context.

Since “black box” is used to describe “舆情”, which is also a concept repeatedly mentioned by many participants when discussing Internet censorship, it is necessary to make a brief explanation of “舆情” first.

According to Jing (2021), “舆情” is the abbreviation of “the public opinion monitoring” in Mandarin. It refers to the monitoring to the public's attitudes, opinions, and expressions around the process of a social event or an issue within a certain period of time (Jing, 2021). Moreover, “网络舆情” means the public opinion monitoring situation expressed and disseminated through the Internet, which is also the “舆情” specifically referred to by participants in the interviews (Liu, 2007). There are many pieces of research on “舆情” established by Chinese scholars, most of which focus on the construction of a “舆情”

management system and the strategic analysis of how to deal with “輿情” (Wang, Feng and Wang, 2013).

There are three participants have worked in the “輿情” department of the government or Internet companies. When discussing censorship and surveillance in #MeToo China, they immediately mentioned “輿情”. In general, they consider that the current Internet censorship can be classified into the category of “輿情” management.

“When I was working in the department of online content review in a social media company before, they would provide a form with a detailed list of sensitive words and topics. When one of these words was encountered during the content review work, the relevant content and account would be deleted and blocked” (A11).

“Actually, I do not know what the “輿情” is. As news that the media can report in a day is limited, we must first report news about national leaders and major policies as much as possible in a certain limited time. If there are social issues that are more popular than this main reported news on a certain day, then these issues become “輿情” and will be further censored...In the Internet and media industries, to control “輿情” are mainly two steps. First, the discussion popularity of “輿情” should be reduced, which means ‘I do not want you to discuss this topic’. The second is to ‘warm-up’ another topic to make the focus of public opinion change” (A4).

“In government departments, dealing with ‘public opinion’ is mainly a top-to-bottom process. When the upper management department assesses that a social issue has reached the “輿情” standard, they will issue orders to the lower-level executive departments. When the order comes to the final department for implementation, the action always becomes posts deletion and account blocking” (A6).

Two things can be summarised from the participants' descriptions. First, both departments of state and Internet companies do have a complete set of “輿情” and response processes. Second, the specific implementation of this process shows what is known as control and regulation. According to participants'

descriptions, the so-called online censorship is the final stage of “輿情” management. Subsequently, in “輿情”, how do the state and specific departments judge a social event or a social issue as “輿情”?

“The problem is that nobody knows what a precise standard for judging ‘輿情’ is. The official does not plan to tell anyone either. I know that there should be an official document for the ‘輿情’ instruction. However, I have never seen it in my work. More often, I will be suddenly notified that a piece of news has become ‘輿情’, so we can no longer report it. In the end, what criteria are used to judge “becoming a ‘輿情’ or ‘making a mistake’ if we want to block a person, remains unknown. The issue is that there is no standard. Therefore, to avoid the unnecessary business cost, many Internet companies will self-censored first” (A4).

“I think the standard for judging ‘輿情’ is vague. In general, we would say that when the discussion of a social issue is too hot, and it is possible to be out of control, this social issue becomes ‘輿情’. However, these criteria are very subjective, so they cannot be said to be objective. Also, even if an issue meets the criteria for ‘輿情’, why can't it continue to be discussed? For example, the #MeToo movement and people's discussion of secondary disasters during the Covid pandemic. ‘Because it is not ‘positive’, this ‘輿情’ should be controlled and blocked.’ I cannot agree with it. The so-called ‘輿情’ management is a cover-up of the dark side of society, and it cannot solve any problems” (A6).

When the discussion reaches this stage, it can be clearly found that in addition to the suppression of freedom of speech, the more profound problem presented by “輿情” and Internet censorship is the violation of the public's right to know. If people decide to obey the rules under this censorship system, they still have the right to know more about the specific and explicit regulations. Both positive and negative issues are closely related to the social lives of the public. The public has the right to know and discuss what is happening in society.

Furthermore, the elusiveness standard of “輿情” may be part of the Internet censorship strategy of the state. As A4 said, Internet companies will first conduct self-censorship because of the unpredictable and uncertain standards.

This uncertainty has instead heightened government censorship. As discussed earlier, individuals and organisations are manipulated to produce self-censorship by the state, thereby enhancing state-level governance. Of course, this ambiguity of standards is unreasonable, but perhaps this irrationality is what the state wants to pursue. Thus, the state and its regulatory system have become a “Black Box”. People know that there must be certain truths in this box, but no one is capable of disclosing them. The box becomes the working mechanism of power itself, the embodiment of governmentality.

Summary

This chapter begins with a review of censorship in #MeToo China 2018 and reveals the underlying logic and strategies. Subsequently, the discussions delve into specific sub-themes regarding censorship in #MeToo China based on reflections from participants. Several conclusions can be summarised.

First, censorship in #MeToo China needs to be viewed from two perspectives. From the Chinese government's perspective, the censorship strategy is comprehensive, integrated, adjustable, and ongoing. On one hand, the government continues to censor social media through two significant mechanisms: friction and flood (Roberts, 2018). These include deleting posts, blocking accounts to prevent online discussions, and posting a large number of unrelated posts to distract public attention and control the direction of discussions. On the other hand, the purpose of Chinese government censorship is to cut off any potential for collective action and prevent large-scale social movements (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). Thus, although the themes and discussions of #MeToo China are legally and morally justified, they have been subject to large-scale and harsh censorship since #MeToo China 2018.

Furthermore, from the public's perspective, this censorship results in the suppression of freedom of speech and individual rights. It is a production mechanism that forces individuals and organizations to conduct self-censorship, thereby constantly generating new relations of domination and subordination. This continuous production mechanism strengthens and guarantees the government's rule, which has not been dissolved despite the continuous iteration of technology in the digital age.

Finally, even those who are engaged in the work of “輿情” cannot grasp its criteria. This is mainly due to the fact that the criteria for judging “輿情” are inherently uncertain and ambiguous, and this ambiguity is likely the intention of the government. Individuals and institutions begin to censor themselves because they cannot define standard boundaries, and the state strengthens power relations through these self-censorship actions. What is revealed behind this online censorship strategy is the government's violation of the public's right to know. The standard of “輿情” is like a “black box”, and the government will not open it to uncover the truth to the public, thus making this box the embodiment of governmentality.

Chapter 9 Discussion

Introduction

In the first phase of this study, the analysis centered on three representative cases from #MeToo China 2018. An examination of twenty-one samples from these core cases was carried out using both critical discourse analysis and reflexive thematic analysis, and this was complemented by an overview of communication trends. In the second phase, the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with twelve participants associated with the three core cases from #MeToo China, furthering the in-depth discussion based on the outcomes of the reflexive thematic analysis. Through this two-phase research approach, the findings uncovered a range of insights, offering answers to the four core research questions of this study. Additionally, these results spotlight certain issues that surfaced from #MeToo China.

The four core research questions of this study are:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?
2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?
3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?
4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

In this chapter, the first section focuses on answering the first research question, while the second section discusses the answers to the second, third and fourth research questions. The third section is a discussion on issues raised by #MeToo China. Finally, there is an overall summary.

9.1 #MeToo China: Online Feminist Movement and Women's Narratives

To answer the first research question, we need to begin by defining and discussing #MeToo China in terms of whether it qualifies as a social movement and how its critical features differ from other #MeToo movements. From this foundation, we can infer and summarise the narratives created by participants in #MeToo China.

As discussed in Chapter 1 about the definition of social movements, #MeToo China qualifies as a social movement rather than merely a collective action. Diani believes that social movements are organised, enduring social processes, with collective actions forming specific components of these processes (Diani, 1992). Tilly contends that social movements comprise numerous organized collective actions, whereas collective actions might be isolated, temporary behaviours (Tilly, 2019). #MeToo China, which started in 2018 and spanned over a year, marked a period of consistent revelation of cases and extensive online mobilization. Individuals rallied under the hashtag of “#MeToo China”, voicing their demands against sexual harassment and assault. Through persistent social media engagement, they amplified the reach of their stories, promoting the movement. These characteristics align with Diani and Tilly's distinction between social movements and collective action. By comparison, individual cases within #MeToo China can be categorised as collective actions.

So, what exactly typifies the social movement of #MeToo China?

Firstly, #MeToo China's main aim is to advocate for anti-sexual harassment and assault and to address the violations of women's rights caused by gender power

imbalances. As Melucci and Tarrow point out, participants employ symbols and narratives to consolidate support and disseminate information, challenging dominant cultural and power dynamics and introducing alternative narratives to reshape societal truths (Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 2011). As detailed in Chapter 5, #MeToo China participants employed the hashtag “我也是” (“me too” in Mandarin) to rally individuals and share stories, thereby creating a united discourse against gender violence and refreshing the views of society on gender inequality.

Moreover, Gamson's concept of the “injustice frame” within social movements finds resonance in #MeToo China (Gamson, 1992b). Gamson argues that when people receive unjust treatment and believe this injustice problem can be solved through collective actions, they will engage in social movements (Gamson, 1992a, 1992b). For such a frame to be impactful, it's not enough for it to be individually acknowledged; it must gain collective acceptance (Gamson, 1992b). As presented in Chapter 7, participants highlighted this sense of injustice, which became one of the motivations for their activism. The public largely empathised with their narratives about gender power imbalances in sexual harassment and assault cases. The narrative of gender-based power inequality in these cases becomes the collective “injustice frame” for #MeToo China participants.

Additionally, when exploring how #MeToo China experienced censorship and suppression, it's evident it did not shift from online to offline platforms like Western #MeToo movements. Some use this point to question the validity and impact of #MeToo China. However, Zhao's perspective on China's distinct state-society relations and the government's legitimacy rooted in moral and economic progression can explain it (Zhao, 2001, 2012). Chinese society is composed of an authoritarian government governed by the elite class, intellectuals and the

middle class, and the lower classes, each holding different discourse systems and priorities (Zhao, 2001). Thus, when dealing with tensions between the public and the state, the government often offers regulations and financial solutions without fixing the main problems (Zhao, 2012). When citizens intensify protests or adopt collective actions due to unmet demands, the government sees this as overstepping boundaries, leading to suppression (Zhao, 2001, 2012). Also, the government has not integrated organised social movements into its system for normalisation (Zhao, 2012). As a result, when addressing social movements, the government's primary approach is to ensure stability by resorting to suppression and censorship (Zhao, 2001, 2012, 2016).

Moreover, King and Pan's view on the Chinese government's censorship strategy further explains the political relevance of #MeToo China. As pointed out in their study, the purpose of government censorship is to prevent any potential large-scale collective action from occurring, thereby posing a challenge to government authority and governance (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). Thus, any group of people focusing on one topic to discuss and spread information on social media, regardless of the details, will be censored (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014).

#MeToo China 2018 did not encounter large-scale censorship when discussions were initially limited to higher education. However, when #MeToo spread across various fields and attracted more widespread attention and discussion, especially after the exposure of Xianzi's case, the censorship became comprehensive, large-scale, and strict. This shift shows that the widespread discussion and influence of #MeToo China on the Internet were judged as a signal of large-scale collective action, posing a challenge to government authority.

Therefore, although #MeToo China does not align with the general interactive

form in Tilly's "polity model", it is still highly political, especially in the Chinese context (Tilly, 1978; King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014). The Chinese government's vigilance against #MeToo China 2018 and the subsequent large-scale and strict censorship confirm this. Moreover, despite being confined to online development and encountering large-scale censorship, #MeToo China has achieved significant progress and remains an ongoing process, further confirming its validity and impact.

So, in the context of #MeToo China 2018, what narratives did Chinese women present? Combining the analyses of Chapters 5 and 6, as well as the above discussion, the first research question can be summarized and answered as follows:

First, the three core participants in the representative cases, Luo, Huahua, and Xianzi, proactively shared their experiences to bring attention to the issues of sexual harassment and assault, thereby protesting the consequences of this gender power inequality. By speaking out, these participants challenged the existing narratives of sexual violence where victims are often silenced, blamed, and continually oppressed. They especially underscored the unequal power dynamics embedded in narratives of sexual violence that mute the victims and erase their subjectivity. From this foundation, they encouraged victims to stand up against these power imbalances and share their stories openly.

Additionally, activists challenged certain victim narratives in the textual discussions surrounding the three core cases. Transitioning from a passive victim status to an active activist role, and moving from self-blame to resisting such narratives, they challenged the traditional victim narrative, liberating themselves from a disempowered position. These activists also emphasized the significance of speaking out both assertively and publicly. They argued that an actual representation of women's voices is essential for constructing self-

narratives. They highlighted the compounded oppression women face due to unequal power dynamics and called for a shift in this imbalance to create new gender narratives.

In short, during #MeToo China 2018, Chinese women used #MeToo to share and disseminate their experiences and put forward anti-sexual harassment and anti-sexual assault slogans to protest the oppression caused by power inequality. By deconstructing existing narratives of sexual violence, they highlight the injustice frame that underlies them, thereby constructing narratives that challenge existing gender-based power structures and reevaluate gender issues.

To sum up, despite the challenges of censorship and suppression, #MeToo China stands as an unprecedented online feminist movement in China. Its differences from Western social movements do not question its rationality as a social movement but emphasise the distinctiveness of the Chinese feminist movement within the broader context of global social movements. Its uniqueness, firstly, from this movement being a new practice in the historical and cultural context of Chinese feminism, which historically prioritized theory over practice and nationalism over individual awareness. Moreover, #MeToo China is also a practice where Chinese feminists break away from the limitations of nationalism and collectivism and construct feminist narratives based on individuals.

9.2 “Dancing in Shackles”: the Knowledge Production of Chinese Women and Censorship in the post-#MeToo China Era

This section aims to answer the second, third and fourth research questions based on the analysis and discussion in Chapters 7 and 8, combined with the

theoretical framework, and further highlight the relevant issues revealed in this study.

The description “Dancing in Shackles” was provided by an interview participant in Phase 2 of the research. She used this phrase to describe the situation of Chinese women since the #MeToo China movement in 2018, reflecting three years after this significant online feminist movement. While other participants mentioned #MeToo China 2018 in terms of “dancing” or “shackles”, this participant's summary aptly combined both viewpoints. Thus, the researcher decided to start the discussion with this description.

Specifically, “dancing” refers to the knowledge production and narrative construction of #MeToo participants, which began with #MeToo in 2018 and continues today. Meanwhile, “shackles” points to the challenges Chinese women face in advancing narrative construction and feminism, due to ongoing censorship in the current social context. Together, they define the circumstances and experiences of Chinese feminists in the post-#MeToo China era.

9.2.1 Knowledge Production and Censorship

As discussed in Chapter 1, postmodern feminism employs the power-knowledge perspective of Foucault to discuss feminist issues. Foucault believes that knowledge is the product of power; power creates knowledge, and knowledge, serving as a standard of normalization, produces power (Foucault, 2002). Thus, postmodern feminists advocate for using women's knowledge production to challenge the oppressive power produced by patriarchal knowledge creation, thereby cultivating feminist insights to empower women (Li, 2018).

From the analysis in Chapter 7, the knowledge production of #MeToo China participants mainly shows in three areas. First, #MeToo China has expanded knowledge on gender issues for many, clarifying what sexual harassment is, how to counter it, and why supporting victims is crucial. This has contributed to the spreading of feminist theories.

Second, #MeToo China offers both a theoretical and practical framework for people when addressing relevant issues. As Huahua noted, the subject of sexual violence has always been unfavourable, so people tend not to discuss it. Yet, the pain felt by victims does not diminish due to this silence. By sharing their experiences of harassment and assault, survivors have filled knowledge gaps and reshaped public understanding. More importantly, they offer a paradigm to help others develop effective strategies for such incidents and to protect their rights.

Third, #MeToo participants have built a unified female narrative by sharing experiences, supporting each other, and advocating for their rights. This narrative gives those who were unable to express themselves in male-dominated stories an opportunity to find their voice within a collective female perspective.

These three points align with the view of postmodern feminism, which emphasizes women's knowledge production to fight the oppressive power from patriarchal knowledge mechanisms. Making more people aware of sexual harassment and assault confronts and breaks down previous notions of rape culture. By providing a reference paradigm, participants allow others to formulate strategies against gender-based violence and ensure their rights. Lastly, through shared experiences and support, a unified female narrative is formed as a result of women's knowledge production. Together, these aspects

form a specific framework of female knowledge production. Practically, the contributions of #MeToo China participants have also advanced the spread of feminist ideas in China, grown the feminist community, and progressed the development of Chinese feminism.

Moreover, this knowledge production also showcases the collaboration between China's first, second, and third generation feminists. On one side, the spread of basic gender knowledge can be traced back to the introduction of Western gender studies and the work of earlier generations of feminists. Their efforts have paved the way for current discussions on gender issues.

On the other side, while the third generation of female activists might not have initiated #MeToo China, they've been instrumental in its promotion. They have, in many ways, offered a model for the feminist movement's practices. One interviewee from Chapter 8, belonging to the second-generation feminists, might have reservations about the practical strategy of #MeToo China, but she was an active participant in the movement and recognised its value. This represents the interaction between two generations of feminists. It also can be said that #MeToo China has created new connections between socialist state feminists of the first and second generations and young feminist activists of the third generation, offering new avenues for collaboration and growth.

While #MeToo China participants have broadened the scope for female narratives and resistance to gender issues through knowledge production - termed as “dancing”, they also face unignorable limitations or “shackles” in the post-#MeToo era, mainly due to censorship. In Chapter 8, this study deeply analyzes and discusses the issues of "censorship" and “輿情”(public opinion monitoring) from the time of #MeToo China's emergence to the present. From this chapter, the impact of censorship and “輿情” in the post-#MeToo China era

can be concluded from two aspects.

Firstly, censorship in #MeToo China can be interpreted from two perspectives. From the Chinese government's perspective, the censorship strategy is comprehensive, integrated, adjustable, and ongoing, aiming to cut off any potential for collective action and prevent large-scale social movements (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014). An additional reason for the large-scale censorship in #MeToo China is the government's struggle to address the movement participants' demands sustainably and rationally (Zhao, 2001, 2012, 2016). From the public's perspective, this censorship suppresses freedom of speech and individual rights, producing a mechanism that forces individuals and organizations to conduct self-censorship, thereby constantly generating new relations of domination and subordination.

Secondly, when examining the impact of censorship on #MeToo and feminism issues in the current context, the ambiguous criteria of “舆情” (public opinion monitoring) make it impossible for individuals and platforms to judge the boundaries between legality and violations. To avoid the risk of official censorship and potential repercussions, individuals and organisations automatically engage in self-censorship. This top-down constraint becomes internalised, shifting the censorship-related tensions from the state-public dynamic to the individual-platform relationship. This tactic resembles a “black box”, the embodiment of governmentality, trapping stakeholders within an invisible power mechanism.

9.2.2 The role and Impact of social media

Given the context detailed above, it becomes clear that there is a duality in the role of social media in #MeToo China.

On the one hand, social media provides a platform for #MeToo participants to speak out, amplifying their voices and facilitating communication, thus promoting the development of #MeToo China (Tufekci, 2017, p. 3-48). On the other hand, social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat are owned by private companies whose algorithm design and operational decisions prioritise commercial interests over social responsibility, making them unreliable (Tufekci, 2017, p. 132-163).

Moreover, in the context of the Chinese state-owned Internet, both Weibo and WeChat are subject to government policies and censorship regulations, providing avenues for government surveillance and repression (Earl, Maher, and Pan, 2022). Controlled by or cooperating with the government, Weibo and WeChat become part of the government's censorship system in the #MeToo China process.

Revisiting #MeToo China three years on, it's pertinent for participants to evaluate its impact and limitations. Three main points stand out: First, #MeToo China has advanced the spread of feminist ideas in China. Secondly, the movement has spurred the deconstruction of power narratives on sexual violence and gender bias, fostering narratives focused on women. Lastly, echoing Burke, "MeToo is a movement, not a moment" (Burke, 2018). As long as women face gender-based violence, their voices will continue to rise. #MeToo China remains a strong feminist movement against sexual harassment and assault, with much progress still to be made in China's gender equality journey.

In summary, the responses to the second research question of this chapter are as follows: Three years post-#MeToo China, the movement undoubtedly stands as a significant online feminist initiative in China. It has both promoted feminist

ideas and led feminists to reshape narratives around gender violence and equality. Moreover, #MeToo China participants have long been “dancing in shackles”, building narratives centered on opposing gender violence and seeking gender equality—a process still in motion.

Regarding the answer to the third research question, censorship has had various impacts on #MeToo China, summarised in the following three aspects.

Firstly, the government’s comprehensive, integrated, and ongoing censorship process has hindered the development of #MeToo China to a certain extent. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the vitality and sustainability of #MeToo China have allowed it to gradually develop into an ongoing process and a long-term social movement.

Secondly, the ambiguous criteria of “輿情” (public opinion monitoring) make it impossible for individuals and platforms to judge the boundaries between legality and violations. Individuals and organisations automatically engage in self-censorship to avoid the risk of official censorship and potential repercussions. This tactic resembles a “black box”, the embodiment of governmentality, trapping stakeholders within an invisible power mechanism that continuously strengthens and guarantees the government's authority.

Thirdly, the enduring Internet censorship in the post-#MeToo China period has constrained feminist expression and female narratives. Yet, #MeToo China marks a novel approach for Chinese feminists, moving beyond nationalism and collectivism to focus on individual narratives.

Concerning the fourth research question, this study asserts that the role of social media in #MeToo China is dual. On the one hand, it promotes the

occurrence and development of #MeToo China; on the other hand, as part of the government's censorship system, it hinders the development of #MeToo China through censorship. Additionally, social media's emphasis on the platform and commercial interests over social responsibility makes it an unsuitable platform for Chinese feminists and relevant participants to trust for sustainable, long-term use in the anti-sexual harassment and gender equality movement.

9.3 Other Debates on #MeToo China

9.3.1 A Game for the Well-Educated Middle-Class to Play?

In Chapter 7, the profile information of interview participants raises a question: Is #MeToo China primarily an online movement led by well-educated, middle-class urban youth (mainly women) against sexual harassment and assault? In the process, are the experiences and voices of women from lower socio-economic backgrounds or rural areas being overshadowed or sidelined?

A research study focusing on #MeToo in China has highlighted this disparity. Yin and Sun, in their research on intersectional digital feminism, argued that while "information technology" offers platforms for people to express opinions, personal issues, and social concerns, it does not ensure that all voices are heard, as the "expression" is contingent on its users (Yin and Sun, 2021). Specifically, lower-class women unfamiliar with using the Internet or social media for self-expression, or those in impoverished or rural communities who cannot afford mobile phones or laptops, are often sidelined (Yin and Sun, 2021). Such women likely did not participate in online social discourse or benefit from the advancements of #MeToo China.

During the examination of #MeToo China, the situations described by scholars above were observed. The #MeToo China archive shows a specific context for those who came forward. While there are cases involving grassroots social workers, like the sexual harassment incident with Liu Meng in the charitable domain, they are not the majority (#MeToo in China Archives volunteers, 2019). Out of 52 #MeToo China cases, 26 are linked to higher education institutions, where core participants typically hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Of the remaining cases, the central participants are often white-collar professionals in the arts, media, and internet sectors or volunteers committed to public welfare initiatives. Mostly, they come from educated, middle-class backgrounds.

Participation in #MeToo China primarily involves sharing personal experiences on Weibo or WeChat, advocating for justice, supporting others, or using hashtags to engage in discussions. Such participation presupposes internet access, familiarity with social media platforms, and an understanding of the relevant issues and their broader context.

Given these factors, it's unsurprising that #MeToo China participants display similar backgrounds. Their education empowers them to grasp social issues, while their financial stability facilitates unrestricted internet and social media access. In contrast, those with limited education, less awareness of citizen rights, or less financial stability are often excluded.

As detailed in Chapter 7, the backgrounds of the 12 participants include higher education institutions, the internet and finance sectors, governmental departments, and national or international NGOs, painting a portrait of the “well-educated, middle class young people”. To clarify, these individuals were not selected because of their similar backgrounds; rather, the summary of post-selection sample information revealed this pattern.

To some degree, these interviewees, being less powerless than others, are still better positioned to discuss gender issues online and participate in feminist movements. While their collective narrative may not deliberately exclude rural and lower-class females, barriers created by differential access to “information technology” and varying education levels still subtly create a divide: the “we” in #MeToo China versus the “others” who lack the means to participate. Can the voices of #MeToo China represent all Chinese women? Certainly not.

So, where have the voices of these women gone? Haven't they ever experienced sexual harassment? Indeed, in 2013, the Guangzhou Sunflower Women Workers Center released the *Research Report on Sexual Harassment of Female Workers in Factories* (Guangzhou Sunflower Women Workers Center, 2013). According to the report, 70% of female workers have encountered sexual harassment in the workplace, and 43% opt to tolerate it to maintain their jobs (Guangzhou Sunflower Women Workers Center, 2013). Furthermore, in 2012, there was a news report about rural women facing sexual harassment (Zhao, 2012). According to this report, most women suppress their anger due to uncertainty about handling such incidents and a lack of basic knowledge about their legal rights (Zhao, 2012).

Post the #MeToo China movement, some Chinese scholars turned their attention to the challenges faced by lower-class women, such as female workers and rural women, and their absence from the movement. Consequently, these scholars undertook relevant studies, aiming to discern the reasons behind the silence and non-involvement of these female demographics, and to identify potential solutions. ChangXin, for instance, investigated female workers, beginning with the anti-sexual harassment case raised by a female sanitation worker in 2020 (ChangXin, 2021). ChangXin deduced that many workers have not been adequately informed about the information on sexual harassment, which leads to ineffective responses when confronted by it (ChangXin, 2021).

Moreover, those in positions of authority who commit harassment (typically the victim's superiors) adeptly use their power to intimidate (Yao, 2020). For a female worker to publicly resist sexual harassment, she not only needs the courage to speak out but also faces the risk of losing her job, which is often the primary income source for her family (ChangXin, 2021). Notably, in the sanitation worker case, the survivor persisted because she was prepared for the potential job loss (Yao, 2020). Chang Xin argued that the financial price of speaking out for female workers can be prohibitively high (ChangXin, 2021).

Furthermore, Wang highlighted two primary challenges female workers encounter when addressing sexual harassment (Wang, 2021). The first is awareness, as the notion of sexual harassment remains vague for many female workers (Wang, 2021). The second is coping. Female workers have limited access to information about policies and regulations, as they frequently encounter advertisements for services like painless abortions in factories, but rarely see information about rights and regulations (Wang, 2021). The digital gap makes it hard for them to find helpful online information. All these reasons contribute to their silence and lack of representation. Regarding the rural women, current research primarily emphasises their mobility and poverty issues (Li, 2016). There is a dearth of research focusing on the anti-sexual harassment challenges faced by rural women.

From this, it's evident that the neglect and marginalisation of lower-class women, encompassing female workers and rural women, in the #MeToo China movement against sexual harassment and assault can be attributed to three primary reasons.

Firstly, these women are inadequately educated about gender equality and their legal rights, resulting in their inability to counteract sexual harassment

effectively. Secondly, for these women, sexual harassment is not merely a manifestation of power abuse. It's also because of structural issues that come from power differences and economic problems. When these economic challenges are not fixed, it's hard for female workers to speak up about their concerns. In reality, their circumstances might preclude them from having a choice. Thirdly, they are often uninformed about how to use the internet and social media to stand up for their rights. Notably, though, the technological barrier is perhaps not the main obstacle. Even if female workers are aware of #MeToo and can navigate social media, they might still refrain from speaking out if the fundamental issues remain unaddressed. It is telling that the first public accusation by a female worker against sexual harassment emerged in 2020, even though #MeToo China has been active since 2018.

In essence, lower-class women's marginalisation in #MeToo China is not because the educated middle-class women, the primary #MeToo participants, exclude them on purpose or by accident. Neither is it solely because of barriers posed by social media. In fact, both lower-class and middle-class women deal with the shared structural challenges born from power inequality. The difference is in their financial means: while middle-class women might afford the financial prices of voicing their experiences, such costs can be too high for their lower-class women.

Some might infer from this that the Marxist feminist perspective is validated, suggesting that class issues overshadow gender issues. However, this study suggests the contrary. It is precisely because these women live in the same patriarchal society that both lower-class and middle-class women cannot escape the oppression of gender inequality in this system. Due to the demands of this patriarchal culture for women to internalize self-discipline, both lower-class and middle-class women face the dilemma of “whether to speak out” before actually doing so. Thus, both further academic exploration and social

practice are needed. Additionally, fostering a more holistic connection between gender issues faced by middle-class and lower-class women to better understand Chinese feminist concerns requires further scholarly pursuit and exploration.

9.3.2 Stuck in Between: The Marginalised #MeToo China Feminists Abroad

Finally, this study wishes to touch upon the challenges faced by some #MeToo China participants who are now overseas. After the rise of #MeToo China in 2018, a number of participants moved overseas for various reasons, attempting to relay the narrative of Chinese women through Western media channels. Among them are Lu Pin, the former founder of Feminist Voices, who has garnered some attention, and a small group of volunteers that organized a touring #MeToo China exhibition in the UK (JiuTian, no date).

In 2015, due to domestic censorship, Lu Pin decided to live in exile in the United States. She started a Twitter account where she regularly posts discussion articles related to gender issues in Chinese society (Lv, 2023). Although she updates often, the attention she receives is limited (Lv, 2023). Additionally, because her focus remains on the feminist movement in China, she hasn't made strong connections with the feminist community in the US, leaving her somewhat isolated (JiuTian, no date).

In 2019, after being showcased in numerous domestic cities, the #MeToo China exhibition faced suppression and had to be terminated. In response, a group of Chinese volunteers in the UK came together and launched a #MeToo China exhibition that toured various UK universities (Leilei, 2022). However, due to worries about domestic censorship, volunteer safety, and the potential

disruption of the event, the exhibition was not widely promoted (Leilei, 2022). As a result, not only did the exhibition fail to attract the expected attention, but it also faced disruptions, recordings, and damage to exhibits by anti-feminist nationalist students from abroad (Leilei, 2022).

It appears these feminists are experiencing a sort of double marginalization post-#MeToo movement. In China, censorship restricts them from voicing their opinions on public platforms, pushing them to the edges of the national conversation. Yet, when trying to communicate the narrative of Chinese women on Western platforms, they encounter challenges due to language barriers, cultural differences, or other communication issues (JiuTian, no date). The mainstream Western media often frames reports on #MeToo China as a conflict between personal freedoms and an authoritarian government, which further drowns out the individual voices of these Chinese women (BBC, 2021; DW,2021a). These overseas #MeToo China participants are caught between their homeland and the West, marginalized in both arenas.

Summary

This chapter serves as the discussion section of the study, with the primary objective of addressing the four fundamental research questions and emphasizing the issues that emerged from the research.

In the first segment, this study leans into social movement theory and combines the analytical findings from Chapters 5 and 6 to deliberate on the broader context of #MeToo China and the narratives that sprouted from this movement. This addresses the first research question: Chinese women utilized #MeToo to broadcast and spread their experiences, endorsing anti-sexual harassment and anti-sexual assault messages in response to the oppression born from power

imbalances. By challenging established narratives around sexual violence, they spotlight the inherent injustices, paving the way for new narratives that counter prevailing gender power dynamics and reassess gender topics.

Regarding the second research question, drawing from the insights of Chapters 7 and 8 and integrating the relevant theoretical framework, the second section concludes that, reflecting three years onward, the movement undeniably represents a pivotal online feminist endeavor in China. It embodies a novel approach rooted in China's historical and cultural feminist traditions, which prioritize theory over practice and collective consciousness over the individual. The movement bridges the gap between socialist state feminists of the earlier generations and the younger, third-generation feminist activists, offering a renewed path for collaborative progress. Furthermore, #MeToo China represents a concerted effort by Chinese feminists to shed the constraints of nationalism and collectivism, championing a unique feminist narrative anchored in individual experiences.

The chapter also responds to the third and fourth research questions. Regarding the impact of censorship on #MeToo China, it highlights how censorship acts as a "black box," trapping stakeholders within an invisible power mechanism that continuously strengthens and guarantees the government's authority. For the fourth question, the answer clarifies the dual role of social media in #MeToo China, pointing out its unreliability and urging activists to carefully consider its use when promoting the long-term feminist movement.

The third section discusses two predominant concerns associated with #MeToo China that extend beyond the primary research queries. Firstly, the study highlights the limitations in the representation of women's narratives within #MeToo China. It was observed that #MeToo China participants are mainly well-

educated, middle-class urban women. The narratives of lower-class women, including workers and rural women, were largely absent. Through a review and analysis of relevant studies, it's believed that the lack of educational empowerment and motivation to participate are reasons why lower-class women are marginalized in the #MeToo narrative.

Secondly, the study discusses the challenges faced by #MeToo Chinese feminists overseas. They face censorship and marginalization in China and struggle with language and cultural barriers abroad, making it hard to integrate into the Western mainstream narrative. The Western media's stereotypical reporting further sidelines their voices, resulting in a state of dual marginalization.

In summation, this chapter, as the concluding discussion of the study, integrates the various facets of the research – merging theory with analytical insights from both research phases – to provide an exhaustive and profound exploration of the study's core themes, conclusively addressing four research questions.

Conclusion

When the #MeToo movement started in the United States in 2017, no one could have predicted that a #MeToo movement would also take place in China in 2018, nor could they have foreseen the impact and progress it would achieve.

Although many studies have focused on the #MeToo movement since then, most employ data network analysis to deduce the overall structure or internal logic of the movement, which overlooks the specific individuals and their experiences within it. This highlights the lack of qualitative research perspectives. In addition, scholars have increasingly focused on #MeToo movements in the Global South, conducting various studies on cases in India, South Korea, South Africa, and South America (Dilip, 2022; Falkof, Phadke, and Roy, 2022; Medrado, 2023). However, research on the #MeToo movement in East Asia still requires further development, and the lack of geographical diversity in #MeToo studies calls for more attention to the Global South for improvement.

Furthermore, concerning the existing studies of #MeToo in China, there is also a literature gap that needs addressing: a need for both comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the movement from a non-Western perspective. Specifically, what narratives have participants of #MeToo China created, and what features have these narratives shown? What is the relationship between these narratives and censorship? These issues require further discussion and study.

To address these issues, the researcher developed a two-phase research strategy and outlined four core research questions. Starting with an examination of the three primary cases of #MeToo China in 2018 and later

conducting interviews with participants from these cases three years on, the study aims for a thorough understanding of the research topic over time. Accordingly, the study is divided into two parts. The first establishes the theoretical framework and introduces the research context, while the second focuses on the methodology, detailing the entire research process and discussion. Throughout the research, three relevant issues arose:

Firstly, in constructing the theoretical framework, the researcher realized that a model grounded in Western theoretical viewpoints, even when adjusted for China's specifics, might not be adequate for this study. The complexity and distinct nature of #MeToo China meant that the Chinese perspective had to be an integral part of the research framework. Thus, the researcher opted to merge a selected Western theoretical foundation with a unique Chinese theoretical and practical viewpoint to create this study's framework. Having introduced the general transition from #MeToo Global to #MeToo China, the research began with this theoretical foundation.

Secondly, during the Phase 1 sample analysis, it was evident to the researcher that one method of analysis would not fully capture the essence of the samples. Therefore, two methods of analysis were chosen to ensure a comprehensive examination. When moving to the second phase of the research, the global outbreak of COVID-19 made face-to-face interviews impossible. The researcher then turned to online interviews, ensuring they were thoroughly prepared. This change ensured the interviews were conducted successfully and maintained their quality.

Lastly, shortly after the commencement of this research, the global COVID-19 pandemic began, posing challenges to the entire research process. Gathering samples became challenging, and the health of the researcher was at potential risk. Despite these obstacles, the researcher persevered, completing the

research and the thesis.

This research mainly focuses on four core questions. Through comprehensive and in-depth analysis and discussion, this study provides answers to the four questions as follows:

1. What narratives emerged from participants in #MeToo China 2018?

During #MeToo China 2018, Chinese women used #MeToo to share and disseminate their own experiences, put forward anti-sexual harassment and anti-sexual assault slogans, and protest against the oppression caused by unequal power. By deconstructing existing sexual violence narratives and highlighting the injustice frame behind them, they constructed narratives that challenge existing gender power structures and reassess gender issues.

2. Three years after #MeToo China, how do the participants view the movement and the associated effects resulting from it?

Three years post-#MeToo China, there's no doubt that it remains an unprecedented online feminist movement in the country. On one hand, it has advanced the dissemination and promotion of feminist concepts throughout China. On the other, it has also led feminists to deconstruct narratives of sexual harassment and assault and to construct narratives of women standing against gender violence and advocating for gender equality.

Furthermore, #MeToo China participants and Chinese feminists have long been in a situation of "dancing in shackles." They have constructed a female narrative centered on opposing gender violence and fighting for gender equality, a process still ongoing. However, long-term internet censorship and the shrinking public discussion space post-#MeToo China have constrained and suppressed

feminist voices. Despite this, #MeToo China remains a novel attempt by Chinese feminists to distance themselves from the chains of nationalism and collectivism, and to construct local feminist narratives from an individual perspective.

3. What impact has censorship had on #MeToo China and the narratives of its participants?

Censorship has had three main impacts on #MeToo China. Firstly, the government's comprehensive, integrated, and ongoing censorship process has hindered the development of #MeToo China to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the vitality and sustainability of #MeToo China have allowed it to gradually develop into an ongoing process and a long-term social movement.

Secondly, the ambiguous criteria of “輿情” (public opinion monitoring) cause individuals and organizations to automatically engage in self-censorship to avoid the risk of official censorship and potential repercussions. This tactic resembles a “black box”, the embodiment of governmentality, trapping stakeholders within an invisible power mechanism that continuously strengthens and guarantees the government's authority.

Finally, enduring Internet censorship in the post-#MeToo China period has constrained feminist expression and female narratives. Yet, #MeToo China marks a novel approach for Chinese feminists, moving beyond nationalism and collectivism to focus on individual narratives.

4. What role did social media assume in the progression of the #MeToo China movement?

This study concludes that the role of social media in #MeToo China is dual. On the one hand, it promotes the occurrence and development of #MeToo China; on the other hand, as part of the government's censorship system, it hinders the development of #MeToo China through censorship. Additionally, social media's emphasis on the platform and commercial interests over social responsibility makes it an unsuitable platform for Chinese feminists and relevant participants to trust for sustainable, long-term use in the anti-sexual harassment and gender equality movement.

In addition to providing answers to four research questions, this study also addresses two other pertinent issues. First, it was observed that #MeToo China participants are mainly well-educated, middle-class urban women. The narratives of lower-class women, including workers and rural women, were largely absent. Through a review and analysis of relevant studies, it's believed that the lack of educational empowerment and motivation to participate are reasons why lower-class women are marginalised in the #MeToo narrative. This study aims to bring attention to this gap, offering insights for future research and initiatives.

Secondly, the study discusses the challenges faced by #MeToo Chinese feminists overseas. They face censorship and marginalisation in China and struggle with language and cultural barriers abroad, making it hard to integrate into the Western mainstream narrative. The Western media's stereotypical reporting further sidelines their voices, resulting in a state of dual marginalisation. It is hoped that this issue gains recognition and that future solutions can be explored.

In conclusion, despite the challenges of censorship and suppression, #MeToo China stands out as an unparalleled online feminist movement in China. Its distinct nature when compared to Western social movements accentuates the

unique position of the Chinese feminist movement within the broader context of global social movements. Rooted in the historical and cultural tradition of Chinese feminism that prioritises theory over practice and national consciousness over individual rights, it fosters connections between socialist state feminists of the older generations and the young feminist activists of today, paving the way for future collaboration and growth. Additionally, #MeToo China represents a conscious effort by Chinese feminists to move beyond nationalistic and collectivist constraints, striving to voice and craft a local feminist narrative grounded in individual experiences.

This study primarily makes original contributions in four aspects. First, it fills a gap in #MeToo China studies by offering both a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the movement from a non-Western perspective. In this study, the voices of ordinary participants, who constitute a significant part of #MeToo China, have been specifically represented and discussed. This highlights their narratives of challenging existing gender power structures, reassessing gender issues, and breaking free from the chains of nationalism and collectivism.

Second, this study delves into the issue of censorship in #MeToo China. It reveals the logic behind the censorship strategy, its impact on the #MeToo and post-#MeToo eras, and highlights how the “black box”, the embodiment of governmentality, continuously strengthens and guarantees the government's authority through an invisible power mechanism. This provides a distinctive perspective for analysing censorship issues in the digital age.

Third, the study also bridges the academic gap in the geographical diversity of #MeToo studies by providing a distinctive perspective on the Chinese #MeToo movement within the academic context of East Asia and the Global South, offering valuable references for related research.

Finally, in the past few years, amidst global turmoil and change, the researcher has recorded and preserved the precious narratives of #MeToo China participants through this study. Regardless of whether they will have the opportunity to tell their stories on a broader platform, this study provides a channel for their voices to be heard.

Regarding the limitations, the study acknowledges certain constraints. The global COVID-19 pandemic, combined with Chinese censorship, impacted the sample collections for research, limiting the scope of texts and interview samples that could be analysed and discussed in this study. Additionally, the two topics mentioned in the Discussion chapter—lower-class women who are marginalised in #MeToo China and feminists who are stuck in between because of #MeToo China—are not explored in depth in this study due to limited space and conditions.

Despite these limitations, this research is committed to presenting a multi-dimensional exploration to its readers. It aims to provide valuable insights using as many available samples and as in-depth an analysis as possible. The researcher also plans to conduct an in-depth analysis of the two topics mentioned above, as well as a broader exploration of #MeToo China, if conditions permit in the future.

Appendix1: Thematic Analysis Codebook of Materials (Articles, Blogs and Weibos) from Three Core Cases of #MeToo China in 2018

Name	Description	Files	References
1. Victims		7	16
Being a 'victim'		6	7
Deconstruct the 'victim'		4	9
2. Blame		7	18
Self-blaming		4	10
Victim-blaming		6	8
3. Voices		10	29
To be heard		3	4
To present		5	8
To self-empowered		6	9
To support		5	5

Appendix 2: Thematic Analysis Codebook for Samples from 12 Online Semi-structured Interviews with #MeToo China Participants

Name	Description	Files	References
1. Censorship			
Negative Attitudes		8	13
Neutral attitudes		13	21
舆情—The Vague 'Red Line'		7	12
2. Significance and Limitations			
Significance		10	20
Limitations		12	24
3. Injustice Frame		7	11
4. Knowledge Production		7	11
5. Social Media		8	14

Appendix 3: Semi-structured Interview Outline

提问者(Researcher/Interviewer): Huanyu Huang

受访者(Participant): _____

1. 关于 2018 年的中国米兔运动 (The Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018)

(1) 2018 年时, 您是作为发声者、还是作为支持者参与了运动?

(In 2018, what role did you play in the #MeToo China, as a participant who spoke out or as a supporter?)

(2) 当身在其中时, 您的感受是怎样的? (How did you feel at that moment?)

(3) 从您的视角出发看#MeToo China, 这场运动是否存在任何局限性?

(From your perspective, did #MeToo China have any limitation?)

2. 三年之后, 再回顾 #MeToo China 2018 (Reflecting on #MeToo China after three years)

(1) 您的感受和三年前相比是否发生了改变? (Have your feelings changed in the last three years?)

(2) 三年后再回顾, 您觉得这场运动的影响是什么 (或者是否会觉得没有造成任何影响)? 这场带来了 (或没有带来) 什么改变?

[Looking back from three years later, what do you think the impact of the movement was (or do you feel that it didn't have any impact)? What changes did this bring (or didn't bring)?]

3. 关于社交媒体 (Discussions on social media)

(1) 您觉得微博和微信这两个社交媒体, 在#MeToo China 中扮演了什么样的角色?

(What role did you think the two social media, Weibo and WeChat, played in #MeToo China?)

(2) 您觉得它们对于运动的发生, 以及后续的发展, 是否带来了任何积极或者消极的影响?

(Do you think they have any positive or negative effects on the occurrence of the movement and its subsequent development?)

4. 关于审查制度 (Insights into the censorship system)

(1) 您怎样看待 2018 年#MeToo China 过程中, 发生在微博和微信平台上的大规模审查?

(What do you think of the mass censorship that took place on Weibo and WeChat during the #MeToo China in 2018?)

(2) 您怎样看待这些年来, 中国互联网平台越来越严苛的审查制度?

(What do you think of the increasingly strict censorship on Chinese Internet platforms over these years?)

(3) 走到今天, 人们似乎在逐渐习惯互联网审查, 并且他们会通过截图、谐音、

玩梗、数字化技术等来逃避这种审查。您怎样看待这种“审查与反审查”的博弈？

(Today, people seem to be getting used to Internet censorship, and they evade this ubiquitous censorship by using screenshots, homophones, memes, and digital technology. What do you think of this “censorship vs. counter-censorship” game?)

- (4) 您如何看待“舆情”？(What do you think about the "public opinion monitoring"?)

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