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From “Non-Governmental Organizing” to “Outer-System” – Feminism and Feminist Resistance in Post-2000 China

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Abstract

In post-2000 China, both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance have changed, and the change embodies a swing away from the ‘non-governmental organizing’ path that characterizes the development of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. This article addresses this ‘paradigm shift’ in Chinese feminism by examining the ‘outer-system’ political stand of the post-2000 feminism and the domains of feminist action through performance art, philanthropic organizations and cyber feminist articulations. It proposes that the absence of formal organizational structure in post-2000 feminism challenges our understanding of feminism as a process of ‘non-governmental organizing’ in the public space and warrants a cultural analysis to understand how feminism engages in cultural contestation and subversion, often in semiprivate and semipublic spaces, to develop new and alternative cultural patterns and interpretive frames.

Key words Post-2000 feminism Outer-system Non-governmental Organizing Performance art Philanthropy Cyber feminism

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

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

-------- Interview with a Shanghai-based feminist scholar S

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

-------- Ye Haiyan (Zhao, 2017)
The two women cited above are obviously feminists in different ways. While the former resides in formal academic and political institutions and is engaged in making changes from within, the latter is a feminist of her own kind, paying no respect to the existing political system and the state apparatus of women, the Women’s Federation. This difference, easily gone unnoticed, is in fact rather meaningful, as it both points to a central clue and provides a key for how to understand the changing landscape of feminism and feminist resistance in post-2000 China. For decades since the reform period began, bottom-up feminism in China has followed the path of non-governmental organizing to create new organizations and institutions outside the state orbit to address women’s issues and feminist concerns (Hsiung et al. 2001; Milwertz, 2002, 2007; Wesoky, 2002; Wang, 1996, 1997; Li and Zhang, 1994; Zhang and Xu, 1995; Min 1999). These organizations, together with many other social organizations that have blossomed under the relatively relaxed political climate of the early reform period, become a symbol of the emerging ‘civil society’ and hence a promising sign of democratic development in China (Howell, 2003; Brook and Frolic, 1997).

Since the new millennium began, both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance in China has changed significantly. First, the Chinese government has over the years tightened the grip on social organizations, making it both difficult and risky to organize and to engage in organized activities (Shi, 2016; Chen, 2016; Yuen, 2015). This has restrained the possibility of organizational building and led to a mutation of the mode of organizing in feminism. Second, in tandem with the intensified gender discrimination and patriarchal backlash in Chinese society, women of different social classes, occupations, age groups and sexual orientations have stood up to fight back, often with greater degree of spontaneity and without a long, formal organizing process and formally organized structures. Third, many of the existing non-governmental women’s organizations, be it academic Women’s Studies or project-based NGOs, have after decades of operation become somehow specialized and institutionalized. Post-2000 feminists find these established NGOs narrow in focus and stiff in forms and are therefore reluctant to align with them. Fourth, new technological development in the new millennium, especially ICT, has paved the way for virtual mobilization and cyber communication and hence facilitated the emergence of new and alternative channels for feminists to come together. Physical organization building is not the only option any longer.

While the established NGO feminism is still alive and active in their own way, post-2000 feminism in China is anything than the ‘non-governmental organizing’ paradigm could suggest. In post-2000 China, both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist resistance have changed, and the change embodies primarily a moving away from the ‘non-governmental organizing’ path that characterizes the development of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. This article examines this ‘paradigm shift’ in Chinese feminism and dwells upon two interrelated questions. First, if the borderline in Chinese feminism has changed and ‘non-governmental organizing’ no longer represents what the new feminism is, then where does the borderline lie now and what alternative term do the new feminists use to describe who they are and what they stand for? Second, if feminism in post-2000 China, especially in the 2010s, no longer follows the path of non-governmental organizing, then what is feminism (s), where and through what channels and in what forms does feminism (s) manifest
its’ existence and struggles? In the following, I will devote two sections to address the two questions respectively. The article ends with a section of concluding remarks where I will briefly reflect upon some of the theoretic implications involved in the understanding of post-2000 feminism in China.

In this article, I use ‘post-2000 feminism’ and ‘new feminism’ concurrently to refer to the wide spectrum of feminist protest taking place over the last two decades, especially in the 2010s. Emerged in the post-2000 epoch, new feminism contains first and foremost a generational dimension, given that China has undergone profound demographic changes over the past decades and a new generation has come of age and entered society with their generational characteristics (Sabet, 2011; Zhao, 2011). Post-2000 feminism, in this sense, is feminism of the new generation and feminism that springs out of the new generation. In talking about feminist generation in specific, however, the notion of ‘new generation of feminists’ is mainly associated with the Feminist Five and the diverse groups of young action-orientated activists who played a central role in the series of feminist protest around 2012 through their bold and unconventional performance behavior on the street. In a broader sense, however, feminist protest in today’s China takes various forms and unfolds from all different arenas, and not all active feminists fall exactly into the category of this action-orientated feminist group. In this article, the term of ‘post-2000 feminism’ or ‘new feminism’ refers to both the high profiled action-orientated feminist activism and other scattered feminist articulations and resistance in everyday life.

**From ‘Non-Governmental Organizing’ to ‘Outer-System’: the changing frontier in Feminism**

Bottom-up feminism in China emerged in the process of opening-up and economic reforms in the 1980s. Being set in motion by the post-Mao Chinese leadership to push China toward the direction of modernization, the reforms soon resulted in a retrenchment of state control and growing spaces for societal and economic lives (Hsiung et al, 2001; Wang, 1999; Young, 1999), which in turn catalyzed the sprout of non-state initiated feminism. Post-Mao bottom-up feminism comprises two wings: one is the academic Women’s Studies in forms of research centers and teaching programs and one is the project-based women NGOS dealing with various practical gender issues in society (Wan, 1988; Wang, 1997; Milwertz, 2002). The latter began to arise in the 1980s but gained a momentum in the 1990s in the aftermath of the UN Fourth Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 (Zhang and Xu, 1995; Wesoky, 2007; Hsiung and Wong, 1998; Zhao and Haste, 2012; Zhang, 2009). In both cases, the development has followed a ‘non-governmental organizing’ path through which feminists set up groups, organizations and institutions from the scratch and employ these organized platforms as a leverage to address gender issues, educate the public, provide services, support to women in vulnerable situations and, in the end, create social changes (Hsiung et al. 2001; Milwertz, 2002; Milwertz and Bu, 2007). Non-governmental organizing breaks the state ideological and organizational monopoly on women’s issues and opens a whole new terrain for women to organize by themselves and for themselves.

The post-Mao non-governmental feminist organizing, however, has never been a smooth, straightforward and even process. Not all organizing attempts have given birth to an organization, and not all the organizations that sprout out have developed an equally tangible and solid form. Some
of the Women’s Studies centers and institutes, for instance, were ‘three without’ and exist only on papers (Hsiung, 2001; Du, 2001; Min, 1999; Li and Zhang, 1994), while other organizations came into being but did not manage to survive all the way through. Notwithstanding, decades of tenacious efforts to organize have left a clear imprint on the organizational landscape of reform China. Never existed and impossible to exist before, Women’s Studies societies, associations, centers and institutes proliferated all over the country, while project-based women NGOs mushroomed in the North and South to tackle pressing gender issues, such as reproductive health, domestic violence and migrant workers’ rights (Hsiung et al. 2001; Milwertz, 2002, 2007; Wesoky, 2002; Wang, 1996, 1997; Li and Zhang, 1994; Zhang and Xu, 1995; Min 1999). Some of the NGOs have, with the financial aid from international donor agencies, grown into a routine, robust and influential player of gender politics. For the sake of simplicity, feminism following the ‘non-governmental organizing’ path can also be referred to as NGO feminism.

Back to the 1980s and 1990s, many of the remarkable women individuals who rode the wave of non-governmental organizing were all formal state employees, as either university teachers/researchers or cadres from the state institution of women, the Women’s Federation (WF) and WF local branches. They were on the state payroll list and enjoyed a high degree of job security as the Chinese metaphor ‘iron rice bowl’ implies. Since the state did not pay them for doing NGOs, these women simply moon-lighted NGOs while performing their normal work duties (Hsiung, 2001; Du, 2001; Min, 1999). In doing so, they skillfully exploited their position and the possibilities within the “the old socialist system” to the advantage of their NGO activities (Hisung, 2001, p.441). In the words of Li Xiaojiang, the pioneer of Women’s Studies in the Chinese academia in mid 1980s, “we were all parasitical to the old system.” And it is largely owing to this ‘parasitical relationship’ that many of the emerging Women’s Studies programs and women NGOs at that time “could survive and develop” without “additional administrative cost, human and financial resources” (Hsiung, 2001, p.441).

Thus, “(A)n essential aspect of Chinese women’s organizing” “entails a subtle choreography of exploiting opportunities, seizing new grounds, and floating with the current within as well as in-between Women’s Federation spaces” (Hsiung et al., 2001, p.12). In the process to establish Women’s Studies and women NGOs, post-Mao feminists had in varied degree cooperated with the Women’s Federation, the state institution of women, and “drew heavily upon” the resources and networks that were available within the WF system (Hsiung, 2001; Croll, 2001). The Women’s Studies movement, for instance, had strategically utilized the “intraorganizational relationship” (Hsiung, 2001, p.440) with the WF to carve out a space for the development of popular Women’s Studies programs. Li Xiaojiang calls this strategy of creating something new by taking advantage of the old or existing system a feminist “two-route approach” (Hsiung, 2001, p.441). Post-Mao NGO feminists thus remain ‘non-governmental’ in what they aimed to organize and achieve, but they were all deeply embedded in the old socialist workplace system and had strategically cooperated with the state institution of women in the process to create Women’s Studies and women NGOs.

Post-2000 feminism rises from a different social origin and under a condition that is utterly different from that of the 1980s and 1990s. Age wise, the activists are younger, typically in their late twenties
and early thirties. Most of them are not on the state payroll list and have not advanced high enough on the social ladder yet to become socially well-established because of their young age. The backbone of the post-2000 feminist activism comprises university students, i.e. young women under education, post-graduates who work as volunteers in various philanthropic organizations, and young women individuals with diverse social background and occupational status. This social positioning renders the post-2000 feminist activists a rather special vantagepoint in feminist politics: they are more grassroots, closer to the lower end of society, not only obviously ‘non-governmental’ in being and doing but also directly outside the formal organizational/institutional framework of the society and the established ladder of socioeconomic ‘success’.

A better way to understand the political stand of the post-2000 feminism is to turn to the Chinese term tizhi (system体制) and the concomitant tizhinei (inner-system体制内) tizhiwai (outer-system体制外) divide. Unlike the English term ‘state’ and ‘government’ referring solely to the political system,体制 connotes both the political system and any other formalized institutional structures, such as economic system (经济体制), educational system (教育体制) or Civil Service system (公务员体制). Post-2000 feminists use ‘tizhi’ to refer to all formally organized structures, including the state workplace/payroll system, the formal labor market, the Women’s Federation and even the well-established major women NGOs. Belonging to none of these structures, they see themselves simply as ‘outer-system’ feminists. They doubt about the usefulness of these large structures for their feminist cause; are strongly skeptical towards the option of co-opt; and prefer to stay tizhiwai (outer-system体制外) so that they can wage feminist protest from outside.

Post-2000 feminists see all formal organizational structures and institutional affiliation a hindrance to their feminist activism. They do not even bother to become an approved NGO, seeing that registered NGOs “tend to be less independent than their unregistered counterparts” (Deng, 2010, p. 198). They deselect the prospect of getting a ‘decent’ job on the formal labor market as well, be it the academia or business, as they believe that such job would restrict their freedom to engage in feminist activism at will. They want to keep distance from any forms of systemic confine and restriction so that they can become ‘a free body’ able to define and involve in what they think is important and meaningful. They regard themselves as truly ‘grassroots feminists’ who have neither personal interest tied up to any formal organizational/institutional structure nor obligation to it. As one activist proudly announces, ‘(we) don’t play with the system any longer’ (我们不和体制玩了) (Zhang, 2015). In her book titled “Don’t Be Quiet, Start a Riot! On Feminist Activist Performance”, Rosenberg writes how transnational feminist protest cultures have “taken advantage of anarchist suspicions against capital and the state” (Rosenberg, 2016, p.223). Global feminist anarchism “rejects the legacy of ready-made systems of thought to make space for creativity” and is “anti-authoritarian and radically individualistic” (Rosenberg, 2016, p.224). This description fits the post-2000 Chinese ‘outer-system’ feminism perfectly well.
Performance art, (right-defense) Philanthropy and Cyber Feminism: the changing mode of action
The changing frontier in feminism from the post-Mao ‘non-governmental organizing’ path to the ‘outer-system’ path in post-2000 China bears far-reaching repercussions for the dynamics and the development of Chinese feminism. In staying ‘outer-system’ and detached to formally organized organizational structures, post-2000 feminism carries a more grassroots and oppositional edge and operates in a manner that is characteristically spontaneous, diffusive and guerrilla-like. Basically, post-2000 feminism manifests itself mainly through tripartite activities which can be abstracted as performance art, (right-defense) philanthropy, and cyber feminist communication and articulation.

Performance art refers to feminist protest activities through body performance and behavior art on the street. Since the 2010s, especially around the year 2012, series feminist performance events unfolded throughout China, and these include the ‘Occupy Men’s Room’ campaign in Guangzhou, Beijing, Xi’an, Wuhan, Chengdu and Hangzhou, and the protest against Shanghai Metro company’s message on the company’s official microblog which singled out women’s ‘improper’ dressing style as the cause of sexual harassment in metro. During the latter protest, two young women boarded a carriage of Shanghai Metro Line 2, wearing light clothes and holding a poster in their hands saying that ‘I can be provocative but not to be harassed’. Moreover, feminist activists shaved their heads to protest gender discrimination in higher education admission; they circulated their topless pictures to collect signatures for anti-domestic violence legislation; and some showed up on the street wearing blood-stained bridal gowns to draw public attention to the problem of domestic violence (Voiceyaya, 2016). As this kind of performance protest takes place in public spaces, they are also described as “street behavioral actions” (Wei, 2015, p.281). To honor these innovative and eye-catching feminist activities, the Chinese media designates 2012 as the “first year of Chinese feminist activism” (Wei, 2015, p.281).

Performance protest neither requires nor relies on any formally organized structure to materialize itself. On the contrary, all the above-mentioned street behavioral actions were carried out by a small number of participants, sometimes “even a single individual” (Wei, 2015, p. 294), and one does not need a formal membership affiliation to join the events so long one is attuned with feminist beliefs and willing to step forward. As so, Wei views performance art as a kind of “individualized collective action” or “deinstitutionalized tactics” (Wei, 2015, p. 294-295). For Wei, performance art, due to its’ high individual and low organizational profile, reduces the potential safety risks and is thus a carefully chosen survival strategy of feminism, given that the Chinese government tends to tolerate individual activists but “continue to remain alert about civilian organizations and…organizational activities with sensitive backgrounds and involved with issues beyond the control of the government” (Wei, 2015, p. 295). But one could perhaps argue that performance art is not merely a surviving strategy but exactly what post-2000 feminism is about. Because street performance takes place in a spontaneous, open, inclusive and non-hierarchical manner, it offers any ordinary rank-and-file citizens the possibility to participate and voice their concerns (Zhang, 2015). As Ai Xiaoming recapitulates, the activists involved in performance art “have a strong and independent sense of citizen subjectivity” (Zhao, 2016). They constitute a true ‘pressure group’ from below and outside, and they have through
their performance art and their distinctive media image send “a signal to young people like them” that this is “a feminist movement that appeals to the participation of ordinary people and relates to the lives of all” (Li, 2015).

Characterized by “openness, spontaneity, contingency, (and) criticality” (Wei, 2015, p.285), feminist performance art “theatricalizes a provocation in public space as an anarchistic method of directing attention to issues” (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 219). By performing on the street, feminist activists create a shocking and sensational moment and a strong visual effect that appeals directly to the audience. Like the Guerrilla Girls in the United States who “were not only gaining the attention of the masses in the streets, but also critiqued the norms of society that were often ignored” (Rhyner, 2015, p. 18). Chinese performance feminists are also confronting, questioning and challenging social norms and taken-for-granted gender assumptions in society and hence engaging in a feminist ‘cultural revolution’ which aims to subvert patriarchal gender dogma, reset social gender values, and enact attitudinal and behavioral changes. They scrutinize state policies and market praxis for gender-bias and inequality, and they are far more vigilant and quick-witted than the earlier NOG feminists in watching and responding to immediate media and social happenings where gender is at stake.

In carrying out feminist performance protest, the protesters’ own body becomes a means of protest and hence a signifier of the new ‘cultural’ feminist politics in which identity constitution and ideational changes are mediated through the material and corporal female body. As the female bodies “are constituted within discourse, rules, norms, and institutions formulated and dominated by men,” they also have “an inherent potential to resist domination and power relations” (Sassoon-Levy and Rapaport, 2003, p. 382). Like the Femen moment, Chinese performing feminists also write their slogans on their bare skin and “use their bodies as scenes in which protest literally unfolds” (Rosenberg, 2016, p.222). By “putting their face and body at the frontline of protest”, “addressing body-related issues as the major subject matter” and at the same time “politicizing everyday life”, these feminists are “constructing new interpretive frames and challenging dominant cultural patters and codes” (Sassoon-Levy and Rapaport, 2003, p. 380). Here the female body functions as “a means of self-empowerment, and/or as constructing counterhegemonic identity” (ibid., p. 382), and performance protests “have symbolic intent-they concretely signify discontent against the status quo and are meant to also fire up public passions” (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014, p.253). In the words of professor Ai Xiaoming, “the body-based protests strike a powerful visual knock” as they simply wage “an absolute counterattack from a place impossible” (Shi, 2015). Bodily protests also attract public and media attentions by taking advantage of sexism and sexist culture. As Zheng Churan, one of the Feminist Five, explains, “if we don’t do it in this way (using our body), the media won’t come and report our protest acts. Sometimes, it just works to show your legs” (ibid.). As Rosenberg refers to what Rebecca Schneider has stated, “feminist performance art accentuates the body in political purpose” (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 222).

(Right-defense) Philanthropy is the term I use to refer to the domain of post-2000 feminist activism through self-initiated or self-claimed philanthropic organizations. While launching cultural performances on the streets, post-2000 feminists also ‘organize’ and work for philanthropic
organizations as a venue of their feminist activism. Many known activists of the 2012 have had the experience of either setting up such organizations or working for this kind of organizations. Wu Rongrong, one of the Feminist Five, for instance, were actively involved in several philanthropic organizations and served as a volunteer for these organizations for years. She has, amongst others, worked for Beijing Aizhixing Institute (北京爱知行研究所), Beijing Yirenping Center (北京益仁平中心) and the Working Group on the Right to Education (受教育权工作组). She also set up a philanthropic organization called Hangzhou Weizhi Ming (杭州蔚之鸣) in Hangzhou in 2014, with Li Tingting and Zheng Churan, the other two among the Five, as her coordinating partners (Li, 2015a). As the Chinese word for philanthropic organization is Public-Welfare-Organization (公益组织), these feminist activists are also referred to as Feminist-Public Welfare-Personage (女权公益人士) (Li, 2015a).

All these philanthropic organizations could in general be termed as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in English. But there is a mismatch between the concept of NGO and the changing political reality of social organizing in China, and the mismatch obscures the fine line between formal NGOs (registered and approved) and informal NGOs (without registration and approval). Since late 2000 and early 2010, NGO organizing in China has undergone a turning point in two directions: one is the mushroom of grassroots humanitarian, disaster relief philanthropic organizations after the great earthquake in 2008 in Sichuan (Shieh and Deng, 2011), and one is the tightening of control on NGOs in tandem with the ‘stability maintains’ policy of the Xi regime (Yuen, 2015; Zeng, 2016). This change fueled a new type of social organization which could be loosely termed as NGO but is fundamentally different from the officially registered established NGOs (Howell, 2007). These organizations often adopt a philanthropy-laden name, and they are often self-claimed and loosely organized without a formal NGO registration. Howell calls this “bypassing of the registration process” (Howell, 2007, p.19). In a strict legal sense, they are in fact ‘illegal’ or quasi-illegal organizations (Saich, 2000; Deng, 2010). Many these organizations are not eligible to apply for foreign funding as the established women NGOs would do due to their ‘illegal’ status (Shi, 2016), but as the philanthropic market in China is in a rapid expansion (Deng, 2010), they could manage to attract small-scaled domestic donations and survive financially on ad hoc basis.

Perhaps the English term ‘philanthropy’ is misleading as well, as many of these philanthropic organizations are ‘philanthropic’ in name and ‘rights-defense’ in content. They are micro feminist cells working to defend and protect the rights of women and other socially disadvantaged groups, and they operate typically in a ‘grey zone’ between the public and private space most of time. Taking the self-claimed feminist Ye Haiyan as an example. Since 2005, She marked herself as a truly grassroots feminist by setting up several offices of her own, such as China Grassroots Women’s Rights Center (中国民间女权工作室), Hubei Provincial Women’s Health Service Center (湖北省女性健康服务中心) and Duckweed Health Service Center (浮萍健康服务中心), to advocate women’s and citizen rights. Self-erected, these offices ran without a legal NGO status and depend on the commitment of volunteers and the number of volunteers for daily function and activities (Zeng, 2016). With these offices as a platform, Ye Haiyan animates her feminist/social activism, striving to help women in
need, including divorced women, single women, sex workers, women exposed domestic violence, elderly women, abandoned children and children with disabilities (Ye, 2009). In a way, these philanthropic ‘organizations’ represent an innovative feminist mode of action, and that is to act upon individual or loosely networked feminist initiatives to defend women’s rights under the façade a philanthropic organization without being too much bounded to organizational procedures and formalities.

The economy of these organizations can be both fragile and instable from time to time. As so, working for these organizations warrants neither job security nor financial payoff (Zhang, 2015). On average, a volunteer could get a pay for two or three thousand Yuan per month at best, and these organizations can be forced to close in no time at the presence of police harassment. Philanthropic feminism is hence a form of feminist volunteerism that plays out in semipublic and semiprivate spaces. At this point, philanthropic feminists distinguish themselves from both what normally understood as ‘charity women’ and established NGO feminists. They are a group of same minded and dedicated activists who came together under the banner of a philanthropic organization to fight for gender equality and social justice on their own premise. At the core of philanthropic feminism lies the spirit of volunteerism, social activism and altruism. When being asked how she could keep working for feminist philanthropic organizations for only three thousand Yuan payment per month while having the possibility to earn much more elsewhere, Datu (the nickname for Zheng Churan, one of the Feminist Five) answered assertively, “why not?” (Lee, 2016).

**Cyber feminism** is the term I borrow to describe how post-2000 feminism “makes use of the Internet and social media to advance their causes and connections” (Yuen, 2015, p.56). In the post-2000 era, China witnessed “an online movement of feminist critique”, as feminist activists use various online platforms to raise their voices, spread their messages and organize protest activities. As Professor Wang Zheng notes, “(T)he most vibrant feminist organisations and female NGOs are currently very active online.” In describing how cyber space has become a battle field for feminism and feminist protest, the Feminism in China project explains, “(W)ith the main media controlled by the government and the market, feminists are marginalised and lack resources to access a wider stage where their voices can be heard”. Hence, like “most dissident voices in China, feminists have also found their way onto the Internet to pass on their message and mobilise other women for the feminist cause.” Platforms like Sina Weibo, China’s biggest microblog, and video-sharing website Youku, are the main windows for feminist display and counterattack.

Cyber feminism in post-2000 China consists of two streams. One is the online manifestation of the same feminist activism that has been active in street performance and philanthropic organizations. One brilliant example of such cyber feminism is the Media Monitor for Women Network based in Beijing, “the first action-oriented folk group focused on media and gender in Mainland China.” As the Network’s homepage describes:

In 2009, Media Monitor for Women Network initiated the feminist e-paper Women’s Voice, which comments and analyzes current events related to women’s rights and
gender equality, follows up and responds to the mass media’ reports on women/gender issues, reports women NGOs’ actions, introduces translations of information on international women’s movement. This e-paper is especially well-known for its rich information, special and critical gender perspectives.

Media Monitor for Women Network made its first appearance in social networks in 2010, followed by its official Sina Weibo account renamed as “Feminist Voices” in April, 2011. With its stand in feminism, perspective from civil society and action–oriented work, the account has remained one of the most active accounts on feminism and has facilitated as well as supported online awareness raising activities with influence.

In 2013, the WeChat public account “Feminist Voices” went into operation. Currently Media Monitor for Women Network owns the following websites and media accounts: www.genderwatch.cn, www.china-gad.org (understaker), “Feminist Voices” Sina Weibo, “Fight back Equality to Grrls” Sina Weibo, “All About Domestic Workers” Sina Weibo, “Feminist Voices” WeChat public account, Gender Watch E-monthly, FeminisTV, and exclusive accounts at websites including Youku, Yeeyan and Douban.

The homepage continues:

Through the communication platforms above, Media Monitor for Women Network is currently the most accomplished new media operator in women/gender domain in mainland China. Over dozens of lectures, training courses and workshops every year help develop new blood for civil women movement, marked by the raise of awareness in potential groups, particularly the young generation in mainland China. In 2012 and 2013, Media Monitor for Women Network facilitated and supported about 30 advocacy activities on anti-gender-based violence and gender discrimination, which raised wide attention and are propelling the amendment of certain policies. The work by Media Monitor for Women Network and its partners can be seen in many women’s rights events or discussion under spotlight.  

As the Feminism in China project describes, Women’s Voice “has one of the most influential Weibo on gender issues with over 25,000 followers. The page is covered with general news concerning women, publications and reports as well as useful female-related links. Their channel on Youku, which is called Feminis TV, also has over 200,000 followers.”  

Aiming to “promote gender equality in media and women’s communication rights”, the Media Monitor for Women Network acts through “research, training, advocacy, writing, media liaison, production of alternative media and resource development”. Since 2012, it “facilitated and supported a great number of influential public advocacy activities on women’s rights, which accounts for part of the achievements of “the Young Feminist Activists” in mainland China. It initiated close contact with these activists and has provided them with the support of communication and training.” As Wang Zheng describes, feminist activists use
their newsletter which “is circulated only by email to a group of subscribers. Whenever they want to stage a protest in public space, they wake up very early. They go out, perform their protest by shouting slogans in front of a government building film it and they get out of there before the police shows up. Then they publish the video online.” With the help of the social media, feminist activists circulate the news of their protests quickly and widely, which in turn magnifies their feminist voices and enables them to constitute a strong critical force.

Another stream of cyber feminism consists of a strip of individuals and on-line groups who are not necessarily a part of the “Young Feminist Activists” known for their series of landmark feminist protests in year 2012 and around. An attention-grabbing example of such individual-based cyber feminism is again Ye Haiyan, known as the Hooligan Sparrow. Initially working as a Karaoke lady and later a sex-worker, Ye has led a precarious life under precarious conditions outside the ‘normal’ life path that most society would choose. This makes her a provocative person and a feminist of an ‘unusual’ kind. In her own word, ‘I am a feminist from nowhere’ (我是在野的女权主义者) (Zeng, 2016, p.44). Apart from running her own philanthropic organizations to champion the rights of women and sex workers, Ye writes candidly about sex and her life as sex workers in the social media, directly defying social taboo around sex work and cultural prejudices against sex workers. Going online in 2000, she published personal notes, essays, short stories of nearly 500,000 words and became a well-known online blogger for her unique style, insights, light and playful words. Ye Haiyan aroused a startling public sensation in 2013 when the news of a school girl in Hainan being taken to a hotel room and molested by the school principal flooded the media. While a legal case against the Principal was brewing, Ye Haiyan stepped out, using performance art to voice her anger and dismay at sex abuse of school girls. She stood in front of the school gate, holding a placard which reads "School principal, take me to the hotel and let go of the pupils". The picture of her circulated quickly on the social media, making her a symbol of the feminist protest wave against sexism and sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Besides, a quite number of feminist-minded on-line virtual communities and chat groups have flourished over the years. A quick random search, for instance, gives at least 15 such online groups, with the earliest being set up in year 2006 and the latest in year 2014, and the number of participants vary from 17 as the smallest to 35989 as the largest. The names of these groups are self-evident: “Feminism”, “Feminist Association”, “My Feminist Friends”, “Women’s Rights and Interests”, “We Are all Feminists”, “Left Feminists”, “Women’s Prospect” etc. Having a different profile and focusing point, these online groups watch and comment media and social affairs, engage in feminist ‘gaze’ and scrutiny, question gender blindness and bias, and air feminist concern and standpoints. They thus fashioned a vocal feminist environment in the cyber space, where feminist counterattack is launched promptly to combat anti-feminist attitude and subvert male chauvinist cultures.

One example of such online feminist group is Baidu Feminist Post Bar, the birthplace of feminist culture on the Baidu search engine which was first launched in 2007. The Post Bar has account on several platforms of social media simultaneously, such as Weibo (http://weibo.com/baidufeminism), QQ (http://t.qq.com/baidufeminismbar) and WeChat. According to a post appeared on Jianshu on October 15, 2015, the first batch of microblogs was posted on March 26, 2013, and over the next two
years or so, about 6.29 tweets were published averagely on a daily basis, bringing out feminist comments, sarcasm and critique on current hot topics (Yip, 2015). The public account on WeChat was established and began to publish since July 2014, and up to now over 500 people have been following it. A post on Weibo, for instance, interprets the successful stories of two women entrepreneurs from a feminist lens. It highlights the fact that these two women (Dong and Tao) sprang out and became a successful business woman only after their husbands had passed away. One of the women states clearly that she wouldn’t have achieved so much if her husband was still around. “He would not allow me to move to another city to start my business,” says the woman (Yip, 2015). This ‘thorny’ post reminds women how the patriarchal idea that women should remain behind their husbands in career still exists and overshadows marital relations in Chinese society.

Concluding Remarks

In post-2000 China, both the frontier and the landscape of feminism and feminist protest has changed, and the change entails a swing away from the ‘non-governmental organizing’ path that earlier Chinese feminists have traveled throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Post-2000 feminism rises from outside the formally organized and institutionalized sociopolitical structures, and they also choose to distance themselves from these structures. This ‘outer-system’ political stand echoes what Rosenberg calls ‘global feminist anarchism’ which “rejects the legacy of ready-made systems of thought in order to make space for creativity” and “is anti-authoritarian and radically individualistic” (Rosenberg, 2016, p.224). Post-2000 feminism manifests itself simultaneously in three domains of actions: performance art on the streets, (right-defense) philanthropic ‘organizations’, and feminist articulation in the cyber space.

Post-2000 feminism warrants a ‘paradigm shift’ from the earlier ‘non-governmental organizing’ mode to a cultural analysis and calls attention to “the development of alternative cultural patterns” and how feminism “change dominant cultural patterns and codes” (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003, p.380) through their “accidental, impulsive, and spontaneous” actions (Kulynch, 1997, p. 337-338, quoted from Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014, p. 253). At this point, performance art on the streets and cyber feminism form the main “repertoire’ of the ‘culture revolution’ that post-2000 feminism engages and stands for. Not only street performance actions “signify discontent against the status quo and are meant to also fire up public passions” (Helvey, 2004, p. 34, quoted from Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014, p. 253), but also feminist activists use their own body as “a site of cultural contest, a flexible signifier of identities and meanings, and an anchor of political knowledge and action” (Klawiter, 1999, p. 109, quoted from Sassoon-Levy and Rapoport, 2003, p.381). Meanwhile, by engaging in feminist scrutiny and critiques in the cyber space, post-2000 feminists are “politicing everyday life and constructing new interpretive frames” for gender and gender relations in society (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003, p.380).

Post-2000 feminism “comprises a loose network of activists.” The “absence of formal organisational structure” implies “the emergence of a form of network-based civil society rather different from the conventional form based on NGOs” and “gives a lot of flexibility and fluidity” for the feminists to design and execute their intended actions (Yuen, 2015, p. 56). Many set up their own philanthropic
organizations or work for this kind of organizations, but these ‘organizations’ often have neither a registered organizational status nor a formal organizational format. Moreover, they are ‘philanthropic’ in name but ‘right-defense’ in nature, and they operate in a space that Engebretsen calls ‘semiprivate’ and ‘semipublic’ (Engebretsen, 2014, p.7). This innovative feminist praxis represents a skillful feminist maneuver in a political climate that has become much harsher than before towards social organizing of NGOs. In the sense of formal organizational building and social movement, feminism is perhaps ‘nowhere’ to find in present-day China, but in terms of everyday resistance and cultural contestation and subversion feminism is out there and ‘everywhere’.

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1 For the Femen movement, see https://femen.org/about-us/
3 See note 17.

5 http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/detail.jsp?fid=300074&cnID=200105


9 See Ye Haiyan on Baidu Baike. Retrieved February 27, 2018 from https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8F%B6%E6%B0%93%E7%87%95?fromtitle=%E6%B5%81%E6%B0%93%E7%87%95&fromid=4797653.