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Shanghai Red House Incidence on Weibo: Praxis of New Feminist Cyberactivism in Mainland China

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Abstract:

This study explores the dynamics of feminist cyberactivism in China, using the Shanghai Red House Incidence as a case study to analyze the impact and limitations of social media, specifically Weibo, in advocating for women's rights and feminist causes. Despite the increasing surveillance and censorship by the Chinese government, which has constrained traditional forms of activism, the paper reveals how women in China have adapted their strategies. By employing symbolic imagery, multiple hashtags, and referencing popular culture, these activists circumvent censorship, fostering a new form of de-organized, grassroots digital activism. At this point, no academic articles have been published on the incident. Leveraging Vegh's cyberactivism categorization framework and analyzing a rich dataset of over 2,000 Weibo posts, this paper employs qualitative content analysis and quantitative analysis to uncover the nuanced ways feminist activism morphs within authoritarian confines. This research contributes to the understanding of how social media platforms serve both as spaces for feminist expression and as battlegrounds against state surveillance in China, highlighting the evolving nature of feminist cyberactivism in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: feminist cyberactivism, social media, Red House Incidence

1. Red House Incidence on Weibo

"The red house is on the Huangpu River's north. This place used to be where a tailor named Zhao Fuqiang made his fortune and where dozens of women's nightmares began. It was filled with money, violence, lust, coercion, and sin, an infernal hell built with women's blood and tears." This heartbreaking excerpt from a December 2021 article published in the *China Business Journal* entitled "Uncovering The Secrets of The 'Little Red House' — Its Inside Story Is Unimaginable" was my first time learning about what has come to be known as Shanghai's Red House Incidence. By the time this article was published, it had already been a year since Zhao Fuqiang, the owner of "Red House," was sentenced to death in September 2020 for his involvement with the case. (Fuqiang is still in jail due to a deferral of his death sentence.) This news article, which circulated on social media, marks the first time the case was widely discussed. As a woman born and raised in Shanghai until middle school, I was furious about how delayed the report was and how the article downplayed women's experiences and narrated them in a fictional way as if telling a legendary antagonist story. When I searched "Shanghai Red House Incidence" on Sina Weibo, a primary Chinese microblogging website, in December 2021, it only said, "According to relevant laws and policies, the topic page is not displayed."

This experience prompted me to ponder how much news and posts on the Shanghai Red House Incidence are still available online, how netizens react to the Shanghai Red House incident, what might cause such a delay in reporting on the incident, and whether social media helps to raise consciousness regarding feminism and women's rights in China. Through analyzing posts about Shanghai Red House Incidence on Weibo, the essay examines the limitations of social media as well as its possibilities for empowering feminism in China.

2. New Cyberactivism on Weibo

As the internet became increasingly essential in social activism since the 20th century, social movement theorists have coined the concept of "cyberactivism" to describe the incorporation of recent technology as a tool for social change in virtual spaces (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Naples, 2006). Authors like Liu Ting have applied the feminist activism concept and theory to analyze the role of "women organizing" in feminist "cyberactivism" in mainland China and Hong Kong in 2008. Chinese "women organizing" established their websites with help from global and exogenous donors to penetrate the party-state's totalising control of information. Following Jaschok and Milwertz (Jaschok et al., 2001, p. 6; Milwertz, 2002, p. 1), Liu Ting uses the concept of "organizing" instead of "organization" in describing the cyber activism to avoid the debate over "structural features of the organization" in China's party-state system. Cyber-feminism in China shifted away from "women organizing" websites and grew increasingly on social media like Weibo beginning in 2015. Online feminist movements, including "Nudity Against Domestic Violence" and "Vagina Event," from 2012 to 2013 on Weibo reinforced women's bodily and sexual autonomy (Holly Lixian Hou). The online feminists demonstrate their agency and creativity in establishing a new genre of body politics, resisting gender and political repression, which would not be realized in real life because of the state's surveillance (Hou). However, as the nationwide, large-scale #Me Too campaign took off on Weibo and other social media in 2017, there was increasing online censorship of content related to feminism and women's rights (Leta Hong Fincher, 2018, p. 6). Indeed, in the past five years, the cyberspace for feminism in mainland China has changed drastically.

This paper re-examines the role of social media platforms in feminist cyberactivism in the contemporary Chinese context in 2020, specifically looking at the role of Weibo in the most recent Shanghai Red House Incidence in 2021. At this point, no academic articles have been published on the incident. The paper considers the Red House Incidence as a case study to argue that since the increasing government surveillance of social media, like Weibo, in the past decade, the role of social media in "cyber activism," especially in advocating for women's reproductive rights, is increasingly limited. Especially for cases where political corruption and sexual abuse meet, social media like Weibo have limited impacts in raising awareness. Despite this limit, women in China seek new methods to raise awareness or circumvent surveillance. Feminist "cyberactivism" in China has evolved despite the challenges; women have started utilizing tactics like sharing photos that contain words and photos that are upside down, using multiple hashtags in relation to other prevalent hashtags that are not banned from raising awareness, referring to fiction and TV drama that symbolically refer to the social events, and so on. Moving away from previous scholars like Liu and McCaughey, the paper avoids using the word "organizing" in describing online feminist advocacy and argues that with increasing surveillance on "women organizing" activism in mainland China, "cyberactivism" in mainland China has transformed into a more spontaneous, down-to-up, and de-organized form.

3. Methods

In this paper, I focus, in particular, on Weibo, one of the biggest social media platforms in China with over 582 million monthly active users as of Q1 2022. Even though there was no content displayed when I searched for keywords, including "Shanghai Red House Sexual Harassment" and "Zhao Fuqiang Incidence," there is one hashtag that continues to be active called "Shanghai Red House Incidence". The hashtag was first used at the end of 2021, somehow circumventing censorship by not containing any sensitive keywords (sexual harassment) or names (Zhao Fuqiang), and continues to be active until now. I found 2230 original posts (each original user is counted once), around 41,000 posts and reposts that use the aforementioned tags, and 33,166,000 views up until May 17th, 2023. I then used cluster sampling, where I divided the posts into three chronological clusters: December 2021 to May 2022, when the Red House Incidence was first widely reported and started to gain attention; June 2022 to November 2022, when the hashtags were forbidden and the reports were taken down; and December 2022 to May 2023, which gets us up to the present day when the paper was written. I collected all 20 posts from the first cluster, 90 random posts from the second cluster using SRS (Simple Random Sampling), and all 26 posts for the last cluster. In this essay, I used quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the data I collected about the Red House Incidence on Weibo.

4. Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis Through Vegh's Cyberactivism Framework

With increasing active users on social medias, there are diverse approaches in cyber-feminism and activism. Vegh defines cyberactivism as "a politically motivated movement relying on the Internet" which can be either "Internet-enhanced" or "Internet-based" (Vegh, 2003, p. 71). He further classifies online activism into three general categories: awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization, and action/reaction. In the following section, the paper examines the 136 posts on Weibo that uses #Shanghai Red House Incidence using Vegh's cyber-activism framework.

Distributing and accessing information is one of the crucial ways in feminist cyberactivism. "Awareness", according to Vegh, is "achieved by accessing information that is relevant to the cause" (Vegh, 2003, p. 80). In recent years, Weibo's role in raising feminist awareness about social events like the Red House Incidence has

become increasingly limited as most of the hashtags about these events are prohibited, and the only hashtag for the incident that I could find, "The Red House Incidence," use an entertaining tone that downplays the severity of the incident. "The Red House" often refers to where rich women or prostitutes lived in ancient times. The hashtag phrases the incident as if these women are voluntarily providing sexual services while they are forced and inhumanely treated. It also uses a frivolous and entertaining tone, catfishing the netizens to click on it without clearly demonstrating them the severity of the incident.

The empowering role of Weibo in raising awareness is further limited as the visibility and public exposure of the existing surviving ones are intentionally limited (*ya redu*). According to Weibo, on May 17, 2023, the real-time prevalence of the hashtag Red House Incidence, which is calculated as 30% number of reads, 30% discussions, and 40% original posts in the last 3 hours, on a scale of 0-10, is 0. In the last 30 days of May 17, 2023, the topic trend, which is the topic's prevalence, maintained close to 100 views daily. The highest was on April 19th, 2023, skyrocketing to 2830 in one day. However, it is unclear what caused such a sudden increase in the views of the hashtag because no new posts are using this hashtag on that day, and the most prevalent news on that day is all irrelevant to the Red House Incidence.

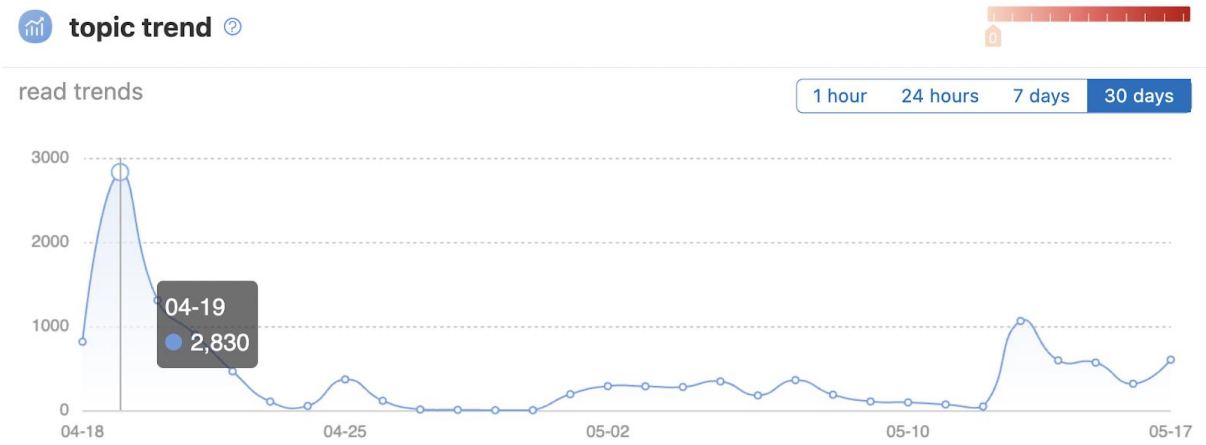

Figure 1. Topic Trend of the Hashtag "Red House Incidence" on Weibo

Weibo's ability to raise awareness of women's right is further prohibited as political corruption and sexual abuse meet, complicating the focus of the incidence. When I searched in March 2023, the earliest post I could find under the hashtag started in December 2021. Only twenty posts from the first cluster (December 2021 to June 2022) use the Shanghai Red House Incidence hashtag. (However, when I returned to the hashtag page to check the posts in May 2023 again, all posts before June 2021 disappeared). 45% of the posts express public outrage and disappointment about law enforcement, justice, and societal issues, especially corruption; 25% criticize the censorship of media and the low coverage of the news; only 20% express concerns for women's rights and well-being. Up to 70% of the posts focused on political corruption and censorship, dominating the discussion on the incidence on Weibo. With increasing surveillance on social media, free speech became a higher priority than raising awareness on women's rights. One of the netizens, Hhhqunimua, in the first cluster questions social media's effectiveness in raising awareness:

> Is internet development really helping? After the incident, the relevant media and related accounts that had previously competed for coverage have lost their voices and shut down their comments one after another, so why don't they liberalize the discussion? These are obviously social problems, is the only way to solve the problem is to suppress the voices? I don't understand this world, let alone this society. It's really disappointing.

The post demonstrates the challenges for netizens to distribute and access information in the contemporary Chinese cyber space. Before raising awareness around women's rights, the netizens face the more urgent and impending problem of social media surveillance.

Beyond social media surveillance, feminist cyber activism on Weibo is further complicated by the new internet regulation in China that requires netizens to display their IP starting in April 2022. To comply with the Chinese government's regulations, major platforms such as WeChat and Weibo have turned on the feature, starting to display the IP affiliation of all users (Dong, 2022). By reinforcing regional differences by revealing users' IP

addresses, such new regulations blur the major concern of the social events, direct audiences' attention, and shift the discussion to other irrelevant information, including the region where the netizens are posting. Indeed, up to 10% of the posts about Shanghai Red House Incidence in the first cluster contain regional attacks toward Shanghai. Netizens focused more on protecting or attacking the metropolitan image of Shanghai, rather than the women persecuted in the incidence. In response to the post which defended Shanghai and claimed that Shanghai Red House Incidence is in fact committed by Sunan and Subei people rather than Shanghainese, one of the netizen, Qiuzhifengbiluo, ridiculed Shanghai, asking how can a metropolitan like Shanghai be embroiled in a scandal like Shanghai Red House Incidence: "Does non-Shanghainese take over Shanghai? Can't you tell a person coming from Sunan or Subei?"

Nevertheless, despite the limitations on cyber spaces on Weibo, to avoid surveillance and bring more attention to the abuse of women's rights beyond this sole event, women netizens started to utilize techniques, including using multiple hashtags. Using a simple random sample method (SRS), I randomly chose 90 posts from the second cluster (June 2022 to November 2022), where 354 posts and reposts use the hashtag. Compared to the first cluster, a lower percentage of posts, around 38.33%, demand justice and express outrage and disappointment in the social injustice and crime; 26.66% question the low coverage of the news and the governmental censorship; an increasing number of posts (30%) express concerns for women's right alongside with other events including the Xu Zhou Chained Women Incidence in January 2022 and Tangshan Restaurant Attack in June 2022, and 1.66% expresses disappointment toward Shanghai. Of the 30% who advocate for women's rights, 100% of the users are women (Weibo uses binary gender identity). In August 2022, netizen Zhan Er Ran posted:

> "She's reading #Fangshi's First Love Paradise. She goes job hunting #Shanghai Little Red House Incidence. When she lives alone #Xinhua Road Luggage. After she got married #Wife killing and body shredding case in Hangzhou. After her divorce #Ram died of arson by her ex-husband. After she gave birth #Xuzhou released the progress of the investigation of the woman who gave birth to eight children in Feng County. She took a taxi #Drip taxi air hostess killed. She took the subway #Official response to the Xi'an subway security guard dragging the woman. She stayed in a hotel #The attack on a girl at the Summer Palace Hotel. She went to dinner #Tangshan Incidence. She went for a morning run #The suspect in the murder of a woman on a morning run was arrested. She went for a night run #Leshan woman killed in night run case murderer gets the death penalty."

Zhan Er Ran raises awareness of women's rights by compiling all the current crimes where women were persecuted and harmed. Even though these events are chronologically apart, they tie closely with each other and are non-linear. The compilation of hashtags not only helps the post to circumvent surveillance because it includes hashtags that are not banned, but they also invite the other netizens to empathize with women and their needs through these horrifying cases. Zhan Er Ran also commented, at the end of the long list of events, "When she is not angry, you said she is weak; when she is angry, you call her a feminist boxer." In Chinese, feminist boxer and feminist have the same pronunciation. Feminist boxer is a new word that mocks women for being "overly aggressive" in speaking up for their rights. Zhang Er Ran uses the list of hashtags to demonstrate that women must speak louder, considering their rights are abused, and gender equity can never be achieved if women are silent.

Because texts are easier to track and block, netizens also included texts in the photos to evade surveillance. In the following photo, the netizen called Hotpot and Fried Bean Curd Skin starts with a list of rhetorical questions:

> "If you don't even speak up, who do you think can speak up for [women in China]? Are you expecting those aunties who have to work in the field during the day and at the bathhouses at night because their husbands never work? Those girls who cannot finish middle school and sell steamed buns for the family? Those women who have endured domestic violence and been told by their parents not to divorce because they already have children? Those single mothers who have three children and are harassed by drunk men while returning from work?"

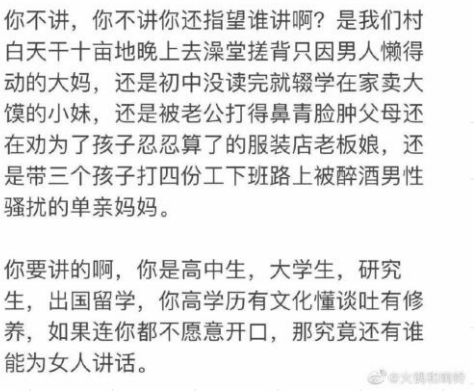

Figure 2. Weibo Post by Netizen Hotpot and Fried Bean Curd Skin

These rhetorical questions reveal various challenges that women faced, including a lack of education and domestic violence, which limit them from the online feminist movement. Finally, after the questions, the author calls all the viewers to speak up. She says: "You have to speak up. You are a high school, undergraduate, and graduate student. You are international students who have studied abroad. You have a high level of education, and you have been well-educated. Who can speak up for women if you don't even speak up?" These photos, which are attached to the post, underscore the importance of other netizens who have the resources and time not to be bystanders but activists. It demonstrates that the online feminist movement has evolved with the increasing surveillance and is still making a social impact and raising awareness through these new strategies. More importantly, it is worth noticing people with higher education seem to carry higher responsibility in this online feminist movement.

Women netizens also use photos full of symbols in the post instead of words, which could be detected, to circumvent surveillance and raise awareness about feminist rights and issues. The following photo uses a bloody background, alluding to the inhumane treatment of women in the various cases that violated women's rights. The chain and the "Baby * 8" on the top left probably allude to the Chained Women Instance in Xuzhou. The building in the middle might symbolize the Red House in which the women were locked. The human head in the down, left corner represents power. Power and alcohol together equal an Immunity Medal from Death in ancient times. The knife and the benches probably refer to the Tangshan sexual harassment incident. Finally, the fists, in a downright way, might refer to the sarcasm that Chinese feminists often face, which is being called a "feminist boxer." The symbolism in the photo implicitly reminds the viewers to speak up for women in the face of injustice and oppression. Weibo probably has not yet developed the ability to detect implicit images like this. Women netizens, therefore, use this strategy to raise awareness for women's rights. The non-verbal, non-textual, but symbolic expression is a new strategy of online women's feminism that has been growing in recent years.

Figure 3. Weibo Post by Netizen zzz7chromia-shero

Besides tying other related events to the Red House Incidence to prevent people from forgetting about them, women also raise awareness by connecting it with literature works and trending TV shows. I collected all 26 posts in the last cluster, which ranges from December 2022 to May 2023, which is the time when the essay is being written. Out of the 26 posts, up to three comments refer to popular fiction works. While these posts seem to comment on the literature, they refer back to the Red House Incident. In these four posts, the netizen talked about how the three books *Please Snow Before Night Comes*, *Room N Tracking Diary*, *I Turn the Criminals Over to the Country*, and the TV show *The Knockout* are based on or similar to the Red House Incident. They remind the viewers that reality and the abuse of women's rights are often more horrifying and inhumane than literature or shows.

However, it is worth noticing that women netizens not only use photos and literature to raise awareness and speak up, but they also use photos to teach other women to protect themselves. In the following images, the netizens made a compilation of posters that shows the most prevalent and unpredictable women trafficking methods, including giving out free sanitary pads, conducting street interviews, pretending to be government agents, sending women to quarantine hotels, etc. These photos demonstrate the various purposes of pictures in the evolving online feminist movement.

Figure 4. Weibo Post "Women's Trafficking in Ways You Wouldn't Expect"

According to Vegh, "organization/ mobilization" is another strategy of "cyber activism," which uses the Internet for mobilization, distributing emails, or posting messages on websites to call for offline action. Posts from all three clusters employ the "organization/mobilization" strategy, pressuring the Chinese government and calling for a harsher punishment (death penalty) for Zhao Fuqiang: "Why Zhao Fuqiang is not sentenced to death? Where is justice? It is just a lip service and a piece of empty paper." Strong public pressure resulted in the authorities giving a harsher penalty to Zhao Fuqiang. Meanshile, it also leads to the suppression of protest voices. However, some people from women's groups insisted on speaking out online when mainstream media became relatively silent on this matter.

The third method of organization and mobilization in cyberspace is 'action/reaction' — that is, to "call for an online action that can only possibly be carried out online" (Vegh, 2003, p. 75). This is considered, by Vegh, to fall into the last category of cyber activism, 'hacktivism,' which refers to online attacks committed by 'hackers' (Vegh, 2003, p. 75). Such method does not seem to be present in the Red House Incidence, as Weibo succeeded in limiting the public exposure and the real-time prevalence remains zero.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of posts on Shanghai Red House Incidence on Weibo demonstrates both the limiting and empowering role of social media in feminist cyberactivism within contemporary Chinese cyberspace. While providing new platforms that allow netizens to spontaneously post and advocate without the need for exogenous support in previous women organizing settings, Weibo is limited in its role in feminist cyberactivism with increasing surveillance and strict implementation of the new IP affiliation policy. However, women's evolving strategies, including posting photos containing symbols and multiple hashtags, gesture toward the future possibility of feminist cyber activism in contemporary China. Indeed, the cyberspace of China is ever-changing; how cyber activist registers their discontent with the status quo remains a question that needs further investigation.

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