'Rice Bunnies' – #MeToo in China: A hashtag movement and women's empowerment through social media

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1. INTRODUCTION

2018 was a year of media headlines and public conversations around sexual abuse and sexual violence. In October 2017, #MeToo a hashtag movement spread virally on social media platforms carried new attention to the pervasive issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault against women. This movement arrived out of the public revelations involving allegations of sexual misconduct made against Harvey Weinstein, a powerful film producer-mogul and rumoured long-time sexual predator in Hollywood.

He was accused by scores of women who worked for Weinstein's movie company of unchecked harassment and sexual abuse including assault that spanned over 30 years. Shortly afterwards after the revelations, many other women came forward to report allegations of sexual abuse by other men in the movie and TV industry in Hollywood. This accelerated to reports from other industries and institutions in the USA with varying repercussions. This outpouring of accusations led the way for women all over the world using Twitter's social media pages to share their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment using the hashtag #MeToo.

In 2018 #MeToo was transferring from the west to China and this began an uneasy journey in China's social media, under the backdrop of complex censorship laws, public sensitivities and repressions around gender and sex. According to Giannini and Bowen (2019), what has made these movements more powerful than ever, is the digital ecosystem to which we are all connected within. Our global network where people are communicating *sans cesse*, brings awareness to causes and crises, while setting the stage for things to break virally at any moment. This particular

hashtag movement acted as a testing ground for women who challenge sexual harassment in China whilst raising wider attitudinal positions. In my research (Han 2019), the analysis of the #MeToo phenomena in China come from interviews and the collection of data from online discourse, and in making the inevitable comparisons with the West.

Figure 1: #RiceBunny as its replacement pronounced "Mi tu," "Rice Bunny".

2. APPROACH

Approaching such a subject requires a broad sweep in understanding the generalities that underpin gender issues in contemporary China. To be able to recognise the contexts fully, consideration of Chinese history and tradition and their place in contemporary China needs to be weaved into the story. I have argued that the #MeToo movement gives Chinese women a new self-empowerment through using social media. This is derived not from straightforward confrontational struggles against patriarchy or producing any game of 'catch up' with 20th-century western women's liberation movements, but a movement based on regional female identity in step with the creation of a harmonious society that is, to coin the phrase, 'with Chinese characteristics'. This extends to digital feminism with Chinese characteristics creating a new 'middle-class' female identity in the

process where women validate and empower themselves through freedom to express an opinion and to be visible under the strictest censorship in a politically sensitised media environment. I approached this with the hope for its potential to produce progressive outcomes, whilst also giving serious consideration of the realities around gender in China today.

As a product of the Internet 2.0 era, social media platforms produce unprecedented speed in information dissemination. This speed and immediacy support, for the first time, the modern consciousness of Chinese women to express themselves without any party organisational approval or their immediate intervention.

A large-scale empowerment movement voicing self-identify being both critical and rebelling against patriarchal social power structures culturally still feels possible in China. Social media platforms have in their essence potentials for public participation, plus convenience functions such as praise reward, forwarding, theme tags, discussion groups and so on. Social media has the conditions crucially for viral dissemination information. Theme tags and forwarding functions play an important role in the #MeToo campaign. The #MeToo theme tag can even in its translation be seen as the banner of this movement. As long as the 'label' or associated label is used, it receives responses from public opinion; for example, Tsinghua University's professor Changjiang launched the hashtag "#I will be your voice" Weibo stories.

'The People' magazine (China) published a public questionnaire to quantify the existence of sexual harassment and sexual assault to discover what kind of predicament women were regularly accustomed to and how institutional disadvantage operated. In less than 24 hours, more than 1,700 stories related to sexual harassment and sexual assaults were received. In these stories, women from vulnerable positions who had remained silent over long periods came forward. Because several women choose to stand up and bravely reveal their experiences of sexual assault and accuse specific parties directly, the #MeToo campaign had captured public attention and gained rapid momentum and energy in China. From within education colleges to the philanthropic communities, then expanding to the attention of media and intellectual circles, each encouraged more victims to speak out.

On 27 July 2018, the Tsinghua professor Liu Yu posted the article "About #MeToo" on her WeChat official account. The article affirms both the meaning of the #MeToo movement and some of its most controversial critical points. For example, the individual actions under the banner of #MeToo are

alleged to "speak out freely with big-character posing the great debate"; however, this is seen as contrary to the spirit of the rule of law in China. Liu Yu, as an opinion leader, had led to discussion on the value of public opinion created by netizens themselves and in promoting the development of the Internet #MeToo movement.

Figure 2: (top to bottom) Hua Mulan Chinese Warrior (Before Disney's *Mulan*); Li Maizi in a 2012 protest against domestic violence in Beijing; Women and Lambs in Chinese Communist Propaganda; VaVa (Mao Yanqi) Rapper (4+ million fans on Weibo).

The new visual turn in China is recognisable in the proliferation of representations of women outside of its communist propaganda. Predominantly in useful application within capitalist pop culture consumerism. Using recognisable archetypal figures and in the old edict that "sex sells". The dominance of women in China's 'new visual turn' is not just left to its private sector.

The Communist Party of China's propaganda department since government was inaugurated introduced a thorough review of the new visual means using markedly different methods from traditional discursive strategies: applying Confucian ethics, articulation within Internet-based popular culture and subcultures. The 'new visual turn' in communist discourse whilst part of the shaping the mainstream political culture in China does not address its male chauvinism.

#MeToo gave China a collection of moving and relatable verbalised narratives each then written up and interwoven with strong, often citizen-led evidenced reporting. Each story contributed in building on the un-seen story of women in China. Hitherto, these aspects are not 'visualised' in any larger meta-narrative of the experiences of Chinese women. Globally, #MeToo shared similar scenarios in depressingly repeated universal themes. In their

telling however a process of humanising occurs across cultures that strives for emotional honesty and visual descriptiveness that tests our human skill of telling difficult stories.

3. CONCLUSION

How we tell these difficult stories; using statistics, analogy, creating visual languages, signs and symbols, using mythology or history or in the playful manipulation of language itself (for example, Rice Bunny) all seem valid experiments in China. As to how important #MeToo will be in the writing of the historical record of digital activism and Chinese women rights it is too early to say. The efforts of activists and artist; the vast accumulation of articles and commentary from citizen journalism; and the 'tweets' in social media, will all form part of the legacy in future historical accounting of #MeToo in China.

4. REFERENCES

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