Chinese Feminism under (Self-)Censorship

Practice and Knowledge Production

ZENG Jinyan

This collection of six essays is developed from a webinar titled ‘(Self-)Censorship, Social Activism, and Chinese Feminist Scholarship’, which was held on 10 July 2020. Chinese feminism today faces increasing pressure for (self-)censorship at both domestic and international levels, on issues of social activism, the politics of identity, and the politics of representation. The webinar aimed to explore the problem of how to deal with the impact of ideological conflicts between China and the West, and to develop strategies for dealing with local and international (self-)censorship of Chinese feminism. Meanwhile, we hoped to update our understandings of ‘what Chinese feminism is’ from conceptual, historical, organisational, and activist perspectives.

Some of the participants—Ye Haiyan (an online writer who advocates for sexual liberation and the rights of sex-workers, women, and, in particular, children), Xianzi (a young feminist and survivor of sexual harassment), Feng Yuan (an important women’s rights and gender equality activist and former professor of women’s studies), the historians and socially engaged scholars Wang Zheng and Dušica Ristivojević, and Huang Yun (a scholar of political philosophy)—respond here to three questions that were raised during the webinar:

How do you see yourself as a Chinese feminist activist/scholar?

Have you experienced or studied local and international (self-)censorship in your activism or work? If yes: 1) How do you deal with it? What kind of strategies do you use

in your activism or work? And 2) What are your research findings and recommendations regarding (self-)censorship and Chinese feminism?

How should Chinese feminism be represented? What are the differences between Chinese and non-Chinese forms of communication and discourse on feminism?

Censorship presents itself as a form of monopoly and hegemony over discourse and practice—against feminism in general, and within the feminist community as well. Both repressive powers and resistance struggles use (self-)censorship as a strategy to advance their own agendas. This complexity of (self-)censorship requires feminists to be aware of the mechanisms that reproduce power and the collusion of repressive powers in our own feminist knowledge production and practices. The experiences of all the participants invite us to think about why individual women, #MeToo activism, or feminism in general are targeted in China. Considering the closure of independent film festivals, village library projects, and various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in 2012 (Zeng 2016b), as well as the detention in 2015 of the ‘Feminist Five’, I used to argue that censorship practices are more tolerant of individual critique than of (potential) collective expression or action (King et al. 2013; Karl et al. 2015). Feminism has shown the potential to become a leading force in activist networking in China’s fragmented world of social activism over the past decade. This has resulted in it being placed at the front line of suppression, accused of aiding foreign powers and of acting as a subversive force (discussed in Wang Zheng’s and Huang Yun’s essays; see also Zeng 2016b). My own gender-specific explanation of state censorship is that women’s bodies are perceived as part of the field of socioeconomic production—as labourers (both in workspaces and as dominated labour in the domestic sphere), as agents of reproduction, and as consumers. As a result, censoring, filtering, and redirecting women’s bodies, desires, and subjectivities are at the centre of China’s political and social engineering agenda, regardless of its socialist rationale or the exploit-

ative and capitalist nature of the market economy in the wave of Confucian revival (Greenhalgh 2005, 2008, 2010; Rofel 2007; Xiao 2014; Ho et al. 2018).

In this collection, each response provides a unique and intimate personal account (sometimes with contradictory perspectives) of the experience of (self-)censorship in relation to Chinese feminism. Each represents the author's specific reflections and strategies for advancing feminist practice and scholarship. The combination of empirical testimony, ideas, and theoretical thinking from activists and scholars found here highlights the self as method and an approach to knowledge production for feminist studies based on lived experiences.

Wang Zheng, a professor of modern Chinese history at the University of Michigan, situates her experiences in both temporal (1989–2020) and spatial (China–US/global) dimensions, and reflects on her identity as a 'diaspora activist'. In this brief biographical essay, Wang recalls that she publicly called herself a feminist (女权主义者) in Chinese settings when others called themselves 'women researchers' or 'women's work cadres'. Wang was the leading figure in launching women's and gender studies in higher education in China in the 1990s. She highlights self-censorship as a strategy for feminist networking in China while also noting that this strategy isolates and limits feminist work by detaching it from politically 'sensitive' issues, such as the labour movement and the defence of human rights (Wang 2010; see also Yu 2015). Wang's identities as a diasporic Chinese activist and a professor at a prestigious US university have mediated the critical translation of feminism (for instance, on the question of the terminology of 'class' versus that of 'stratification') in both directions between China and the English-speaking world. Multiple power dynamics within feminist translation projects and activism are described in her analysis. In particular, Wang critiques the use of 'othering' language to devalue others in discussions of the complexity of feminist activism and feminist knowledge production in an authoritarian political context. The problem of 'othering' invites us to consider further how to form feminist solidarities at both local and international levels, and within the feminist community and beyond. Recently, Wang launched the website

Chinese Feminism (女权学论) to create an online space for Chinese feminism in the context of the tightening political control of civil society that is occurring in China.

The activist Ye Haiyan, also known as Hooligan Sparrow, became a popular and controversial online writer in the 2000s. She recounts her feminist experiences and activism from the perspective of female sexual liberation. She shares her experiences of encountering censorship and violence because of her nude photos and discusses understanding women as the targets of social discipline, violence, and punishment. In Ye's view, she, a liberated woman, has been censored by both established powers and the public because of her gender, class identity, lack of qualifications (for speaking out), and the 'value' of her discourse. Censorship has weakened Ye's voice. To break through that censorship, Ye has also adopted self-censorship as a strategy, with a kind of bottom line based on 'speaking out according to common sense'. Meanwhile, she also describes how representing herself in terms of a subaltern social status has operated as a strategy to protect her from mass violence. Her experiences show us how a feminist activist from the grassroots or from 'among the people' (民间, *minjian*), and with an anti-elitist standpoint, can break through the hegemony of discourse by speaking out using online publishing (of text, audio, and visual materials), street performance, and showing the process of one woman's liberation of herself (for a detailed discussion of Ye's work, see Wang 2016; Zeng 2016a; on the practice and meaning of *minjian* 'speaking out', see Veg 2019).

When she was an intern in documentary journalism at *China Central Television (CCTV)*, the young feminist Xianzi accused host Zhu Jun of sexual harassment. Her contribution describes how the state endorsed Zhu Jun for its own sake (and later unendorsed him), and how the market-based mass media reported her and other similar cases. Such reportage is not simply about 'public interest', but also brings commercial benefits, in terms of online traffic, to these media companies. I would like to underline this unique perspective on the media from Xianzi, who is both a media practitioner and a feminist activist. The combination of market forces and the power of tradi-

tional culture has driven the spectacle of sexual violence and #MeToo cases in both mass and social media discourses, thus complicating, twisting, and censoring feminist efforts. In addition, Xianzi describes how, while #MeToo is a last resort for desperate survivors of sexual violence—due to the lack of normalised channels through which to pursue justice—supporters work tirelessly and anonymously to support survivors, who in some cases display complicated traumatic responses to their experiences. Xianzi notes how the members of her feminist online network actively cooperate with each other and survivors and how they have used encrypted software (for example, Signal) for campaign communication. Meanwhile, the network is careful to avoid targeting state authorities (the police and university administrators, for instance) and to focus its efforts on the sexual violators and rape culture. Discussing factional debates about feminism on Chinese social media and the challenges of dealing with the activist-survivor relationship, Xianzi asks what kind of feminist solidarity we should forge and seeks to develop a non-exclusive attitude to dealing with the relationship between feminist activists and survivors of sexual violence.

As one of the earliest feminist activists in China, the journalist, former scholar, and NGO founder Feng Yuan notes that anti-sexual harassment activism has achieved great progress in China thanks to the ‘coming out’ of survivors, the development of support networks, and the improvements in the political and social environments in which it operates (legal definitions of sexual harassment, cases going through legal processes, increasing media reportage, and mutually evolving discourses) (for a more comprehensive review of the anti-sexual harassment movement in China, see Feng 2019). Indeed, even while the Chinese Government refuses to acknowledge the claims of ‘radical’ feminist activism, it integrates legislative and policy recommendations from feminist voices. In contrast to the strategy used by feminists of avoiding ‘politically sensitive’ issues as a form of (self-)censorship, rendering anti-sexual harassment activism politically sensitive is a strategy used by censors and violators to silence anti-sexual

harassment voices. Thus, Feng promotes a ‘desensitising’ approach to anti-sexual harassment work, to represent women’s subjectivities, and to achieve feminist goals in practice.

Huang Yun’s choice of career as a scholar of political philosophy is at least partially a result of (self-)censorship, while at the same time, negotiating the terrain of (self-)censorship is essential to her career survival in China. Huang describes herself as ‘intervening in present reality by means of taking a step back to do research and developing scholarly reflection as an activist’ (以后退一步的研究介入当下的现实, 作为行动者展开学术思考). Her involvement in #MeToo activism at Peking University in 2018 resulted in Huang being forced to quit her job. In Huang’s view, women’s rights and feminism are largely ignored in the discipline of political philosophy. Thus, in thinking about liberalism, she turns to the field of feminism and everyday life as an entry point to shaking the fundamental paradigm of male-centred domination. Huang develops a contextualised liberal feminism for China, while critiquing Chinese forms of Marxism and postmodernism, both of which have strong connections to, or have identified themselves with, the Chinese state. This contextualised liberal feminism—based on Amartya Sen’s and Martha C. Nussbaum’s studies of poor Indian women—seeks to integrate gender issues, human rights discourses, and theories of justice to develop a Chinese version of the capability approach.

Dušica Ristivojević, a researcher in modern Chinese history born in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in what is today Serbia, describes her personal and research experiences from the perspective of post-socialism in the global community. She interprets different levels of (self-)censorship in feminism through the word ‘silence’—that is, ‘the act of not publicly articulating and displaying our thoughts, feelings, and actions’. Such silence results from pressures both within China (the risk of endangering research informants or losing collaborators because of critical feminist inquiries, on the issue of Xinjiang, for example) and in the international academic community (accusations of being a ‘Chinese nationalist’ for holding the view that China’s subjectivity in international

politics is framed exclusively in terms of its human rights record). Ristivojević keeps silent until she can formulate a position that is critical of *both* Western neo-imperialism and Cold War logic and rhetoric, on the one hand, *and* China's nationalist, xenophobic, neo-imperialist discourses and practices on the other. Her decision to adopt this standpoint reflects a desire to investigate critical feminist thought and practice as though she is embedded in Chinese society rather than being a 'Western' or 'academic' observer, even though Ristivojević self-identifies as an 'outsider' to Chinese feminism. Somehow, she must find an alternative method—to not publish her research on women's and regional activism in China to protect those within it from political danger, until a safer situation arises. Some of Ristivojević's experiences are also felt more generally among early-career Sinologists and critical China scholars.

The individual and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards (self-)censorship found here are also useful for us to explore the issue of authenticity, in philosophy and in the arts, in feminist understandings of self (including that of activists, research informants, and researchers), in practice, and in knowledge production in China. This authenticity in representing Chinese feminism contrasts with the Chinese Marxist representation of women and feminism, which occurs in terms of a grand narrative of the representation of class in an epic movement, and their determination by the socioeconomic foundation and historical inevitability. What we try to bring out in this collection about the representation of Chinese feminism is discursive, individual, and disruptive in terms of non-totalising contingency. Meanwhile, interpretative dichotomies found in some Western scholarship—such as victim/survivor, oppression/resistance, or 'big brother' versus 'small potato turned heroine'—have simplified the diversity and complexity of Chinese feminism in conditions of (self-)censorship, and feminist meaning-making in Chinese discussions of intersectionality (for more discussions of Chinese intersectionality, see Wang 2017; Greenhalgh and Wang 2019). The question of authenticity might guide us through ideological conflicts and political whirlpools, as well as

tensions between theory and practice within the existing constraints. Thus, authenticity, which describes a way of representing Chinese feminism, leads us faithfully towards feminist solidarity and a feminist future. ■

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