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**The Impact of Digital Feminist Activism as Informal Education on Young Women in
China**
by

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Abstract

This capping project explores the complex dynamics of gender issues in contemporary China, where women are increasingly empowered yet remain oppressed by societal structures. The rise of digital feminist activism, particularly following significant events like the 2015 detention of feminist activists, has transformed the landscape of feminism in China, enabling young women to engage with gender issues through online platforms. This activism serves as a form of informal education, facilitating awareness and mobilization around pressing issues such as sexual harassment and gender inequality. Utilizing Lazar's feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), the capping project examines how Chinese digital feminist activism challenges patriarchal norms and promotes gender equality. The project highlights both the potential of digital platforms to foster feminist consciousness and the internal conflicts arising from traditional cultural values. Ultimately, the project underscores the importance of inclusivity in feminist discourse and the need for solidarity among women to combat systemic oppression, while also addressing the challenges faced by digital feminist movements in China.

Keywords: digital feminist activism, informal education, FCDA, China

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Introduction

The main contradiction regarding gender issues in China today is that women—across all ages and classes—are more powerful, independent, and self-respecting than ever, while Chinese society and the government stubbornly insist on keeping them in subordinate positions, refusing to pay fair compensation for their labor contributions (Leung, 2003). This creates the soil for Chinese feminism, allowing it to represent women on the frontlines of social conflicts. The growth of women and feminism parallels economic development, where the demand for *high-quality* female labor in modernization simultaneously generates a new generation of patriarchal resisters. In China, resources and spaces for feminism have always been limited until the Internet popularized feminist ideas. This means that the Internet not only has popularized feminism, but also has brought feminism into the everyday lives of Chinese women (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Nau, 2020). Women's sharing of their life experiences online has created a large discursive project that disrupts the normalization of gender inequality, providing sharp critical interpretations and resistance strategies for various unnamed female dilemmas, enabling more women to identify themselves within this context (Papacharissi, 2015). The internet has also generated numerous intense and impactful debates, allowing women to reinforce their sense of self-worth through repeated passionate discussions on gender issues (Wu & Dong, 2019).

In March 2015, five Chinese feminist activists were arrested and detained by the police for planning to organize a national initiative to oppose sexual harassment against women in public spaces and raise public awareness about anti-sexual harassment (Fincher, 2016). This incident marked a signal of the criminalization of feminist activism in China, but also became an opportunity for the emergence of digital feminist activism in China. Since 2018, Chinese

feminist activists have used social platforms to mobilize and advocate for some emerging women's issues through their grasp of public opinion and professional operations. The #MeToo movement, the revision of the Marriage Law, the enactment of the *Civil Code of the People's Republic of China*, and the news of trafficked women have all been utilized by feminists to spread the ideas and thoughts of gender equality to young Chinese women and to call on them to rebel against the current misogynistic social climate in China. The efforts of digital feminist activists have undoubtedly contributed to the realization by countless Chinese women that they are being treated unjustly. A large number of young women are involved in what has become known as Internet education, which is redeemed as having the potential to challenge China's political system and alter the public discourse surrounding women's rights (Hou, 2020).

As a Chinese woman, I have witnessed the plight of feminism and the rise of digital feminist activism in China over the past 15 years. I am pleased to see that in recent years, digital feminist activism has led more Chinese women to think about the current gender inequality in China, and I am proud that young Chinese women are becoming leaders in resisting China's patriarchal traditions and totalitarian rule. At the same time, I have also observed the huge controversy caused by the conflict between the views of feminist activists and traditional Chinese culture in online discussions, and the resulting stigmatization of feminism. Given the conflict, the controversy and stigmatization of feminism, there is a need to further explore feminist activism from differing points of view.

Purpose statement

The purpose of this capping paper is to investigate the following: 1) in what ways does digital feminist activism function as a form of informal education to mobilize Chinese young women and improve their awareness of gender issues, 2) what attitudes do Chinese young women have towards digital feminist activism, and 3) what challenges and obstacles

does digital feminist activism face in China. I will explore these questions through a critical review of the literature.

Guiding theoretical framework

This capping project will employ Lazar's feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) framework (2005), known for its effectiveness in identifying and critiquing gender-related discourse. Lazar argues that contemporary social science research recognizes discourse as a site of struggle, where the forces of social (re)production and contestation are at play. In line with other variants of critical discourse studies, FCDA acknowledges the interconnections and specificities of discourse strategies used in various forms of social oppression through detailed analyses of actual, contextualized language use (Lazar, 2005). However, as a political perspective on gender, FCDA focuses more on revealing the interrelations of gender, power, and ideology within discourse and theoretically analyzing the particularly insidious and oppressive nature of gender as an omnipresent category in most social practices. It can be argued that the combination of feminism and critical discourse analysis can yield rich and powerful critiques of political action.

By adopting FCDA, this capping project will not only analyze how Chinese digital feminist activism utilizes discourse strategies to challenge patriarchal social norms in China, but also shed light on the dilemmas they face in a society permeated by toxic patriarchal values.

Capping paper overview

The capping project will begin with an introduction to the definition and characteristics of informal education, and then will briefly introduce the origin of digital feminist activism, explaining why it can be classified as a form of informal education. Next, the development of digital feminist activism in India, South Korea, and other Asian countries and its impact on young women will be analyzed to manifest the potential of digital feminist activism as a form

of informal education in advocating gender equality and women's rights. It will then focus on women's issues that have received widespread attention on social media in China from 2018 to 2024, and explore how digital feminist activists use Chinese digital platforms (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, etc.) and technologies to mobilize, educate, and raise awareness of gender issues among Chinese young women. Lastly, this capping exercise will discuss the controversy caused by digital feminist activism in China and reflect on the limitations of informal education based on it.

Definition and Characteristics of Informal Education

In the OECD's definition, informal education is characterized by its lack of organization, established goals, and specific learning activities (Werquin, 2010). Consequently, informal education typically occurs within everyday activities, making it difficult for learners to recognize that they are learning, and challenging to assess or measure their learning outcomes. Similar to the OECD's definition, Richardson and Wolfe (2001) argue that key aspects of informal education should include not only a focus on daily life but also its approachability, openness, the utilization of the environment, a process-oriented approach, and interaction with participants. The National Science Teachers Association in the United States (NSTA) provided a more detailed definition of informal education (1999). Building on K-12 formal education, they describe informal education as a mode of learning that complements, supplements, deepens, and enhances classroom learning. Formal curriculum objectives or assessments are not required. The content of learning can extend into affective, cognitive, and social realms based on the needs of the non-mandatory audiences. Therefore, regardless of the variations in definitions from different scholars and organizations, there is a consensus that informal education should contrast with formal education. Unlike formal education that has specific learning guidelines, objectives and curriculum, informal education is spontaneous, experiential, and unplanned.

Based on the definition, the internet, as a tool that provides extensive interactive spaces, has increasingly garnered attention for its potential in informal learning. Social platforms like Instagram, X, and Facebook showcase a wealth of original content, allow external readers to comment in response to posts (Wei, 2009), and feature numerous interactive or educational communities created around specific interests (Clay, & Miller, 2012; Clothey & Li, 2010), all of which promote ongoing reflection among users who generate and consume content (Park et al., 2011).

Analysis of accounts focused on specific educational areas and individual users on social platforms has revealed that these social platforms, exemplified by Instagram, have become spaces for sustainable informal education (Bennett & Morton, 2021; Bush & Löns, 2024). These platforms not only serve as a complement to structured curricula in formal education but also encourage lifelong learning among users (Bennett & Morton, 2021). Furthermore, informal education based on the internet and digital tools can facilitate effective communication and dialogue among participants, making the collaborative construction of knowledge possible (Ramsurrun et al., 2024). Additionally, informal education positively influences the professional identities and careers of participants, particularly evident among post-secondary students (Han & Chai, 2024; Ramsurrun et al., 2024).

In addition to serving as a complement and supplement to formal education, the importance of informal education in promoting civic education and advancing social equity is becoming increasingly evident. Jones and Brady (2022) argue that informal education surpasses formal education in fostering students' roles as advocates for social justice. They posit that informal education, which emphasizes practice, experience, and interaction, encourages students to consider social issues from the perspectives of social justice and well-being, while also recognizing biases embedded in mainstream consciousness. Similarly, Woyshner (2023) and Clothey (2020) suggest that the integration of informal education and

the internet has made it possible to empower marginalized groups. The formation of online communities fosters respect for cultural diversity and cultural revival (Cormack, 2005; Wotherspoon, 2015). Communication and reflection among community members contribute to a deeper understanding of social oppressions such as cultural appropriation, gender discrimination, and racial bias (Clothey, 2020). By sharing experiences of oppression, discomfort, and anger, participants can connect their identities to social processes. Thus, informal education aids marginalized groups in reclaiming public spaces and amplifying their political voices (Rodó-de-Zárate, & Baylina, 2014). It can be concluded that discussions surrounding social issues within the context of practical, experiential, and interactive informal learning have become part of a broader movement advocating for social justice. The proliferation of informal education itself is a sign that social change is underway (Jones & Brady, 2022).

Digital Feminist Activism and Its Development in South Korea, India and Iran

With the global rise of social media, there is an expectation that social media platforms can innovatively advance feminist activism and promote women's awakening. Established in 2005, the website Hollaback! (now Right To Be) brought to light the issue of street harassment faced by individuals of all genders and sexual orientations, dedicating itself to combating this phenomenon (Mendes et al., 2019). A decade later, in 2015, a high school student in Canada used the hashtag #CropTopDay to protest school dress codes that unnecessarily sexualized girls' bodies (Keller, 2018; Ringrose, & Renold, 2016). Subsequently, in 2017, the hashtag #MeToo gained traction on the internet, not only highlighting the violence women endure but also sparking discussions and debates on how to challenge the rape culture (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018).

Since 2005, it can be argued that feminists have increasingly utilized the internet and social media platforms to build communities and organizations for women, while

simultaneously challenging pervasive misogyny, rape culture, and gender discrimination (Mendes et al., 2018). The emergence of digital feminism activism is regarded as a new moment or turning point in the feminist movement (Fotopoulou, 2017). It is commonly characterized by four features. First, digital technology provides more individuals the opportunity to share their experiences of gender discrimination and misogyny, ensuring that their voices are both seen and heard (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Fotopoulou, 2017; Mendes et al., 2019). Second, despite the internet facilitating communication and lowering barriers to interaction, participants in digital feminist activism often face increased risks of online bullying and mockery (Baer, 2015; Han, 2018). Third, digital feminists are required to engage in significant hidden unpaid labor, making their activism emotionally taxing and exploitative, much like other forms of *women's work* (Mendes et al., 2018). Finally, digital feminism activism is crucial for revealing the lived experiences of grassroots women and mobilizing bottom-up social movements (Mendes et al., 2019).

Digital feminist activism is seen as a platform that empowers women currently experiencing or who have previously endured social oppression to voice their political concerns, while also providing strong emotional support and solidarity (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Keller et al., 2016; Mendes et al., 2018). This solidarity often transforms into feminist consciousness, prompting women to recognize that the sexual violence they face is part of a broader structural social issue rather than merely an individual problem (Baer, 2015; Mendes et al., 2018). An increasing number of feminists are using social media as an education platform to disseminate feminist ideas; in addition to expressing their views on feminist political issues, many artists also use social media to showcase their work, articulating their understanding and interpretation of feminism (Mendes et al., 2019).

In Asia, digital feminist activism is continually emerging. The feminist movement in South Korea is regarded as relatively radical, and the South Korean internet has ignited a

noteworthy gender war. The online feminist group Megalia, established in 2015, not only encourages women to bravely share their experiences of gender discrimination but also attempts to mimic misogynistic language to mock and offend Korean men (Jeong & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2019). Furthermore, Megalia actively organizes both online and offline collective political activities to protest structural gender injustices and state patriarchy, leveraging the widespread reach of the internet. In 2016, in solidarity with Megalia and to challenge internet censorship in South Korea, the feminist art collective Silent Megaphone held several online and offline exhibitions, providing a safe communication platform for feminist supporters and encouraging more Korean women to engage in feminist activism (Jeong, 2024). In 2021, the #Women_ShortCut_Campaign on Twitter saw Korean women posting photos of their short haircuts as a means of resisting patriarchal control over their bodies and reclaiming agency over their physical selves (Lee, 2024).

In India, digital feminist activism has also notably intensified since 2015. Initiatives like #Boardthebus and #SafeCity have been launched to document the gender discrimination faced by Indian women in public spaces (Eagle, 2015; Pain, 2020), while #HappyToBleed challenges the ancient customs that prohibit menstruating women from entering temples (Pain, 2020). The #LahukaLagaan campaign, initiated in 2017 by the women's rights nonprofit Shesays, aimed to protest the government's high tax on sanitary pads (Fadnis, 2017), successfully compelling the Indian government to abolish this tax in 2018. Since then, a significant number of Indian netizens have participated in the #MeTooIndia movement, encouraging women to express their anger and embrace the full spectrum of emotions surrounding the sharing of their experiences with sexual harassment (Pain, 2020). Although the movement has faced criticism for a lack of diversity among its participants (Baer, 2015; Sircar, 2018), its positive impact on the proliferation of digital feminist activism in India is undeniable.

Additionally, in 2022, the Iranian internet witnessed the #MahsaAmini movement, protesting the gender violence faced by Iranian women for not wearing headscarves (Navarro & Peres-Neto, 2023). This movement is viewed as a response to and a complement of the #MeToo movement, prompting reflection on the oppression of women within religious contexts (Mincheva, 2021; Navarro & Peres-Neto, 2023). Subsequently, the movement evolved into a collective digital poetry initiative on X (Rezai, 2024), allowing Iranian users to express the grievances of marginalized groups within Iranian society. This internet-based literary creation illustrates the potential of the internet as an innovative and vibrant socio-cultural space.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is a methodology that arises at the intersection of feminist theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Rooted in the works of Lazar, FCDA seeks to investigate how language and discourse are shaped by and shape power relations, particularly concerning gender (Lazar, 2005). This methodological framework emphasizes how language can either perpetuate or challenge social norms and inequalities, focusing on the representation of women and feminist issues across various discourses.

At its core, FCDA involves the analysis of texts, spoken language, and visual representations to uncover the underlying ideologies that inform them. It interrogates how language constructs gender identities, reinforces stereotypes, and influences public perceptions of women's roles in society. By critically examining these discourses, FCDA aims to empower marginalized voices and promote social change.

In the context of analyzing Chinese digital feminist activism, existing research indicates that FCDA is particularly effective in understanding how online feminist movements impact young women in China (Chen & Gong, 2023; Hou, 2024; Peng, 2019; Yu

et al., 2024). Through posts, hashtags, and digital campaigns, feminist activists utilize language to articulate their experiences, raise awareness about issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence, and mobilize collective action.

Research has detailed how women's experiences and perspectives in discussions surrounding violence against women are constructed (Hou, 2024; Peng, 2022). The direct and confrontational language used by women in recounting their experiences starkly contrasts with the submissive female archetype prevalent in Chinese cultural traditions, revealing a shift in young women's attitudes toward gender issues in contemporary Chinese society (Guo et al., 2022; Peng, 2019). FCDA is also valuable in identifying counter-narratives that emerge within women's discourse (Chen & Gong, 2023; Yu et al., 2024). By focusing on the relationship between language and the construction and reinforcement of established social power (Lazar, 2007), FCDA helps identify the discursive strategies that feminists use to question existing power relations. Strategies such as irony, humor, and personal narratives are widely employed to subvert dominant discourses that marginalize women (Chen & Gong, 2023; Hou, 2024; Meng & Literat, 2023; Zhang & Mu, 2024).

By utilizing FCDA to analyze the discourse surrounding Chinese digital feminist activism, this capping project is able to explore how language strategies foster a sense of agency among young Chinese women. FCDA provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of digital feminist activism in shaping the consciousness and empowerment of young women in China, thereby highlighting the positive impact of these movements on gender equality in contemporary China.

Digital Feminist Activism in China

In March 2015, five young Chinese feminist activists were detained for planning to distribute printed materials in public spaces to oppose sexual harassment against women (Fincher, 2016). This incident sparked public discontent regarding the government's

suppression of feminist organizations and activities, leading Chinese feminists to realize that public gatherings and offline protests were no longer safe methods for advocating feminism. Consequently, despite increasingly stringent internet censorship in China, social media has emerged as a vital platform since 2015 for feminist activists to promote feminism and call for women's awakening (Tan, 2017).

The earliest feminist activism to gain widespread attention on social media originated from a post by the official Weibo account of the Shanghai Metro in 2012, which implied that the attire of sexual harassment victims was the primary reason for their victimization (Hou, 2020). This post provoked significant outrage among many young women. In response, an activist protested on a Shanghai Metro train by holding a sign that read, "I can wear less, but you cannot harass me." The photos from this event circulated online, garnering substantial support from netizens. Over the following years, uploading photos of individuals holding placards and providing narratives became a common method of promotion for Chinese digital feminists (Tan, 2017). Notably, several activists uploaded images of themselves with "Domestic violence is shameful" written on their bare skin to advocate for legislation against domestic violence (Lu, 2014; Tan, 2017); others adhered used sanitary pads to various parts of their bodies to combat the stigma surrounding menstruation (Tan, 2017).

In 2017, Chinese digital feminist activism gained momentum alongside the global #MeToo movement (Li & Li, 2017). Activists launched China's #MeToo campaign on Weibo, expressing solidarity with women worldwide and raising awareness among young Chinese women about the injustices they face in various aspects of life. Numerous incidents of sexual harassment in universities were exposed (Guo et al., 2022; Hou, 2020; Liao & Luqiu, 2022). Several mobile games faced widespread backlash from netizens for their ads that deliberately vilified female players (Liu, 2024; Sun, 2018; Yang, 2024). Additionally, many expressed frustration with the mainstream male narratives and the one-dimensional

female characters in Chinese television dramas, proposing the production of a show featuring four professional women as protagonists (Mao, 2020). This proposal sparked considerable sharing and participation in scriptwriting among netizens. Such feminist activities have undoubtedly encouraged Chinese internet users, particularly young women, to engage in the collective formation of knowledge and have facilitated the widespread dissemination of feminist consciousness through these initiatives.

This capping project will review two digital feminist movements that have garnered widespread attention on the Chinese internet from 2019 to the present. Utilizing feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), this project aims to reveal how contemporary Chinese feminists leverage social media to disseminate feminist ideas, challenge dominant gender narratives, disrupt patriarchal social orders, and promote the awakening of consciousness among young women in China.

‘Married Donkey’

As a significant topic in feminist debates within the Chinese context, discussions surrounding marriage have never ceased. The influence of patriarchy and traditional Chinese cultural values have long rendered entering heterosexual marriage—where women are often assigned subordinate roles—as a mandatory expectation for Chinese women. However, socio-economic development has prompted more women to focus on personal education, careers, and health, leading to a growing skepticism and resistance against the notion that being a wife and mother constitutes a woman’s lifelong responsibility (Liu, 2016; Luo & Sun, 2014). Increasingly, younger women are reflecting on the gender oppression hidden within marriage, viewing it as a means through which men exploit women. The term ‘married donkey’ was created in this context, often used in anti-marriage discourse (Huang, 2023).

As one of the most vehement expressions within anti-marriage discourse, the term ‘married donkey’ sparked significant controversy upon its emergence. This term refers to

women who disproportionately expend vast amounts of time and energy within the family, likened to a working donkey. Initially, the term was used to emphasize women's unpaid labor and the emotional value they provide to their families. However, its meaning has since been distorted, used to belittle married women and ridicule their perceived lack of independent thinking and family-centric focus.

In contrast to 'married donkey,' the term 'independent woman' typically refers to single and financially independent females. The stark contrast between these two terms reveals that some women engaged in anti-marriage discourse regard not marrying or having children as the only viable solution to gender inequality. The advocacy for individual choices regarding marriage and motherhood, along with the increased use of the term 'married donkey,' partially expresses the anger towards the vulnerable status of women within heterosexual marriages. While this critique holds certain positive implications for challenging adverse social traditions regarding women, unfortunately, such advocacy has not developed into a movement against discrimination towards older women or a push for diverse intimate relationships; rather, it quickly morphed into a backlash against married women online. Some young women even regard married women as "others," positioning them in opposition to unmarried women.

In response to this phenomenon, some feminists have explicitly argued that the harsh criticism of married women not only fails to improve the structural oppression faced by women but also exacerbates internal divisions within the female community:

Fascists, before persecuting a group, often deny that group's humanity. For example, the Nazis in Germany likened Jews to rats spreading disease. Referring to some women as "donkeys" similarly attempts to deny their humanity. Thus, even feminism can become a form of fascist feminism. (August 7, 2022)

The opposition between married and unmarried women essentially represents a “catfight” among women. This antagonism targets one group of women against another, rather than against the institution itself. I believe the most important goal should be to overthrow that institution. (June 22, 2020)

I think the most crucial aspect of equality is respecting others’ choices. You have the freedom to choose not to marry or have children, and you can explain why you believe that choice is better; however, you have no right to label anyone who makes a different choice as a ‘married donkey.’ Sometimes, I feel that this factional attitude is precisely a remnant of patriarchal society. (August 7, 2022)

It is evident that by comparing Jews to rats and women to donkeys, feminists highlight the term ‘marriage donkey’ as an oppressive discourse that justifies violence and discrimination. Labeling feminism with fascist implies that there may be forms of oppression within the feminist movement that mimic fascist strategies. This raises critical questions about inclusivity and the internalized misogyny present in Chinese feminist discourse. Similarly, by identifying the factional attitude as “a remnant of patriarchal society” (Downtown_Roof_4755, 2022), the text calls for a more inclusive feminist approach that respects the diverse choices of women. This not only expresses a critical stance toward patriarchal values but also reveals the incompatibility of the term ‘marriage donkey’ with the pursuit of social equality. The notion of a catfight reflects a societal tendency to create divisions among women, which weakens collective resistance. By advocating for the overthrow of institutions rather than internal conflict, the text emphasizes the necessity of solidarity among women.

Moreover, some have pointed out that while the prevalence of the term ‘married donkey’ has generated significant online traffic, it has not contributed to the expansion of

feminist discourse. Feminists' reflections on the diversity of feminist issues have been overshadowed by binary oppositions and dichotomous narratives:

The prominence of marriage and childbearing issues as mainstream feminist concerns actually reflects a narrowing of gender issues—when discussions of other feminist issues are quite limited, topics related to marriage and childbearing, which have relatively low thresholds for engagement, are easier for people to rally around.

(January 24, 2024)

I believe feminism should inherently be inclusive. It should allow for both good and bad individuals within its ranks. I feel that now is not the time for purges; rather, when you hear someone referring to others as “married donkeys,” you should recognize that their views differ from yours. Your focus should not be on their identity as a feminist, but rather on their statements, their discourse, and their evaluations of other women. If they cannot engage in discussion with the principle of equality for all, their viewpoints may be flawed; however, they can still identify as feminists, albeit imperfect ones.

(June 22, 2020)

Both texts emphasize the need for dialogue over exclusion, suggesting that the prominence of marriage within feminist discourse and calling for purges within the feminist ranks can be counterproductive. Expanding feminist discourse to encompass a wider range of issues and perspectives is integral to promoting a more friendly and inclusive society for women.

The Chained Women

At the beginning of 2022, a video on the short video platform Douyin (Chinese TikTok) garnered national attention in a short period. The video documented the life of a man named Dong Zhimin and his family in Feng County, Jiangsu Province. His wife was shown chained in a dilapidated house, dressed inadequately for the harsh winter, with missing teeth

and apparent signs of mental illness. Comments beneath the video indicated that this woman, upon marrying into the village, could speak English and was mentally stable, suggesting that her current condition was a result of domestic violence. This raised public suspicions regarding her potential abduction and experiences of domestic abuse, prompting concerned netizens to contact local police and women's federations for intervention. However, the four official investigation reports provided were riddled with inconsistencies, leading to further skepticism among the public. Journalists, civil organizations, and individuals attempting to investigate in Feng County faced obstruction from local authorities. Two female netizens even disclosed their shocking experiences of being warned and detained by local police during their investigation. It was not until April 2023 that the case concluded with charges of illegal confinement against Dong Zhimin and legal consequences for those involved in the trafficking of the chained woman.

This highly publicized incident sparked multifaceted discussions about women's rights and safety. Many began to contemplate the living conditions of women with mental disorders in rural areas. They keenly pointed out that China's current legal services and support systems for individuals with mental disabilities are inadequate, making it difficult for women with mental or intellectual impairments, particularly in rural settings, to secure equal rights:

I have conducted research on the plight of individuals with mental disorders in rural China. The prevalence of unions between older unmarried men and women with mental or intellectual disabilities is widespread, often facilitated by high bride prices, with some even being "picked up" from outside. In such "marriages," women possess no autonomy; they are either deceived or have their families make decisions on their behalf. (February 8, 2022)

In low-income areas, women with mental or intellectual disabilities still possess value in their reproductive capabilities, leading to their sale to rural men. (February 8, 2022)

China has never sanctioned anyone for infringing upon the personal freedom of those with mental disorders by means of confinement. If courts have never punished anyone for violating the personal freedom of individuals with mental illness, it implies that the rights of the mentally ill are unprotected. I believe that the legal community bears an undeniable responsibility for the stigmatization of mental disorders. (February 8, 2022)

The widely publicized incident of the chained woman in Feng County also highlighted the bravery of two female netizens. They ventured to Feng County solely to uncover the true identity of the chained woman, sharing their observations in detail on Weibo. Despite being detained and beaten by local police before encountering the victim, their accounts of resistance fueled ongoing public interest in this incident and prompted scrutiny of China's judicial system.

Have you witnessed the fervor and passion of women? Have you recognized the strength of women? Do you believe that women can risk their lives for their peers and for justice? (February 9, 2022)

My experience of being detained in Feng County inflicted the most severe psychological trauma on me. The extreme fear made me realize that China's judiciary is a colossal deception, a lie that has become a sword piercing my body. (February 20, 2022)

We hope that she can achieve both safety and fair treatment. (February 10, 2022)

No interviews for reporters, no visits from ordinary people, no open channels for reporting, and no release of the chained woman back to her hometown. Official media provided no in-depth coverage or commentary, and accounts calling for action against trafficking were deleted from the internet. This raises a crucial question: In our efforts to protect women and children, who exactly are we safeguarding—victims or perpetrators? (March 7, 2022)

The above texts effectively serve to invoke a sense of urgency and solidarity, emphasizing women's strength and resilience. By presenting themselves as both a victim of state oppression and an advocate for justice, these two female netizens reveal the complexities of women's experiences in oppressive systems where they may be subjected to violence yet simultaneously display remarkable courage and agency.

The question “who exactly are we safeguarding—victims or perpetrators?” challenges the readers to reconsider the narratives surrounding women's protection. It strongly critiques the superficial measures often taken by authorities, suggesting that genuine safety for women is not being prioritized. It is evident that the emotional weight of women's struggles in these texts not only criticizes the societal structures that fail to protect them, but also underscores the importance of amplifying women's voices in discussions about justice and equality.

Discussion

This capping project employs feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) as a theoretical framework to examine the widespread feminist discourse surrounding the keywords ‘married donkey’ and ‘chain woman’ on the Chinese internet.

After extracting comments from netizens who approached these two topics from various perspectives, this project finds that, in an era where feminist activism in China faces increasing obstacles, digital feminist activists have successfully utilized the internet as a platform to promote feminism, challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchy in Chinese society, and call for female empowerment.

Numerous studies have found that Chinese women are increasingly aware of the inequalities they face within marriage. In the face of overwhelming marriage propaganda, more women are opting to remain single, while the term ‘leftover women’ has been employed to distort and shame unmarried women of advanced age (Ip et al., 2024). Many Chinese feminists argue that ‘leftover women’ is a male-centered, discriminatory term (Gui,

2020). The stigmatization of unmarried women and successful career women is largely believed to stem from traditional heterosexual values in China, which are often used by men and elders to exert pressure on unmarried women (Gui, 2017; Ip et al., 2024).

However, the term ‘married donkey’ discussed in this capping project is typically wielded by some feminists as a criticism directed at other women who enter into marriage. This has sparked intense debate among Chinese feminists. Many feminists have keenly recognized that the use of the term ‘married donkey’ is, in fact, a form of violence and discrimination against married women, fundamentally akin to the denigration of women by patriarchy. This narrative that separates married women from unmarried women is not conducive to solidarity among women. Furthermore, it suggests that discussions about women’s relationships with marriage on Chinese social media platforms reflect a severe restriction on broader women’s issues. With other topics related to gender inequality deemed off-limits, discussions regarding marriage attract disproportionate attention.

Currently, existing research has focused on the experiences of domestic violence among women in China, primarily addressing the violence faced by women living in urban areas (Cao et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2024), the reasons why abused women find it difficult to leave violent relationships (Yuan et al., 2024), individual actions against domestic violence (Wu et al., 2022, and the interventions of social workers and the police (Sun et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). Li and Wang’s study (2021) explored the relationship between toxic patriarchy and domestic violence experienced by rural women, yet it did not include women trafficked to rural areas. This capping project extends the topics on deeper feminist issues such as human trafficking, domestic violence, and legal assistance for individuals with mental and physical disabilities by reviewing the discussions triggered by the *chain woman incident* that occurred in Feng County, China, in 2022. It reveals the inadequacies of current Chinese laws and the government’s inaction. In this incident, two

women traveled to Feng County to expose the truth but faced violent treatment from local police, igniting public debate—especially among young women in China—over who the current judicial system truly serves.

In this context, digital feminist activism emerges as a crucial form of informal education for young women in China. Through social media platforms, feminist activists disseminate knowledge about gender inequalities, challenge traditional norms, and empower their peers to engage critically with societal issues. This informal education fosters a sense of community among young women, allowing them to share experiences and strategies for resistance. As these digital spaces become sites of learning and activism, they equip young women with the tools to question patriarchal structures and advocate for their rights. As a result, digital feminist activism plays a transformative role in reshaping the discourse around women's identities and relationships in contemporary Chinese society.

Conclusion

In this capping project, the exploration of digital feminist activism in China underscores the transformative potential of online platforms as crucial spaces for informal education and empowerment among Chinese young women. As Chinese society grapples with persistent gender inequalities, the rise of digital feminist activism provides a vital avenue for women to articulate their experiences, challenge patriarchal norms, and foster a collective feminist consciousness. The analysis reveals that while digital platforms enable greater visibility and discourse around women's rights, they also highlight the complexities and conflicts within feminist movements, particularly regarding traditional cultural values and the stigmatization of feminist identities.

Moreover, the critique of terms like 'married donkey' illustrates the need for a more inclusive feminist discourse that respects diverse choices and experiences among women. By emphasizing solidarity over division, this project advocates for a unified front against

systemic oppression, calling for feminists to engage in constructive dialogues rather than perpetuating internal conflicts.

As digital feminist activism continues to evolve, it stands as a powerful catalyst for social change, encouraging young women to question societal norms and assert their rights. The challenges faced by these movements, including censorship and backlash, highlight the ongoing struggle for gender equality in a patriarchal context. Overall, this project not only contributes to the understanding of contemporary feminist movements in China but also serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusivity and collaboration in the pursuit of social justice. The future of digital feminist activism in China will depend on the ability of activists to navigate these challenges and expand the discourse to encompass a wider array of issues, ultimately fostering a more equitable society for all Chinese women.

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