When positive energy meets satirical feminist backfire: Hashtag activism during the COVID-19 outbreak in China

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Abstract
Amid the eruption of the COVID-19 outbreak in February 2020, the Chinese Communist Party Youth League promoted VTubers on Weibo to diffuse positive energy. However, the female VTuber Jiangshanjiao was appropriated immediately as political satire by netizens to air public grievances. While political satire is widely considered as political resistance in authoritarian states, little research has addressed its combination with feminist narratives and online activism. This article builds on previous literature on the propagandistic nature of positive energy and the Chinese feminist movement to consider how positive energy lying under Jiangshanjiao was deconstructed and how femininity was invoked to serve for broader political purposes in a repressive online environment. Drawing on the framework of online connective action and political satire as a networked practice, this research sheds light on the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#. This research explores how the satirical hashtag was collectively produced in an Internet trolling culture and contributed to building a collective identity through personalized narratives. Through the feminist hashtag, netizens expressed their multilayered grievances against misogyny, state propaganda, and censorship. However, this article also offers evidence that the satirical hashtag and ambiguity associated with it limited the influence in catalyzing online and offline changes.

Keywords
COVID-19, digital activism, femininity, positive energy, VTuber

Introduction
Due to the government cover-up of the early coronavirus outbreak, a call for freedom of speech fermented in Chinese cyberspace. However, the authorities have not eased the control of the
outpouring sentiment and information. Hashtags including #RefusePeriodShame# (拒绝月经羞耻#), which were used to uncover and condemn hospital administrators in Wuhan who rejected donations of urgent needed sanitary supplies for the frontline female medical workers and denied the necessity of sanitary products, were censored on Weibo and beyond.1 On 17 February, CCTV broadcasted an interview in which a nurse told the interviewer that while she was having period pain, she had to take care of three patients; however, this episode was edited out in the rebroadcast (J. A. Li, 2020). While female medical professionals account for more than half of the doctors and approximately 90% of nurses (Hao, 2020), their physiological needs and expressions encountered deliberate denial.

In tandem with information control, the Chinese government has launched campaigns to steer public opinion. The Chinese Communist Party Youth League (CYL) transplanted its personified VTubers Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman from an ACG (animation, comic and games) focused website Bilibili to Weibo to diffuse positive energy (正能量zhe nengliang) and earn political allegiance through “appropriation of fan culture” (Guo, 2018) (see Figure 1). The two names, which mean “gorgeous homeland” and “abundant red flags,” respectively, were extracted from widely known poems by Mao Zedong. The duo was promoted on CYL’s Weibo account to its 12 million followers before the Weibo account “Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official” (江山娇与红旗漫Official) appeared at 14:00 on 17 February 2020 (see Figure 2).2

However, facing massive criticisms from netizens, the VTuber strategy backfired and the campaign was swiftly terminated. Despite VTubers’ short Internet lives, a Weibo user bridged the media spectacle of VTubers and the marginalization of women in the outbreak. Since Jiangshanjiao is depicted as a teenage girl, to whom the society usually starts to guard her sexual as well as routine activities, the user adopted a sarcastic voice and posted, “Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?” (江山娇，你来月经么?).3 Following the post, public frustrations exploded. Netizens collectively adopted satirical interrogations over Jiangshanjiao, raising concerns about “state-sanctioned misogyny” (X. Han, 2018). The post received 820,000 likes and it was reposted 110,000 times in 10 hours before it was censored at around 10:30 a.m.4 Many, assuming the interrogation would be censored, circumvented the censorship by preserving the evidence through screenshots and screen recording. They further circulated the
evidence and discussed the “Jiangshanjiao incident” under hashtags related to Jiangshanjiao. Up until 15 March 2020, the topic #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# (#江山娇你来月经么#) and #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# (#江山娇与红旗漫#) have gathered in total more than 89,200,000 views (11,200,000 and 78,000,000, respectively) and 70,000 discussion pieces (10,000 and 60,000, respectively). Despite the sensitivity behind #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#, the campaign was not clamped down as strictly as #RefusePeriodShame#. #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# has been valid for Weibo users to search, post, and circulate until the time of this research.

#JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# is located in a global context of hashtag feminism, in which activists combat period shame and everyday sexism. Developed from previous feminist movements that seek state law reformation and gender justice in legal domains, the hashtag movement #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# took the path of “microrebellions” (Salime, 2014), underscoring the marginalized bodily experiences and everyday experiences as significant political domains. This Chinese hashtag in this study resonates with hashtag feminism employed worldwide to protest against menstruation taboo, as in the case of the #HappytoBleed hashtag on Facebook.

More importantly, #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# represents both the unique opportunities and dilemmas faced by Chinese feminists and Chinese activists. Different from conventional feminist movements around the globe, the Jiangshanjiao incident stands out through its sarcastic narrative against a female character. By detailing the similarities, contradictions, and connection with the global hashtag feminism, this research uncovers how Chinese feminists combated misogyny in the compliant cyberculture. The coexistence of gender subordination and governmental critique has been
Global Media and China 7(1)

an enduring and distinctive practice in the Chinese digital world (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wallis, 2015). Chinese users generated content, such as “Grass-Mud Horse (草泥 caonima),” a Chinese curse phrase, and “the Green Dam Girl (绿坝娘lübaniang),” to express a subversive attitude toward state propaganda and online censorship and to show their collective defiance through the problematic gender mechanism (Wallis, 2015). As narrating sexualized sarcasm and insulting femininity are safer than launching collective action against the government, femininity has been bestowed subversive connotations. Investigating the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# allows us to clarify one of the important dimensions of Chinese online contestation, namely, how activists trod the line between sarcastic gendered discourses and political critique.

This research documents how netizens appropriated the officially orchestrated VTuber Jiangshanjiao and employed the sarcastic feminist hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# to articulate grievances on Weibo. To explain the context of the VTubers, this study will begin with the discussion of positive energy as a core element of state propaganda. To give feminist activism into the saga, this article establishes the Chinese historical context of the feminist movement and reviews the recent development of feminism in the digital space to clarify the features and struggles of hashtag feminism in China. Then, this research draws on the theoretical framework of online connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and political satire as a networked practice (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015) to explicate the production, circulation, and networks of meaning of #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#. Furthermore, this research refers to official responses to assess the limited influence of the hashtag movement. While sarcastic hashtag activism contributes to empowering silenced voices, how hashtag activism could stimulate policy changes remains a difficult task.

Positive energy and state’s evolving communicative strategies

The Chinese party-state’s adaptivity is considered as a primary way for renewing and strengthening its legitimacy (Shambaugh, 2008). The Chinese party, in particular, has invented new adaptive strategies to deal with the increasingly commercialized cyberspace. Beyond the widely discussed strict online censorship and surveillance in the Chinese Internet (Fu et al., 2013; King et al., 2013; G. Yang, 2009), the Chinese state has been found to proactively manage public opinion without coercion (R. Han, 2015a) and experiment with new modes of ideological control and e-governance (Guo, 2018).

Among all, the appropriation of positive energy manifests the state’s effort to align grassroots cyber-nationalism (X. Chen et al., 2020) and to produce docile citizens who internalize the party-state’s interest (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019). Positive energy has been incorporated into the Chinese state ideology since 2012 (X. Chen et al., 2020; Z. Chen & Wang, 2019; P. Yang & Tang, 2018) and it has been a central part of political ideology under Xi Jinping’s administration (Bandurski, 2015; Z. Chen & Wang, 2019). P. Yang and Tang (2018) investigated the ideological purpose behind the party-state’s intervention in the positive energy discourse; they suggested that even though positive energy originates from individual-personal, societal-cultural, and political-national/global levels, the party-state dissolves the internal differences within the three and interlinks the public faith of the regime with individual and public well-being.

Governed by the positive energy logic, the regime has been found to fabricate propaganda and appropriate relevant bottom-up patriotic sentiments. Scholars have provided considerable evidence of “reverse censorship” by the Internet commentators, including “50-cent party” (R. Han, 2015a, 2015b; King et al., 2017). In contrast to the widely held belief that the 50-cent party defends the
party-state by debating with skeptics, King et al. (2017) suggested that the 50-cent party distracts
the public from critical public issues and collective action by engaging in cheerleading, discussing
valence issues, and narrating the honorable revolutionary history of the party. China’s propaganda
officials appropriated self-organized cyber-nationalistic movements including “Little Pinks (小粉
红 xiaofenhong)” or “Diba Expedition (帝吧出征 diba chuzheng)” and made them exemplars of
defending national interests (e.g. Fang & Repnikova, 2018; H. Liu, 2019).

Against the backdrop of positive energy, the VTubers in fandom culture were promoted to guide
public opinion and distract the public from various socioeconomic problems in the coronavirus
outbreak. The Chinese state has resorted to “ideotainment,” which “entails the intermeshing of
high-tech images, designs, and sounds of popular Web and mobile phone culture with subtle ideo-
logical constructs, symbols, and nationally inclined messages of persuasion” (Lagerkvist,
2008, p. 123) to build legitimacy in the Internet era. Saturated with the positive energy, state propa-
ganda exerts power through popular culture “as at once a player, a producer, and a regulator of
cyber-culture” (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019, p. 213). The official news channels constructed the Chinese
state as an idol “Brother Ah Zhong (阿中哥哥 a zhong gege)” or “Brother China” since 2019. The
People’s Daily hosts the Weibo page #WeAllHaveAnIdolCalledAhZhong# (#我们都有一个爱豆
名字叫阿中#), and on 17 January 2020, the CCTV News account initiated the hashtag #BrotherA
hZhongHasMoreThan1.4BillionFans# (#阿中哥哥活粉超14亿#). During the Anti-extradition
Law demonstration in Hong Kong, Chinese grassroots nationalism morphed into fandom culture,
and netizens defended the state as the idol Ah Zhong and supported its stance on the Hong Kong
issue on digital platforms. Similarly, Guo (2018) suggested that the CYL has historically attempted
to attract the younger generations by using a personalized communicative style and transforming
itself into a pop idol.

Before the launch of the two VTubers Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman, the CYL had incorporated
virtual characters into its campaign strategies. In 2017, CYL recruited China’s first virtual singer,
a holographic pop star named Luo Tianyi, who was designed by Japanese conglomerate Yamaha
and Chinese entertainment company Zenith Group to serve as a youth ambassador to convey posi-
tive values (Xie, 2017). During the COVID-19 outbreak, media outlets were instructed by authori-
ties to comprehensively report the achievements from the epidemic prevention, to adopt positive
narratives when narrating anti-virus stories, and to present a picture of unity among Chinese people
(Xinhuanet, 2020). The VTubers are thus believed to inherit the behest of the central government
and share a similar positive energy origin with its predecessors, with the goals of promoting patri-
otism and extolling social stability in the outbreak.

The historical context of Chinese feminism

Since the 20th century, when feminist ideology and feminist movements were transplanted to
China, a top-down structure, led by the state, the political parties, and the elites, was the paradigm
of feminism. As feminist concepts were absorbed into CCP’s revolutionary theory and leadership,
state feminism was the main solution toward women’s issues until the reformation era in the 1970s.
The state feminism foregrounded gender equality and women’s liberation by ensuring women’s
equal entry into production and labor; gender relations were thus altered through the change of
women’s places in the socioeconomic structure (Evans, 2008). However, state feminism in the
Maoist era was criticized for “the erasure of gender,” through unisex dress code, diminishment of
the sexual division of labor, and other practices (M. M.-h. Yang, 1999). Notwithstanding the fact
that women remained in a disadvantaged gender hierarchy, gender inequality and femininity were
turned invisible and gender politics was replaced by class politics (Evans, 2008; M. M.-h. Yang, 1999). Beyond erasing the visibility of gender, state feminism was seen as inherently bureaucratic, ineffective, and averse to any political instability, including civic engagement and dissenting expressions (Ip & Lam, 2013). Under this context, activists in the era of post-socialist market economy and privatization have resorted to means such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activism to challenge the pervasive sexist social norms (Zheng, 2015). In 1995, China hosted the United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women and its NGO forum. In response to the events, the state encouraged the establishment of autonomous women’s organizations which mainly carried out their activities under the mechanism of the United Nation’s Review (S. Li, 2013). Moreover, government-organized NGOs have played a central role in promoting women’s rights in policy advocacy. Since women’s organizations inextricably link with the state as they collaborate with state initiatives or rely on the state’s financial and political support, they are commonly found to avoid politicization and a confrontational stance against the state (Ip & Lam, 2013; S. Li, 2013). Hence, women’s organizations lack efficient ways to ensure the government’s accountability in women’s rights.

Social media have empowered the new generation of feminist activists in the past decade (Fincher, 2018), even though surveillance on digital activities of organizations limited the influence of feminist associations. Tan (2017) considered young feminists in the Youth Feminist Action School promoting the feminist cause on social media, especially on Weibo, a representation of the new feminist activism era. However, X. Han (2018) noted that women’s civic associations in digital space hardly engage in protests or express dissenting opinions on governmental policies; contrarily, they primarily raise the awareness of gender equality among their networks. Even so, digital women’s associations such as Gender Watch Women’s Voice on Weibo have faced the threat of social media account suspension. Thus, online feminist associations have been left with limited online space and they have played limited roles in organizing collective action. As organizational efforts were circumscribed by governmental surveillance and unified collective action is likely to be immediately stifled by the party-state (Ip & Lam, 2013; Zeng, 2020), feminist activism hinges upon individual users. Well-educated women in urban areas have assumed prominent roles in feminist activism (Tan, 2017), and they no longer aim at setting feminism as a public agenda, in the way typical of feminist organizations; rather, they seek fellow communities to communicate their lived experiences (S. Li, 2020).

### Hashtag feminism and its dilemma in China

The emergence of the Internet and social media stimulates a bottom-up form of feminism. Hashtag activism has fueled and even bred a new wave of feminism around the globe (e.g. Dixon, 2014) and it has become a chief component of feminist media repertoire (Clark-Parsons, 2019). Hashtag feminism, inheriting feminist activism’s historical discursive tactics, gains its power through the hashtag’s capability to spark individual stories; through hashtag feminism, practitioners politicized the personal and increased the visibility of feminist agenda (Clark, 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2019). It “created a virtual space where victims of inequality can coexist together in a space that acknowledges their pain, narrative, and isolation” (Dixon, 2014, p. 34).

As a continuation of the global conversation on gender justice and as part of the globally networked social media campaign, Chinese hashtag feminism gained increasing public influence through several influential domestic Internet incidents. In October 2017, the #MeToo hashtag was transplanted from Twitter to Weibo through Chinese graduate students and alumni who studied and...
Yang lived in the United States (Zeng, 2019). Zeng (2020) explained that digital media in China are more than facilitators of the feminist movement as in the case of liberal democracies, but rather function as organizing agents. #MeToo# (or #MiTu#), as the first direct and active participation in the global feminist campaign, provided an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese women and feminist activists. #MeToo# in China advances awareness of sexual harassment, recovers individual pains, and reconstructs identity; it also contributes to building solidarity and fostering collective actions (Z. Lin & Yang, 2019). However, it was curtailed by a high level of censorship, and the tension between the authorities and activists was “the cat and mouse” battle (Endeshaw, 2004; Zeng, 2019), with the dynamic of “a push and pull of silencing and voicing, censorship and circumvention” (Zeng, 2019, p. 76). Zeng (2019) indicated that this tension results from the Communist party’s agenda of building a harmonious society, while Fincher (2018), by analyzing a broader historical development of Chinese feminist movements, suggested that the backlash against feminist movements in China derives from the state’s concerns over freedom and individuality integrated with the movements. Whether the dilemma of Chinese feminist movements lies in the “patriarchal authoritarianism” (Fincher, 2018) structure or pragmatic political agendas (Zeng, 2019), hashtag feminism has faced significant coercion.

Beyond digital surveillance, hashtag feminism in China has encountered discursive obstacles and online harassment in the pursuit of women’s rights, as in other contexts. First, hashtag feminism through the attention economy of commercial media, where clicks, likes, ratings and ad revenues are the primary goals, and where experiences as complex as sexual violence are easily simplified and commodified, inevitably leads to online harassment (Clark-Parsons, 2019). Second, the emergence of hypocritical feminists (伪女权weiquan), who do not truly believe in gender equality but utilize societal sympathy for disadvantaged women to maximize their own economic and social interests, largely disrupts societal impressions of feminism. For example, many self-identified feminist Weibo accounts are found to discriminate against economically disadvantaged groups, people of disability, and the queer population (S. Li, 2020). Third, the stigmatization of radical feminists discourages women fighting for gender equality from gathering under the tenet of feminism. Radical feminist ideology, compared to moderate and liberal feminist ideology, is more exposed to public attention due to its controversial nature. Weibo users believe that radical feminists irrationally attack men and conjugal arrangements by showcasing their miseries as victims. The radical feminists are commonly labeled as “female boxers (女拳师nüquanshi),” “female fist (女拳nüquan),” or “countryside feminists (田园女权tianyuan nüquan),” and these labels sometimes render rational feminist discussions futile. Fourth, as mentioned by X. Han (2018), non-radical feminism in China is also associated with negative connotations, as feminists challenge the gender norms within the Confucian doctrine. In general, stigmatization of feminists and Internet trolls dissuaded people from identifying themselves as feminists when pursuing women’s rights.

Methods
The thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the salience and occurrence of themes associated with the original Jiangshanjiao post and the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is defined as a “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Among the different types of qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis is commonly used (Bryman, 2016, p. 578). Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify implicit and explicit messages within the data through themes, and it is considered “the most
useful method in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set” (Guest et al., 2011, pp. 10–11). Two Chinese native speakers implemented thematic analysis to code the data independently. Cohen’s kappa test, as a measure of agreement over the coding of textual information (Bryman, 2016, p. 280), was conducted through SPSS.

As mentioned above, the original post of “Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?” was censored in 10 hours. To retrieve the censored content, this research used the screenshots released on China Digital Times. China Digital Times is a California-based China news website with a focus on censorship. It was founded by Xiao Qiang, the director and research scientist of the Counter-Power lab at the University of California, Berkeley. This research documented the censored original post and subsequent comments by manually collecting the content and the number of likes of these comments. According to the screenshots released by China Digital Times, the post gathered 42,000 reposts and 7892 comments. Comments with over 50 likes were manually recorded in an Excel file, and in total, 110 pieces were recorded. The intercoder reliability measured by Cohen’s kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$) shows the almost-perfect agreement between the two coders.

Furthermore, Weibo users initiated and circulated the hashtag on 18 February, and from 27 February, the hashtag was appropriated to discuss the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on the Management of Permanent Residence of Foreigners (Exposure Draft). To reflect the initial and primary discussion, this research harvested Weibo posts with the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# ranging from 18 February to 26 February 2020. This research used web scraping to gather all available posts through the Weibo advanced search function on 18 March 2020. This research collected 1248 Weibo posts with the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# and their respective engagement metrics including likes, reposts, and comments. As stated by Ng and Le Han (2018), when Weibo data are not downloaded in real time, researchers would not be able to determine the exact number of posts that were censored. However, this study believes that a large number of posts were censored or blocked from the advanced search function, due to the huge number gap between the dataset and the metrics published by Weibo. Moreover, downloadable Super Topic posts only contribute to nearly 5% of the total number of the estimated Super Topic posts. As many Weibo posts are written casually and ambiguously, coders agreed to categorize according to only one primary theme. Posts without explicit primary themes were categorized into “other themes.” The codebook was finalized with nine categorizations. The following Cohen’s kappa test was conducted, and the intercoder reliability ($\kappa = 0.74$) indicates substantial consensus between the two coders.

#JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# as a networked practice

Grassroots political satire in the Chinese digital space manifests itself not only as a form of collective political resistance and social critique (Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011) but also as a networked practice (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). G. Yang and Jiang (2015) point out that three aspects are involved in political satire as a networked practice: (1) collective and corporative production, (2) circulation and interactions, and (3) networks of meaning. The hashtag in the Jiangshanjiao incident, as digital political satire, also reflects these networked characteristics.

Production and circulation

The Jiangshanjiao incident was produced collectively and cooperatively in an Internet trolling and bantering culture. The first Weibo user’s provocative interrogation, “Jiangshanjiao, do you
get your period,” galvanized discontent netizens to collectively shame Jiangshanjiao. The seemingly off-topic mundanity and ambiguity widened participation as netizens usually have fewer concerns when they could avoid expressing direct political criticism. Netizens inherited a popular means of satirical collective resistances in China’s digital sphere, called “national sentence-making,” to modify and circulate popular phrases (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). Following the example of the first user, many more posted additional questions to call attention to everyday sexism (see Figure 3).

In contrast to many feminist movements presenting women’s solidarity against male perpetrators or privileged men, outraged Weibo users confronted an underaged female VTuber. The trolling stood out from female demureness in Chinese discursive conflicts. According to X. Han (2018), the feminist group Gender Watch Women’s Voice on Weibo is found to ignore misogynistic and irrational trolls, occasionally publish articles to tackle biases, and rely on its followers to communicate with misogynists. Different from previous findings on feminine discourses in computer-mediated communication, which was described as apologetic, agreeable, and communicative (van Zoonen, 2002), participants bombarded Jiangshanjiao with masculinist discourses, which were dominated by an aggressive, argumentative, and offensive language pattern (van Zoonen, 2002). Although some may criticize that the emancipatory potential was diminished as marginalized women uncovered oppression through humiliating the female VTuber, the incoherence between the noble desire

**Figure 3.** The frequency of themes and the number of likes per 1000 received per theme in the original post.
of advancing the cause of feminism and the offensive means used to achieve the goal reflected the “powerlessness” of women. In a misogynistic society, trolling a woman is less challenging.

However, after the VTubers’ account and the Weibo post encountered censorship, netizens turned to sympathize with Jiangshanjiao. For them, Jiangshanjiao, as a silent puppet, was manipulated and censored in a similar way as women’s expressions and needs were maneuvered and their indignation was wiped out. Thus, #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# rallied users to uncover misogyny through the state’s symbol.

Located within the network of feminist hashtags circulated on Weibo, which include #RefusePeriodShame#, #ToSeeFemaleWorkers# (看见女性劳动者kanjian nüxing laodongzhe), and #ThisIsMyPeriodBlood (这是我的经血zheshi wode jingxue), #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# manifests itself as an atypical hashtag. While most hashtags in hashtag activism have a complete sentence structure and call for actions including “petitioning, demanding, appealing, and protesting” (G. Yang, 2016, pp. 14–15), #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#, as it is expressed in the form of a question, lacks a self-evident aim. As the VTubers were removed from the platform, fragmentary information references rendered the hashtag a confusing jargon. Furthermore, different from relevant feminist hashtags which highlight a primary agenda, the ambiguity inherent in #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# allows pluralistic interpretations. Although these characteristics harmed the hashtag’s efficacy and hindered its virality (see Figure 4), they reflect activists’ adaptive strategy. As previous hashtags in the network were stifled heavy-handedly, unambiguous callings and dissent were substituted by ambiguity. The limited mobilization power of #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# constituted its survival. Thanks to its survival, it drew public attention and created transformative effects for participants and the general public.

*Figure 4. The counts of posts with the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# over time.*
Participants constructed a monolith collective identity of underclass women through #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#. Women were depicted as a unified, amorphous, and homogeneous group with socio-economically disadvantaged experiences, casting a stark contrast to the storytellings of elites and media-savvy women in the #MeToo# movement. For example, a popular post reads,

how can Jiangshanjiaoyou have her period? Jiangshanjiao who took care of her brother at the age of five, cooked [for her family] at eight. [She] has never worn short sleeves nor shorts again since fourteen. [She] was sexually harassed without speaking up at the age of sixteen. [She] voluntarily gave up the opportunity to go to a university and took a job to support her brother at the age of eighteen. [She] married a man and suffered from domestic violence at the age of twenty. [She] was willing to give birth to kids if they are all boys.

This depiction of Jiangshanjiao may not necessarily correspond to lived experiences of participants because the digital divide excluded the most marginalized women of the lower class from joining hashtag activism. Instead, the anecdotal and stereotypical story of an underprivileged woman was adopted as “contentious performances,” fostering the visibility of the movement. While netizens aroused public sympathy through the storytelling, netizens deliberately blurred the boundaries between gender and class struggles. The feminist call remains circumscribed by what Evans (2008) called “limits of gender,” the marginalization of gender as an independent category of analysis.

Beyond the collective identity of oppressed women, the “loose coalition,” spontaneity, and flexibility enabled by the hashtagging affordance facilitated pluralistic and personalized grassroots expressions in the Jiangshanjiao incident. The absence of a centralized online community eliminated the need to form collective ideological identification, reach a consensus, and carry a common mission; instead, it encouraged inclusive identities and personalized discourses. Although the hashtagged connective action had an apparent feminist façade, feminist organizations were not seen to play central roles in organizing the action. The hashtag’s decentralized nature enabled loosely connected netizens with a variety of feminist perspectives to focus on personalized political critique. Although netizens attempted to foster a long-lasting digital community through a Super Topic, which features a rather centralized organization, they did not receive the approval to do so from Sina. Without a Super Topic community, the circulation of the Jiangshanjiao incident incorporated inclusive personal action frames. With the connective logic, netizens not only relied on the vulnerable hashtag to connect with wider participants but also disseminated the topic within individual networks to challenge gender discrimination.

 Networks of meaning
The interrogation of Jiangshanjiao disrupted the “preferred readings” (Hall, 2001, p. 169), subverted the official discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014) of it as a representative of the honorable Chinese leadership, and transformed the attempts to create consent into a contentious field. Moreover, a comparison between the comments under the original post and the hashtagged posts reveals a shift from a relatively insular discussion of female experiences to multilayered collective sentiments. The shift originated from the hashtag’s connective logic and the heavily surveillant media environment. A connective logic enabled personalized content and expanded the boundaries of meanings and discourses of Jiangshanjiao. To discuss sensitive political topics in repressive
cyberspace, netizens developed various rhetorical tactics, such as code language and homophones (J. Liu, 2017; Qiang, 2011), naturally giving birth to alternative networks of meaning (Table 1).

**Misogyny: “Is Jiangshanjiao allowed to have period today?”**

The market liberalization since the 1970s brought a shift in gender politics; the sexless portrayals of women during the Maoist era have been replaced by the commodification of women’s bodies (Evans, 2008). The image of the VTuber Jiangshanjiao reproduces a subtle convergence of androgynous sexed bodies and hegemonic femininity in the pandemic, which triggered collective sentiments on diminishing individualized gender identities. Among posts with the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod#, only 1.1% carry the original aim to destigmatize menstruation, and the largest proportion (38.5%) of the posts extends the scope to uncover female experiences through personalized storytelling.

Influenced by the gender ideology from the Maoist era, the state has constructed both genders as social apparatus, with men as a caliber to which women are ought to match (Evans, 2008). The societal contribution has eclipsed bodily differences between men and women. Therefore, gender in a private context including menstruation disappeared at large on the public agenda. This partly explains why hospital administrators claimed that sanitary pads were unessential, as women were supposed to work as men, regardless of their physiological conditions. According to a WeChat article published by the Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital of Fudan University, to better perform their duties, medical workers were given birth control pills to delay menstruation (Huang & Li, 2020). Beyond the material exclusion of female bodily experiences, the censorship of women’s voices across media channels diverted netizens’ attention from societal misogyny to state-sanctioned misogyny. One user posted that “only bad girls have menstrual bleeding, [while] good girls naturally bleed into red scarves.” The grievances related to menstruation, residing outside of the “red scarf” public context dictated by the party-state, were unfortunately not tolerated. Therefore, the censorship against menstruation, as a denial of mature womanhood and a deliberate construction of androgynous sexed bodies, brought netizens to ridicule the misogynist political culture.

| Themes                                | Frequency | Percent | Likes  | Reposts | Comments |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|---------|--------|---------|----------|
| Sharing women’s experiences of oppression | 481       | 38.5    | 14,637 | 1,381   | 2,219    |
| Solidarity                            | 265       | 21.2    | 24,755 | 2,724   | 2,199    |
| Criticism of the VTubers              | 156       | 12.5    | 5994   | 1,315   | 763      |
| Censorship                            | 149       | 11.9    | 3406   | 1,070   | 322      |
| Criticism of CYL                      | 94        | 7.5     | 915    | 92      | 58       |
| State-sanctioned misogyny             | 35        | 2.8     | 1362   | 51      | 158      |
| Other themes                          | 24        | 1.9     | 2086   | 285     | 417      |
| Confusion about and explanation of the topic | 22        | 1.8     | 550    | 37      | 52       |
| Anti-feminist sabotage                 | 22        | 1.8     | 352    | 3       | 223      |
| **Total**                             | **1,248** | **100** | **54,057** | **6,958** | **6,411** |

CYL: The Communist Youth League of China.
Along with the exclusion of female bodily experiences, Jiangshanjiao, as a propagandistic product in popular culture, exhibits highly commodified feminine features. “Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity” (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). It entails hegemonic feminine beauty, commonly as an ideal image of girlhood and what Schippers accentuated as “compliance, nurturance and empathy” features (p. 94). The commodified hegemonic femininity marginalized images of other women. Thus, enhancing the visibility of “pariah femininities” (Schippers, 2007, p. 95) and silenced womanhood has become increasingly urgent.

Although through #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# private sufferings were jointly shared in an intimate public, the hashtag was also appropriated by anti-feminists to disrupt the movement. Anti-feminist sabotage (4.7%) and gender trolling rendered the Jiangshanjiao incident a case of ambivalence. Some labeling participants as “female boxers” or “countryside feminists” claimed that women have been sufficiently empowered, and they should not protest against the state. This narrative echoed with the state discourse on gender equality, which assumes women’s rights have been well-protected and gender equality has been a fait accompli (M. M.-h. Yang, 1999). The movement was interpreted as a calculated tool to garner unspeakable interests, and women who unfolded their experiences of oppression were ill-intended. Thus, women, who spearheaded the campaign for women’s rights, were interpreted as bringing negative energy to the government, the state, and the society. In response to counter-movement voices, while some participants directly supported the feminist movement, a larger number of users strategically avoided labeling themselves as feminists in digital battles. Narrating female experiences of oppression, as historical discursive tactics, was separated from feminist ideology. The artificial disjunction between storytelling and feminist activism again shows the stigmatization of feminism and feminists in China.

**State propaganda: “Jiangshanjiao, we are citizens not your fans”**

Evolving from the unanimous propaganda conveyed through mass media, the party-state has adopted personalized forms of identity politics to channel stratified citizens and their pro-state sentiments. The VTubers of fandom culture, as idolized social media personalities, were deployed by Chinese governmental organs to tap into the fan culture, mobilize political participation, and inject positive energy into the cyberculture. However, the tried-and-tested formula of the Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman brought more defiance than applauses.

Netizens questioned the validity of the propagandistic deployment of VTubers and perceived the VTubers as politainment and as the trivialization of politics. Many insightfully noticed that the animated characters and the fandom language were employed for the political purpose of substituting the concept of citizens, taxpayers, and members of CYL with the concept of fans. A reconstruction of citizens to fans exploits the active individual subjectivity in defending and promoting political entities’ interests. As explained by Sandvoss (2005), fan groups are physically and emotionally involved in building celebrities’ images and careers: they organize events and activities to show and improve celebrities’ popularity; they protect celebrities’ interests by various means, ranging from increasing social media engagements of celebrities’ accounts to engaging in arguments with fans of other celebrities if necessary. Netizens condemned the propaganda, as it corrupted the public sphere by turning citizens into affective labor or even irrational fans, vanishing their civilian duties.

Netizens rebuked the inopportune positive energy encapsulated in the propagandistic essence, narratives, and communicative strategies of the VTubers. First, as mentioned in CYL’s introduction of the VTubers (see Figure 2), the two VTubers draw a connection between a glorious communist
revolutionary past and a bright national future to signal the legitimate leadership of the CCP. Similar to the 50-cent party, which shows high coordination of distracting critical online discussions and celebrating the party-state (King et al., 2017), the VTuber aimed at interrupting public grievances and diffusing positive energy in the outbreak. However, the strategy was overambitious to distract the public from the “Chernobyl moment” (Shih, 2020), when the skyrocketing number of infected cases and death and mishandling of medical supplies still distressed China. Second, positive energy produces self-disciplined citizens through the contradictory parallel between the narrative of suffering and stigmatization of negative personal emotions (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019). The narrative of suffering highlights how people overcome difficulties through morality and self-sacrifice; in the pandemic, it translated into the glorification of unreasonable sacrifices of female medical workers, including shaving heads to reduce the spread of the virus and commitment to work while heavily pregnant and shortly after miscarriage. At the same time, public frustrations over the menstruation stigma were censored and overshadowed by the positive VTubers. Thus, the denial of the VTuber was used to repudiate the parallel behind the logic of positive energy. Third, the contradictions between the official ideology and communicative strategies of the VTuber betray the propagandistic nature of positive energy. While the names of the VTubers are extracted from Mao Zedong’s poems, endowing communist and nationalistic implications, the VTubers backlashed for their “foreign characteristics.” Netizens cast doubt on the design which employed visual elements of Japanese anime and Kawai culture to construct the representatives of the Chinese communist governmental organ. Similarly, the employment of the English word “official” in the screen name also brought mistrust. The inconsistency between cultural appropriation and the political doctrine of “four matters of confidence (四个自信 sige zixin),” which partly emphasizes confidence in Chinese culture, triggered wide cynicism. Consequently, netizens mistrusted the authorities and dismantled the positive energy of the VTubers.

Censorship: “Jiangshanjiao, can our questions for you survive tonight?”

Online activism happens despite censorship, and sometimes because of censorship (G. Yang, 2019). Instead of letting Jiangshanjiao “pass away” from Weibo, netizens resuscitated her by circulating her name, images, and interrogations. In all, 11.9% of posts fall into the category of censorship, and posts with screenshots of censored content related to Jiangshanjiao received considerable reposts and likes.

Censorship, veiling as legal and informal pronouncements (Repnikova & Fang, 2018), draws an implicit line against public grievances. According to the announcement of the Provision on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem published by the Cyberspace Administration of China on 15 December 2019, in addition to illegal contents, negative contents should be removed. A user explained the pervasive censorship with patriarchal social practices, asking, “. . . may I ask [if this] is against the law [called] ‘patriarchal supremacy’?” In a “conforming and compliant culture” (J. Lin & de Kloet, 2019) demanded by the Chinese authorities, the destigmatization of menstruation and the discursive display of women’s struggles evoked cynicism and disrupted the highly hailed combat against coronavirus. The “negativity” was sufficient to justify its prohibition. More importantly, feminist movements, different from many social movements initiated by isolated activists, have a large community and supporters to tap into (Fincher, 2018). Thus, the potential of triggering wide-range offline collective actions brought intensive attention from censors (King et al., 2013)

Netizens posted with the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# to not only circulate the banned content but also criticize the censorship of destigmatization of menstruation. Users creatively
dubbed Jiangshanjiao its homonym “ready-to-delete Jiao (将删娇),” to pinpoint that the positive energy in the harmonious homeland was partially maintained by the censorship system, and public consents were manufactured by concealing discordances out of sight. Moreover, netizens with “cultural skills” (G. Yang, 2019, p. 7), which consist of the ability to produce popular multi-media content and linguistic and rhetorical competence, produced remix musical content to disseminate dissenting views. For example, netizens creatively produced music Jiangshanjiao chuchuwen through contrafactum, substituting the original lyrics of a popular song chuchuwen with political critique.13 With light-hearted beats, the song condemns censorship and calls for collective action. “Someone has to speak up, even though she will be slapped. It is the spirit of revolution, and even Marx would praise it. Who is she? Who is the next? (She) is tired of indoctrination. Stand up and rebel!”

Among the four styles of digital protest, playful, confrontational, consensus, and subversive, the subversive style has no room in Chinese domestic social media (G. Yang & Wang, 2016). Forthright political critique of the state and the state organ was limited in the Jiangshanjiao incident (7.5%).14 However, the subversiveness has subtly conveyed through sarcasm. The non-radical nature rendered the Jiangshanjiao hashtag and callings a “hidden transcript,” which “remains a substitute for an act of assertion directly in the face of power” (Scott, 1990, p. 115).

Limits of the movement

Compared to previous feminist hashtags, #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# with a sarcastic logic managed to survive on Weibo. However, the sarcasm behind the hashtag, which empowered erased voices and contributed to bypassing the censorship, at the same time failed to establish common knowledge of grievances and diminished its power of mobilization. Furthermore, even though the hashtag to a certain degree circumvented the censorship, it was thwarted by the state’s “passive information control,” which ignores criticism (King et al., 2017). Chinese netizens, according to Tai (2015), tend to believe that expressing their opinions online will enable the government to better understand the citizens. It also has to be recognized that Internet satire hardly produces any practical effect (Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011) and that authorities will not necessarily be accountable or proceed to policy change after activism (Ip & Lam, 2013). In the Jiangshanjiao incident, the authorities turned a deaf ear both online and offline to the collective appeal for the destigmatization of menstruation and public acknowledgment of women’s contributions in fighting the pandemic.

Although medical workers received donations of sanitary products from NGOs and private sources, in offline policymaking, the regime refused to acknowledge gender as an analytical category (Evans, 2008) and left sanitary products outside of the detailed newly updated tax cut guideline released by the central government on the 10th of March 2020.15 On Weibo, CYL posted to commemorate martyrs and deceased citizens in the pandemic during the Qingming Festival (see Figure 5). To infuse the depressing social climate under the pandemic with positive energy and to propagate public compliance by displaying consent, deceased doctors including the whistleblower Li Wenliang show cheerful countenances, taking a selfie with victory and heart gestures. A close examination reveals that CYL has not adjusted its gendered discourse after the Jiangshanjiao incident. Out of 32 honorable national representatives, only three women appear in the corner of the picture. Compared to male national heroes as doctors, policemen, soldiers, and farmers, the occupations of the female characters are indistinctive. The propagandistic depiction, which appropriates women’s labor force and one-sidedly honors male contributors in the public health crisis, marginalized women’s contribution in the public transcript.
Conclusion

Due to the high surveillant nature of Chinese social media, hashtag activism in China is uniquely governed by a satirical logic. Although scholars have broadly explored hashtag activism and political satire in catalyzing contentious politics in China’s cyberspace, the combination with feminist narratives is seldom captured. Through the prism of the Jiangshanjiao hashtag, this research offered insights into how feminist narratives may serve as a cause of Chinese digital political critique.

Figure 5. CYL’s Weibo post on 4 April 2020.
Source: https://www.weibo.com/3937348351/IBIEabBU1?type=repost&_rnd1588755692923 (accessed 14 April 2020).
When we send away the severe winter and welcome the dawn of spring, they will certainly appreciate the scenery in the spring with us. #MournMartyrsinQingMing#
The feminist hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# backlashed against the positive energy crystallized in the VTuber Jiangshanjiao during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research discussed the networked features of the feminist hashtag as Chinese digital political satire. It explored the collective production by “national sentence-making” in an Internet trolling culture and the collective identity construction of oppressed women. The decentralized circulation and communication among personalized networks helped netizens navigate the compliant cyberculture. This research further revealed that the satirical hashtag with its networks of meaning, despite its struggles to survive, allowed netizens to carve out a critical sphere and to air multilayered grievances. Paying attention to the “hidden transcript” which appropriates the “public transcript,” and identifying the networks of meaning behind ambiguous collective resistance, enabled us to understand the survival strategies of digital activism and deepened the critical inquiry regarding the ambivalence in Chinese social media.

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Notes
1. An nongovernmental organization (NGO) led by Liang Yu (@梁钰stacey) launched a hashtag campaign #SistersFightAgainstTheEpidemicAMovementofCarefree# (姐妹安心战疫行动#) on Weibo and was dedicated to donating sanitary products to aid female medical workers in cities under the lockdown. Liang and her team reported on 11 February that the urgently needed donation of sanitary products was deemed unessential and was rejected by hospital administrators.
2. The Weibo account of Chinese Communist Party Youth League (CYL) (@共青团中央) was established on 27 December 2013. Until the time of this research, the account has more than 13 million followers. The two characters were introduced in Chinese as virtual idols (虚拟偶像). However, the English translation shown in the post is “VTubers.” The distinction between the two lies in that VTubers are human streamers presenting themselves with avatars, while virtual idols are completely generated through digital technologies. Based on this distinction, the two characters are considered in this research as VTubers.
3. On 18 February 2020, a Weibo user (@为什么它永无止境) posted that “Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?,” which generated a series of comments of sexist interrogations. The post received more than 820,000 likes and it was reposted 110,000 times before it was censored. The Weibo account can be found at https://www.weibo.com/p/1005053102117384/home?is_search=0&visible=0&is_all=1&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=7#feedtop (accessed 10/05/2020)
4. According to the Weibo user’s post on 18 February, the original post of “Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period??” was deleted before 10:30. While it appeared to be deleted by the user herself, she argued that she was “set up” by Sina.
5. Source: the topic page of #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# can be found at https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E6%B1%9F%E5%9B%91%E5%A8%87%E4%BD%A0%E6%9D%A5%E6%9C%88%E7%BB%8F%E5%90%97%23 (accessed on 15/05/2020)
The topic page of #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# can be found at https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E6%B1%9F%E5%9B%91%E5%A8%87%E4%B8%8E%E7%BA%A2%E6%97%97%E6%BC%AB%23_loginLayer_1585023735038 (accessed on 15/05/2020)
6. The first can be found at: https://m.weibo.cn/search?containerid=231522&type=3D1%26t%3D10%26q%3D%23我们都有一个爱豆名字叫阿中%23&extparam=%23我们都有一个爱豆名字叫阿
The YFAS manages at least two important feminist Weibo accounts @FeministVoice and @WomenAwaking.

In March 2015, five feminists circulating messages against sexual harassment in public transportations were detained for “disturbing public order.” Followed by the detention of the “Feminist Five Sisters” in 2015, NGOs dedicating to women’s rights have been heavily monitored and activists organizing offline protests have been threatened and detained. Nevertheless, activists and the public managed to solitarily support the Feminist Five through social media (Tan, 2017). In 2016, #GirlAttackedAtHeyiHotel# gathered nearly 3 billion views and nearly 3 million discussion pieces (S. Li, 2020).

The name “female boxers” originated from the “raised fist” symbol of feminism; because of the symbol, people commonly replace the word “feminist (女权nüquan)” with its homonym “female fist (女拳nüquan).” “Countryside feminists” refers to the indigenous rural dogs (田园犬tianyuan quan); to call feminists “Chinese countryside feminists” or “Chinese countryside feminist dogs (feminists and female dogs are also homophonic)” is to disparage Chinese feminists as naïve and unsophisticated compared to their Western counterparts (Feng, 2017).

The affordance of Super Topics is similar to hashtag as both gather users with similar interests. However, compared to the spontaneity of hashtags, as a more organized threading page, a Super Topic is run by hosts and contains specific topics, albums, popular, and latest posts. To set up a Super Topic, netizens have to meet several requirements established by Weibo. Requirements include a minimum number of 10 applications, a perceived popularity of the topic, and the uniqueness of the topic itself. Users can repost the application and invite other users to click on the link in the post to accelerate the approval procedure. When a user clicks on the link, he or she will repost by default. A new repost shares the same content with the previous post, while it also includes the updated count of the repost. In the dataset, several Super Topic reposts are marked with a count above 2000, suggesting that the Super Topic generated more posts than the ones that could be downloaded.

Recent years, many celebrate 7 March as the “girl’s day,” in contrast to “women’s day” on 8 March. The Jiangshanjiao incident attends to a similar tendency to raise the concern of womanhood over girlhood.

Due to its rebellious nature against the censorship system, links to the song suffered from high surveillance. Most links to the video have been deleted by May 2020, while users kept on renewing the link. One link of Jiangshanjiao chuchuwen can be found on Weibo at https://weibo.com/tv/show/1034:4503721246392334?from=old_pc_videoshow (accessed 01/31/2021).

Another possibility is that the dissenting posts that are recognized as crossing the state’s boundaries had been censored and therefore are no longer evident in the dataset gathered by this study.
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