Uncovering the low-profile #MeToo movement: Towards a discursive politics of empowerment on Chinese social media

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Abstract
In China, a few posts related to #MeToo movement survived and remained online well after its peak and the state’s response in July 2018. This article proposes a theoretical framework that pays attention to discursive meaning-making and employs a broad notion of empowerment, referred to as ‘empowerment through discourse’, in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of the low-profile #MeToo movement in the Chinese context. This framework is used to analyse a corpus of uncensored #MeToo material, which appeared on Chinese social media. This article combines a discourse analysis of these posts and interviews with feminists from activist collectives to critically examine feminist empowerment by reflecting on survivor/victim narration and storytelling practices, digital media’s capacity to facilitate critical dialogue between witnesses and survivors/victims and activist collectives’ organising role in opening up a dialogic space for collective reading, listening and healing. These reflections lead to broader considerations on how notions of empowerment can spur collective action and structural change. In short, this article demonstrates the potential possibility of discursive change and reflects on this mode of feminist politics as a way to speak to empowerment in the Chinese context.

Keywords
empowerment through discourse, digital feminism, women’s empowerment, Chinese #MeToo, Chinese women

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Introduction

On 1 January 2018, US-based Beihang University alumnus Luo Xixi published a statement on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo (@cici小居士) accusing her former secondary PhD supervisor Chen Xiaowu of sexual harassment. Her post referenced American actress Alyssa Milano’s tweet ‘#MeToo’, which sparked a broad movement for the recognition of and redress for sexual harassment against women. Luo Xixi recounted her experience and ended her post with the statement, ‘So, my sisters, don’t be afraid. If we’ve been sexually harassed, we need to bravely stand up and say No!’ (Luo Xixi, @cici小居士, 1 January 2018).

After Luo Xixi’s testimonial was published, many sexual assault survivors and victims publicly named their abusers. These abusers included former professors, bosses, acquaintances and colleagues, and the impact of these actions rippled through institutions from universities to the entertainment world to monasteries. The hashtag #MeToo started to become a trend on Chinese social media shortly afterwards, totalling almost 50 million mentions within 2 months. The hashtag’s popularity garnered mainstream media coverage in several newspapers, including the China Daily, Global Times, People’s Daily and The Paper. The movement’s momentum peaked in July 2018, right before all Chinese social media sites suddenly began blocking users from making #MeToo posts. By late July 2018, the overwhelming majority of #MeToo-related content had been scrubbed from Chinese social media. However, the content presented in a ‘low profile’ manner – that is, posts which were not aggregated into trending topics or did not make explicit mention of #MeToo in hashtags – survived the government crackdown.

This article examines how China’s low-profile #MeToo movement invokes a new understanding of empowerment within the specific socio-political constraints of the Chinese state. Guided by a growing body of research that attends to discursive interventions and discursive changes as modes of feminist praxis (e.g. Clark, 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Shaw, 2016; Trott, 2020), this article asks how the #MeToo movement foregrounds discursive power and can be seen as empowering in the Chinese context. It does so through an empirical study of uncensored #MeToo material and in-depth interviews with five feminist activists. To set the background for this analysis, the following section first reviews the theory around discursive activism and some key insights from digital feminist politics and then outlines this study’s theoretical framework.

Feminist hashtag campaigns as discursive activism

Feminist scholars Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Stacey Young were among the first to legitimise the role of discursive activism in women’s movements. They both highlighted how women raise their consciousness through speech and texts to lift themselves out of oppression and transform patriarchal structures. They argued that, in doing so, women construct new feminist discourses to contest hegemonic ones. This ‘feminist discursive politics’ aims to change meaning-making and seeks to ‘reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state’ (Katzenstein, 1995, p. 35). In their view, this ‘feminist discursive activism’ is ‘directed at promoting new grammars [and] new social paradigms through which individuals, collectivities, and institutions interpret social circumstances and devise responses to them’ (Young, 1997, p. 3).

Recent writings on feminist media highlighted the discursive character of the feminist politics enacted online (e.g. Boyle, 2019; Clark, 2016; Gabriel, 2016; Serisier, 2018; Shaw, 2012, 2016). As Clark (2016, p. 790) notes, contemporary feminism’s most salient feature is its ‘discursive nature’ (see also Clark, 2014). Shaw (2012, p. 373) identified the importance of discursive politics in the Australian blogosphere and argued for ‘discourse as the mode of activism’ in this space. Going
further, Shaw (2016) charted how the use of discursive acts, such as negotiation and dialogue, became associated with a discursive politics that ‘intervenes in and creates new discourses by identifying and unpacking power relations in existing discourses’ (p. 3).

Indeed, digital discursive activism has received more and more attention in the literature. Feminist hashtag campaigns such as #BindersFullofWomen (e.g. Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), #Gamergate (e.g. Braithwaite, 2016; Massanari, 2017), #WhyISStayed (e.g. Clark, 2016; Weathers, Sanderson, Neal, & Gramlich, 2016), #YesAllWomen (e.g. Baer, 2016; Serisier, 2018; Thrift, 2014) and #MeToo (e.g. Boyle, 2019; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Trott, 2020) have drawn special attention. Such work considers hashtags as ‘both a tool and space for digital feminist activism’ (Linabary, Corple, & Cooky, 2019, p. 2) and ‘one of the most popular forms of feminist activism’ (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 237).

However, some scholars doubt whether feminist discursive protests within digital media can truly produce structural changes. One of the key critiques is that the articulation of feminist claims online works in tandem with corporate social media platforms that are guided by neoliberal ideas of self-promotion, self-governance, personal choice and individualism and, thus, runs the risk of depoliticising feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016, 2017; Rottenberg, 2017, 2018). In this sense, for feminist politics today, ‘neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this experience as a commodity to be consumed’ (Mohanty, 2013, p. 971). This question has also been raised by Fotopoulou (2016) as to the ‘reduction of the political to the personal and individual’ (p. 6). In short, scholarly debates about the possibilities and constraints of feminist discursive activism have led to a recognition of the political value of digitally mediated discourse in contemporary feminism. Amid the diverse discursive tactics which drive online feminist activism, the question remains: how do women construct discourse and develop political reflections through language and cognition? What is the process through which women’s articulation of their discourses can evolve into a politics of empowerment?

These concerns form the core of this article’s analysis. To offer a solid basis for this enquiry, the study will now briefly engage some feminist critiques of empowerment through the lens of discourse and outline its analytical perspective. The key theoretical implications of this framework are also essential to the analysis of discursive practices in the Chinese #MeToo movement and are particularly applicable to the Chinese context, in which ‘symbolic and discursive expressions are an important part of online activism’ (Yang, 2009, p. 33).

**Empowerment through discourse**

Borrowing terms from Blair (1998), this article proposes a conceptual framework to analyse empowerment through discourse. In this respect, Amy Allen’s (1998, 2005, 2008) synthesis of power offers important insights regarding empowerment and discursive potential. Allen adopts an integrative approach to mapping out three modalities of power described below: power-over, power-to and power-with. Each of these modalities entails a particular analytical focus on power relations and creates the conceptual space from which we can identify some new linkages between discourse and empowerment.

**Power-over: intersecting the structural and discursive domains**

Allen (1998) defines power-over as ‘the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way’ (p. 33). It is typically used to characterise power as a system of dominance, in which patriarchy has been recognised as a
significant and immutable aspect of our social reality; thereby, ‘the domination relation between men and women will, of necessity, be pervasive’ (Allen, 1998, p. 23).

This concept follows Foucauldian feminist critics by locating power-over in the domain of structural politics (e.g. Bartky, 1998; Cooper, 1994; McNay, 1991; Sawicki, 1986). In addition, power-over is also connected to what Collins (2000, p. 299) calls ‘the disciplinary domain of power’, which describes how male surveillance constitutes a major mechanism of disciplinary control over women’s lives through culture, social conventions, and bureaucracy. This idea highlights the significant role played by discourse: ‘the significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies’ (Collins, 2000, p. 304).

Critics of the concept of power-over claim that it provides a one-dimensional view of women’s empowerment because it carries masculinist connotations of domination and control and neglects the potentially transformative elements of power. Many feminist scholars have argued for alternative conceptions of power to complement the concept of power-over. For example, some of these scholars claim that the process of empowerment should involve ‘the use of power, but not “power over” others or power as dominance as is traditionally the case; rather, power is seen as “power to” or power as competence’ (Bystydzienski, 1992, p. 3).

Power-to: discursive production of selves and personal empowerment

Allen’s second modality of power, power-to, concerns everyday social interactions and is considered a response to power-over. Allen (1998) defines power-to as ‘the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends that serve to subvert domination’ (p. 35). Women are not passive victims who are inevitably and uniformly dominated, but are instead active agents capable of exercising power in the generative sense (Deveaux, 1994; Lister, 2003).

These scholars show how the emergence of women’s resistance is tightly bound up with the consciousness-raising which took root during second-wave feminism. Collins (2000) claims that the self-defined ‘womanist’ consciousness that arose during second-wave feminism has not only played a prominent role in transforming internalised oppression into free-mindedness but ‘equally fundamentally, this type of change is also personally empowering’ (p. 129). Thus, consciousness-raising is not an end in itself but rather the point of departure in the process of women’s empowerment.

Storytelling is a key element of consciousness-raising and empowerment. According to Plummer (2001), life stories, autobiographies and narratives can be important in helping to reveal how people ‘get through their days making decisions about what can be done through telling stories of their moral choices which are embedded in their lives and their environments’ (p. 248). In turn, this capacity for storytelling enables women to reflect on their ways of living and ask whether helpful changes can be made through their choices; therefore, storytelling can actualise women’s internal sense of empowerment. Thus, the practice of storytelling can be ‘an incredibly empowering experience, a way of reclaiming subjectivity and agency after a desubjectifying experience of violence’ (Serisier, 2018, p. 11).

Power-with: discursive resistance and collective empowerment

However, because the women’s movement is intimately bound up with collective power, it is impossible to achieve women’s empowerment without solidarity and coalition-building. According to Collins (2000), ‘micro-changes may remain invisible to individual women. Yet collectively, they
can have a profound impact’ (p. 293). Behind this point lies Allen’s third modality of power: ‘power-with’, which can be understood as ‘the ability of a collectivity to act together for the shared common purpose of overturning a system of domination’ (Allen, 1998, p. 36).

Many scholars have illustrated how the most concerted feminist attempts to become empowered concern the building of successful alliances and pursuing dialogue. For Yuval-Davis (1994), a dialogue is a core dimension of the formation of social groupings with different ideological positions. For her, dialogue recognises ‘the specific positionings of those who participate in them as well as to the “unfinished knowledge” that each such situated positioning can offer’, and consequently ‘the boundaries of such a dialogue are determined by the message, rather than the messenger’ (p. 194). Iris Young (1994) also considers dialogue as critical – specifically, empowering ‘individual, relatively powerless persons [to] engage in dialogue with each other and thereby come to understand the social sources of their powerlessness and see the possibility of acting collectively to change their social environment’ (p. 50).

This article also values such dialogue and follows Ganesh and Zoller’s (2012) emphasis on the dialogic elements of confrontational activist tactics that aim to ‘relativise a dominant discourse by constructing and rendering visible alternative political stances’ (p. 79). These understandings that stress ‘discursive openings’ may create ‘social awareness and visibility’ which subvert power relations (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 79). Thus, these openings can help subaltern women perceive the role of dialogue in organising their ‘move from an acceptance of institutional forms as natural and given to seeing them as human constructs that are changeable’ (Young, 1994, p. 50).

This article’s analysis of the #MeToo movement in China builds on the above-mentioned feminist conceptions of empowerment: conceptions that envision the development of women’s capacities to exercise power-to and power-with to make significant changes to how men exert power-over women. Furthermore, these power models indicate that the discursive character of women’s empowerment entails a process of change; in the process of challenging gendered social constructs and their structural constraints through discourse, female actors recognise their subordinate status, raise their consciousness, participate in actions and build solidarity.

**Methods and data**

This article explores how the Chinese low-profile #MeToo foregrounds discursive power and fuels its political growth in relation to empowerment while working in tandem with socio-political constraints. In so doing, the research design for this article incorporated two stages of analysis. As mentioned above, the Chinese state has censored posts containing the hashtag #MeToo on Chinese social media since late July 2018, but the public can still read articles, comments or personal narratives that are not aggregated into trending topics and/or not presented as #MeToo posts. In this context, I manually searched for ‘Me Too’ and ‘米兔’ (‘Rice Bunny’ – a Chinese homonym for ‘Me Too’) on Weibo, Zhihu (known as ‘Chinese Quora’), Douban (known as ‘Chinese Reddit’) and the website weixin.sogou.com/ – a third-party search engine that hosts an archive of public accounts on WeChat (an all-purpose social media app). This process yielded a total of 200 uncensored posts published throughout 2018.

This dataset consisted of the first stage of the analysis to examine how they invoked discursive politics of empowerment in terms of consciousness-raising, standpoint expression and solidarity building. In so doing, the analysis followed Fairclough (2003) and took a discursive approach to genre analysis of these posts by identifying the purpose, topic, author and values of each post. It also identified the posts’ use of tone, pronouns and metaphors. Two major genres of discursive actors emerged from the data: (1) narrators, or #MeToo survivors/victims who voiced their personal
experiences and (2) witnesses, or #MeToo audience members who wrote commentaries. Following this, I developed an inductive coding manual by applying thematical analysis of all the collected posts and detected 25 themes of the messages (‘critiques of power structure’, ‘slut-shaming/no-victim-blaming’, ‘expression of support’, ‘PTSD storytelling’, etc.).

These data were supplemented with the second stage of the analysis through in-depth interviews with five feminist actors from three activist collectives. The first interviewee was one of the producers of 2600-page pdf file from the #MeToo in China Archives (Figure 1).

This archive was voluntarily created and curated by a group of feminist activists and came into circulation within the inner ring of Chinese feminists’ social media networks. It contains online content regarding prominent #MeToo cases and news reports produced by major media outlets and was specifically created to preserve this content in the event of state censorship. Due to its strong influence within the feminist inner ring in China, I sent the editorial board of the #MeToo in China Archives an interview request via email. This request resulted in a 90-minute, semi-structured interview with a spokesperson for this project.

Meanwhile, a loosely structured group, named ChinaMetooOrg, was established after the outbreak of the #MeToo movement in China—both of its website and Weibo account were alive. Then, I set up a 60-minute group interview between myself and three core members of this group with approval granted.

A telephone interview was also conducted with a core member of Feminist Voices, which had been the most influential Chinese feminist social media account until Weibo and WeChat were banned permanently in China. This third open-structured interview was derived from a longitudinal ethnographic study of the role of feminist groups in bringing about women’s empowerment in China. Taken together, these in-depth interviews allowed the current study to explore feminist actors’ motivations for participating in the movement, their routine work and how they perceived the impact of the movement in China.

Due to the sensitive nature of the Chinese #MeToo movement and related ethical, safety and privacy concerns, all the interviewees’ identities were concealed. They agreed to disclose their group names for publicity. All the interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed in Chinese. A thorough qualitative analysis was then applied to the transcripts and only those quotes that appear in this article were translated into English. Below demonstrates the result analyses of both the social media dataset and the interview data. They generate insights into the attitudes, understandings and practices of narrators, witnesses and activist collectives and reflect on how these groups discursively expressed themselves during the rise and peak of the #MeToo movement in China.

Narrators: gaining a sense of personal empowerment

The data from the sampled social media posts suggest that digital platforms afforded survivors/victims with an opportunity to tell compelling stories about their individual experiences. These content creators were labelled ‘narrators’ because they typically began their posts with their accounts and ended with their reflections, concerns or commentaries on #MeToo in China. This ritualistic repetition of the narrative genre formed an easily searchable and accessible space that aggregated a great diversity of abuse stories, voices and circumstances under the single discursive framework of the #MeToo movement and thus created openings for a matter of power-to empowering becoming to question and critique the power-over gender order (see Brickell, 2012, p. 30).

Many of these narrators were sharing their experiences of PTSD for the first time. As a result, they offered an alternative discourse, which took issue with the taken-for-granted trope of the ‘ideal
Figure 1. Cover of the #MeToo in China archives.
victim’, who was accused of falling to prevent what happened to them and broadened the popular perspective on sexual harassment, which should be understood as a crime with lifelong implications, rather than a single, short-lived instance of misconduct. For example, one narrator wrote:

I’ve never felt so helpless, as a woman, as a citizen. For a year, the indifference of others and the incompetence of the police continued to make me feel scared. I can’t recall what actually occurred to me…that moment made me feel humiliated. It’s been a year since I read #MeToo on Weibo, but I never forgot the sadness, humiliation, and hatred I experienced. (@eva, 26 July 2018, 21:02:55)

These narrators often drew attention to their experiences of PTSD and how those experiences led them to blame themselves for their assault. They did this to highlight the social stigma attached to the mainstream, normalised and problematic questioning of survivors/victims. For example, as one posted,

Why, as a victim, can I not relieve myself of the burden? My friend told me that I didn’t do anything wrong and I didn’t need to blame myself, but I still got upset every time I thought about it. (@whiteskirt, 26 July 2018, 19:03:47)

Others experienced intrapersonal conflict; they simultaneously regretted not taking any action and explicitly maintained that their abuse was not their fault:

That’s my experience of being harassed four times and it’s sad and depressing. I’m not educated to respond to it, so I’m unaware of this kind of thing even though it happened to me many times. I’m simple and I’m kind, but that shouldn’t be a reason for me to be bullied. If there is a next time, I hope I can give him a break like I imagined I would. And, if I meet one of these old perverts staring at me with dirty eyes on the street, I also hope I can shout at him, ‘What are you looking at? Old pervert!’ (@lengyanjichefille, 26 July 2018, 17:41:22)

Some women used a strong tone to criticise the homogenised way in which survivors/victims are burdened by slut-shaming discourse:

So sexual harassment really has nothing to do with what you wear, because the fucking reason is the sexualisation and objectification of all women and the creepiness and despicableness of some men. (@buddhism, 26 July 2018, 18:50:24)

The victim is not at fault! No consent is sexual assault! There’s no causal relationship with the victim’s clothing, time of day, or relationship history! Please stop the slut attack! Only the perpetrators are at fault! (@icecream, 26 July 2018, 18:15:50)

These acts of public testimony dispute the dominant victim-blaming discourse and speak to what Rowlands (1995) calls ‘internalised oppression’ – the widespread recognition that women may accept their subordinate role in an existing social order as long as their perceptions, cognitions and preferences continue to be shaped by the status quo ideology, which reinforces male domination. Focusing on abusers’ responsibility for their actions, these women survivors/victims were empowered by raising their and others’ consciousness regarding the damaging effects of patriarchal injustice.

Perhaps most encouraging, many of the posts in the sample were framed as calls to stand up and speak out, and many employed the first-person pronoun ‘I’, the plural ‘we’ and/or phrases like ‘all
women’. These rhetorical moves connect the individuality of women’s experiences with the systemic oppression they face, thus cultivating a sense of solidarity through sharing individual stories. For example, @notwarmatall appealed to all women by saying,

Girls, be sure not to give in!!!!!! If you don’t like it, be brave and say so. If you’re afraid to say so, stay away. Don’t leave him alone. If you’re not brave enough to say no to such things, it’ll keep coming! (26 July 2018, 11:31:46).

@tengxi stated her hope that ‘more victims across China will come forward and bravely say: Me Too! Fight for our women’s future!’ (26 July 2018, 19:57:01).

These women’s use of social media to connect narrators’ stories with broader, gendered, structural oppression underwrites the potential for discursive empowerment in the digital age. This in turn contributes to a sense of power-to and thus leads to greater empowerment that can be viewed in two complementary ways. First, as Collins (2000, p. 305) notes, as ‘gaining the critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies’; second, as women’s capability to construct new knowledge and ways of knowing.

**Witnesses: defining sexual harassment as a systemic structural problem**

#MeToo in China not only provided a platform by which women survivors/victims could voice their experiences and counter the social silence and stigma surrounding these experiences, but also aroused strong emotions in individual readers, media outlets, public intellectuals and micro-celebrities – all of whom responded to the stories emerging from the movement with essays, memos, intrapersonal narratives and in-depth analyses. The study refers to this group of audience participants as ‘witnesses’ because they had no direct or indirect experience of sexual harassment but affectively engaged in the movement’s conversation and acknowledged these survivor/victim narratives’ entanglement in structural and systemic violence. As Loney-Howes et al., 2021 argue, through witnessing the experience of the ‘other’, it fosters the power-with ability to respond collectively to the dominant modes of sexual violence, which adds another layer of power relations to complement with power-to.

Witnesses’ posts rendered the structural violence of sexual harassment visible by explicitly addressing patriarchal power in Chinese society. For example, @luxiaoyu wrote, ‘But the problem now is that sexual harassment is not only an issue of gender inequality, it’s also an issue of power’ (18 July 2018, 19:04:34). @feiqichihou posted, ‘The MeToo movement is a direct reference to existing power inequalities’ (28 July 2018, 09:51:25). @zeze stated, ‘Perhaps this attributes to the disadvantages that women are usually at in patriarchal societies, such as not having the upper hand in workplace resources from tradition, not being respected as equals, and so on’ (30 July 2018, 09:41:47). In this sense, the identified witnesses in the study indicated that the persistence of power-over was crucial to the Chinese #MeToo, functioning as a principal reason why they challenged the seemingly accepted and often unquestioned sexism surrounding sexual harassment and assault.

Speaking out against systems of oppression through #MeToo also generated a wider public consciousness of sexual harassment, as many witnesses in this case study echoed narrators’ calls to stand up to harassers. They extended this call by pointing out how sociocultural institutions combine to force survivors/victims of sexual assault to internalise slut-shaming discourses. One witness wrote:

Sexual harassment has long existed on the map of feminist issues in China, but it has long been in its infancy: women complain, and men are in charge, turning a blind eye. Sexual harassment, like other so-
called ‘women’s issues’, is the result of women’s lack of self-respect, lack of resistance. Harassers get off scot-free, while victims, no matter what they choose, are trapped in accusations and abuse – either by the harasser or by the cultural abuse of the condemned victims. (@zhangzhiqi, 17 January 2018, 15:25:58)

Strikingly, these examples are in contrast with many current studies on digital feminist activism. They run particularly counter to postfeminist assertions that the personal is the political has been reduced to the personal is the personal (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Linabary et al., 2019). In contrast, the findings suggest that witnesses made patriarchal power structures visible and identified these structures as the root cause of the Chinese #MeToo movement. In doing so, some witnesses amplified critiques of unequal social structures and stressed the necessity of sex education:

Today I just want to say that the current state of #MeToo# in China is ample proof that there is no sex education in the country. And if there is, it is quite a failure of sex education. (@Lin En, 28 July 2018, 04:18:29)

Other posts openly scoffed at cultural norms that condone and normalise sexual harassment. These posts pointed out male perpetrators’ vague perceptions of what constitutes flirting and consent and identified further failings in the discourse surrounding sex and sex education:

These middle-aged men, who were born before the 1980s, may not have felt that the masculine image of ‘scum’ existed among them. After all, they did not think that ‘promiscuity’ or sexual harassment was a big deal... they may not have had much respect for individual values, so even the boundaries between men and women were blurred. Sexual harassment was not as seriously and neatly defined as it is today when they were growing up, so they felt more like flirting rather than harassing. (@gooodoooot, 2018-07-27, 18:26:35)

Thus, witnesses staked new definitional claims regarding sexual harassment, which accorded with the extensive work by scholars of digital feminism (Mendes et al., 2018; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015; Thrift, 2014). This finding demonstrates the power of social media platforms to generate a wider consciousness of feminist issues in public space, an attribute of social media which is well-recognised in the literature.

Dozens of witnesses explicitly showed their support by creating ‘affective solidarities’(Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2018) with survivors/victims. For example, one audience participant @straberry stated: ‘Hail to the brave survivors!’ (4 August 2018, 23:22:38). Another concurred: ‘We support the #MeToo Movement, we support women’s power, we support gender equality’ (@Angellic Xie, 2 November 2018, 12:07:18). Moreover, some witnesses hoped to make systemic interventions by expressing their strong belief in the implementation of a legal mechanism specifically designed to handle sexual assault crimes:

To achieve the goal of China’s #MeToo, a legal system is necessary…. What is the use of setting up a ‘sexual harassment complaint box’ in a system full of patriarchal hegemony? (@zhangzhiqi, 17 January 2018, 15:25:58)

Although these posts maintained the macro-level challenge directed towards institutions and power structures, many worried about the precarity of China’s #MeToo movement (see also Baer, 2016). These witnesses worried about the sustainability of the movement in the Chinese political and cultural context:
This summer’s #MeToo movement looked like it was quite a big deal, but in reality, it was just a drop in the bucket, and a tip of the iceberg. Beneath the shiny skin of this world, there is no telling how many shocking evils are hidden. But light and dark, black and white, good and evil, are always together. It is unrealistic to expect a society of pure goodness. (@hetaileng, 3 August 2018, 11:25:17)

Similar concerns have arisen in the literature because a feminist hashtag is typically short-lived and often becomes a media spectacle with little real momentum or impact (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Gill, 2016).

By exploring how witnesses participated in the Chinese #MeToo movement by centring how sexual harassment serves and stems from power and privilege, we can see how these actors’ acts of listening were key to making survivors/victims’ stories meaningful. This further contributes to an understanding of how an individual experience has been transformed into a collective concern, through witnessing others’ experience, to create the power-with possibility that can challenge gendered hegemonic structure (see also Loney-Howes et al., 2021). Although digital media can foster feelings of being in someone else’s shoes (Rodino-Colocino, 2018), practices of collective listening ‘would refuse the presumption that political solidarity arises automatically from stories of rape and sexual violence’ (Serisier, 2018, p. 193); listening alone does not build solidarity or spark collective action.

Activist collectives: opening up a dialogic space for empowerment through listening and healing

This section turns to interview data that allowed us to address how solidarity building required the existence of a participatory and dialogical space based on shared goals and mutual understanding in the context of China’s #MeToo movement. This space also took the power-with dimension of the movement to new levels and threatened to generate collective power and action.

The #MeToo movement launched by the feminist activist Tarana Burke is based on ‘empowerment through empathy’ (JustBe Inc, 2013); thus, feminist media scholars have kept a close eye on the movement’s survivors/victims and treated them as protagonists. Scholars have examined how these actors gain a sense of power-with empowerment through speaking out and have explored the resulting feelings of solidarity between these actors and attentive audience members (e.g. Clark-Parsons, 2019; Rodino-Colocino, 2018; Trott, 2020), as demonstrated above. However, few analyses have focused on women’s groups’ use of digital media to engage with #MeToo.

Scholars of feminist empowerment have long debated the critical role of women’s groups and their efforts to jointly negotiate, collaborate and mutually support one another to transform oppressive structural relations (Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1994). In China, women’s groups, organisations and networks play important roles in promoting women’s rights and creating social change (author’s work). These groups and their members are also active participants in the use of digital media for progressive feminist politics. This study found that three activist collectives – #MeToo in China Archives, MetooChinaOrg and Feminist Voices – were on the front lines of this movement.

The group spokesperson of #MeToo in China Archives interviewed for this study perceived the archives as a discursive platform that facilitated a dialogue among women – a dialogue that aimed to build the knowledge, skills and support networks that women need to thrive as sexual harassment survivors/victims (personal communication, 19 June 2020). Drawing on Rodino-Colocino (2018), we can see these archives as empowering through healing and solidarity.
The healing provided by the #MeToo in China Archives was built upon a collectivist rather than a do-it-yourself, individualist approach (see also Jane, 2016). The spokesperson made this clear:

We wanted to put all the Chinese #MeToo cases together. Reading our archives was like having an opportunity to know those survivors and victims, and ask: what did they experience? How did they go through? I think making the archives is a very meaningful process of collective healing for all of us, whether we’ve experienced it or not (personal communication, 19 June 2020).

The above quote also echoes Clair et al. (2019) idea of organisational bystanders, since the archives’ curators deliberately organised an online space to promote reciprocal listening.

MetooChinaOrg was also run by volunteers who were ‘dedicated to the #MeToo movement and to supporting victims of harassment, allowing them to anonymously share their stories with the public’ (https://metoochina.org). Whereas the #MeToo in China Archives prioritised collective healing, MetooChinaOrg opened up a safe and public space for collective listening. Indeed, the group members I interviewed identified this as a specific point of pride and designed their group’s logo around this idea (Figure 2):

The main purpose of our website is to encourage survivors/victims to speak and to create a more comfortable atmosphere. So, we choose a very warm colour as the basis of our logo… We want to help survivors/victims at least from the design of the logo and the attendant tone of the website, because typing about personal experience per se is rather stressful, so we would not create any additional noise or pressure in this sense. This designing principle continued in our Weibo, hoping to provide them with a safe, quite space to talk (personal communication, 16 July 2020).

Beyond offering a listening ear, MetooChinaOrg also provided more tangible forms of support on their digital media platforms, such as links to psychological counsellors, shelters and charity law firms, as well as educational posts for survivors/victims, to help them face up to sexual harassment. Through this outreach work both MetooChinaOrg and #MeToo in China Archives performed organiser work and put forth a collective effort to alleviate the individual strain that accompanies practices of reading and listening. Drawing on Clair et al. (2019), we can see MetooChinaOrg’s determination to open a dialogue as a form of power-with which worked towards exposing systems of oppression and privilege.

Yet, as loosely structured, voluntary activist collectives, it is no surprise that both groups struggled to sustain their efforts. Even so, members of both groups voiced their faith in digital media as a tool in the ongoing effort to strengthen #MeToo campaigns within China. This optimistic vision of digital media’s potential to bring feminist politics to life was best exemplified in my interviews with Feminist Voices, which dedicated itself to covering and demanding justice for #MeToo-related stories in early 2018. Feminist Voices was forced to close its Weibo and WeChat accounts by censors on the 8th and 9th of March 2018. Even so, the collective’s members continued using social media and created two alternative WeChat accounts to continue the group’s work.

One of these accounts continued actively supporting the #MeToo movement by sharing advocacy journalism, commentaries and interviews with survivors/victims. By asking why the group’s ban did not discourage its continued activities, the group’s core organiser replied,

To claim a feminist voice in China is a process. There are of course limits on our speech freedom. Although our social media accounts are blocked for this time being, I am still looking forward optimistically to the future. (personal communication, November 28, 2018).
This new WeChat account opened up a dialogic space for key Chinese feminist figures and allowed them to forge connections to other activist collectives and push #MeToo towards a more discursive politics of empowerment.

**Conclusions: towards a politics of empowerment through discourse?**

In *Punishment, treatment, empowerment: three approaches to policy for pregnant addicts*, Iris Marion Young (1994) writes, ‘Empowerment is like democracy: everyone is for it, but rarely do people mean the same thing by it’ (p. 48). Her remarks also apply to arguments that reconfigure and rework the notion of feminist empowerment via digital media in the context of #MeToo (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). In China, whereas much existing scholarship in digital feminist activism reckons the risks of state repression and censorship, the explosion of the #MeToo movement and its precarious survival after the crackdown have evidenced the unprecedented capacity of digital media to empower women and feminist activists to discursively combat oppressive systems and
advance new interpretations of and responses to discourses that normalise sexual harassment and assault.

Building upon Allen (1998, 2005, 2008) and others, this article calls for a widening of the concept of empowerment, which refers to (a) renegotiating the formal structures of men’s power-over women by engaging in levelled discourse; (b) engaging in discursive practices aimed at helping women gain a sense of power-to as individuals through storytelling and dialogue and (c) acting out politics of power-with to collectively upend the very systems of patriarchal power. This article’s discourse analysis of uncensored digital texts and interviews with key feminists from activist collectives has demonstrated how feminist empowerment became central to China’s #MeToo movement through online storytelling and the cultivation of a sense of community; through it, bystanders were brought into dialogue with survivors/victims to discuss and dismantle their patriarchal understandings of sexual harassment and assault. When these bonds of solidarity form through organised dialogue, feminist empowerment can further develop and possibly effect structural change. Thus, this article has not only drawn explicit links between digital feminist politics and feminist empowerment but also argued that the #MeToo movement in China was and continues to be based on empowerment through discourse.

Through a case study of the Chinese #MeToo movement, I have mapped – from the perspectives of narrators, witnesses and activist collectives – the promise and perils of a politics of empowerment that advances discourses from the ground up within an authoritarian country. For narrators, empowerment has arisen from the digitally discursive act of storytelling that helps them reclaim power-to by narrating their silenced or unspeakable personal experiences. More specifically, the invisible hashtag #MeToo in China’s censored Internet has provided a discursive space and allowed a discourse for and among narrators to push back against the power-over victim-blaming discourses, as long as their posts maintained a low profile.

Empowerment also swells into witnesses who have used digital platforms as a dialogic space to cultivate a sense of power-with relationship-building to fight for hegemonic discourses surrounding sexual harassment and assault; however, we cannot ignore that this power-with relation operates largely only at the individual level. For activist collectives that may be censored at any time, empowerment unfolds through organised dialogues that prize collective storytelling, listening and healing to form a discursive power-with resistance. Relying on discourse has developed as an adaptive strategy for activist collectives to transform discursive influence into open feminist politics, whose voices have the opportunity to overshadow institutional gatekeepers’ online filtering, albeit the long-term effects of this work are not entirely clear.

This article is not written to trace the outline of a Chinese version of the #MeToo movement but to grapple with a legacy of a discursive politics of empowerment that can produce socio-political change through the use of Chinese social media with great care and creativity. In this way, perhaps the low-profile #MeToo movement in the context of China serves as a starting point for digital feminist researchers and activists to be mindful of a discourse that makes space for the endurance of a politics of empowerment by shifting their scholarly attention away from censorship. This study demonstrates the discursive nature of feminist politics that occurs in new forms of storytelling and dialogue through narrating, commenting and solidarity and extends support to the existing research that reimagines the radical potential of digital media for feminist empowerment in China and beyond with a critical sense of discourse.
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