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Rice Bunnies in China's #MeToo: Discussion of a Feminist Movement under Censorship

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"RICE BUNNIES" IN CHINA'S #METOO: DISCUSSION OF A FEMINIST
MOVEMENT UNDER CENSORSHIP

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion
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Reader: Dr. Joshua Howard

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Chinese feminists who are bravely speaking their truth in the face of censorship. I recognize that this censorship may not only be online, but may also come from family members, significant others, and friends. Please know you are not alone.

(Sung to the tune of "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from *Les Miserables)*

我想出门不害怕
想美丽不被骚扰
请保护我别困住我
为何我失去自由
快醒醒吧抓住他犯错的人不是我

I want to take back the night
And to be beautiful and free from harassment
Please empower me but don't prison me
Why do you take my freedom from me?
Snap out of it! Catch the perpetrator- not me.

- Original Chinese and English Translation by Li Maizi, Feminist Activist

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to assess the reception of the currently developing #MeToo movement in China from the perspective of Chinese internet users, feminists, and the state government as well as how censorship affects the way in which these individuals express their opinions on gendered sexual violence in Chinese society. By using a qualitative content analysis to comb through Chinese social media posts, Chinese state-sponsored news articles, and Western news articles, findings suggest that Chinese netizens are engaging with societal concerns over #MeToo and sexual assault, but do not define their grievances as being within a movement presumably to avoid censorship. Chinese feminist activists use public support of #MeToo-related discussions to justify local change in dealing with sexual assault while at the same time being careful to not challenge state authority. Consequently, these findings add to research previously conducted on online activism, social movements, and Chinese feminist ideology.

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Introduction

The #MeToo movement in the United States has so far been a testimonial to the power of social media activism. Tarana Burke first coined the phrase in 2007 while working with young victims of sexual assault, but the phrase was not in the vernacular until October of 2017 when celebrities on twitter used #MeToo to show the breadth and magnitude of sexual assault. Within 24 hours, #MeToo was shared by over 12 million twitter posts (Garcia, 2017). #MeToo has since sparked international conversations on gender inequality and sexual violence among culturally diverse societies. In China, a country that ranks 100th out of 144 countries for gender equality (Wall Street Journal, 2018), women have used similar social media avenues to share their own stories of sexual violence. Hashtags such as #我也是 (*wo ye shi*, or the phrase "me too" directly translated into Chinese), #MeToo 在中国 (#MeToo in China") and #米兔 (the character for rice pronounced as *mi* combined with the character for rabbit pronounced as *tu*, used to get around censorship) have all been seen on Chinese social media networks such as *Weibo, Zhihu,* and *WeChat*. #MeToo provides a context for Chinese netizens to discuss the sensitive issue of sexual assault, particularly how it hinders women's professional development and contributes to devaluation of women's role in society. Chinese feminists are also using #MeToo to further their activism by using highly publicized #MeToo cases to justify the need for action. I have found in my research, however, that state censorship limits #MeToo conversations for both netizens and activists. Censorship has consequently caused China's #MeToo to be focused on only a handful of publicized cases, personal anecdotes, and small offline local activism to assert its ideals as an important, but not state-threatening, movement.

On the official #MeToo Movement webpage, curated by founder Tarana Burke and funded by Girls for Gender Equity, the mission of #MeToo is to "address both the dearth in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, who will be at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt sexual violence in their communities" (MeToo, 2018). These goals are met through grass-roots, bottom-up organizing along with the creation of a digital community for survivors who can link others to resources (MeToo, 2018). Tarana Burke founded #MeToo based on her own experiences as a sexual assault survivor and as a black woman in the U.S. The organization and digital activism were originally aimed to help young women of color from a low-economic status (Garcia, 2017). The adoption of #MeToo by white Hollywood actresses expanded #MeToo to become an online movement for any woman (or man) affected by sexual violence and garnered attention from feminist activists around the world. #MeToo is now a global movement in which activists use #MeToo to discuss what policies, resources, and education are needed in their respective countries to combat sexual harassment and assault.

My interest in analyzing social media posts and news media surrounding sexual harassment and assault in China stems in part from working for the Women in Leadership League in Shanghai during the summer of 2018. One of my main projects was to coordinate and promote a Chinese version of "The Vagina Monologues." My supervisor, Sophie Wu, had worked with the NGO Phoenix Risen to create resources for victims of sexual assault. In addition, she created an almost entirely new play based on the lives of five Chinese women to demonstrate the obstacles women face in Chinese society including sexual assault. A week out from the production, however, my supervisor

received a call from a government official who believed the play to be "too culturally sensitive" a topic for Chinese audiences. My supervisor decided to continue with the play, but our original venue backed out of the deal. We struggled to find a new venue until we eventually decided to host the event at our own office. After this ordeal, my impression was that Chinese feminists face an uphill battle, so I was surprised to discover that, despite censorship, #MeToo was appearing on Chinese social media and occasionally referenced in Chinese newspapers. This discovery led me to wonder: how could sexual violence and gender inequality be discussed on Chinese social media in relation to a Western-inspired movement? What are Chinese feminist activists and organizations doing to spread awareness of sexual violence? Are their goals similar to those of U.S. #MeToo activists, and if so, would Chinese society and the government accept that there is a need for better measures to protect victims of sexual assault? These preliminary questions led to the resulting study of Chinese and Western media content covering #MeToo and sexual assault in China.

#MeToo as a social media campaign on the behalf of a larger anti-sexual assault movement is appealing to Chinese audiences for historical and societal reasons. This study thus presents a chapter focused entirely on the impetus for #MeToo in China. Traditional gender values as discussed by Johnson show that there is a long history of gender inequality in China. Even though many Chinese have abandoned traditional values, such as a division of labor between the sexes, economic trends have led to a reemergence of systematic gender inequality as well as a reintroduction of some traditional values to justify this inequality. Researchers Sun and Chen define this phenomenon as the public-private divide. Due to this divide, Chinese feminist ideology

has become a robust academic pursuit in the past several decades. There is much debate within this field on whether Chinese feminism is a product of Western values, a completely separate and localized ideology, or a mixture of both. Theories surrounding this debate from Min Dongchao, Spakowski, and Wesoky help to conceptualize if #MeToo in China mirrors movement in the U.S. or if it contains localized aspects.

Theories concerning sexual violence in China also elucidate the perceived need for a #MeToo movement. Research on sexual assault in China is unfortunately limited to a few formal studies in urban areas. Even so, a recent study by the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center Equality found that 75% of female students experienced sexual harassment at their university. A second study also conducted by GSEC found that 80% of female journalists experienced sexual harassment at their place of work (Low, 2018). Chinese feminists have used these studies to justify the need for #MeToo in China. Lastly, a brief look at Chinese feminist activism, mostly deriving from Leta Hong Fincher's research on the subject, paints a picture of common feminist activist tactics and state response.

#MeToo is a movement largely concentrated on social media websites which led this study to focus on online materials. During this study, however, it became evident that censorship hinders the amount of available #MeToo content. For example, *Weibo*, China's microblogging website often likened to Twitter, is where a Chinese woman first used her real name with #MeToo to tell her story of sexual harassment. Within a day her post had three million views leading the post to be taken down by censors (BBC, 2018). Her post was archived on third-party sites along with other censored #MeToo posts, but these sites can only be seen by Chinese netizens using VPNs to get around internet

blocks. Thus, even though *Weibo* is where much #MeToo activism occurred at the start of #MeToo in China, almost every variation of the #MeToo hashtag on *Weibo* that would suggest a movement within China has been censored since the end of 2018 into early 2019. This study then turned away from examining the content of Chinese #MeToo posts on Weibo, but instead focused on online content surrounding #MeToo on *Zhihu* and news media.

知乎 (*Zhihu*) is a social media site in China where discussion and debate over #MeToo cases and views towards the nature of sexual harassment in society are actively occuring. Unlike *Weibo*, *Zhihu* can escape heavy censorship because it is a question-and-answer social media site that encourages debate in the answers or "comments" to the question. #MeToo posts are "blown up" on *Weibo* through reposts to netizen's own blogs where their followers would see the post even if they did not follow the account that wrote the original #MeToo post. A strict word-limit on *Weibo* also dissuades people from writing any in-detail arguments against #MeToo for their followers to read. On the other hand, *Zhihu* users respond to questions on a discussion forum for the question and often participate in debates to make their "comment" the most "liked" or "upvoted" answer to the question and also to express their views on a subject. *Zhihu* questions can easily have upwards of a thousand "comments" to a question and contain varying positive and negative views towards the subject matter. Indeed, Chinese netizens often use *Zhihu* to learn about different perspectives towards the latest news, political development, or social trend creating a space for netizens to discuss culturally sensitive issues with some degree of leniency. In my experience conducting, comments on *Zhihu* are only censored

if they contain language that directly criticizes the government such as if a comment contains the phrase "corrupt government" or "corrupt politicians."

"Popular" questions on *Zhihu*'s homepage and under different question categories are determined by the amount of responses or "comments" to the question as well as the amount of people "upvoting" or "liking" comments to the question. This system encourages *Zhihu* users to respond to popular questions, but users can also use the search engine to find questions on topics relevant to their interests and find popular questions under different topic headings. "Top comments," which make up the bulk of this study's data, are the comments that appear first under a question due to receiving the largest number of "upvotes" or "likes" from other *Zhihu* users. "Top comments" contain important insights into what views are commonly held in China towards #MeToo or issues surrounding sexual assault while also providing a window into the discussion without having to sift through hundreds or thousands of question responses. In addition to *Zhihu*, data was collected from Chinese and Western news sources to shed light on feminist activism and state response to #MeToo since these perspectives cannot be inferred directly from social media sites like *Zhihu*.

Following a brief Data and Analysis chapter detailing the results from the sources previously mentioned, an in-depth Findings and Discussion chapter discusses what online #MeToo conversations reveal about gender dynamics and feminism in China and how censorship impacts what can be discussed about #MeToo on *Zhihu* and in the news. I use theoretical concepts from Charles Tilly and Guobin Yang to interpret my findings. Charles Tilly discusses in his 2002 book *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* how storytelling is an important piece of creating an identity that can sustain a viable social

movement. Social media posts on *Zhihu* often use storytelling and personal narratives to discuss sexual assault and creates a link between sexual assault victims publicized in the news and netizens. Guobin Yang's view of social media in China as a way for creating a larger and more engaging civil society despite censorship is prevalent in my analysis of *Zhihu* posts as well. I argue, similarly to Yang, that since #MeToo in China has identifiable cases to direct attention towards, a small, localized offline movement using formal channels has been created, even if many netizens are not aware of activist's actions. Netizens propel the movement through discussing a needed reassessment of societal values.

Contributing factors to the #MeToo Movement in China

Contributing factors of the #MeToo movement in China help to contextualize my findings. I begin this chapter with an outline of traditional gender roles to provide background of how China's traditional patriarchal values still exercises some influence on modern society. Next, I discuss the public-private divide in China and how this divide hinders women from becoming an equal contributor to China's economy. Then, I outline competing ideas towards Chinese feminist ideology and a synopsis of potential causes for sexual violence in Chinese society. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of feminist activism of China to set the stage for #MeToo.

Traditional Gender Roles. Traditional Chinese society can best be understood through vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical relationships, such as intergenerational, were built on the Confucian ideal of filial piety and "underpinned by the norm of patrilineality: the male-center line of descent (Johnson, 1985). Inheritance would trickle down through the male children in a family so that the eldest male would receive the most. In addition, the eldest male reciprocates the most time and energy into caring for elderly parents to fulfill the obligations set forth in Confucian ideals of filial piety (Johnson, 1985). Meanwhile, female children moved out of their parent's home to their husband's home and enter rules of a horizontal relationship dominated by gender roles. Patrilocal marriages were the norm in China meaning that if a woman married a man from a different village she would move away from her hometown in order to best serve her husband's family (Johnson, 1985). Chinese women were thus barred from receiving the benefits of vertical relationships while at the same time being on the weaker end of a power imbalance in their marriage. According to researchers Hu and Scott,

"women's major function was reproductive, that is, giving birth and child-rearing. This division of labor was central to conventional gender roles in China" (2016, 1270). While Hu and Scott found that in recent years beliefs towards gendered division of labor receive significantly less support in China, they still hold out in some western towns that prescribe to traditional gender roles (2016, 1287). Researchers Sun & Chen similarly found that in recent years Chinese media portrays men as dominating "the public spheres of politics and work, whereas women were closely associated with family and home" (Sun & Chen, 2015).

Public-Private Divide in the PRC. Mao Zedong, as the first leader of the People's Republic of China, did much to unite China after the Civil War between Nationalists who favored the previous republic government and the victorious communist revolutionaries. During the early years of the PRC, women were encouraged to actively participate in society with Mao saying, "Whatever men comrades can do, woman comrades can do" (Hershatter, 2004).Another one of Mao's policies under the Great Leap Forward constructed communes with local agricultural and mechanical industries to profit the immediate area (Gabriel, 1998). Communes were outfitted with *danweis* or a social welfare system that provided health care, housing, and ration coupons to factory workers (Ibid.). *Danweis* were instrumental in bringing women into the workforce since they also helped with child care and family planning easing some of the domestic pressure on working women (Sun & Chen, 2015). Even though the *danweis* helped to uproot traditional notions surrounding domestic femininity and this change was supported by Mao, it has still been found that "the emphasis was on men as the norm in revolutionary models" (Hershatter, 2004).

Agricultural output dwindled and famine spread throughout China under the Great Leap Forward in spite of the social supports of the *danwei* system. This failure allowed greater input from conservative-inclined politicians which weakened Mao's position amongst his party. To regain his stature and prevent social inequalities from conservative reforms, Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution to forcibly bring China's arts and education in line with Communist ideology (Keyser, 2009). The consequences were mass social upheaval and economic stagnation. After Mao's death in 1976, the conditions were ripe for rightist-leaning Deng Xiaoping to reintroduce private business ventures and market reforms to China's economy effectively disbanding state-owned enterprises and the *danwei* system (Pye, 1986, 610). Once the work units were disbanded under privatization laws, many women had no choice but to return to domestic life. This shift back to domesticity is paradoxical to "socialist ideals regarding gender equality, in which women's liberation is primarily achieved through labor force participation" (Tao, 2004, 100). Tao asserts that in order to justify Chinese women's return to the home, the Chinese government had to frame this domestic shift as beneficial work on behalf of the state (2004, 101). However, emphasizing women's role as being in the home is inherently contradictory to the Marxist-socialist feminism of the Maoist Era which emphasized liberation for Chinese women through traditional men's work (Spakowski, 2011). Chinese women have since reemerged as a significant portion of China's workforce, but market developments contributed to a significant gender income gap that has persisted into the early twenty-first century (Liu, 2011). A survey conducted by Zhaopin, a Chinese job hiring website similar to LinkedIn, found that in 2017 Chinese women earned 22% less than men in their same position (Zhaopin, 2017).

One should note that women's rights under Mao did not necessarily expand out of a belief in gender equality, but out of the need to mobilize women to help produce economic growth that was sorely needed at the time (Liu, 2011). Therefore, when new market components and capitalist enterprises were introduced into China's economy, the negative impacts felt exclusively by women, such as gendered job competition and a burgeoning wage gap, was not a huge governmental concern. Researchers, like Mary Brinton, believe that this phenomenon can be explained through a "human capital development regime" in which occupations are gendered and societal structures focus on training men and women for different jobs (Brinton, 1988). Women in reform-era China were regarded as a bad investment by private industry employers since women would "inevitably" leave their profession to give birth and raise a family. Non-domesticated women were then relegated to low-paying, unskilled jobs fulfilling a new human capital development regime in China (Shu & Bian, 2003; Brinton, 1998). Chinese companies are legally banned from gender employment discrimination, but unfortunately, many instances of "men only" job postings and other discriminatory hiring practices exist. According to Human Rights Watch, 13% of civil service job postings in 2017 specified "men only, men preferred, or suitable for men" while none specified "women only, women preferred or suitable for women" (Stauffer, 2018).

A long-held critique of capitalist economies is that the competition for economic gain leave women at "an historical disadvantage as the ones still holding a weaker share of social resources" (Tao, 101). Sun and Chen's 2015 study show that state propaganda frames women's domestic role in modern society as being an individualized choice and an affirmation of feminine identity (Sun & Chen, 2015). This reframing is the state's

attempt to justify women's return to the domestic sphere and society's gendered human capital development regime. This reframing is also important because China has an aging population and needs more families to have children, as evidenced by China ending it's one-child policy (Xu, 2015). The state is encouraging women to think of having more children at an earlier age and staying at home to raise them as a service to the state.

Chinese Feminist Ideology. During reform and opening up, women's studies as an academic field and as part of the humanities flourished in China thanks to Western feminist theory becoming a cultural import. Chinese feminist scholars like Li Xiaojiang, Zhong Xueping, and Dai Jinhua all dealt with trying to define the "local" aspects of Chinese feminism and whether Chinese feminism could even be separated from imported Western theory. All of these scholars deal with the ramifications of trying to create a concrete Chinese feminist view after first being introduced to statist and Western views of feminism. Li Xiaojiang considers "top-down" feminism or achieving gender equality through state intervention as in the Maoist period, as localized Chinese feminism. However, Li advocates for a shift away from "top-down" feminism in favor of Western "bottom-up" feminism which is thought to create individualized shifts in thinking facilitated through NGOs (Li, 2005:59). Zhong Xueping on the other hand saw Li's perspective as too diminishing of the positive outcomes of Chinese women's economic liberation in the Maoist period and the social awareness working conditions brought middle-class women. Dai Jinhua is also rather outspoken on the effects capitalist reform and globalization has on Chinese women saying this is "the beginning of the reconstruction of the patriarchal order" (Dai, 2001, 178).

These debates over what should be considered Chinese feminism led to Min Dongchao's "traveling theory." Min attempted to prove that feminist rhetoric that traveled from the West, like "gender" and even the term "feminism" itself created problems of double meaning and misinterpretation (Min, 2004). Disputes over vocabulary led to negotiations on Chinese words that may now not fully indicate the subtleties of the original English word further causing problems in defining China-specific feminism (Min, 2004: 8). Scholar Spakowski has attempted to refute traveling theory as being overly sensitive to Western connotations of feminism and has tried to piece together "local" definitions of Chinese feminism without forsaking the impact of Western feminist theory (2011, 34). In fact, Spakowski points to Zhong Xueping's view of recent Chinese feminist developments, particularly the Maoist Era, as a "local" definition since it lends itself to "the idea of non-antagonistic and more harmonious gender relations" seen in Chinese academia (2011, 39). In other words, Spakowski sees non-confrontational feminist activism that does not disrupt social harmony as being a distinctly Chinese feminist strategy. Still, scholars like Wesoky see the localization or the intersection between local-global definitions of feminism as inconsequential and instead focuses on localization as a conversational resource that can either be used positively or negatively depending on the context (Spakowski, 2016: 57). For example, Wesoky sees "local" aspects of Chinese feminism, such as the previously discussed "top-down" or statist approach, as helpful in political or nationalist discussions, but casts doubt on the ability for Chinese feminists to avoid state-pressure in creating "local" definitions of Chinese feminism and so views Western theory as a necessary reserve (2016: 55-62).

Sexual Violence in China. Sexual assault research and theoretical concepts ground discussion around the #MeToo movement as potential explanatory variables for the causes of sexual violence. Researchers Parish, Das, & Laumann used a power-differentials approach to hypothesize who would be the most vulnerable to sexual assault within the Chinese populous (2006). They were proven correct that "employed women reported significantly higher levels of harassment," but were surprised to find that women "near the top of the occupational hierarchy…were more likely to be harassed" (Parish, Das, & Laumann, 2006). These findings led the researchers to conclude that opportunity for harassment and perceived cost and benefit of harassment from the attacker's point of view helps to explain sexual harassment trends in Chinese cities (Parish, Das, & Laumann, 2006). Chinese women are more often found at lower-rungs of a company or in the public sphere which gives support to Parish, Das, & Laumann's conclusion, since according to this study women in such positions are more likely to be taken advantage of.

In the U.S., MacKinnon's power differential approach to sexual harassment states that sexual violence is inherently gendered as a way for those in power (men) to continue the subjugation of those who serve (women) (MacKinnon, 1983). Battle for power is then played out in the workplace and sexual harassment functions to keep women from gaining positions of power (Ibid.). MacKinnon's view has since been critiqued since it fails to adequately deal with male victims of sexual assault and does not consider the social-cultural norms that might play a role in facilitating sexual harassment rather than a subconscious need for power (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004: 66-67). Indeed, Parish, Das & Laumann (2006) find in their study of sexual harassment in China that a routine activities model, generally used in crime studies, better predicted whether a working woman would

face sexual harassment. The routine activities model argues that women who routinely place themselves in vulnerable positions with clients, coworkers, and superiors have a greater chance of being harassed (Ibid.) and so perpetrators of sexual assault are not necessarily those who hold occupational power over women as theorized by MacKinnon.

Even so, MacKinnon's theory of power differences used to explain sexual harassment carries some weight when discussed with Marxist feminism. While Marx did not discuss "the women's question" per se, researchers, most notably Gimenez, use Marxist theories to understand women's position throughout history as "reproducers" for capitalist production and how their role in society is then devalued by capitalist regimes. Gimenez (1991:24) explains the repercussions of capitalism on women as such: "the subordination of reproduction to production not only structures gender inequality as a macro-level aspect of capitalist social formations; in doing so it also affects people's existence and practices and, therefore, their consciousness." Her view is that through a socio-Marxist lens, women's role in society, and by extension issues of gender violence, cannot just be appreciated as issues of men vs. women or those in power vs. those without power. In order to understand the root cause of power differentials, one must examine the ways capitalism throughout history created and reaffirmed social norms that give preference to men and oppress women (Gimenez, 1991:14).

This is not to say that capitalism is a root cause of gender inequality and sexual violence or that Marxist-socialist societies automatically fix this imbalance. While there is evidence found from the public-private divide and the human development capital regime that capitalist reforms helped cause an increase in power differentials between the genders in China, that does not mean the impact of thousands of years of traditional

gender roles and familial structures on women in China should be ignored (Johnson, 1985). Socio-Marxist methodology is useful in understanding how historical forces that led to the introduction of capitalism also intertwined with notions of biology and could have led to the public-private divide and human development capital regime further leading to the current state of gender inequality and ubiquity of sexual violence in China today.

Feminist Activism in China. Chinese feminists have made combating sexual violence a cornerstone of their activism including spearheading anti-domestic abuse laws and protesting harassment on subways (Mistreanu, 2019). In Leta Hong-Fincher's book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China,* she argues that organizing feminists in the twenty-first century have been the largest threat to state stability since Tiananmen protests in 1989. Most of her research surrounds "the Feminist Five" or five activists who were detained in 2015 for organizing protests on International Women's Day, but Hong-Fincher details many other ways in which the Chinese government recognizes feminist movements as a threat through severe censorship, monitoring, and threats.

Detention is a common tactic the state uses to prevent or control protests. The Feminist Five were held in detention on the grounds of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (Hong-Fincher, 2018, 60) and organizing under the influence of "foreign forces" (Hong-Fincher, 2018, 61). These vague statements are commonly used to detain activists on the sole basis of organizing or acting in a way not condoned by state authorities. For example, in July of 2015, roughly three hundred lawyers and legal assistants were detained, interrogated, or disappeared in what has come to be known as the "709

crackdown." Among the detained lawyers was Wang Yu, a lawyer who planned to represent Li Maizi of the Feminist Five after Li's release from detention earlier that year (Hong-Fincher, 2018, 138). Detention of #MeToo activists has also occurred. In late 2018, student Yue Xin requested Beijing University investigate a case from twenty years ago in which a student committed suicide after being raped by a professor. Yue was later detained in July 2018 and has not been heard from since (Mistreanu, 2019).

Fincher notes that censorship is a given for any movement in China and describes how different feminist social media accounts have been banned because of their involvement of promoting #MeToo. In March 2018, the online website for Feminist Voices, an online publication that was instrumental in advocating for the revised anti-domestic abuse laws from 2015, was censored and not even a month later deactivated (Hong-Fincher, 2018). In December 2018, a Feminist Five member's non-profit organization, the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center, was forced to shut down due to pressure from government authorities after the organization printed their findings on sexual assault in university and professional settings as quoted above (Mistreanu, 2019).

Methodology

      A variety of online materials and sources posted between spring 2017 and February 2019 were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach including Chinese social media sites (*Zhihu*), Western news articles (BBC, The New York Times) and Chinese news sources (Tencent, Xinhua, Pengpai). A hypothesis was not used to guide research due to the nature of online content surrounding #MeToo in China. Firstly, #MeToo in China is still developing as an emerging issue, so a hypothesis would potentially narrow the scope of this study to the point that the overall picture of #MeToo in China would be lost. Secondly, the availability and accessibility of data is an issue when studying Chinese civil society online. While #MeToo related posts are plentiful, censorship causes the amount of usable data to dwindle. Instead, two questions were identified to guide research and establish goals for the type of information this study wanted to procure:

      1) What insights can #MeToo related social media posts on Zhihu give into gender dynamics and feminism in China?

      2) How does censorship impact netizen discussion of #MeToo on social media, news media, and feminist activism?

      By using these questions as a guide, this study was able to differentiate between perspectives of Chinese feminists, netizens, and state actors towards the #MeToo movement. This data gave way to "emergent topics" that could be discussed in more depth.

While Chinese and Western news sources were analyzed because of the article's availability, content, and insights into #MeToo or related discussions of sexual assault in China, *Zhihu* comments were examined to assess public opinion and engagement with #MeToo related topics. In December of 2018, *Zhihu* reported to have over 220 million users (新浪科技, 2018). This number is a significant proportion of total internet users in China which in August of 2018 amounted to over 802 million (搜狐 2018). Still, the number of *Zhihu* users is less than the number of Chinese netizens on the micro-blogging website 微博 (*Weibo*) where original #MeToo posts in China were posted. The amount of *Weibo* users surpassed 400 million as of May 2018 accounting for almost half of all internet users in China (新浪科技 2018). Even with this statistic, I have focused the bulk of my research by analyzing the most upvoted responses to *Zhihu* questions for three reasons:

1. While many #MeToo activists and everyday citizens post their #MeToo story on *Weibo* rather than *Zhihu*, Chinese government censors are more active censoring #MeToo posts on *Weibo* than on *Zhihu*. Multiple times throughout my research, the hashtags #我也是 (*#Woyeshi*, #MeToo) and #MeToo 在中国 (#MeToo*zaizhongguo*, #MeTooinChina) on *Weibo* would show an error page instead of posts containing the hashtag. Chinese users with a VPN can still access censored #MeToo posts on sites that screenshot or use encryption codes to save the original post like on Matters.news, but this limits the amount of people who are actively engaging with these posts.

2. Due to censorship on *Weibo*, it is harder to gain a sense of Chinese public opinion towards #MeToo stories and related questions about sexual harassment and

assault. *Zhihu*, as a social media site designed to foster discussion, is thus uniquely situated to provide insight into the discourse on Chinese #MeToo cases outside of feminist activism and state-sponsored media that *Weibo* cannot.

3. I am familiar with the format of *Zhihu* as I have been an active participant since the fall of 2016. Several of my Chinese courses assign homework assignments in which I have had to comment to *Zhihu* questions.

For these reasons, *Zhihu* comments were used to analyze netizen public opinion of #MeToo and issues of sexual assault.

Data and Analysis

This section is divided into three subsections. The first discusses the Chinese social media site *Zhihu* and charts the #MeToo and sexual harassment/assault related content of nine different *Zhihu* discussion forums. The second gives an overview of the information that can be learned about #MeToo from Western news media, specifically the BBC and TIME magazine. The third does the same but with Chinese news sites Xinhua and Tencent as well as a synopsis of current plans posted to Pengpai from within the past year to modify China's legal code in relation to sexual assault and harassment laws.

I. Zhihu

I analyzed the comments to the below *Zhihu* questions pertaining to #MeToo and sexual assault/harassment. I listed questions by the date the most "upvoted" or "liked" comment was posted and included the total number of question views. English translation of each question is my own.

a.   April 16, 2017

 "为什么很多人认为女生收到了性侵犯不应该说出来?" Viewed 4,025,496 times

("Why do so many people think that women should not speak up when they are sexually assaulted?")

b.   January 2, 2018

"如看待已毕业女博士罗茜茜实名举报性骚扰、北航长江学者陈小武被撤职?" Viewed 9,716,209

("How do you view graduate Luo Xixi using her real name to report sexual harassment and the firing of Beihang University Changjiang Scholar Chen Xiaowu?")

c.　　January 10, 2018

"如何看待蓝洁瑛指控曾志伟性侵?" Viewed 31,503,549 times

("How do you view Lan Jieying accusing Zeng Zhiwei of sexual assault?")

d.　　July 24, 2018

"如何看待南大支教被性骚扰?" Viewed 2,152,142 times

("How do you view the sexual harassment of Nanjing University rural teachers?")

e.　　July 26, 2018

"是不是只要女性觉得男性让自己不舒服就是男性性骚扰?" Viewed 8,166,351 times ("If a woman thinks a man makes her uncomfortable then does that constitute sexual assault?")

f.　　September 1, 2018

"无辜男性被女性指认性侵,是不是永远无法换回名声? - Viewed 8,211,266 times

("Is it true that innocent men who are accused by women of sexual assault will never be able to restore their reputation?")

g.　　October 12, 2018

"女性穿着暴露是否会诱发男性犯罪? 如果是, 责任应该如何归属? 如果不是, 穿着暴露是否存在风险?" Viewed 3,543,114 times

("Do women wearing exposing clothing cause men to commit [sexual] crimes? If so, how should the guilt be attributed? If not, is there a risk of wearing exposing clothing?")

h.　　　　October 23, 2018

"学术圈和媒体圈是性侵害的【高发区】吗？为什么？ - Viewed 1,420,881 times

("Are academic and media circles a high-risk area for sexual assault? Why?")

i.　　　　December 14, 2018

"为什么大多都是女性被性侵？" – Viewed 96,383,927

("Why is it that the majority of sexually assaulted are women?")

#MeToo has its own topic on *Zhihu* titled "Me Too 行动" (Me Too *xingdong*, Me Too movement), but only 5 of the above questions appeared under this topic page. Questions that contain #MeToo in English within the question are few and have very low counts of responses and low number of upvotes to the responses. Most of the questions under the Me Too *xingdong* topic that do have high numbers of comments do not reference #MeToo as a movement, but instead try to address the topic of sexual assault and sexual harassment as seen by the questions used in this study. For example the question "Are academic and media circles a high-risk area for sexual assault? Why?" is under the Me Too *xingdong* topic page. Other questions under the Me Too *xingdong* page with high numbers of comments and upvotes reference high-profile #MeToo cases such as the question "How do you view graduate Luo Xixi using her real name to report sexual harassment and the firing of Beihang University Changjiang Scholar Chen Xiaowu?" These questions do not seem to contribute to #MeToo as a movement, but they show an

increased awareness and a willingness to discuss sexual assault that may not have taken place before #MeToo.

It is important to mention that while there is discussion on some prominent #MeToo cases, other cases have been ignored on *Zhihu*. The *Zhihu* question concerning the accusation of a Beihang University professor by former student Luo Xixi, which essentially began #Metoo in China, has over 900 comments with the most "upvoted" comment receiving 8,405 "likes" by other *Zhihu* users. However, questions about the accusation of Zhu Jun, the popular CCTV news anchor who will likely be the first accused under #MeToo to go to trial, all have less than 100 "likes." One possible explanation could be that the accusation and trial of Zhu Jun may be seen as likely to draw attention from censors. Zhu Jun is the most popular public figure to be accused and is directly linked to the largest state-sponsored news station.

The below chart shows the emergent concepts arising from the "top comment" of each *Zhihu* question. I found that from these nine *Zhihu* questions, three overarching topics emerged from each "top" comments content: 1) Belief in the importance of speaking about sexual harassment/assault, 2) Rural-urban and class divide in treatment of sexual assault cases, and 3) Narrative and identification of personal relationship to content. I list the *Zhihu* questions in the below chart time order and number each question with a 1,2, or 3 depending on which concept the comment to the question best falls under. I also include "Number of Top Comment Upvotes" and "Number of Responses to Top Comment" to indicate the robust engagement other *Zhihu* users had with said "top comment." All of these comments have 4,000+ likes with the most liked top comment gaining 25,753 as of February 2019 showing the universality and wide agreement of each

comment's content. While comments to the "top comment" may not always be

expressing agreement, the sheer number of comments show robust engagement with the

content. Information about the *Zhihu* user who wrote the comment is also provided to the

extent that their *Zhihu* profile provides this information. One of the benefits for *Zhihu*

users is the option of anonymity in posting their comments allowing them to more freely

join the discussion, even if it is more difficult to trace what kind of background the

person who wrote the comment.

English Translation of *Zhihu* Question	Number of Likes on Top Comment	Number of Upvotes to Top Comment	Gender of Top Comment	Education Level of Top Comment	Emergent Concept Classification
"Why do so many people think that women should not speak up when they are sexually assaulted?"	9,797	2,906	female	N/A	1,3
"How do you view graduate Luo Xixi using her real name to report sexual harassment and the firing of Beihang University Changjiang Scholar Chen Xiaowu?"	8,405	444	Female	Graduate degree	1,3
"How do you view Lan Jieying accusing Zeng Zhiwei of sexual assault?"	25,753	N/A	Female	N/A	1,2

"How do you view the sexual harassment of Nanjing University rural teachers?"	9,309	817	N/A	N/A	1,2
"If a woman thinks a man makes her uncomfortable does that constitute sexual harassment?"	14,023	1,228	Male	College degree	1,3
"Is it true that innocent men who are accused by women of sexual assault will never be able to regain their reputation?"	9,910	N/A	Male	N/A	3
"Do women wearing exposing clothing cause men to commit [sexual] crimes? If so, how should the guilt be attributed? If not, is there a risk of wearing exposing clothing?"	4,184	417	Female	N/A	1
"Are academic and media circles a high-risk area for sexual assault? Why?"	4,248	327	Female	College degree	1,2,3
"Why is it that the majority of sexually assaulted are women?"	19,832	3,324	N/A	N/A	1

Legend:

1) Belief in the importance of speaking about sexual harassment/assault

 2) Rural-urban and class divide in treatment of sexual assault cases

3) Narrative and identification of personal relationship to content

All of the top comments except the top comment to the question "Why is it that the majority of sexually assaulted are women?" signaled a strong belief in importance of speaking about sexual harassment and assault through language that either supported women coming forward with their stories or vilified notions to the contrary. Three questions "How do you view Lan Jieying accusing Zeng Zhiwei of sexual assault?"; "How do you view the sexual harassment of Nanjing University rural teachers?" and "Are academic and media circles a high-risk area for sexual assault? Why?" included a statement in the top comment concerning the discrepancies between the way sexual harassment and assault cases are treated differently either along a rural-urban divide or a rich-poor divide. All top comments except for to the questions "Do women wearing exposing clothing cause men to commit [sexual] crimes? If so, how should the guilt be attributed? If not, is there a risk of wearing exposing clothing?"; "How do you view Lan Jieying accusing Zeng Zhiwei of sexual assault?" and "How do you view the sexual harassment of Nanjing University rural teachers?" consisted of a significant personal anecdote that illustrated the point the commenter was trying to make. The emergent topics of belief in the importance of speaking about sexual harassment/assault; rural-urban and class divide in treatment of sexual assault cases; and narrative and identification of personal relationship to content give insight into current gender dynamics and feminist beliefs in China.

As a case study, below is my own English translation of the top comment to the question "Why do so many people think that women should not speak up when they are sexually assaulted? with analysis of how the comment signals the first and third emergent topic. This case study will demonstrate what top comments on *Zhihu* look like in terms of length and language. In my Findings and Discussion chapter, quotations that best demonstrate the emergent topic will be pulled from any of the *Zhihu* comments from my data to illustrate how the emergent topics answer my initial research questions when necessary. Links to the top comments of all the *Zhihu* discussion posts can be found in the bibliography of this work. All rights to the below comment are reserved to *Zhihu* user 之乎 (Zhihu).

Question: "Why do so many people think that women should not speak up when they are sexually assaulted?"

Top Comment: The place I used to work at had a very wide road, along the road there were many trees, and at night not many people walked along this path.

One day on my way home from work, I ran into an exhibitionist on this road. He showed his genitals, followed me, and used all sorts of obscene language to start a conversation with me. I felt dread and despair because there was only the one road to walk on. When I finally saw a figure not too far away, I turned my head and with all my might loudly cursed the exhibitionist using foul language.

When I calmed down, I found my palms were sweaty. I called my boyfriend at the time and told him that I had just encountered an exhibitionist.

He asked me what was wrong and I briefly described what had happened and told him I had cursed the man.

After he finished listening to me, he uttered the four characters "不知羞耻." (do you have no sense of shame?)

I did not start crying because of the exhibitionist, I was provoked to cry by my boyfriend's words. While I was still crying I asked him "what did you just say?"

He said "how do you, a girl, have the nerve to speak to someone like that? [You] really have no sense of shame!"

"I was so angry, I shouted at him [the exhibitionist] because he dared to show his disgusting thing! Why should I not scold him! I called you for comfort, not to listen to you accuse me!"

When I hung up the phone my tears fell like rain, [and] I reflected on whether I was really in the wrong, in that situation, should I have ran away, the farther the better, to protect myself?

How could he [the exhibitionist] bully and humiliate me, but I cannot curse him to air my disgust? I could not figure it out. And then I was even more angry that the person who was supposed to be my boyfriend called me shameless!

The two of us continued to send messages on all kinds of disagreement over this matter.

Too much time has passed, [but] what I can remember most clearly is, he [my boyfriend] said that it doesn't matter who conducted themselves the way I did, he would still feel there is a problem, [because] a woman who acts in this way is without restraint. Although that person's indecent exposure was wrong, I should not have been walking on that path, and when I ran into [the exhibitionist] I also should have just buried my head and ran away, and not been in his presence so long. In addition, having experienced this disgraceful matter, I shouldn't have told him [my boyfriend] about it, I shouldn't have told anyone about it, and secretly cry to myself about it.

In the end it didn't make sense to fight. I called him and asked him what if I got raped tonight. He paused. I hung up and blocked him on all forms of contact.

To this day, I still think, it wasn't a problem with me, it was male chauvinism.

[This next section follows a divider that indicates the author of this comment wrote this last paragraph after her initial posting as an edit]

To my surprise, there were a lot of guys (some kind people suggested that I converted a lot of people in the comments, and I clicked on all these pictures, and they were all male) accusing me of making up this story. In fact, your reaction makes me think that this answer is most relevant to you all. Why shouldn't a girl say she was sexually assaulted? Because if she speaks out you people will think she is lying.[1]

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[1] 以前上班的地方有一条特别宽的马路，路旁种满了树，晚上几乎没有人路过。有一天下班回去，我就在这条路上碰到了一个暴露狂。露出生殖器，一路跟着我，用尽各种猥琐的语言试图与我搭话。我心里又惧怕又绝望，只能一路小跑，终于看到不远处有人影的时候，我回过头，用尽力气大声吼那个人，你跟个屁啊！又细又小的死牙签！冷静下来以后发现自己手心都是汗，给当时的男朋友打电话，我说刚刚遇到了一个暴露狂。他问我怎么回事。我简单的描述了一下事情的经过，并且告诉他，我骂了那个人。他在听我说完这些话后，说了四个字，不知羞耻。我没有被一个暴露狂吓哭，我居然是被我男朋友字正腔圆的这四个字给激哭了。当时眼泪就止不住的流下来，我问他，你刚刚说什么?他说你，一个女孩子，你对人家说这种话你好意思？真是一点羞耻心都没有！我真是气急了，我吼他，他都敢露出他恶心的玩意儿！我凭什么不能骂他！我给你打电话是来求安慰的，不是听你来指责我的！挂了电话以后哭的稀里哗啦，反思了自己是不是真做错了，那种情况下，我是应该要赶紧跑开，越远越好，才是保护自己是吗？可凭什么他能欺辱我，我却不能骂他来

This question and top comment exemplify a belief in the importance of speaking about sexual harassment/assault and is written using a personal anecdote to respond to the original question. The author of this comment waits until the very end of her story to say she believes that male chauvinism is the cause as to why people, particularly men in her case, think victims of sexual assault should not come forward. Her reasoning clearly comes from the argument with her ex-boyfriend who tells her that she should not have told anyone about her experience confronting an exhibitionist. She expresses that her boyfriend's anger at first gave her pause seemingly out of uncertainty and some shame. However, she concludes that she was in the right and her boyfriend was blaming her for something out of her control by shifting the responsibility of this experience onto her, i.e. she should have "not stayed in his presence so long" and should not have defended herself by cursing the perpetuator in public. Her beliefs on speaking against sexual harassment is consistent throughout the entire comment since she begins by describing how she cursed the exhibitionist and then breaks up with her boyfriend when he did not support her. Writing her experience on social media is also inherently an act of speaking up for herself. The comments in response to her comment convey doubt that her story is true which forces this *Zhihu* user to change her answer to the original question slightly.

出口恶气呢？我想不通。并且当时我更生气的是，出了这样的事，作为我男朋友角色的那个人居然骂我不知羞耻！于是两个人就这个问题，发信息各种争执。时间太久，能记清楚的大概也就是，他说我这样的行为不管是谁，都会觉得有问题，一个女孩子最基本的矜持都没有。虽然那个人暴露是不对，可我就不应该走那条路，遇到了也应该埋头赶紧跑，而不是跟他待那么久。还有，发生这么丢人的事，就不应该给他说，给谁都不应该说，自己偷偷躲着哭吧。争到最后也没什么意义了，我给他打了个电话，问他，如果我今晚被强奸了呢。他语顿。我挂了电话，拉黑掉所有联系方式. 所以直到今天，我依旧这么认为，错的不是我，是直男癌。分割线。出乎我意料的是，居然有很多男生(评论里有善良的人建议我改成很多人，但这些头像我都点开看过，都是男生)，指责我是编故事。其实你们的反应更让我觉得，这个答案最切题的是你们。为什么女生受了性侵犯不应该说出来？因为说出来你们觉得是在编故事啊。

She is clearly frustrated by the people who accuse her of lying and ties them to a larger societal problem of victim blaming even though she does not expressly call it such.

II.   Western News Articles

Western news sources are reporting on China's #MeToo movement to a great extent. Since #MeToo in China only recently began, news sources become critical in understanding what events are occurring within the movement. Western news sources are especially important to follow as a contrast to China's censored and state-propagated news outlets. Below are summaries of two news articles with some analysis of what these articles add to the #MeToo discussion in China, the insights into #MeToo activism that Chinese news sources do not include, and a brief assessment of the journalist's perspective in regard to whether or not the #MeToo in China will be a robust movement.

1.   "Will #MeToo Spread in China?" posted by the BBC on January 6, 2018

Authors Ho & Tsoi give context to how China's #MeToo movement began by discussing the first #MeToo post in which Luo Xixi's accused her former University advisor of sexual assault. BBC reports that Luo Xixi's post "gained more than three million views within a day." Ho & Tsoi do not interview #MeToo activists since the movement was still largely anonymous at the time of publishing. Instead, one reporter interviewed NGO co-founder Feng Yuan whose NGO fights against gender violence in Beijing. Feng Yuan "notes that Ms. Luo planned her actions carefully and shrewdly before going public. She contacted other women who had also been sexually harassed by the same professor and gathered a lot of evidence- including recordings- before taking the case to the university. She waited until after the university decided that the professor

would be suspended before publishing her account on social media." Li Sipan, another Chinese feminist activist, is reported as discussing the "hidden rule" or "the widely accepted notion that women are not being harassed by sexual aggressors, but willingly comply to gain future favours." This "hidden rule" is not apparent in other data sources such as *Zhihu* posts but does contribute to a belief that China has a victim-blaming culture.

Feminist Xiao Meili is quoted as saying "many young netizens are university students or have received higher education" even though it is nearly impossible to identify the authors of many #MeToo posts in China prior to Luo Xixi's post since they were posted anonymously. Ho & Tsoi describes #MeToo in China as "finally" happening and having a "focus on universities." The article ends on a somewhat optimistic note by using a quote by Leta Hong Fincher to illustrate that #MeToo is a threat to the CCP's power, but the article also notes that recently "there has been a large-scale crackdown on civil society in China."

2.   "She's on a #MeToo Mission in China, Battling Censors and Lawsuits" posted by the NYTimes on January 4, 2019

In this article, the reporter Javier C. Hernandez focuses on depicting Zhou Xiaoxuan's accusation and legal battle with China Central Television anchor Zhu Jun. Hernandez characterizes the #MeToo movement as having "struggled to gain footing in the face of censorship and reluctance by the authorities to investigate cases of sexual harassment and assault." Zhou Xiaoxuan claims that she has "helped abused women seek justice, accompanying them to police stations to file criminal reports" and is "optimistic that attitudes will change." She details in the article that when she

first reported to the police that Zhu Jun forcibly kissed her when she was left alone in his dressing room with him, the police argued that "Mr. Zhu was a force for good in society" and warned "she might endanger the jobs of her parents." Zhou hoped that by writing about her experience, she may move the #MeToo movement forward by letting "her male friends know that sexual misbehavior [is] widespread." The article details how the legal battle between Zhu and Zhou began in October 2018 and includes a video from *Baidu* (China's equivalent to Google) of Zhou talking outside the courthouse. Zhou discusses her motivations as being part of a larger #MeToo movement and says it was important to her to show her face publicly to make her story more credible. She also hints at the shortcomings of the law by saying "法律是法律但是执行是执行" or "the law is the law but implementation is another matter."

III. Chinese News Media

1. 《把讲政治贯穿于妇联改革和工作权过程》（"Implementing politics into the entire process of the Woman Federation's reform and work"）written by the All-China Women's Federation Party Secretary Song Xiuyan and posted to 中国妇女报 （China Women's News）found through a link on 新华报纸 (Xinhua News)

Song Xiuyan, as a Party member and Vice Chairman for the All-China Women's Federation, writes this essay as a response to President Xi Jinping's speech given to the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on March 11, 2017. She begins her essay expressing support for Xi's speech as it regards to China's place in international relations by stressing "紧密联系" ("close contact") between China and foreign governments and urges the Women's Federation to "树立政

治意识" (establish political awareness) in their work going forward. Song further writes that "西放敌对势力加紧对我国实施西化分化战略" or that "Western hostile forces stepped up their strategy of implementing Westernization and splitting up of China." She believes that these forces attack Marxist feminist ideology and the Chinese national policy of gender equality by forcing the idea of "女权至上" ("Women's rights first"). Song says that instead, Chinese women should "严防有人打着'维护女权'七号从事不法活动，帮助妇女擦亮眼睛，明辨是非，避免被别游泳心的人利用，维护政治安全和社会稳定" ("Strictly prevent people from engaging in illegal activities under the banner of 'maintaining feminism,' help women to keep their eyes open, make a distinction between right and wrong, avoid being used by people with ulterior motives, and maintain political order and security"). Ultimately, this speech indicates that the party is disinclined to allow a large-scale feminist movement to occur in China since it would be at the expense of men. The language of "maintaining right and wrong" is also very telling that overt feminist thinking is wrong and a hindrance to the development of Chinese society.

2.   《专访 "中国女记者性骚扰调查" 发起者黄雪琴》（"Interview with Huang Xueqin publisher of "Sexual Harassment Investigation of Chinese Female Journalists""）posted on 腾讯网 (*Tengxun wang*, Tencent Holdings Website), a news site from the developers of QQ, a Chinese instant messaging app

The article begins by framing #MeToo as a "风暴" ("storm) that "盘踞" (entrenched) the Western media. Next follows an introduction into Huang Xueqin's Report on the Investigation of Sexual Harassment of Chinese Women Journalists and writes that

China's version of #MeToo contains "聚焦女性媒体人" or a focus on female reporters. Huang Xueqin's report includes 1,762 female journalists and 83.7% responded that they had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and only 3.2% reported their experience to human resources or a unit manager (全媒派, 2018). Huang Xueqin says that the reason she believes female reporters do not speak out is because they 不想让家人失望，也不想让别人对她所代表职业失望"的心理 ("do not want to make their family disappointed, and also do not want to make other people be disappointed in the profession she represents") (全媒派, 2018). This statement is telling that Chinese society historically makes it difficult for women to share their experience with sexual harassment. Notably, Huang believes that victims are most concerned how their family and peers will think of them and how this will affect their relationships, similar to the culture of victim blaming seen on *Zhihu* and in the "hidden rule" discussed by Chinese feminists with the BBC.

3. People's Republic of China Legal Code

China is in the midst of creating, drafting, and by 2020 passing a comprehensive Civil Code that will be the first ever for the PRC. The Civil Code aims to unite several codes which have been issued sporadically since the inception of the PRC. Sexual harassment cases in the past several decades have been taken to criminal court and victims attempted to appeal to Article 237 of China's Criminal Law. Below is a translation of the beginning of Article 237 from China's Foreign Ministry to the United Nations:

"Whoever, by violence, coercion or other means, forces, molests, or humiliates a woman is to be sentenced to not more than five years of fixed-term imprisonment or criminal detention."

This is currently the only law related to sexual assault and since cases must go through criminal court, there is a high burden put on the prosecution to show proof of sexual assault. No clear path of determining whether sexual assault occurred is included in this provision compounding on this problem. Xinhua news reports on China's new civil code states that the newest draft of the civil code "in response to social concerns…also includes a provision on anti-sexual harassment measures. Employers are required to take reasonable measures to prevent, stop, and deal with complaints about sexual harassment." There is no indication of how sexual harassment cases will be dealt with specifically in Chinese media, but the promise of a forthcoming law is present.

Findings and Discussion

1. **What insights about gender dynamics and feminism in China can be gained from analyzing #MeToo related social media posts on Zhihu?**

Importance of Speaking Out. The first topic, belief in the importance of speaking about sexual harassment and assault, is inherently an important aspect of the #MeToo movement and helps to further conversation around how to view sexual harassment in China. #MeToo as described by the movement's website uses personal stories to demonstrate ubiquity of sexual assault in modern society (#MeToo, 2018). Victims write about their experiences also in the hopes that the sheer number of stories will force public recognition of sexual assault as a problem that deserves attention. Many *Zhihu* users signal their belief in speaking up against sexual harassment or sharing one's personal experiences with sexual harassment through language supporting victims. This idea can be seen in the question "Do women wearing exposing clothing cause men to commit [sexual] crimes? If so, how should the guilt be attributed? If not, is there a risk of wearing exposing clothing?" *Zhihu* user Xu Huilin writes in the top comment that ride-sharing passengers who were sexually harassed by the driver were wearing conservative clothing at the time, but the media only used pictures of the victims wearing more exposing clothing. She believes it is important to share the details of what actually happened because the media portraying the victims in such a way led to "从而给大众带来错误印象，甚至为受害者招致侮辱评价，造成二次伤害" ("leaving a false impression on the public, even bringing insult and secondary injury to the victims").

Additionally, all *Zhihu* top comments except for two deal with examples of sexual harassment in a work setting. Previous efforts to discuss violence towards women in China were discussed in a domestic setting, but *Zhihu* posts show that China is currently discussing the ramifications of women taking back their power in professional spaces. *Zhihu* users relate sexual harassment as a byproduct of work life such as discussing sexual harassment in "high-risk industries" or in the case of *Zhihu* user "Zhihu" encountering an exhibitionist on her way home from work. One reason for the importance of speaking out about sexual harassment in a work-related context may be because of the shifting public-private divide as discussed by Tao, Sun, and Chen. Chinese women are trying to once again participate fully in professional and public life but are receiving signals from China's capitalist reforms and Chinese media that to be feminine is to be domestic. A threat women face when stepping out of private home life is evidently men who do not take them seriously and see them as sexual objects. By speaking about this threat, women can gain support in trying to overcome it through public recognition.

Rural-Urban Divide. *Zhihu* netizens also bring nuance to the conversation surrounding sexual harassment and assault by discussing differences in treatment, and lack thereof, between rural and urban areas. While there is little to no research on attitudes of sexual harassment and assault specific to rural areas (most deal with university students, migrant workers in cities, factory workers in cities, or urban-based professional women), Hu & Scott did find that rural areas were more likely to hold traditional values regarding the family (2016: 1287). It is significant that three *Zhihu* questions discuss these disparities especially because the question "How do you view the sexual harassment of Nanjing University rural teachers?" accumulated over 2 million

views and the other two questions do not deal with these disparities yet the top comments do. Evidently, there are many Chinese netizens who find the rural-urban or poor-rich divide an important topic of discussion in relation to #MeToo. On one level, discussing this divide appears to be rhetoric persuading netizens that sexual harassment and assault is not only a problem for professional urban women, but for the entirety of Chinese society. On another level, it appears to be a mirror of the types of discussion held in Western societies, particularly the U.S. The U.S.'s movement gained popularity when a white celebrity used her platform and privilege to spread #MeToo even though Tarana Burke's #MeToo foundation originally worked on the behalf of minority women and girls from low-income backgrounds. A conversation has since taken hold of #MeToo to recognize a certain degree of privilege regarding whose stories are deemed worthy by mass media (Garcia, 2017). The rural-urban and rich-poor conversations on *Zhihu* function similarly. The question "Are academic and media circles a high-risk area for sexual assault? Why?" indirectly implies that urban areas are where sexual assault occurs most often since top universities and entertainment industries are often found in Chinese cities. However, the top commenter to this question laments that victims of sexual assault in rural towns would likely lack the knowledge to make reports to the police making it hard for these victim's experiences to be acknowledged. The user further writes "victims [in academic and entertainment circles] have the ability to speak up… and are able to win the support of some men and women" which stands in strike contrast of women in rural areas.

Pivoting the conversation towards discrepancies between rural-urban or rich-poor appears to be a tactic borrowed from Western movements to facilitate dialogue on

differences in treatment of sexual harassment. This conversation quells the worries of scholars like Spakowski and Wesoky who thought there might be a lack of "indigenization" of Western feminist theory in China. Wesoky particularly believed that the process of "indigenization" could "create space…in relations between Western and Chinese feminists and feminisms…[and] can also hinder deeper understandings of power relations within China – for instance, between elite, academic, urban feminists and the marginalized and often rural women who are often the targets of their projects" (2016: 54). #MeToo as a movement originating in the U.S. could make it difficult for Chinese citizens to use rural cases of sexual assault/harassment as anything other than a prop to further the movement, but ultimately, it seems that discussions around these divides are actually giving way to better understanding of power relations and what privileges exist amongst Chinese society. Since people across the globe are using #MeToo to facilitate dialogue on sexual harassment and gender inequality, this understanding of rural-urban and rich-poor discussions supports Li Xiaojiang's view of globalization as a phenomenon that "brings new opportunities for vulnerable people and marginalized groups in China, as well as new opportunities for China's development" (Li, 2006: 167). Recognizing intersectionality in China's #MeToo movement can also reassure scholars like Min Dongchao whose "traveling theory" assumes feminist ideology in China might be unable to initiate subtler dialogues on feminist issues (Min, 2004).

Usage of Personal Anecdotes. Personal narratives discussing sexual harassment in one's life or the identification of personal relationships to someone who has shared a #MeToo story is seen in six out of the nine *Zhihu* questions analyzed. For example, the top comment to the question "How do you view graduate Luo Xixi using her real name to

report sexual harassment and the firing of Beihang University Changjiang Scholar Chen Xiaowu?" is of someone claiming she attended Beihang University at the same time as Luo Xixi. Even though the *Zhihu* user was in a different class than Luo, she attempts to corroborate Luo's account by discussing the atmosphere of their degree program at Beihang. She writes 北航完全是男老师的天下，女生进实验室很多时候是看长相而不是看实力，这是大家都知道的事实 "Everyone knows that Beihang is completely the male professor's dominion, a lot of the time when female students enter the laboratory, [male professors] look at [the female students] appearance and not their strength/ability." The top commenter also writes that her *Zhihu* profile was previously anonymous, but since she is a university professor in the U.K., she dares to use her real name like Luo who is safe in the U.S. (*Zhihu* user Pan Xueni). It can be seen from *Zhihu* that personal stories that create a unifying identity with victims in prominent #MeToo are an important and brave step in furthering discussion surrounding sexual harassment in China. It is crucial for #MeToo posts to stress individual experiences so that there is an additive effect when looking at #MeToo posts in total.

Zhihu posts containing personal anecdotes concerning #MeToo and sexual harassment establish #MeToo as a movement even if users do not use language to connect their story with the larger movement. Charles Tilly defines social movements as "demands righting of a wrong, most often a wrong suffered by a well-specified population" (Tilly, 2002, 88). Tilly characterizes the people making the demands as WUNC- an acronym for a group being "1) worthy, 2) unified, 3) numerous and 4) committed" (Tilly, 2002, 88). *Zhihu* users using their own stories of sexual assault or identifying their support of victims whom they have personal relationships with create a

WUNC group as described by Tilly. He believes that stories and storytelling are how social movement activists bridge the gap and create social bonds between those already within and those considering participating in WUNC social movement groups (Tilly, 2002, 90). By telling one's story, internet users contribute to the creation of a WUNC group. The sheer number of people speaking out contributes to the group some of its worthiness based on sheer number. The process of creating a WUNC group is initiated for the #MeToo movement on *Zhihu* since only a few #MeToo cases in China are discussed in the news. At the same time, however, the pressure and danger that goes along with using one's true identity when telling their story shows some degree of commitment on behalf of internet users and can create a sense of unity among those who have used their own name, as evidenced by Pan Xueni's motivation to not remain anonymous. Additionally, it takes courage to speak out on a personal issue contributing to the cause's worthiness.

On the other hand, narrative and personal anecdotes have been used by male *Zhihu* users to show the potential harm that false sexual assault accusations may cause. The *Zhihu* questions "Is it that innocent men who are accused by women of sexual assault will never be able to rectify their reputation?" and "Is it just if a woman thinks a man makes her uncomfortable then that man committed sexual harassment?" both have top comments where male users air their concerns about false accusations. The fact that these responses become the top comment on these highly viewed questions show that false accusations or accusations being blown out of proportion by victims is a concern. The former question mentioned above deals directly with false accusations as not only being a possibility but a reality. The top commenter brings up the example of his high school

physics teacher's colleague who was accused of sexual assault after tapping a female

student on the shoulder to wake her up from sleeping in class. As a result, this colleague

was forced to leave town by the student's father, and the *Zhihu* user's physics teacher was

no longer strict towards his own students out of fear. The *Zhihu* user expresses that this

situation was one he has been unable to forget and will never forget the rest of his life

(*Zhihu* user Doumou). As evidenced by this user's anecdote, storytelling is thus used not

only by the WUNC or "in-group" but by the "out-group" who are also trying to claim

themselves as WUNC. Tilly recognizes the availability of storytelling as a tactic by those

resisting a social movement, but ultimately concludes that without having enough

ubiquity to one's story, there will not be as strong of a sense mobilization against a

movement (Tilly, 2002). In fact, many *Zhihu* users have responded to this story to say

that while it is not accusable to falsely accuse people of sexual assault, this fear should

not get in the way of believing victims of sexual assault.

2.   How does censorship impact netizen discussion of #MeToo on social media and feminist online activism?

Translation Activism. The most vital information coming from Western news

sources concerns how Chinese activists push their movement forward while under

censorship. International media allows Chinese activists to discuss what specific actions

they are taking to force institutions to better handle sexual harassment and assault cases

to fulfill an evident goal of China's #MeToo movement. For example, Zhou Xiaoxuan

notes she has been helping "abused women seek justice, accompanying them to police

stations to file criminal reports" (NYTimes). Zhou and other current feminist activist are

choosing to pursue avenues of local change such as supporting victims in filing their

claims and petitioning universities to improve campus policies. Known Chinese feminist activists Li Sipan and Xiao Meili were also asked to comment on #MeToo developments allowing there to be continuity between feminist action within the past decade and the #MeToo movement.

Guobin Yang's translation activism also seems to be at play in China's #MeToo movement. He argues in *Media Activism in the Digital Age* that translation of Chinese materials into English and vice-versa provide "narration of alternative identities and communities" usually unseen in Chinese society (Yang, 2009, 63). Different Chinese communities have used translation not only to spread information to people of different language-ability, but also to further their own goals in Chinese society. The difference with #MeToo interviews in Western media, however, is that feminist activist are not calling attention to protests as previously done by feminist translation activism (Yang, 2009). Previously, feminist activists in Beijing used the internet to organize an international anti-domestic violence network beginning in 2000 and have since used Twitter to send out information about their demonstrations. In this way, global media could pay attention to demonstrations and follow up when protests may have gone unnoticed otherwise (Yang, 2002, 68). Zhou Xiaoxuan, however, details her efforts as being strictly victim supporting rather than mass demonstrations (NYTimes). Other Western media outlets, like Foreign Policy, touch on petitions, hotlines, and counseling services that are being created in light of #MeToo (Mistreanu, 2019). At the same time, while Huang Xueqin interviewed for Chinese media, her report findings are limited to journalists which allows for the news article to regulate sexual assault as a problem only for certain industries. Other Xinhua news outlets report on university sexual assault cases

but outline what the universities or local governments are doing to prevent sexual harassment on university campuses. Chinese news agencies avoid linking redress of campus sexual harassment/assault policies to #MeToo, mon-state organizations that also try to prevent sexual harassment, and feminist activists further showing that translation activism in China is being used more subtlety than in previous years.

  Civil Society developing within a Censorship Hierarchy. My data gives evidence to some activists and netizens knowing and caring about working within censorship to continue #MeToo in China. The following discussion of what can and cannot be safely discussed on certain Chinese media platforms is adding on to scholarship of Guobin Yang. Guobin Yang's *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* details netizens relationship with the internet's ability to provide new pathways of contention that are less obvious than offline activism. This ability is borne out of multi-interactionism or the influences between online activism and state power, culture, market business, civil society, and transnationalism (Yang, 2009: 7). #MeToo deals with many of these interactions. The state, through the words of the All-China Women's Federation Vice Chairman, is unwilling to concede that Chinese professional society is hostile towards women in part that this concession allows "threatening" Western feminism movements within China's borders. In spite of this, civil society is expanding online over the culturally important issues brought up in #MeToo as seen on *Zhihu*. This may be because the internet provides a space for moral discussions that do not have to be directed towards the state government. Yang saw this to be the case when a woman published her "sex diary" online and debate over sexual openness in Chinese society ensued (Yang, 2009: 79). The #MeToo movement advocates for better support for

victims of sexual assault which could be easily directed at the state government, but instead, activists and netizens discuss the moral shortcomings of Chinese society. Because of this, activists have had some success in petitioning universities further showing that putting responsibility on local, smaller-scale institutions can be effective.

Topics related to #MeToo found in Chinese news articles are safe from censorship and are therefore at the top of the hierarchy. Sexual assault/harassment cases reported in Chinese news articles, such as in the cases of Luo Xixi, Huang Xueqin, Zhou Xiaoxuan,still have some information on Chinese social media sites with a #MeToo which is becoming fewer and far between. A question about Luo Xixi appears on *Zhihu*, Huang Xueqin is interviewed by Tencent, and *Baidu* news interviewed Zhou Xiaoxuan after her court appearance. The reasons these cases are safe from censorship may be found in the way they first appeared on social media. All of these cases were highly sensationalized in that they attracted a lot of media attention being the "first" case in their field. Luo Xixi was the first woman to take to *Weibo* and write about her experience using her real name. While her original post was censored, resulting online discussion and reporting have been plentiful and have yet to be censored. Huang Xueqin was the first woman to use her name while describing her experience in a field other than academia. As a journalist, she describes the profession as hard for women to break into and to be respected by her male peers (Tencent, 2018). The most sensational story, in the eyes of media reporting, is Zhou Xiaoxuan's as it involves one of the most recognizable figures in Chinese media and is the first (and at the time of this study, only) #MeToo case to go to trial. Since these cases are so easily picked up by the media for being "special" examples of sexual violence, they can be safely discussed from a moral perspective. For

example, Beihang University students petitioned the university for better sexual

harassment prevention policies and the university obliged (Ho & Tsoi, 2018).

Next in the hierarchy are discussions about sexual assault/harassment that do not

reference #MeToo directly but evoke similar debates. None of the *Zhihu* questions using

the different #MeToo hashtags in English or Chinese had a substantial amount of likes or

comments, and only three of the *Zhihu* questions used for this study discussed sexual

assault/harassment cases that have been brought up in China's #MeToo movement. The

remaining *Zhihu* questions approached sexual assault/harassment in China from an

abstract, indirect, moralistic, point of view. For example, the question "Why is it majorly

women who are sexually assaulted?" is not phrased as "Why do men sexually assault

women?" and the question "Why do so many people think that women should not speak

up when they are sexually assaulted?" is not phrased as "Why can't women speak up

when they are sexually assaulted?" These questions are leading people to respond with

their own personal stories, and in doing so, take the pressure or responsibility off of

institutional or societal factors that may be contributing to sexual assault. Since these

questions appear on *Zhihu* where there are differing opinions and debate, these questions

remain visible online. While looking through the available online content, it also became

clear that Chinese news sites (*Xinhua*, *Tencent*) and social media sites (*Zhihu, Weibo*)

regularly reported on #MeToo developments in other countries like the United States,

France, South Korea, and Japan. These posts were not included as data since they do not

directly deal with #MeToo in China but do show a leniency in state censorship towards

#MeToo when the movement is discussed in the context of places outside of China.

Additionally, concrete reporting on activists appealing to the law (other than the case of

Zhou Xiaoxuan) is difficult to find in Western or Chinese social media that discuss feminism or sexual assault. Evidence of this tactic could be found, however, by the fact that when China's draft of the first Civil Code was first posted on the National People's Congress webpage to receive comments from the masses, many netizens responded that there should be a provision outlining what employers should do to prevent and deal with sexual harassment in the workplace (Liangyu, 2018).

At the bottom of the hierarchy are posts written by activists or any material not written by state-controlled media that say what should be done to address sexual assault/harassment. These posts and materials are heavily censored leading activists to turn to Western news sources where they might win the attention or support of foreign governments and also reach Chinese people living abroad or those in China using a VPN. While China's new draft of the Civil Code is expected to be sensitive to current social issues such as the problem of sexual assault, it has been shown that societal issues banned in other legal documents, such as gendered hiring discrimination (Stauffer, 2018), still occur leading to doubts about how impactful this new addition to the Civil Code will be. Another indicator that the state is unwilling to allow #MeToo and feminist activists to make their claims known online are the remarks made by All-China Women's Federation Vice Chairman Song Xiuyan. While this speech was given before China's #MeToo movement began, she clearly outlines that Western feminist thought should be avoided and organizing in the name of feminism will not be tolerated (宋秀岩, 2017).

Conclusion

China's #MeToo movement is having its moment, but there are serious doubts on whether it can sustain itself amongst censorship. Despite censorship, #MeToo in China has been a catalyst for moral discussions concerning sexual assault and the threats Chinese professional women face in the workforce. Activists are surprisingly able to fill in the gaps for victim support as long as they do not discuss their doing so openly on social media. Discourse over sexual assault on *Zhihu* and Chinese news sites may not present #MeToo as a movement, but in doing so allows for discussion of #MeToo related topics and some localized activism. Activists have moved away from mass demonstrations that shift blame onto the state which is a change from feminist activism in recent years.

I aimed throughout the course of this study to view censorship as something that could be studied in tandem with feminist activism in China and not as a limitation. I believe my most significant contribution to the field of online feminist activism in China is showing that feminism in China is more nuanced and complex than Min Dongchao's travelling theory outlines. I also believe that my outline of what is and is not censored on Chinese media in relation to #MeToo may be useful in understanding how Chinese feminist movements will evolve in the future. From the current nature of #MeToo in China, feminist activism is seen as a threat to state power which forces feminist action and discussion of sensitive issues to be conducted on a smaller, person-to-person or context-to-context scale. From this study, I believe the next step would be to work with feminist organizations in China working on the issue of sexual violence. In doing so, more research on how the state deals with reportage of sexual assault and research on

gauging whether victim shaming and other traditional attitudes towards sexual assault are changing due to #MeToo could be conducted.

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