Was There a Countersphere in China's Nationalist Narration of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020? A Perspective from Feminist Internet Studies

Gab es eine Gegenöffentlichkeit in Chinas nationalistischer Erzählung über die Covid-19-Pandemie im Jahr 2020? Eine Perspektive aus der feministischen Internetforschung

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Abstract (English)

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic in China, a nationalist discourse emerged across leading social networks, portraying female medical personnel as self-sacrificing heroines. Female activists not only questioned this media coverage and successfully launched online fundraising campaigns to support female doctors and nurses, but also raised attention to patriarchal structures within Chinese society. However, most feminists' attempts to decentre nationalist discourse were either censored by algorithmic forms of social control or ignored by mainstream media. Hence, intercultural studies investigating China's global entanglement need to consider these restrictions on communicative possibilities and forms of censored resistance, to ensure nationalist discourse does not overshadow the transnational struggle that women face against patriarchal oppression, spurred by the pandemic.

keywords: China, Feminist Internet Studies, nationalism, online activism, Covid-19

Abstract (Deutsch)

Der Ausbruch der Covid-19 Epidemie in China wurde von einem nationalistischen Diskurs in prominenten sozialen Netzwerken begleitet, der das weibliche medizinische Personal als sich selbst aufopfernde Heldinnen porträtierte. Feministische Aktivistinnen hinterfragten nicht nur diese Berichterstattung in den Medien und initiierten Spenden, um die Ärztinnen und Pflegerinnen zu unterstützen, sondern richteten die öffentliche Aufmerksamkeit auch auf patriarchische Strukturen in der chinesischen Gesellschaft. Doch der Versuch der Feministinnen, Chinas nationalistischem Diskurs entgegenzusteuern, wurde entweder von algorithmischen Formen der sozialen Kontrolle zensiert oder von den Mainstream-Medien ignoriert. Deshalb sollten interkulturelle Studien, die Chinas globale Verflechtung untersuchen, diese Einschränkungen der kommunikativen Möglichkeiten und Formen des zensierten Widerstands ins Auge fassen, um zu verhindern, dass der nationalistische Diskurs den transnationalen Kampf von Frauen gegen patriarchische Unterdrückung überschattet, welcher durch die Pandemie weiter angefacht worden ist.

Schlüsselwörter: China, feministische Internetforschung, Nationalismus, Online-Aktivismus, Covid-19

1. Challenging Feminist Activism: Confucianism, Consumerism, Nationalism, and Media Surveillance in China's Cyber Culture

China's ongoing modernization process has required negotiation between traditional culture and global norms, while aiming to develop a new coherent national value system that shapes both its internal identity and its external appearance as a soft power on the world stage (Wu / Mao 2011:2). The Western concept of feminism has posed challenges to China's "troubled relationship between history and modernity" (Wu / Mao 2011:5).

Gender is socially and culturally constructed (Butler 1999), and it has been argued that gender differences, familial hierarchy, heteronormative familialism, and patriarchal social arrangements are deeply rooted in Confucian East Asian countries.[1] In China, women are expected to perform the role of a caring and gentle wife (Peng 2020b:583), and are primarily responsible for child-rearing and domestic household management. As such, marriage is the traditional benchmark for judging a woman's social status and dignity (Chang et al. 2018:332). Despite Maoism, modernization, and globalization challenging traditional Confucianism, traditional gender roles have continued to persist in contemporary Chinese society, where women are subjugated under "Confucian patriarchy" (Mou et al. 2021:3).

During the Mao era, the government promoted equal employment between women and men and cultivated a rather "masculinized" image of equally hard-working women. With the post-Mao marketization of the reform policy and economy in the 1980s, neoliberal ideas and a consumer economy began to foster new forms of female subjectivity (Ho / Jackson 2021:507), which changed from production to consumption and from political rights to personal success (Hou 2015:80). The introduction of non-governmental organizations in the mid-1990s spurred a new wave of feminism, however it was conducted in a top-down manner, with NGOs closely cooperating with the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the state (Hou 2015:81). A rather harmonious "feminism with Chinese characteristics" emerged, in which Chinese women did not use radically discursive weapons to press for economic and political gender equality, but implemented "consumerist freedom of choice", whereby financial independence served as the basis for women's sense of autonomy and security (Chang et al. 2018:334ff). Researchers found that instead of abandoning traditional gender roles, young Chinese women working as middle-class resellers in China's digital capitalism try to reconcile the neoliberal feminine ideal of a consumerist, individualistic woman with the ideal of a "self-sacrificing and family-oriented" woman (Zhang 2018:150).

Large public protests are forbidden in China (Ho / Jackson 2021:508), so it was not until the emergence of the Internet in the early 2000s and the widespread use of smart phones in the 2010s that feminist activism gained public traction. Young grass-root feminist activists began surpassing the triangular relationship between the state, ACWF, and NGOs by initiating broad discussions about gender issues (Hou 2015:79). They employed the strategy of "making news" to orchestrate activities against the discrimination of women in public spaces, as seen in the 'Occupy Men's Toilets' movement in 2012 (Li / Li 2017:11,14f). New forms of feminist online activism emerged, directed against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and heteronormativity ("The Vagina event", 2013).[2] Young activists aimed to promote more gender-conscious journalism (Wang / Driscoll 2018). Ordinary users produced and distributed their own entertainment formats on popular social media platforms, such as Weibo, to challenge traditional gender concepts (Mao 2020).

At the same time, the Chinese government fears that critical discourses of

gender might lead to criticism of its reform policies. Internet surveillance and algorithmic control of content has become more sophisticated in recent years. The #metoo social media campaign of 2018 was initially tolerated and received much public attention in China, but was censored after accusations against a television host risked harm to the image of state media (Mou et al. 2021:2). In April 2021, several feminist accounts on Weibo were shut down, and feminist activists began to find ways to circumvent censorship (Ho / Jackson 2021:508). For example, creating personal social media accounts with different pseudonyms after their official Chinese feminist group accounts were censored (Xiao 2018:744).

Furthermore, scholars have observed a prevalent "misogynist culture" (Hou 2015:84), a "masculine cyberculture that follow[s] the same patriarchal structure as the real world" (Xiao 2018:739). They have identified a growing gender antagonism (Wu / Dong 2019) and discuss how feminist activists and women's organizations have been depicted as unpatriotic by male nationalist Internet users (Peng 2020a:93ff). Schneider (2018) has described how digital information and communication technologies, state governance of the Internet, and social groups as networked communities (e.g. digital nationalists) have fostered nationalist discourse in China's online publics. Scholars identify a sense of superiority of Confucian civilization as a central characteristic of contemporary nationalism (Schroeder 2018: 74ff).

The Covid-19 pandemic became another opportunity for digital nationalists to promote nationalist governance. When the epidemic was officially announced to Chinese audiences on 20 January 2020, a patriotic media campaign was launched, appealing to national unity (Cai et al. 2021:8) and triggering active online user engagement. This was further fuelled by anti-Chinese discourse that had been circulated by Western media (e.g. Australia, Den-mark, U.S.A.) since the end of January (Wang 2020a:157). Despite China being described as an authoritarian capitalist country (Witt / Redding 2012), over the course of 2020, the pandemic became a proxy war between the allegedly competing "capitalism/anti-communism" and "communism" ideologies in Chinese and U.S. American media (Wang 2020a:157f). In early 2021, worldwide media finally began debating the cultural rather than political reasons for why some East Asian countries handled the pandemic better than their Western counterparts (Kleine 2021).

The scholarly debate outlined above identifies a revival of traditional gender roles and the government's promotion of consumerism, nationalism, and internet regulation as a means to maintain socio-political order. At least three main roles for women in China can be identified – the traditional gender role, consumers or entrepreneurs, and activists. In this paper I explore how feminist activism can exist within a cyber culture dominated by nationalism and threatened by censorship. In particular, could a feminist counter discourse develop within the nationalistic narrative that characterized China's health crisis communication in 2020?

2. The Framework of the Study

This critical digital social research study will firstly reconstruct how the patriotic media campaign portrayed female medical personnel as heroines to stage a united people's war against the virus. Feminist media studies has recently shifted from analyzing media representations of women to analyzing women's power over their (re)presentation (Kanai 2015: 85). Against this backdrop, I then shed light on the emergence of a feminist online counter-public that a) criticized the representation of female medical personnel in mainstream media, b) questioned the government's pandemic control measures, and c) successfully initiated online fundraising activities.

I will then not only show how feminists attempted to decentre the nationalist discourse by raising attention to patriarchal structures in Chinese society, but also how these efforts were either censored or ignored by mainstream media throughout 2020. In this study, the reconstruction of socio-structural inequalities explores the interplay of three subfields of feminist Internet studies: a) feminist media studies (texts), b) cyberfeminism (users), and c) feminist technoscience (material infrastructures) (Leurs 2017:137). Hence, when conducting text-based critical analysis of expressions of power and their contestation by Chinese female users (a, b), it is important to also highlight the material infrastructures that aim to systematically silence female self-expressions with the help of censorship (c). Combining both interpretative and critical paradigmatic approaches (Kiguwa 2019:228ff), this study analyzes female netizens' approach to media images of women (interpretative approach) and how these images are connected to broader socio-political structures of inequality in China's patriarchal system (critical paradigm).

Social media is the dominant channel for contemporary public debates in China, so this study is centred upon an elaborate search of prominent platforms where different entities (e.g. individuals, companies, government offices, national and media outlets and other organisations) run public accounts to offer media content. These platforms include: Tencent's *WeChat* (Weixin) and its Mini-Program *QQ*, the micro-blogging service *Sina Weibo*, Bytedance's *TikTok* (*Douyin*) and Bytedance's information release and recommendation platform *Toutiao*, the video platform *Bilibili*, discussion forums like *Baidu* post bar, and the question-answer forum *Zhihu*.
To reconstruct feminist activism, my research assistants[3] and I conducted a manual search with the Chinese search engine Baidu and screened the aforementioned social media platforms. We used keywords we had become acquainted with by following users' online debates since February 2020. These included words such as "menstruation" ("月经"), "hygiene products" ("卫生用品"), "protective suits" ("防护服"), phrases like "women's health" ("女性医护"), "period poverty" ("月经贫困") and the name "Jiang Shanjiao" ("江山娇"), a heavily debated virtual idol created by the Communist Youth League that became a proxy figure in users' feminist critique of female doctors' and nurses' work conditions.

A search for the same keywords in public social media accounts of news outlets such as *People's Daily, CCTV News* and *Xinhua News* showed very few results, demonstrating that journalists brought little attention to the topic of sanitary health protection for female medical professionals, whereas netizens were discussing it vividly from mid-February 2020 onwards. This highlighted a gap between state media and user generated content in the discussion of feminist topics. This indicated "suppression and dispersion", a censorship strategy centred around disseminating a particular view to suppress the less desired viewpoint (Jiang 2012:81).

While conducting the search, we also came across direct forms of censorship whereby content was censored after it had been published. This includes denying access to feminist media critics' user accounts and related user comments. To reconstruct various forms of online censorship, we followed cues that were still accessible, from netizens who had summarized censored debates, or provided screenshots and art depicting censored content. We also conducted an elaborate search on the search engine Baidu to find censored content on social media platforms such as Weibo. For instance, when using the image search function of Baidu, we started with a reverse image search by uploading an art piece that visualized a censored debate. The search result mentioned the blog post's title and indicated that the image had been uploaded by an unknown user in a Weibo blog

post to which access was denied. Then we conducted a forward image search, using the blog post's title in combination with the aforementioned search terms to acquire images as a result. Our search with images and words resulted in a screenshot of the related discussion thread and user comments. Although we cannot access the Weibo account of the user who triggered the debate, this "detective work" enabled us to at least verify that the censored discussion had indeed taken place.

It must be noted that ethical issues surround the research process in feminist Internet Studies. Users who publish in informal spaces may not be aware that publicly accessible data might be used for research purposes. However, users' real names are unknown so contacting them is impossible, and thus Leurs' road map (2017:139) for an alternative data-analysis in feminist studies is difficult to realise. Also, Chinese feminist activists' engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic has been largely ignored by official media and silenced by internet censorship, so this paper gives voice to an important debate which would otherwise go unnoticed.

3. The Role of Female Medical Personnel in Nationalist Discourse

After the Covid-19 outbreak was officially announced, the first media reports mainly covered male medical professionals, as a report by Changjiang Daily from 26 January illustrates (Huang et al. 2020). It praises "the best doctors" and "most beautiful retrograde men rush[ing] to aid Wuhan".

From February onwards, female workers were included and "nurses at the frontline" became a high frequency phrase in news reports (Wumenglousuibi 2020). Hospital social media accounts documented nurses shaving their heads to prepare for the mission (Gansu Maternal and Child Health Hospital 2020) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Hospitals send medical teams to Wuhan. Source: Gansu Maternal and Child Health Hospital (2020)

Journalists cover nurses who rush back to the "battlefield" after miscarriage (Fig. 2) and risk the health of their unborn babies for the sake of disease containment (Fig. 3), as the following two screenshots from media reports illustrate:

Fig. 2: Combat-ready after miscarriage. Source: Female nurse returned (2020)

Fig. 3: Combat-ready during late pregnancy. Source: Nine-month-pregnant nurse (2020)

The media article about the miscarriage alleges the nurse wrote in her diary that "we will still be good men after weeping" (Female nurse returned 2020). Here, the feminine attribute of emotionality in Chinese traditional

culture (Peng 2020b: 583) is 'reconciled' with the concept of masculinity presented as an ideal.

At first glance, these media images depict women in the traditional gender role of "reproducers and nurturers" (Liu 2014: 20), but they also highlight how female workers subordinate their reproductive health to the fight against the epidemic. These attempts to "masculinise women" are a strategy previously used during Mao's era to cultivate the image of women as equally hardworking as men (Hou 2015: 80). This nationalistic discourse not only served to guide public political opinion and foster social cohesion during the health crisis by broadcasting a united fight against the epidemic, but also facilitated a sensational gaze on the bodies of female medical professionals to attract public attention and nourish digital capitalism (via click rate).

4. Feminist Criticism: From Media Representation of Female Medical Personnel to Structural Forms of Discrimination

Using the interpretative paradigm mentioned above, I will demonstrate how this depiction of female medical workers backfired when increasing numbers of female Internet users identified the stereotypical presentation of women and women's bodies in mainstream media. Throughout 2020, this extended to a wider online debate on social media platforms such as Weibo concerning China's patriarchal society. Using the critical approach, I will discuss how female activists link their criticisms of epidemic containment measures and media images to socio-political structures of inequality. This next section explores the origins of feminist debate within the discourse on Covid-19.

4.1 Online activism: Liang Yu's Donation Campaign for Female Medical Workers

The female blogger Liang Yu (@ 梁钰 stacey) was the first to identify the vulnerability of female medical workers and call out the unique problems women faced in the medical force. The mainly young and middle-aged female physicians and nurses sent to the epicentre of the epidemic in Hubei province lacked access to protective suits and menstrual hygiene products. A news report acknowledged that while female medical professionals could hold their urine for more than eight hours to minimise the usage of protective suits, they could not control their menstruation, so relief pants were desperately needed (People's Daily 2020a). The government allegedly did not include sanitary napkins, relief pants or disposable underwear in the list of emergency supplies for medical workers in February 2020. No official documents confirmed this decision, but several media reports alluded to it by remarking that such items should have been included in the national procurement system of disaster relief (People's Daily 2020a; Southern Metropolis Daily 2020).

In response, Liang Yu launched an online fundraising campaign on 7 February 2020 (Liang 2020a), using the hashtag #Sisters Fighting and Comfort Relief Public Action#, to provide "support [for] female medical staff at the frontline in the war against the epidemic, [to] meet their actual needs and protect their physical health" (Liang 2020b). The campaign was coordinated with the help of non-governmental organizations[4] and the Weibo platform, and received public support from ordinary netizens, companies, Women's Federations and Weibo key opinion leaders (Liang 2020b). The campaign raised approximately 357,000 Euro by 10 April 2020, and paid for supplies that reached around 60,000 to 80,000 female staff in 156 hospitals and medical teams (Lingshan charitable organisation 2020; Liang 2020b) across the Hubei province (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Outcome of donation campaign. Source: Liang (2020b)

Despite public support, Liang Yu became a victim of online harassment and cyberviolence, with some netizens accusing her of being a radical feminist (Plus One New Biography 2020). Furthermore, all weblinks on her blog (which documented the campaign and provided additional information sources) have been broken since spring 2021 (Liang 2020b). Her blog may have fallen victim to the government censorship of several feminist channels and individual feminists' Weibo accounts in April 2021 (Ho / Jackson 2021:508).

More than a week after Liang Yu launched the fundraising campaign, a photograph of a medical team (consisting of 14 shaved females and one unshaved male) was posted on Gansu Provincial Maternity and Childcare Hospital's Weibo account (Fig. 5). Shortly after-

wards, the news outlet *Gansu Daily* also published a video online showing nurses crying while being shaved (Fig. 6). These images triggered online controversy regarding gender equality.

Fig. 5: An unshaved male medical professional. Source: Huanhuan (2020)

Fig. 6: Shaving nurses' heads. Source: Mountain man (2020)

Interestingly, a male online user posited that despite having been raised and educated with "stories of heroes who sacrificed their own personal safety to help others", the younger generation would see through this type of propaganda, as evidenced by recent online debates. He argued his generation preferred to assist the heroes and heroines by solving practical problems, as they did when supporting Liang Yu's fundraising campaign (Huanhuan 2020).

4.2 Feminist Criticism: From Targeting a National Virtual Idol to Targeting Patriarchal Structures in Society

Other forms of feminist media activism, including the online controversy about the visual image of Communist

Youth League's idol "Jiang Shanjiao", were immediately considered to be a political threat to the stability of society, and censored (Communist Youth League 2020). On 17 February 2020, the Communist Youth League released two virtual idols[5] on its official Weibo account – Jiang Shanjiao (female figure, left) and Hongqi Man (male figure, right). These idols were meant to represent the national image, but were removed after only a few hours, due to heated online debate (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Virtual idol Jiang Shanjiao and Hongqi Man. Source: Communist Youth League (2020)

Critical netizens thought the virtual idols were dubious, superficial and attention-seeking. They argued that the Communist Youth League should create serious characters as role models (Baibaibaibaibaiviva 2020) and to "represent the Chinese nation" (Schroedinger's Rainbow Cat 2020). But most of the discussion was devoted to how the female virtual idol Jiang Shanjiao represented Chinese women. The female blogger @Why is it endless was presumably the first netizen who established a link between Jiang Shanjiao and the working conditions of female medical personnel during the epidemic. In the early hours of the morning on 18 February 2020, she published a post criticizing government officials and hospital managers for epidemic control measures that harm women. She re-frames Jiang Shanjiao, staging her as a symbol of Chinese women's oppression. She

poses rhetorical questions such as "Jiang Shanjiao, have you also been instructed to take progesterone?", to demonstrate that male politicians sought to control women's bodies and bodily functions. These questions extended to other areas, including work life ("Jiang Shanjiao, do you and your brother get paid the same for the same kind of job?") and social life, for example "Jiang Shanjiao, are you a slut because you have been raped?" This alludes to how the concept of 'losing face' and the normativity of sexism (e.g. shame around losing female virginity) forces rape victims to remain silent to save their family's reputation (Mou et al. 2021:5).

Her original Weibo posts and related user comments are no longer accessible, as she has restricted access to her posts from before 22 April 2020 for unknown reasons. However, other users have documented the censored debate by providing screenshots of female blogger's @Why is it endless posts (Sijiubei 2020), alongside a list of rhetorical questions added by other users (Talk with you about sea and ice 2020). Furthermore, netizens found ways to circumvent algorithmic forms of social control by creating and publishing artwork with the censored words. For example, the following piece created by an unknown netizen (Fig. 8) and shared on Sijiubei's blog:

Fig. 8: Artistic visualisation of censored debate about Jiang Shanjiao. Source: Sijiubei (2020)

This artwork uses around thirty of the most frequent rhetorical questions raised by WeChat and Weibo users participating in the Jiang Shanjiao online debate, to create the image of a crouching woman.[6] Despite censorship on Weibo and the mainstream media's silence regarding the Jiang Shanjiao debate, users continued to discuss these questions on other platforms such as Zhihu, and began to question whether hospitals violated women's rights by instructing female staff to take medicine to suppress menstruation (How to judge 2020).

A genuine heroine who was silenced by the platform's algorithmic control was Dr. Ai Fen, director of the emergency department at Wuhan Central Hospital. She gave an interview to the state newspaper *People's Magazine* published on 10 March 2020 (jcq15 2020a), criticizing hospital managers' delayed response during the early stages of the outbreak (Gong 2020). The article immediately went viral on Weibo and WeChat but was quickly deleted by Internet censors. However, netizens retweeted the original article (jcq15 2020a, Congxin 2020) and created new versions of the report to mock and successfully circumvent censorship (Tucau 2020, Liao 2020, Zhou Nuo 2020) in the form of a collaborative art event (CDT 2020). For example, as illustrated in the screenshots below (Fig. 9-12), these included a Pinyin version (Yuan 2020), English and German language versions (Shuju 2020), a vertical (jcq15 2020b) and flashback version (jcq15 2020c), an Emoji version (jcq15 2020d), a Morse code version (NeuroCai 2020b), and Mao's calligraphy version (NeuroCai 2020c):

Fig. 9: English version. Source: Shuju (2020)


Fig. 10: Emoji version. Source: jcq15 (2020d)
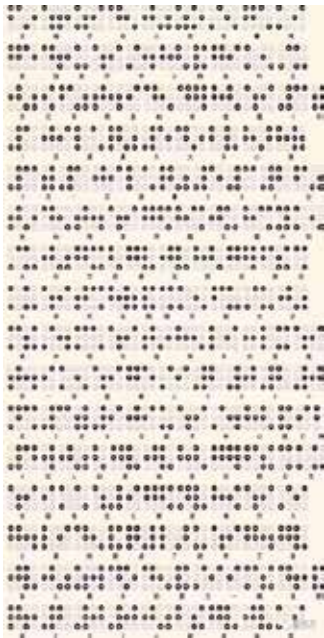
Fig. 11: Braille version. Source: NeuroCai (2020a)
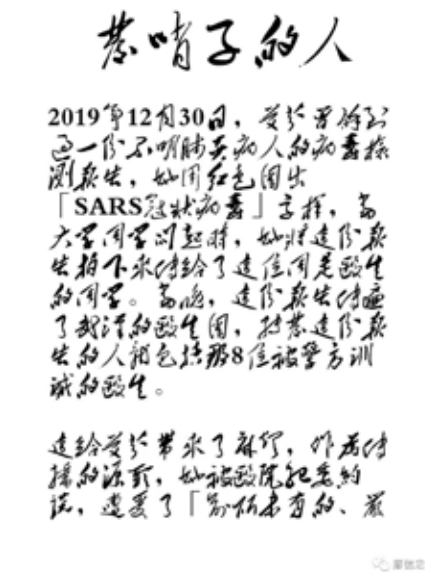
Fig. 12: Mao's calligraphy version. Source: NeuroCai (2020c)

These cases (i.e. the delayed censorship of Liang Yu's blog documenting the donation campaign, and the immediate censorship of the debate concerning the national female virtual idol Jiang Shanjiao and female doctor Ai Fen's critique of male hospital managers) illustrate an attempt to 'anaesthetize' feminist criticism through censorship during the height of the epidemic (January-March 2020). However, they also illustrate netizens' creative attempts to circumvent these forms of Internet surveillance. Debates concerning gender equality

continued to characterize public discourse for the rest of the year. Apart from persisting patriarchal structures within Chinese society, the three major reasons for this were: 1) male criticism of feminist activism, 2) the inability of official media producers to represent female medical personnel in a more nuanced way and, 3) the continued effort of Internet censors to silence feminist activism, as the following two sections will explore.

4.3 Attacking a Misogynistic Internet Space

On International Women's Day (8 March) 2020, a post by a female netizen highlighted several examples of misogyny in the mainstream media's representation of women. These ranged from initially ignoring the needs of female medical personnel, to reporting styles characterized by a "male gaze", as illustrated by reports concerning nurses who continued to work after miscarriage (Luo 2020). Furthermore, she criticized male hospital managers' ignorance of women's needs, with a screenshot of Liang Yu's Weibo account showing that some male hospital managers refused to accept sanitary napkin donations, claiming there was no need, or claiming they did not receive approval from their leaders (Luo 2020). She also highlights how a male netizen (可能我是你野爹) aimed to discredit Liang Yu's initiative when he sent a Weibo post to Liang Yu on 7 February 2020: "Even in such terrible circumstances, all you care about is your crotch" (Luo 2020). At the time of writing, his account no longer exists. Luo also referred to a recent Weibo discussion entitled "period poverty" ("月经贫困"), in which netizens describe how menstrual hygiene creates a real financial burden for low-income women in poor rural areas. She observed that discussion of socio-economic factors involved in menstrual hygiene has been ridiculed by some male netizens, who label female advocates of this argument as "shameless" (Luo 2020). She regards this discursive strategy as representative of a patriarchal society that discrimina-

tes against women and sexualizes them. Although some users blamed Luo for creating a conflict between men and women to attract traffic to the platform (The Land 2020), the majority of netizens agreed with Luo's identification of sexism as a major social problem in China (cf. user criticism of the post by netizen 'The Land' 2020).

4.4 Mainstream Media's Attempt to Appeal to Female Audiences – How they Fail

On International Women's Day (the same day Luo published her comment), *People's Daily*[7] emphasized that two-thirds of the 42,600 members of the medical emergency team sent to Wuhan at the end of January 2020 were female. The news appeared to be an attempt to appease recent feminist criticism online, mentioning that "women are not worse than men" (People's Daily 2020b). Other media outlets adopted a similar stance (Chen et al. 2020, Xiaoxiang Morning News 2020).

A few media outlets contextualized the debates and elaborated on measures to increase women's autonomy (Southern Metropolis Daily 2020, Xiao 2020). These reports highlighted that Liang Yu's donation campaign contributed to women's voices being heard in an online space where mostly male speakers dominated discussions regarding sex and gender. These reports add to the discussion of period poverty, confirming that "menstrual shame", rooted in traditional Chinese culture, prevented young women from seeking medical treatment for gynaecological diseases and from attending school during menstruation (Southern Metropolis Daily 2020). They argue in favour of sex education to foster mutual respect between the genders, and advocate state subsidies and tax reduction for hygiene products to support poor women in rural areas (Southern Metropolis Daily 2020). Apart from these rare exceptions in news production, entertainment productions continued to misrepresent female medical personnel in autumn

and winter 2020. Critics complained about an anti-Covid-19 television series broadcasted by CCTV (Guangdong A, B, C, Ding Film Industry 2020) with the hashtag "#Stop broadcasting 'Heroes in Harm's Way'#", which was read by 140 million users (Wang 2020b). In one particularly controversial scene, a government official asks employees working for Wuhan Public Transport Company to join an anti-epidemic transportation team. Only men were shown standing up to volunteer, with almost all women (except a female bus driver) refusing to join the emergency team due to family obligations (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: Male volunteers. Source: Screenshots taken from TV show Heroes in Harm's way (2020)

Many female online users opposed the unfair representation of women in mainstream media by recounting the contributions of nurses they knew personally (Plastic river 2020), and emphasizing that these personal stories provide a more accurate glimpse into the "true history of our country and nation" than the television show (Mimei 2020). It is not surprising that more than 104,000 Weibo users agreed the show should be discontinued (Gentleman 2020), and the ratings for the television show on

Douban (social media platform) were very low (Qu 2020). Shortly afterwards they were no longer available (Douban movie search 2020). In addition, users can no longer access content related to the #PleaseStopHeroesInHarm'sWay# hashtag on Weibo (Why is 'Heroes in harm's way' 2020). Furthermore, the official Weibo blog of CCTV does not mention the criticism raised, and instead only displays the positive feedback of netizens (CCTV 2020).

This has had a profound impact on public perception of the debated media images since the social media accounts that have the most followers on Douyin and Weibo are the media outlets of *People's Daily* and *CCTV News*.[8] Hence, if criticism of the television show and subsequent feminist activism (hashtag) is removed from the social media accounts of these outlets, then it is effectively prevented from developing further as a topic of general public interest.

Despite feminist criticism throughout 2020, it is astonishing that television shows at the end of the year continued to present only male medical workers (Zhejiang TV 2021), as the following screenshot of the television show illustrates (Fig. 14):

Fig. 14: Representatives of medical workers in Hubei are all male. Source: misssmeow (2020)

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the call for critical studies which a) analyze how humans experience digital society, and b) investigate power structures, ethical dimensions of new technologies, and the normative foundations of communication and society (Fuchs 2019:14f). As a feminist Internet study of Chinese public discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, it is also an attempt to de-Westernize knowledge and link the study of gender to wider global issues of gender relations, nationalism and global capitalism, showing that digital capitalism has different consequences for feminism in authoritarian-ruled China compared to Europe and the U.S. (Ho / Jackson 2021: 509).

As soon as the Covid-19 epidemic was officially announced in China, a patriotic media campaign was launched that propagated a heroic and sensational image of female medical personnel fighting at the "front line". As a result, a counter-public emerged that criticized (a) the male gaze on women's bodies in the news, (b) an under-representation of female medical workers in the media, and (c) the governance that allowed male managers to make decisions that harmed women. This turned into a general discussion concerning discrimination against Chinese women in other areas of life, but it failed to nudge media producers towards a more nuanced representation of female medical personnel.

With a few exceptions, most news and entertainment media diverted public attention to prevent popular public discussions from developing further. Furthermore, Internet censors blocked the accounts of female activists, and deleted hashtags, media articles and art exposing patriarchal structures. Although these attempts to silence Chinese feminist critics support scholars' conclusion that social media platforms like Weibo "might not be a utopian public sphere" (Hou 2015: 84), this study also presented examples of how Internet users make creative attempts to circumvent censorship.

In summary, the reconstruction of censored or ignored debates shows that feminist activism does exist in China. Hence, critical digital studies that investigate China's global entanglement need to consider the (restriction of) communicative possibilities of its media landscape, so that nationalist discourse does not overshadow the transnational struggle of women against patriarchal forms of oppression spurred by the pandemic. If culture is understood not as a homogeneous construct, but as a dynamic process in which communicative self-understanding and public controversies constitute a culture's identity (Bolten 2003: 1), an investigation of the interplay between the Chinese state, its media and its online public sheds light on the degree to which the government is willing to integrate new concepts of gender into its contemporary national value system.

Acknowledgement

6. Literature

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Endnotes

1 Confucianism is an integral part of East Asian societies, despite the blurred boundaries of capitalist and socialist systems. In China's modernity, Confucian traditional values like equality, sympathy, civility, group spirit and human-relatedness as well as an agriculture-based economy, merchant ethics, a family-centred social structure, and a paternalistic polity have continued to persist (Tu 2002:198; 203).

2 Hou provides an account of various feminist online campaigns by grass-root activists that have taken place in China since 2012 (Hou 2015:79f; 82f).

3 My research assistants searched for specific information and translated excerpts from media articles and user posts. Their first two months of work (in January and February 2021) were financed from a start-up research grant I received from the Institute of Creative and Cultural Industry (ICCI) at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The remaining period was personally financed by the present author.

4 Liang Yu cooperated with Lingshan charitable foundation (@ 灵山 Philanthropy/ @ 灵山力量基金), which serves non-governmental organisations and is registered with the Department of Civil Affairs of Jiangsu Province (Lingshan charitable foundation 2021).

5 These anime figures were meant to be used as spokespeople for Communist Youth League's publications and social media posts to capture the attention of the younger generation and reduce the gap between fan subcultures and the Communist Youth League (Ruantibuwending 2020).

6 An elaborated image search on Baidu (search engine) using the keyword "Jiang Shanjiao" revealed the artwork was uploaded on 22 February 2020 by an unidentified Weibo user in a blog post entitled "Can you hear Jiang Shanjiao calling?", but access to that post was restricted. However, the search result displayed the name of the blogger "Why is it endless?" (为什么它永无止境) who initiated the debate. Adding the word "menstruation" to the search resulted in a compilation of the censored debate, containing the title of the discussion thread initiated by the blogger "Why is it endless?" and related user comments (Baidu image search 2020).

7 It is the news outlet with the largest number of Weibo followers amounting to 132.83 million by July 2021 (People's Daily 2021b).

8 By July 2021, CCTV News had 120 million followers on Douyin (CCTV 2021a), and an equal amount of followers on Weibo (CCTV 2021b).