



Beyond #MeToo in China:

A Conversation with
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Zhang Leilei is an activist for gender equality and LGBTQ rights in China. She was part of the group who planned to hand out stickers with an anti-sexual harassment message on the eve of International Women’s Day 2015, though not one of those arrested who later came to be known as the ‘Feminist Five’. Since then, Zhang has gone on to work on a number of high-profile campaigns against sexual harassment, most notably the effort to have anti-sexual harassment billboards placed in the subway in Guangzhou.

Nuala Gathercole Lam: Feminist consciousness among young women in China has grown in recent years. What do you think has driven this change?

Zhang Leilei: Around 2012, a new wave of feminist activism dedicated its efforts to launching feminist voices into the public discourse. In so doing they broke free from the small social circles which had previously characterised the movement, and brought discussions of feminism to a broader segment of Chinese society.

A key aspect of this change took place around 2010, when a few individuals—scholars, people employed within the system (体制内), and journalists—realised that much of the efforts of feminists in China were being directed at top-down initiatives. They understood that the seemingly never-ending lobbying and the small-scale reforms taking place within the system were wholly inadequate and that the public had a very minimal understanding of feminism. At the same time, these people also came into contact with a number of anti-discrimination and advocacy NGOs that were having great success using public advocacy methods, for example on the issue of hepatitis B. Performance art, media stunts, utilising current events and celebrities, as well as legal methods, were invaluable tools in the early stages of the feminist movement’s development.

While social media in China in recent years has become increasingly tightly controlled, it has still provided a dynamic large-scale platform to debate feminist issues and organise groups—the most powerful example being the #MeToo movement which was initiated, spread, and expanded on



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social media in 2018. In the early days of the movement, the mainstream media was afraid to speak up, but after the topic of sexual harassment exploded on social media they started, one by one, to cover the issue. The #MeToo movement in China has always been subject to official investigations and related posts on social media are frequently deleted, but at its height this interference was not sufficient to prevent the movement from taking off.

Another example is the so-called ‘Naked Anti-domestic Violence Action’ (裸身反家暴) of 2012. The traditional media would not cover it because it was considered extreme, but it got a lot of shares on social media and within a short space of time gathered thousands of signatures calling for an anti-domestic violence law to be enforced. Of course, Weibo has been seriously sanitised, but over the last few years there have been many big and small accounts devoted to publishing information on feminist issues. WeChat is another gathering place for Chinese feminists. The online world has become home to a pretty substantial feminist community in China.

Added to that, the general educational level of Chinese women has risen and more than half of students in higher education in China are now female. This is to some extent a result of the one child policy—women with financial resources have benefitted and this has increased their chances of coming into contact with feminist ideas, making them more likely to act to change their own situation.

NGL: In 2012, a group of feminists launched a campaign with the slogan ‘I can be slutty, but you cannot harass me’ (我可以骚，你不能扰). The campaign was launched in response to a Weibo post by Shanghai Metro Company, which asserted that women wearing revealing clothing on public transport should expect to be harassed. Since then, feminist activists have consistently focussed on the issue of sexual harassment on public transport. The action planned on the eve of International Women’s Day in 2015 by the women who would later be dubbed the ‘Feminist Five’ would have involved handing out stickers to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transport and, somewhat sarcastically, direct victims of harassment to call the All China Women’s Federation Hotline. Later campaigns sought to purchase billboard space in Guangzhou to display a poster sending a warning to would-be harassers. Why was sexual harassment on public transport chosen as the focus of so many of the feminist campaigns in recent years?

ZL: The main reason is because sexual harassment is so prevalent on public transport and in public places in China—and there is a great deal of statistics to support this. For instance, in 2017 the Guangzhou Survey of Female University and College Students shocked people with the revelation that almost 90 percent of female students said that women close to them, classmates or friends, had experienced sexual harassment.

Public transport—including the subway and the bus—was found to be a high incidence area for sexual harassment. In September 2014, the Canton Public Opinion Research Centre published the results of research carried out the previous August, which showed that 40 percent of women aged 19 to 30 saw sexual harassment as a common problem on the subway. That is more or less one in four people saying it is a common problem.

Members of the public in China also commonly hold misconceptions about sexual harassment in public spaces and tend to blame victims for their own harassment. For example, the performance piece that started the ‘I can be slutty, but you cannot harass me’ campaign originated after the Shanghai Metro Company posted on Weibo a picture of a female passenger wearing see-through clothing, with the comment ‘dressed like that it would be a wonder if you were not harassed’. Many public discussions centre around the relationship between women wearing ‘revealing’ clothing and being harassed. Yet in these conversations we do not hear a word about public policy to fight sexual harassment, and that is despite the fact that in many cases a few friendly policies could prevent instances of sexual harassment from occurring, and make women safer. In spite of this, the government rarely comes through in this area and so advocacy is very important. The numbers of people affected are huge, meaning that the issue serves as a kind of entry point into the feminist movement.

NGL: Feminist activists and rights lawyers were engaged in exposing sexual abuse in schools before the advent of #MeToo. For example, Ye Haiyan’s work drew attention to the case of schoolgirls in Hainan, and in particular to the loophole in the law which encourages perpetrators to cast underage victims as prostitutes. Can you describe the anti-sexual harassment movement in China in recent years? What is the relationship between this movement and #MeToo?

ZL: The anti-sexual harassment movement in China over the last few years laid much of the groundwork for the 2018 #MeToo movement. Previously, specific incidents were the driving force for discussion around sexual harassment. There was the ‘I can be slutty, but you can’t harass me’ campaign of 2012, and then the Human Billboard campaign of 2017, when Guangzhou city government’s refusal to allow activists to buy advertising space on the city’s subway culminated in the design of wearable ‘billboards’ which were eventually used by feminist groups across China. There was also the Wu Chunming incident of 2012 at Xiamen University, when Wu, formerly a professor at that institution was dismissed for sexually harassing students, but was later found to have been kept on by the university as a librarian. Between 2012 and 2017, there was a huge increase in the public awareness of sexual harassment, but the scope and

continuity of the discussion had not reached the point where it could be called an anti-sexual harassment movement. In the months running up to the explosion of #MeToo in June 2018, large scale mobilisations of students and young people began to take place, starting with anti-sexual harassment activities in schools and colleges. These mobilisations in turn affected the formulation of policy, raised awareness, and formed a broad community and public foundation for the #MeToo movement. It was precisely on this foundation that in June and July 2018 the large-scale movement spread into other spheres: the third sector, media, religion, and entertainment circles. What is more, the level of understanding and approval from the public increased and the public discussion became far more nuanced.

NGL: How have you, and other gender equality activists, worked with the #MeToo movement that came out of the United States? Has it changed your activism?

ZL: The movement in the United States motivated a lot of women, including normal women who are not feminist activists. Many celebrities became role models as they told their stories, including Luo Xixi, a former PhD student at Beijing's Beihang University who became a key figure in China's #MeToo movement after she revealed on Chinese social media that her former professor at the university tried to have sex with her. Luo said explicitly that she had been influenced by the movement in the States. As far as I am concerned, I found the unfolding of #MeToo in the United States profoundly encouraging. It gave me a feeling that women all over the world were standing together. That is what motivates my work as a feminist activist: oppression, resistance, and standing together as women.

NGL: Critics have said that it is inaccurate to claim that there is a #MeToo movement in China. Some have questioned the extent to which it can be called a 'movement' given the periodic censorship of the hashtag on Weibo. Others question the scope of #MeToo in China, arguing that it has spread predominantly among those studying abroad or with professional or personal contacts outside China. How do you think we should assess the #MeToo movement in China?

ZL: Much of the media attention for #MeToo originated with the deletion of the hashtag on Weibo, as many of the household names in Western media noted at that time. If you just look at the hashtag, then the number of people involved in the movement in China is not that significant. Evaluating it from that angle would lead to the misconception that the breadth has been very limited. However, the reach of a movement cannot simply be measured by the reproduction and spread of a hashtag. The movement in China was highly concentrated from the start, with a great many men being accused and women

coming forward each day in the month of July 2018. It was each individual case which caught the public's attention and gave rise to debate on social media, not the spread of the hashtag.

The social media that I follow—including the entertainment media, which have nothing to do with politics or social issues—discussed and supported the anti-sexual harassment movement. Even to the extent that people like my parents, living in rural villages whose channels of information are normally comparatively narrow, followed situations such as the sexual harassment case that involved Zhu Jun, a well-known Chinese TV host and actor. Even more important, the mood of the discussion did not tend towards defending people like Zhu. This was probably not because of the words 'me too', but because the level of awareness around sexual harassment in China has increased—pretty much anyone who was paying attention to current affairs knew about it. There was also a high degree of diversity among the activists involved: many of the women who stood up were not feminists, and the same could be said for many of the supporters, but they were willing to personally speak up on the issue.

As for women workers, several NGOs investigated the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace and undertook some actions, but the current movement still has limitations in terms of social class. The living arrangements of women workers and the limited available channels of communication may affect their chances of coming into contact with information about the movement. I myself do not have a full picture of whether or not women workers are broadly aware of #MeToo, nor how this varies across sectors and occupations, but a group was set up which published some articles on the topic. The public social media accounts which republished these articles—specifically *Jianjiao Buluo* (尖椒部落), *Tudou Gongshe* (土豆公社), and Xiao Meili's (肖美丽) public WeChat account were subsequently banned. So, the issue of women workers, and workers in general, is very particular: not only is it a question of class differentiation, neglect, and stigma, it is also one of government control.

NGL: A further criticism is that #MeToo in China has focussed largely on members of civil society and those in unofficial circles, staying away from officialdom or people with real power.

ZL: The most powerful people to be accused under the #MeToo movement were Zhu Jun and the abbot and former chairman of the Buddhist Association of China, Xuecheng. In their own circles they were very powerful, including a degree of political power. However, those in higher positions of power never had accusations made against them. That is not to say

that they were not guilty. I am convinced that these powerful people are even more likely to use their power to exploit women, but accusing high-level officials in China would be immeasurably politically sensitive. As well as being very frightened of those with political power, everyone is also aware that such accusations would not go anywhere, that they would be ‘harmonised’ immediately. Perhaps there have already been accusations that no one knows about, we will never know.

NGL: Feminist activism in China is often publicly dismissed as being under the influence of ‘hostile foreign forces’. How has this impacted your work?

ZL: Well, for instance I do not want the name of the NGO I work for to be made public. The Chinese government’s stigmatisation and marginalisation of NGOs has forced many of them to operate underground. We rely on constantly recreating our identity, using individual cases and current affairs as the pretext for our advocacy work—the organisation itself being unable to act publicly. This became particularly apparent after the Foreign NGO Management Law came into force and many organisations lost their sources of funding. Many did not want to be labelled as being under foreign influence and voluntarily cut off foreign funding sources, rendering their continued existence extremely difficult. Added to all of this, many members of the public, influenced by this discourse, are now suspicious and hostile towards NGOs.

NGL: Do such accusations impact your interest in joining forces with movements like #MeToo which originate in the West?

ZL: I think the starting point for most Chinese feminist activists is fighting sexual harassment, combining the real situation on the ground and the complexities of the situation in China to launch their own initiatives. Borrowing from the impact of movements in the West to spread the word about the cause, while also assuming responsibility for the risks that ensue is a part of that.

NGL: Article 48 of the Chinese Constitution states that ‘Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life’ and that ‘the state protects the rights and interests of women’. How have you used the Communist Party’s stated commitment to gender equality in your work?

ZL: Writing to delegates at the annual sessions of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is something we continue to do each year in the hope that through this we can slowly change the opinions of policymakers. Sometimes, owing to strategic

considerations, we also use the fundamental national policy of equality between men and women to publicise our cause. However, equality of the sexes is more like an oath than a substantive slogan. We decide based on the situation on the ground whether or not we want to use this type of language—for instance, sometimes we use the government’s own discourse to emphasise the legality of our actions. Appealing to the government to address feminist issues through legislation is something we have always done.

NGL: You talk about the importance of being ‘hard core’ (硬核) in the process of growing the feminist movement in China. Can you explain what you mean by this?

ZL: The identity of a ‘hard core’ feminist activist is probably adopted only by a very limited number of feminists in China. As far as I am concerned, it means forever raising problems and trying by any means to solve those problems, maintaining independence, and being reflexive and defiant. It means breaking ground on issues that others are not raising and following up on unresolved ones. At the same time, it also requires a willingness to maintain open discussions and mobilise people in an attempt to change the entire system and culture of gender in China.

NGL: You are currently producing *VaChina*, a Mandarin rewriting of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*, with Chinese students in London. Is this part of a strategy to build capacity for the feminist movement in China with Chinese students abroad?

ZL: The *Our Vaginas, Our Selves* show is primarily intended to bring together Chinese students interested in women’s issues through doing activities and performing together to raise consciousness and increase the conversations occurring around these problems. It could be considered a form of training for the community of new feminists and activists, and also a tool to raise awareness about the Chinese feminist movement and gender issues in the country more broadly. ■