

## ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has emerged as a defining moment in feminist digital activism, yet the majority of literature has primarily examined its impact within North American and European contexts. With the increasing prominence of international digital activism and discussions surrounding censorship and social movements, understanding the arrival of the #MeToo movement in mainland China offers a valuable and distinct opportunity to explore how these dynamics operate in a non-Western context. This project presents four in-depth case studies of allegations that epitomize the Chinese #MeToo movement, considering variations in media exposure, state surveillance, and public reaction. It interprets the #MeToo discourse in China as a battleground for the emergence of a feminist counter-hegemony against the state's patriarchal authority. Drawing from Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony, common sense, and good sense, this thesis examines feminist public discourse and resistance to state repression as hegemonic struggles, highlighting how the general understanding of sexual assaults has been shifted by the #MeToo movement and how the movement exposes the vulnerability of the state's hegemonic position. Despite evolving state interventions and heightened surveillance of #MeToo conversations, the movement also unveils opportunities for future feminist activism in China.

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Beyond Silence:

The #MeToo Movement's Confrontation with Chinese Patriarchal Hegemony

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Thesis in the Program of Critical Social Thought

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Dec 11, 2023

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Iyko Day. Thank you so much for your wisdom and guidance throughout my thesis writing and academic journey. I am forever grateful for what I have learned from you over the past three years, starting with my first close reading and ending with my final thesis.

To Professor Kenneth Tucker, it has truly been an honor to take three courses with you and continue to learn from you in our reading group. Thank you for all the support and encouragement you have given me over the past two years.

Special thanks to Professor Calvin Chen for introducing me to a comparative approach to East Asian politics and engaging in insightful thesis conversations. I am also thankful to Professor Laurie Tupper for inspiring me to explore my passions.

To my cherished friends on campus - Jasna, Sicily, Gillian, Bella, Olina, Ziyue, Nina, Isha, Stephanie, and Margot - life wouldn't be complete without all the moments we spent together. I will always miss our time together drinking boba, having dinner, chatting, dancing, traveling, studying at LITS, and walking around the Upper Lake.

Thank you to my chosen family outside campus. Zhang Ting, there is no way I can do this without all the laughter and tears we shared. Zoe, knowing you will be there always gives me warmth and strength. Caroline and Jessie, thank you for sharing your lives and all the love you have shown me. Thanks, Hunter, for all the joyful moments!

Lastly, to my parents and grandparents in China - your love means everything to me. Thank you for everything.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Dissecting the Discourse: #MeToo in Mainland China**

In the wake of the sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein that reignited the #MeToo movement in 2017, this movement began to resonate within mainland China by 2018. Since its inception, it has recurrently appeared across various social and political sectors. However, the response to this anti-sexual assault campaign in China has been unique, marked by a mix of support and opposition entangled with gendered and nationalist norms, reflecting the country's distinct political, social, and cultural context. This thesis delves into the underpinnings of the unique #MeToo discourse in China, offering novel perspectives on how the global feminist wave adapts and evolves within China's specific milieu.

While numerous scholarly investigations have delved into the Chinese #MeToo movement with a focus on aspects such as digital activism, censorship, transnational social movements, and participatory politics, relatively few have approached it from the perspective of analyzing the discourse surrounding #MeToo in China as a manifestation of the rise of a feminist counter-hegemony and transformation of civil society. To address this gap in the literature, this project conducts a thorough examination of the multifaceted #MeToo discourse in mainland China, framing it as an embodiment of an ideological struggle: on one side, feminists striving to cultivate a feminist “good sense” and forge a counter-narrative to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 's ingrained patriarchal cultural hegemony; on the other, the CCP endeavors to curtail such burgeoning feminist resistance using various censorship and depoliticization mechanisms. Throughout the three chapters, I illuminate how such feminist digital activism destabilized the

patriarchal hegemony supporting the CCP's rule. Moreover, how the state's coercive response, particularly through censorship, ironically underscores the weakening of state power and paves the way for potential future activism in China.

Methodologically, this research is underpinned by crucial concepts from Marxist theory, subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, social movement theory, and queer theory. Given the nuanced interpretations of terms such as hegemony, civil society, and intellectuals across various academic spectra, it is imperative to crystallize their definitions at the outset. Therefore, this chapter offers a detailed literature review, drawing insights from scholars like Antonio Gramsci and Jia Tan and setting the foundational concepts and historical context that steer subsequent deliberations. However, before delving into the theoretical framework, this chapter commences with a comparative analysis of recent #MeToo movements in Taiwan and mainland China. Through scrutinizing the public response in mainland China to the recent #MeToo allegations in Taiwan and juxtaposing the Taiwanese cases with their mainland counterparts, this introduction lays the groundwork for an in-depth understanding of the current dominant narratives about sexual assault cases in China.

**“Let's not just let it go this time.”**

Taiwan has often been seen as a beacon of political progressivism compared to its neighbors. To quote Vickie Wang, a Taiwanese writer and stand-up comedian, “We elected an unmarried, childless woman as president and legalized same-sex marriage. We have laws in place for sexual harassment on campuses and in the workplace. And we're banning plastic straws.” Even with such milestones, the island has not been immune to the deeply rooted

patriarchal norms, the disconcerting culture of victim-blaming, and the societal shackles that have deterred many from voicing their experiences with sexual violence. With similar Confucian cultural influences and reception of the #MeToo movement from abroad, the evolution of #MeToo in Taiwan serves as a crucial counterpoint to its development in China. Although Taiwan embraced the #MeToo movement five years later than China, this island, which shares cultural and historical ties with its neighbor across the strait, has experienced distinct political and public outcomes in response to allegations, in stark contrast to China.

The wake-up call for Taiwan came from an unexpected quarter: the popular Taiwanese political drama on Netflix, *Wave Makers*. This series featured a subplot involving a female member of a political party who bravely disclosed being sexually harassed by a fellow party member to her supervisor. In response, her supervisor vowed to assist her in reporting the incident, offering a quote that later became a symbolic battle cry for the new wave of the #MeToo movement in Taiwan: "Let's not just let it go this time."

Drawing inspiration from this story, Chen Chien-jou, a former staffer of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), made a grievous accusation on Facebook on May 31 and ignited the #MeToo movement in Taiwan. She alleged that film director Hsueh Chao-hui, who also served at the party, sexually harassed and groped her. Upon reporting the incident to the party's head of women's affairs, Chen's claims were dismissed, and she was questioned about why she had not screamed at the time. As the post went viral overnight, some DPP supporters accused Chen of betraying the party, especially with the presidential election on the horizon. As the DPP's deputy secretary-general, Andrea Yang, remarked in an interview, "this was such a massive political storm at the beginning" (J. Wang). In the subsequent weeks, several of Chen's

former superiors at the DPP stepped down, with one withdrawing from a legislative seat race. Chen's revelation soon led to a surge of individuals coming forward with accusations of sexual harassment and assault within the DPP, putting pressure on officials at various ranks within the party and government and leading to multiple resignations. As the credibility of the DPP plummeted, President Tsai Ing-wen issued two separate apologies on behalf of her party for mishandling internal complaints and vowed legislative reforms.

While the #MeToo movement initially revolved around the DPP, it soon cast its shadow across nearly all significant sectors of Taiwanese society. Countless allegations have emerged, encompassing not only the opposition party, Kuomintang (KMT), but also academic circles, the cultural sector, businesses, activists, and celebrities in television, film, and music (Wang et al.).

By July 2023, President Tsai endorsed a set of legal amendments to fortify the judicial framework against sexual offenses. These amendments seek to bolster victim rights and protections against sexual harassment and introduce an independent third party to aid investigations (Y. Wang). With the wave of allegations beginning to recede, Taiwan's #MeToo movement seems to be entering a period of reflection. However, when these accusations cross over to mainland China, which has witnessed more active #MeToo activism in the past, the public's response to sexual assault allegations shifts, revealing intriguing social attitudes towards the issue of sexual assault.

### **The Politicized and The Depoliticized in mainland china**

Unlike Taiwan, the #MeToo movement began to resonate within mainland China as early as 2018. In fact, a significant surge of #MeToo accusations emerged from China's cultural

industry and academic institutions in late April, just before the movement gained traction in Taiwan.

On April 26, Shi Hang, one of China's most esteemed screenwriters and intellectuals, faced anonymous allegations of verbal and physical sexual harassment on Douban, a social media platform popular among educated young adults. As of May 12, 26 women have come forward to accuse Shi of committing a variety of assaults, some of which allegedly date back more than a decade (He et al.). Shi fervently denied all accusations, offering selective screenshots of conversations with his accusers to prove his innocence. However, several accusers countered his defense by highlighting the glaring power disparity between them, sparking a widespread debate on the definition of sexual harassment on Chinese social media. Multiple businesses severed ties with Shi, excluding him from cultural events and revoking his book endorsements. This represented a landmark moment for the #MeToo movement in China, as it was the inaugural instance where numerous organizations openly severed ties with a celebrity over accusations of sexual misconduct (Gan). Furthermore, it is seen as the movement's initial foray into the discourse surrounding cancel culture in the country (Hou). Concurrently, Fan Xin, a renowned publisher of feminist literature, faced anonymous allegations of sexual assault on Douban, resulting in his resignation. The Douban account that exposed both Shi's and Fan's scandals poignantly posted, "Maybe it's time we disenchant ourselves from this industry. Intellectuals are just ordinary people as well" (Yang).

Despite the well-established presence of the #MeToo movement in China, Chinese responses to Taiwan's sexual harassment allegations have been more monitored and guided by

the state censorship mechanism than spontaneous feedback from individuals. In reaction to the incidents in Taiwan, Weibo reinstated the #MeToo hashtag, banned years ago, yet limited the search results exclusively to cases from Taiwan (Xia). While one of the focal points of Taiwan's #MeToo movement has been political institutions, Chinese discussions regarding sexual assault cases within Taiwan's political parties and government mainly occurred within state-controlled media channels. These discussions emphasize the gravity of sexual harassment allegations against the ruling DPP, providing insight into Taiwanese discontent with these cases and often concluding with reflections on the prospect of "Taiwan's return to the motherland." While individual responses to sexual allegations in Taiwan's political arena were generally measured, viewpoints aligning with the official position occasionally escaped scrutiny. For instance, on Zhihu, the Chinese equivalent of Quora, some perceive Chen's initial allegation as part of a political agenda orchestrated by the KMT to weaken the DPP in the presidential election, drawing parallels between #MeToo accusations and what they perceive as "political controversies" seen in the United States and Japan, rather than understanding them as genuine sexual harassment allegations (知乎). In mainland China, the over-politicization of sexual abuse allegations is a common tactic used by the state to delegitimize allegations of sexual assault, as they often overshadow a broader discussion of sexual harassment itself.

On the other hand, mainland China's public attention to Taiwan's #MeToo movement predominantly centered on allegations against several TV celebrities. The accusations against Taiwanese comedian Mickey Huang and Taiwanese actor-singer Aaron Yan gained significant traction on Weibo and TikTok. However, within these less censored #MeToo allegations, public

interest was quickly diverted toward unrelated drama, leaving minimal exploration of the core issue of sexual harassment. For instance, following his admission of sexual assault, Huang strategically redirected attention by posting three consecutive videos on social media, accusing 13 prominent Taiwanese artists of misconduct, including drug use and cheating. What began as a #MeToo case transformed into a spectacle of celebrity accusations, effectively sidelining and diminishing the significance of the movement itself.

This trend of transforming sexual assault accusations into entertainment and depoliticizing the discourse is not a novel occurrence. It echoes the earlier high-profile cases of Richard Liu and Kris Wu, detailed in Chapters 1 and 2. The public #MeToo discourse on Chinese social media today consistently oscillates between two patterns: politicization, met with censorship, and depoliticization, leading to an overwhelming and desensitized surge of public debates. These trends are vital to understanding the state's response to the emergence of a feminist "good sense" and the CCP's apprehension over the legitimacy of its gendered governance.

## **Literature Review**

This section offers a comprehensive theoretical and contextual foundation for grasping the nuances of the #MeToo movement in China, particularly its manifestation on social media platforms. Instead of adhering strictly to a singular theoretical paradigm, this thesis weaves together critical insights from various theoretical frameworks to craft a novel lens through which the discourse surrounding China's anti-sexual harassment movement can be examined. Given that China has been under the governance of the CCP since 1949 and considering the grassroots

nature of the #MeToo movement, this review commences with an exploration of Gramsci's works. The renowned Italian Marxist philosopher and activist offers theories on social struggle that transcend the conventional materialist interpretations of Marxism. This section further presents a succinct genealogy of Chinese digital feminism, establishing a context in which the ideas of Gramsci find resonance. This segues into an examination of Jia Tan's groundbreaking theoretical construct of the digital masquerade, which elucidates feminist and queer digital activism in contemporary times. While the breadth of this review is finite, it also incorporates interpretative insights from scholarly adaptations of these studies. This literature review aptly sets the stage for the detailed case analyses in subsequent chapters.

### *State and Civil Society*

Gramsci's theories extend and blur the boundaries of the Marxist notion of superstructures by emphasizing the dialectical relationships between the state and civil society. While the state or the political society refers to the arena under the coercive control of political and legal institutions, the civil society is "not simply a sphere of individual needs but of organizations, and has the potential of self-regulation and freedom" (Bottomore 83) through which hegemony and "spontaneous consent" are organized (Gramsci 12). In the context of this thesis, social media emerges as a pivotal tool for the #MeToo movement's supporters, enabling them to organize and gain such consent effectively to shift the norms within civil society. Chen Chen and Xiaobo Wang describe this online activism as a means of creating "discursive rights" and "discursive space" for feminist discourse. Conversely, the state's coercive interference in this

discourse through censorship signifies an intrusion of state power into civil society, highlighting a transformative and interdependent relationship between these two realms.

Since there is a tendency to read civil society and the political-economic aspect of society as two separate realms, especially under the influence of the Althusserian structuralist reading of Marxism, it is crucial to note that for Gramsci the division between the state and civil society is purely conceptual. In reality, the state and civil society intertwine in political exercises. As Gramsci clarifies, "The ideas of the Free Trade movement are based on a theoretical error...a distinction between political society and civil society, which is made into and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological" (159-160). By suggesting that non-intervention policies of civil society, such as laissez-faire, are still regulated or even enforced by the state, Gramsci undermines the ideal of the base/superstructure dichotomy and argues for a dialectical interpretation of their synergy. This argument aligns with previous discussions on the interplay between grassroots feminist #MeToo activism and censorship. For Gramsci, civil society is an essential political site that allows the ruling party and its opposition to exercise or establish cultural hegemony and struggle for political power.

### *Hegemony*

Cultural hegemony is the main thread of Gramsci's theory, suggesting that the ruling class maintains its governance based not only on coercive force but also on the cultural and ideological acquiescence of the subaltern - non-hegemonic groups that are deprived of the agency under the cultural hegemony of the dominant class. Gramsci writes that civil society and the state "correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group

exercises through society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the state and 'juridical' government" (12). Therefore, the hegemony is contrasted with domination because the former refers to the control of civil society and relies on the "spontaneous" consent from the masses to the general directions or ideologies. It is when a lack of public consent to the ruling class happens that the state apparatuses will step in and impose discipline on dissidents.

Moreover, hegemony can sometimes be seen as distinctive from "economic-corporate" because it is a struggle and strives for leadership in political power (xiv). It is a dynamic, dialectical process, not a unidirectional imposition of power. Hegemony, in Gramsci's view, is not inherently oppressive. Instead, it can manifest as a bottom-up force, where grassroots activism fosters a counter-hegemony that gradually shifts civil society, eventually gaining political influence and sparking social change. In this context, civil society is not simply a reflection of economic interests but rather an area of ideological struggle. Therefore, just as the dominant class will reform and compromise its economic interests to meet the demands of other classes in order to gain active consent and maintain its hegemonic status, the grassroots can cultivate their own counter-hegemony to challenge and transform prevailing norms. For Gramsci, attaining cultural hegemony is the precondition for a social group to come to power.

### *War of Maneuver versus War of Position*

To better understand why hegemony is the precondition for a social group to gain power, it would be helpful to introduce Gramsci's analogy of the war of maneuver (movement) and the

war of position. War of maneuver is the physical struggle of frontal attack and defense that erupts the established order of the state and civil society. An example of a war of maneuver discussed extensively in Gramsci's works is the Russian Revolution of 1905. On the other hand, there is the war of position, which is an ideological struggle and democratic movement waged in civil society to establish a public consensus, or in other words, a hegemony. While the Bolshevik Revolution succeeded through the strategy of the war of maneuver, Gramsci suggests that the Russian success was an outlier and that such a strategy could no longer be applied to Europe or developed capitalist states. He observes, "In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was revealed" (238). Because tsarist Russia was largely agrarian and lacked a developed cultural fortress to resist the socialist revolution, the war of maneuver strategy succeeded. On the contrary, in European states where capitalist social institutions are well structured, war of maneuver is less appropriate because their civil societies will resist the socialist challenge. Without cultural hegemony, an incursion is only an external attack, while the internal solid social structures and massive consent to the ruling groups remain intact. Therefore, war of position, through which social groups could gradually establish cultural hegemony, should be the superior strategy of struggle in the capitalist state, as "a social group...must already exercise 'leadership' [i.e., be hegemonic] before winning governmental power" (207).

### *Organic Intellectuals*

Gramsci writes, “A war of position is...by the whole organisational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field” (234). In order to establish hegemony through reforms, social movements, and other repertoires of struggle, a group of individuals whom Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals” organize the war of position. While for Gramsci, “all men are intellectuals” as everyone’s work contains intellectual efforts, he distinguishes two groups that function in society as intellectuals: 1) the traditional intellectuals who function in society as professional intellectuals, who “undergo more extensive and complex elaboration in connection with the dominant social group;” 2) the organic intellectuals, which are formed based on social groups in order to “give [them] homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (9-10; 5). Organic intellectuals are the thinking and organizing element of a particular social class/group, possessing “a certain directive and technical capacity” to engage in activities “as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (5; 10). In order to create an alternative hegemony and advance its dominance, the organic intellectuals organize a war of position to struggle against the ruling class and, at the same time, “assimilate and to conquer ‘ideologically’ the traditional intellectuals” (10). The possibility for the organic intellectuals to establish a counter-hegemony through the war of position allows for democratic progress in civil society.

### *Common Sense and Good Sense*

Since the war of position allows organic intellectuals to create hegemony or counter-hegemony based on the spontaneous consent of the masses, consent is naturally contestable,

which leads to the concepts of “common sense” and “good sense.” Gramsci distinguishes consensus into common sense and good sense. Common sense is the uncritical, ambiguous, and unconscious knowledge that individuals acquire, which becomes common to a given historical period or society. It is “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is” (419). Good sense, on the other hand, is “unitary and coherent,” and provides “conscious direction to one’s activity” (328). When a social class gains dominance, “there comes into being...in opposition to common sense, a homogenous...coherent and systematic philosophy,” which is the good sense (419). Thus, social groups replace common sense by transforming its good sense into “an active norm of conduct” and thus gain popular support and cultural hegemony (346). Organic intellectuals play a crucial role in challenging the dominant common sense and introducing a new good sense by translating abstract ideas into daily practices that resonate with the masses. In this way, the organic intellectuals act as mediators between the world of ideas and the world of action, and they can create a new cultural and moral consensus based on the interests and experiences of the subordinate groups. Through the diffusion of good sense organized by the organic intellectuals, which challenges the common sense that maintains the status quo, the contests of cultural hegemony become possible, and civil society becomes an arena for democratic ideological struggle through the war of position.

*Digital Activism and Feminism in China*

From its early days during the Chinese Civil War, the CCP championed the cause of women's emancipation, positioning their liberation at the forefront of its objectives. However, after their ascendancy to power in 1949, the CCP's commitment wavered. Women's liberation became secondary, often sacrificed for the broader goals of the party and the state. Despite women playing crucial roles in production - evocatively described as "holding half the sky" - "there was no distinct role for women and no further specific efforts targeted their liberation other than through their role in the struggle and in the productive process" (Leung 363). The "overall desexualization of both men and women" also led women's gender identity to exist only "within the official discourse of socialism," and feminine expression was considered bourgeois culture (366). While women could participate in political struggles, they were rarely party leaders, as they were "officially sanctioned subordinated gendered division of labour" (365). The seemingly progressive stance of the Chinese socialist revolution towards women's political and labor rights is better understood as a continuation of the entrenched patriarchy of imperial China. As Leung points out, "China's state-sponsored rhetoric of women's rights does not generate a humanistic discourse of liberation" and allowed women's emancipation only through mass organizations led by the CCP, which prohibited the production of feminism (370). The high employment rate of women during Mao's era, surpassing 90%, masks the persistence of Confucian patriarchal values, which saw a resurgence after the economic reforms of the 80s (Tian and Zheng).

With the onset of Deng's economic reforms, China transitioned towards neoliberal state capitalism, allowing more diverse discourse beyond the boundaries of Maoist ideology. This era

championed individualism, and voices of “self” began to resonate. A shift in women’s perspective became evident as they started to reclaim their feminine identities, moving away from the previously promoted “masculinization.” Their newfound affinity for traditional female depictions hinted at the lurking return of Confucian patriarchy - “the family is reaffirmed as the basic socio-economic unit...and the individual is forced to play a role of dependence” (370). Consequently, Women found themselves burdened with greater domestic expectations in order to preserve and bolster the family structure. Traditional ideals, such as that of the “virtuous wife,” and long-standing kinship practices, made a comeback, further anchoring women to dated societal norms. By 2014, this shift manifested tangibly as the female work participation rate declined to 64 percent (Erdenebileg).

Amidst what many view as the pitfalls of gender equality, a new wave of feminist activism has emerged alongside the rise of social media, coinciding with Xi Jinping’s ascent to power in 2014. This era is marked by more effective media platforms, but it is also characterized by increased censorship and surveillance. In the initial years of Xi’s leadership, there was a relatively peaceful period where feminist movements flourished online. I was young then, and during my research, I was astounded by the extent of their social media presence. Expressions such as nudity were permitted, and public discourse on topics like sexual harassment was common. Young, media-savvy feminists began to leverage social media platforms, especially Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter), to broadcast their actions and messages. Feminist groups like the Youth Feminist Action School and Women’s Voice utilized these platforms to

engage with their audience, organizing exhibitions, seminars, and workshops and forming feminist communities. This period also saw a significant online presence of queer organizations.

However, the political climate shifted dramatically in 2015. In March, the arrest of five young feminists planning to campaign against sexual harassment on public transport in Beijing drew international and domestic condemnation of the CCP. Public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and petitions called for their release, challenging the government. Although suppressed by censorship, this dissent marked a turning point where the CCP began to perceive feminism as a threat to its governance and societal stability due to its potential to inspire collective action. This led to a crackdown on feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations, with gender discourse being heavily monitored on social media.

As the space for physical activism grew more restrictive, the anonymity and expansive reach of social media opened new avenues for feminist and queer activists. This shift led them to depend more heavily on digital platforms compared to their Western peers, innovatively adapting their approaches for survival in an environment rife with what might be described as “state-sanctioned misogyny” or pervasive patriarchal hegemony (Han). Social media enabled activists to employ “agentic and circumventive adaptations” of platform features, effectively shaping a civil society within this digital realm (Gu). Researcher Jing Zeng highlights this evolution: “feminists in China are forced to incorporate contingency and resilience in their media strategies.” This adaptation marks a strategic transition to more discreet and flexible forms of resistance and advocacy, emblematic of a digital “war of position” in activism.

Jia Tan's work on digital masquerading provides a more contextualized theory of how feminist and queer organic intellectuals in mainland China organize social movements that challenge the patriarchal and heteropatriarchal hegemony of the CCP. By employing masking and masquerading techniques on social media platforms, activists propagate feminist consciousness innovatively. In 2017, Tan coined the concept of digital masquerading and argued that this should be understood as the role of media in the new wave of Chinese feminist activism in response to the CCP's censorship of feminist and queer discourse on social media in her article "Digital Masquerading: Feminist Media Activism in China," which later developed into a book published in early 2023.

Tan's conceptualization of "digital masquerading" is layered. The term "masquerade" refers not simply to the performance of gender, but to the construction, delineation, and alteration of bodily images online" (173). This "construction," "delineation," and "alteration" of gender performances are forms of unified and organized good sense that challenge the conventional understandings of gender under the patriarchy and is disseminated through the actions of digital masquerading on social media, gradually transforming the dominant gender norms into an open conversation about gender disparities. For Tan, the masquerade also describes "a new relationship between the user and digital media that is resistant to state censorship," as the masquerade is a series of intentional representations to evade state repression (175). It symbolizes "the self-awareness and agency of feminists in their tactical use of media to circumvent censorship" (171). Thus, masquerading emerges not just as an act but as a meticulously organized strategy. Activists employ it to carve out a feminist and queer counter-

narrative amidst the burgeoning civil society propelled by the advent of social media. In doing so, they exemplify organic intellectuals, leveraging their expertise and insights to challenge prevailing hegemonic structures.

### **Thesis Organization**

The upcoming chapters delve into four critical case studies that have markedly shaped the trajectory of the #MeToo movement in China. Chapter 1 focuses on the rape allegations against Chinese e-commerce magnate Richard Liu and the landmark sexual harassment accusation against Zhu Jun, a journalist who is a household name in China. Chapter 2 addresses the rape allegations leveled against the Canadian-Chinese superstar Kris Wu. Chapter 3 encompasses the globally known tennis player Peng Shuai's allegations against retired Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli.

This study undertakes a roughly linear and chronological exploration of various cases within the Chinese #MeToo movement, acknowledging that timelines for different cases inevitably overlap due to the nature of lawsuits. The goal is to illustrate how digital activism has shifted public discourse around the #MeToo movement and how, through the rise of a feminist counter-hegemony, the movement is gaining strength from a “war of position” and the “long march through the institutions” strategy. This examination also highlights how feminists, learning from past successes and failures of the #MeToo movement, continually refine their activism strategies. Moreover, it reflects on how the movement has profoundly redefined social norms around gender and sexuality, regardless of legal outcomes. The different profiles of the

accused and accusers provide a lens to observe the state's varied responses to these allegations and the implications of such interventions in civil society.

Chapter 1 directs attention to two emblematic #MeToo incidents from 2018. Characterized by their unique attributes - one taking place under the vigilant watch of the U.S. judicial system, ensuring enhanced transparency in its proceedings, while the other centers on a reporter from a national news channel, a figure symbolic of state authority - these events elicited a range of public sentiments and varied censorship measures. Notably, the nuanced nature of these incidents mirrors many accusations within China's #MeToo saga, wavering between being tagged as politically sensitive or deemed benign to the CCP's notion of social security. This chapter delves deep into a discourse analysis of these cases, illuminating the rising feminist ethos and growing stance against sexual harassment among China's younger female demographic. By engaging in discussions on social media, these women metamorphose their burgeoning anti-sexual harassment awareness into a feminist good sense, thereby sculpting a feminist counter-narrative against the prevailing masculine hegemony in China that motivates future allegations.

By strategically juxtaposing two diametrically opposing cases from 2021 in Chapters 2 and 3 - the complete depoliticization and widespread discussion of Kris Wu's case and the total censorship experienced by Peng Shuai's case - I aim to illuminate the subtle intricacies of the state's intervention in the Chinese #MeToo discourse. Furthermore, I strive to emphasize how a new breed of tech-savvy feminists expertly traverse the myriad landscapes of social media and orchestrate dialogues that formulate a counter-hegemonic narrative that paves the way for robust civic engagement among women.

## **CHAPTER 1: FROM SHADOWS TO SPOTLIGHT - THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST ZHU JUN AND LIU QIANGDONG**

### **In the Limelight: The Catalyst Cases of China's #MeToo Uprising**

On July 26, 2018, Zhou Xiaoxuan, widely known as Xianzi, published a 3,000-word essay on WeChat, a multifunctional super app boasting over 1 billion monthly active users. In her essay, she leveled accusations of sexual harassment against Zhu Jun, a leading TV host affiliated with China's national broadcaster, CCTV. Xianzi recounted that during her 2014 internship at CCTV, Zhu had groped and forcibly kissed her in a dressing room where she intended to interview him. She reported the incident to the police the following day. However, authorities discouraged her from pressing charges, citing Zhu's image as a beacon of "positive energy" - a term from Chinese political discourse under Xi's leadership that underscores exemplary conduct and is intricately tied to CCP's media and ideological control (CMP Staff; Feng and Wong). The police warned her, "Your parents are Communist party members; this will damage their careers" (Yang). So, she remained silent until the #MeToo movement hit China in 2018.

Following the initial post, a friend of Xianzi took to Weibo to share her essay, seeking support, and the post swiftly gained momentum on Chinese social media, eventually becoming a trending topic. With Zhu being a celebrated face, hosting the annual Lunar New Year gala watched by over 700 million viewers, he was the highest-profile figure associated with the state to face such allegations in the then-evolving Chinese #MeToo movement ("早報"; Spegele). Although the #MeToo movement had resonated in academic circles in China by this point,

Xianzi's bold claim marked the debut of a celebrity's involvement. Zhu vehemently denied all accusations and filed a defamation lawsuit against Xianzi. In a courageous move, Xianzi countersued him for "violation of personality rights," which was then the nearest legal equivalence to anti-sexual harassment (Feng and Wong). Xianzi was the inaugural accuser during Chinese #MeToo to bring forth a civil lawsuit on sexual harassment, claiming infringement of personal dignity (Buckley and Chen; Yang). Although her allegations did not prevail and her appeal was rejected, her legal struggle symbolizes a defining moment for the Chinese #MeToo movement's escalating battle against sexual exploitation of women.

Building upon the unprecedented confrontation between Xianzi and Zhu, China's #MeToo movement escalated later that same year. On September 2, 2018, a mugshot of Liu Qiangdong, better recognized as Richard Liu in the English-speaking world, inundated Weibo, accruing over 370 million views (Verberg). Liu, dubbed the "Jeff Bezos of China," and founder of a colossal e-commerce empire, was apprehended in Minneapolis for allegedly raping Liu Jingyao, a Chinese international student at the University of Minnesota. (For clarity, Ms. Liu and Mr. Liu are unrelated; henceforth, we will refer to Ms. Liu as Jingyao, her chosen name within the #MeToo movement.) Invited to a business networking dinner due to her Mandarin proficiency and academic background in business, Jingyao met Liu on August 30, 2018. She alleges that she was coerced into consuming excessive alcohol by Liu and other attendees. Later, in her compromised state, Liu assaulted her in a car and subsequently at her apartment (Wong; Camarillo). Depositions provide credence to her account, with Liu conceding that he had poured Jingyao five to seven glasses of wine (Lu). Jingyao also indicated her inability to decline, as it

would have been perceived as disrespectful (Lu). Immediately after the incident, she confided in a friend who called 911, leading to Liu's arrest and his image flooding Chinese social media.

Following his arrest, Liu was swiftly released the next day, emphatically denying all accusations leveled against him. He maintained that Jingyao was lucid during their interaction and had willingly invited him over, asserting that their sex was consensual (Wong; Camarillo). The legal system also presented challenges for Jingyao, as Minnesota prosecutors opted not to proceed with charges a few weeks later. Their rationale was rooted in "profound evidentiary problems," which will hinder substantiating the claims. Undeterred, in April 2019, Jingyao initiated a civil lawsuit in April 2019, targeting Liu with rape allegations and demanding damages exceeding \$50,000 (Yuan; Wong; Camarillo). This litigation established her as one of the most central, albeit controversial, figures in the discourse surrounding women's rights and the battle against sexual misconduct in China (Qin and Che).

While several academic studies have analyzed the cases of Xianzi and Jingyao, respectively, using media analysis and BERTopic - a sophisticated natural language processing model that identifies clusters of topics - and these cases have always been central to the discourse within China's #MeToo Movement, there has been limited research or discussion that places these cases in juxtaposition due to their distinctive contexts and social responses (Chen and Wang; Yin and Sun; Gu). Although these two cases were not the inaugural confrontations within China's #MeToo Movement, and neither concluded with a definitive legal triumph, my rationale for featuring these cases in the first chapter stems from their profound impact on the #MeToo movement in China.

Chinese feminist Lü divided the Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018 into three stages (Parkin and Feng). The initial stage commenced within universities and academic circles, marked by organized advocacy against sexual harassment in higher education. Despite its relatively organized activism, this phase struggled to gain significant support beyond feminist circles within colleges and faced state backlash in the form of crackdowns on feminist advocacy groups and influencers on social media. This led to a transition into the more individualized second stage, where activists focused on specific universities and urged them to address cases within their institutions. Unfortunately, this phase made limited progress as universities hesitated to take concrete actions, and the police began intervening by intimidating those involved in individualized #MeToo actions.

Xianzi and Jingyao's audacity in challenging iconic figures marked the onset of the movement's third stage, which has had a lasting impact to this day. Their cases spotlight stories of sexual harassment involving prominent public figures, garnering the attention of individuals who were previously unaware of or apathetic towards feminist and anti-harassment issues. "Sexual harassment became a mainstream issue - although mass media organizations were basically not reporting on the issue" (Parkin and Feng). These revelations breathed new life into the movement, sparking unprecedented levels of public discourse, heightening awareness of women's rights, and laying the groundwork for subsequent #MeToo discussions and expansive dialogues on digital activism and women's rights in China. Amidst the debates, conspiracies, and backlashes that swirled around these two cases, feminists forged bonds of solidarity and established communities that championed a good sense vehemently opposed to sexual

harassment. This catalyzed transformative shifts in the Chinese common sense of sexual assaults, rape culture, and women's agency over time. The discourse surrounding these cases also brings to light a recurring pattern in the state's response to feminist counter-narratives challenging patriarchal rule, a pattern that became increasingly evident in subsequent #MeToo allegations in China. Nevertheless, as profound as 2018 was for the movement, it was merely the opening chapter. Both these women and the community rallying behind them knew that the path to justice was lined with forthcoming challenges.

### **Skepticism Surrounding #MeToo Allegations and Unveiling Deep-Rooted Common Sense**

#### *Victim Shaming and the Underlying Rape Culture*

Upon the release of Xianzi's and Jingyao's allegations online, the predominant reaction was one of skepticism. Both accusers promptly reported their incidents to the police, providing significant legal evidence to substantiate their claims, which starkly contrasted to many other #MeToo cases where accusers struggled to obtain concrete evidence for their harrowing experiences inherently challenging to prove. However, despite the presence of compelling legal evidence and the undeniable occurrence of the incidents in these two cases, public scrutiny quickly shifted toward questioning the motivations of the accusers.

The stark power imbalance between Mr. Zhu, a highly influential TV host in China, and Xianzi, an intern at CCTV, fueled widespread skepticism among netizens concerning Xianzi's allegations. Xianzi was unjustly labeled an "attention-seeker," a "wolf in sheep's clothing," and a "liar," with accusations that she aimed to enhance her fame by tarnishing a renowned figure, even

though her actions resulted in more criticism, notoriety, and censorship rather than the fame she was purportedly seeking (James). One prevailing narrative during the allegations against Zhu is that he is the victim of a deliberate plot to ruin his career through false accusations of sexual harassment. This narrative gained even more prominence after the court dismissed Xianzi's case against Zhu in 2021, and Zhu resumed his hosting career.

For example, a significant social issue influencer on Weibo, with 870 thousand followers, posted a video featuring Zhu's recent appearance in October 2023, stating, "He looks markedly older than he did before Xianzi's false accusation of sexual harassment... I hope Mr. Zhu can break free from the shadow cast over his life" (@随笔观澜). This post led to a largely one-sided conversation in the comments section. A user raised doubts about the certainty of the accusation being false, which set off a wave of over 41 comments. These remarks not only maligned Xianzi but also criticized the inquirer. By mid-December 2023, when this chapter was undergoing edits, the initial question had been removed. The most endorsed comments by then were "a setup by feminism," receiving 73 likes, and "he was wronged, the woman just wants to be famous," with 28 likes (@陈辰霖霖; @GaryLi波)."

The post and its comment section bring to the forefront a deeply ingrained male-centric perspective when discussing sexual harassment. The audience instinctively aligns with Zhu's viewpoint, prompting them to scrutinize Xianzi's motivations, often without entertaining the possibility that the accusations against Zhu might be valid, as such questioning would imply challenging their own belief in the entrenched hegemonic ideology. This pervasive misogynistic perspective effectively dismisses the possibility of sexual misconduct on Zhu's part, portraying

him as a victim manipulated by a cunning woman seeking personal gain. In doing so, it systematically erases the subjectivity of women's experiences and dismisses the widespread issue of sexual harassment, reducing women's actions to mere quests for fame and success and thus justifying women's inferiority and untrustworthiness within the hierarchy of gender. This framework also corresponds to a male-centric understanding of sexual harassment as a minor issue, one not worthy of discussion. However, it ironically acknowledges women's agency, seen through the fear of women potentially disrupting the normalization of their objectification and challenging the existing order by simply speaking the truth.

While the allegations against Zhu sparked widespread skepticism regarding Xianzi's motivation, it also led to Zhu's absence from CCTV due to his connection to a sexual harassment case, which is at odds with the image that state media aims to convey. Jingyao's situation was less favorable, as she became the target of severe shaming with relatively minimal consequences for Liu. As one of China's wealthiest individuals, Liu embodies the nation's global ascendancy ("She Accused a Tech Billionaire of Rape"). His journey from obscurity to opulence is a testament to modern China's upward mobility. Adding to his stature, his wife, Zhang Zetian, enjoys her own fame as an internet celebrity. Their relationship, celebrated for its extravagant displays and open expressions of love, is an object of widespread admiration. Thus, when Liu's mugshot went viral, it sent shockwaves across China's digital landscape. The public's fascination was insatiable, with netizens avidly dissecting every facet of the case, particularly regarding Jingyao's identity. A popular sentiment, fueled by Liu's enormous wealth and influence, was skepticism towards the allegations. Many believed that a man of Liu's stature and success would

have no reason to commit such a crime, suggesting Jingyao might be attempting extortion or that there was a “disagreement over the prices.” One comment on Weibo, amassing nearly three million likes, asserted: “I feel like brother Liu has been set up! I don’t believe any of it” (Verberg). Another resonated with this view: “I don’t buy it! My first reaction is; somebody who can control such a big company surely can control his lower body” (Verberg).

The distrust directed at Jingyao intensified as the litigation unfolded, manipulated by an unprecedented wave of disinformation within the Chinese #MeToo Movement. In December 2018, a leading Chinese news platform headlined an article, “Richard Liu’s Attorney: Everything Happened in the Room was Voluntary. Woman Repeatedly Asked for Money.” The piece predominantly quoted Liu’s attorney, with Jingyao’s side conspicuously absent. A venerable former writer for the Southern Weekly, China’s foremost liberal-leaning publication, endorsed the article on Weibo, stating, “Richard Liu isn’t guilty legally though he is morally. The woman is a cheap slut. She’s inviting humiliation” (“She Accused a Tech Billionaire of Rape”).

Further muddying the waters, an unidentified Weibo account released a selectively edited surveillance video with the sensationalist title, “Proof of a Gold Digger Trap?” Carefully edited, it hinted that Jingyao had willingly invited Liu to her residence, with the video gaining traction from over 54 million views (“Viral Video Sets Off a Challenge”; “She Accused a Tech Billionaire of Rape”; Camarillo). Another prominent news source revealed an audio recording of a conversation between Jingyao and Liu’s attorney, where she mentioned compensation. Although Jingyao later released the full audio recording and denied any blackmail attempts, few people supported her. These audio-visual materials solidified the public’s conviction that Jingyao’s

motive was purely monetary, leading to a consensus that Liu was innocent of the rape allegations, even though none of these materials directly addressed the events that transpired behind closed doors.

Advocates for Jingyao argued that these videos were strategically leaked to influence public sentiment ahead of the trial, and this strategy appeared to be successful. Analyses suggest all of these materials were published when Liu was caught in a passive public opinion situation, and each of them did achieve the effect of blurring the boundary of rape and shirting the focus to scrutinizing the morality of the victim (“再谈Jingyao诉刘强东案”). These materials significantly shaped public knowledge and common sense about the case, resulting in overwhelming support for Richard Liu and disdain for Liu Jingyao, with derogatory labels such as “gold-digger” and “slut” becoming commonplace (Wong).

Liu’s case, while it may appear dramatic and sensational, offers a valuable perspective into unraveling the common sense surrounding sexual assault in China. As elucidated in the introduction, in a Gramscian context, common sense refers to the unquestioning, fragmented, and unconscious knowledge that individuals accumulate and share within a particular historical moment in society. Therefore, delving into common sense allows us to contemplate the fundamental values that uphold the patriarchal cultural hegemony, which has led to the outcomes we are witnessing today. Compared to Zhu, a prominent voice for the CCP’s authority, Liu’s role as a business executive appears less menacing to the ruling party, resulting in fewer censorship measures regarding online discussions about his rape case. This reduced censorship can also be attributed to the fact that the case took place in the United States, which may explain why state media has had limited involvement in shaping public discourse. Therefore, from a

communications perspective, this case serves as a vibrant and realistic showcase of the ecology of Chinese public opinion on sexual assault (“再谈Jingyao诉刘强东案”).

However, the reduced censorship does not equate to increased public knowledge, as many debates, especially those involving victim-blaming aimed at Jingyao, are rooted in information gaps and disinformation. While the trial in the United States provided unprecedented access to court records in a Chinese #MeToo case, most legal documents are in English, creating a natural barrier for most Chinese individuals due to both language constraints and the Great Firewall. The absence of fact-checking by Chinese news outlets further allows Liu to disseminate misleading information. Some analysts even suggest that the lack of a robust public media presence in the #MeToo movement in China renders public debates inaccessible due to the scarcity of information (“再谈Jingyao诉刘强东案”). Regardless of how Liu employs his resources to shape public opinion and tarnish Jingyao’s reputation, the readiness of individuals to accept his narrative offers valuable insights into the shared beliefs that deter people from supporting Jingyao.

A recurring theme in the public discourse of both cases, particularly accentuated in Liu’s situation, revolves around the Chinese populace’s fixation on wealth, fame, and social advancement. Under the Communist regime, the party wields unparalleled power, and consequently, joining the party or serving in the CCP government is considered an unquestionable path to success. However, this path to success has become increasingly elusive, especially for the young adults who constitute the primary driving force behind the #MeToo discourse in China. By 2014, the CCP’s membership acceptance rate was comparable to that of

Ivy League universities, and as of 2023, the acceptance rate for the civil service examination in China stood at a mere 1 in 70 (Zhang; McMorrow). Simultaneously, China's embrace of state capitalism and the growing influence of neoliberalism have prompted the adoption of wealth as an alternative yardstick of success despite its apparent contradiction with Communist ideology. Escalating social inequalities and decelerating economic growth have further positioned wealth as an increasingly desirable goal for Chinese individuals. Consequently, individuals who amass substantial wealth become societal role models, with societal expectations that their morality should align with their financial prosperity.

This perspective on success and wealth frequently conflates an individual's material prosperity with impeccable moral character, leading to the dismissal of the possibility that successful individuals may engage in harmful actions. One above-mentioned post exemplified this notion: "somebody who can control such a big company surely can control his lower body." This oversimplified linkage between personal conduct and accomplishments implies that those who achieve material success are inherently morally upright and, therefore, incapable of committing something as base as sexual assault. In essence, this viewpoint presupposes that an individual's success arises from their rationality and ability to exercise self-control and suppress impulsive desires. Consequently, any involvement in such heinous acts contradicts the presumption of self-control among successful individuals, leading to skepticism regarding #MeToo allegations against prominent figures. This abstinent interpretation of success and wealth is partly attributed to Puritan Confucian norms and the "positive energy" image promoted in CCP representative figures, from Chairman Xi to ordinary party members, who are portrayed

as morally upright and dedicated to serving the common good rather than personal needs.

However, this narrative of success simultaneously implies that sex is a reward for success since successful individuals do not need to struggle for it.

This inherently masculine and misogynistic perspective confines women to the role of objects to be granted as rewards to those who achieve success. It presumes that women are incapable of attaining success on their own, casting their primary goal as securing a partnership with successful, affluent individuals to ascend the social ladder. Within this framework, Jingyao's accusation is often viewed as a means to obtain financial gain. This characterization underscores a culture that commodifies and objectifies women's sexuality, using it as a bargaining chip for material gain and fulfilling men's desires while depriving women of agency over their own sexuality. This perspective is aligned with voices suggesting that Xianzi's accusation against Zhu was motivated by her desire to advance in her career.

What becomes glaringly apparent within this patriarchal narrative is the unsettling idea that sex is an obligatory offering from men to women, contingent upon their wealth, social status, and power. This perspective perceives sex as a transaction in which men grant it to women, who are seemingly expected to accept it in exchange for upward mobility. Thus, it is virtually inconceivable for Jingyao or Xianzi to decline the requests for sex put forth by figures like Liu and Zhu due to their accomplishments. Such common sense, in turn, confines women to passive acquiescence or voluntary submission to dominant men. It is this very rationale that reinforces the notion that successful men could not possibly engage in sexual misconduct, given that sexual violence against women is already normalized and legitimized by the definition of power and success within a rape culture. As aptly put by Lü, "this logic tacitly acknowledges the inherently

coercive nature of sex - it's just that women should only be willingly violated by powerful men” (“再谈Jingyao诉刘强东案”).

This entrenched perspective not only accounts for the lack of empathy towards accusers like Jingyao and Xianzi but also skews the focus towards the “damage to reputation” experienced by Liu and Zhu, as sexual assault is a “normalized” minor issue undeserving of attention. As a result of the hegemony of this rape culture, the accusations made by Jingyao and Xianzi are perceived as deviant, even when they are shining a light on the harsh reality. Their revelations challenge the profoundly ingrained common sense perpetuated by the rape culture and the fundamental values central to the Chinese understanding of power relations, leading to automatic backlashes and denials.

The ironic paradox is that even when women seek to reconfigure the power dynamics in coercive sexual encounters with powerful men by actively pursuing material benefits, their agency and actions are stigmatized or criminalized. This occurs because their actions challenge the fundamental Confucian tenets that cast women as pure and passive. As a result, when a recording emerged of Jingyao's conversation with Liu's lawyer, during which they rightfully discussed compensation, she was unfairly stigmatized and falsely labeled as a gold-digger because her proactive stance ran counter to the conventional expectation of women being submissive. Even in the resistance against the rape culture, women are still expected to fit the mold of the “perfect victim” who conforms to the traditional, misogynistic expectations for women to garner public support.

On the other hand, due to the stark denial and objectification of women's sexuality within this patriarchal narrative, it is widely believed to be impossible for women to establish genuine emotional connections with powerful men based on their feelings and desires. A case in point can be found in discussions surrounding figures like Zhang, Liu's wife, which often revolve around how her educational upbringing and online popularity were orchestrated for the sole purpose of marrying affluent individuals like Liu. Enmeshed within this deeply entrenched patriarchal paradigm, women perpetually endure scrutiny, stigmatization, and even criminalization, irrespective of their actions and positions. This common sense has taken root for both men and women, as evidenced by the poignant words of a Chinese sexual harassment survivor in an interview with The New York Times, "slut-shaming doesn't come from others, I'll be the first one to slut-shame myself" ("Viral Video Sets Off a Challenge").

### *Co-opting Foreign Forces and the Chinese Feminist Dilemma*

Another frequently voiced skepticism surrounding the motivations behind the #MeToo allegations in China revolves around the claim that these accusations are a deliberate ploy to sow division within the nation, driven by the influence of Western forces. This narrative came to the forefront, gaining notoriety in the case of Xianzi, a prominent feminist activist and public intellectual. Her allegation against Zhu, who had close ties to the CCP and embodied the Chinese national identity, was a focal point for this line of argument.

"She is not the only accuser in the #MeToo movement to show her face, but perhaps the only one known to the public in a genuine and relatable manner," Lü remarked on the unique

visibility of Xianzi in the movement (“弦子案”). After filing her pleadings with the court, Xianzi set up an account on Weibo with her selfie and began to take on, interact with, and even steer the public discourse surrounding her accusation against Zhu. Her proactive engagement went beyond just keeping her case in the public eye; she catalyzed broader conversations on sexual harassment, women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and even public health policies on COVID-19 (“弦子案”). This steadfast activism and her unyielding courage resonated with many. Her social media platforms garnered over 300,000 followers, and she received an outpouring of messages from women nationwide recounting their own experiences of sexual assault (“Though Muffled”; Feng and Wong).

As Xianzi’s voice garnered a growing chorus of support, it simultaneously drew a louder chorus of naysayers. Many accused Xianzi of deceit, claiming she was “colluding with foreign forces” to generate discord and tarnish the nation’s reputation (Gan; Feng and Wong). These voices went further to contend that Xianzi was actively pursuing a leadership role within the feminist movement, with foreign support acting as a catalyst to transform her legal case into a full-fledged political movement (Gan et al.). The CEO of Weibo even reposted this perspective.

In parallel with the discussions of hegemonic rape culture, this line of argument conspicuously dismisses the genuine impact of sexual assault on women’s lives. However, what adds an intriguing layer to this narrative is the apparent unfamiliarity among the Chinese populace with the concept of a “political movement,” despite its profound historical significance within China. This unfamiliarity partly arises from the reticence surrounding open discussions about social movements, such as the Tiananmen Square Protest, and the inclination to associate

political movements solely with the Chinese Communist Revolution in historical education. It is also because paying attention to political movements is somewhat elitist, as the majority of individuals in China are still predominantly preoccupied with addressing their basic material needs. In 2020, approximately 600 million Chinese people subsist on an average monthly income of merely \$154, underscoring their inherent focus on economic stability, which is intricately tied to the stability of CCP governance (Goodman). Moreover, the relatively small middle class remains vulnerable, as they heavily rely on the opportunities provided by the CCP government to maintain and elevate their social status. Consequently, they are more inclined to support the CCP's hegemonic rule to safeguard their own interests rather than actively engage in social movements that destabilize the existing structure. This context illuminates the heightened sensitivity of many Chinese individuals to the idea of a political movement and their limited knowledge of international social movements, fostering skepticism toward #MeToo allegations in China. It also underscores one of the main criticisms of the #MeToo movement in China: it primarily caters to educated urban women while failing to address the needs of working-class women in rural areas (Hernández and Mou).

The sensitivity of the social movement issue was employed widely by Chinese nationalists, who often frame social movements as instigations of external forces rather than manifestations of authentic domestic discontent. With a broad consensus in favor of CCP governance and the patriarchal conventions that underpin CCP rule, criticism of the existing patriarchal structure is often interpreted by nationalists as an attack on the legitimacy of the CCP's authority. Consequently, rather than viewing feminism as a collective effort to combat gender discrimination, nationalists often misconstrue it as a threat to the state's authority. Given

the ongoing tensions between China and Western countries, particularly the United States, it is natural for nationalists to argue that the #MeToo movement seeks to undermine CCP authority under the influence of foreign forces. To nationalists, Xianzi's interviews with international media outlets such as CNN, BBC, the New York Times, and the New Yorker become perceived corroborations of her supposed collusion with Western interests. This perspective finds tacit endorsement even at the state level; as the state-affiliated Global Times suggests, "the #MeToo movement was being used by Western forces to tear Chinese society apart" (Feng and Wong). This argument also echoes Chairman Xi's cautionary words during his 2018 visit to the state-backed All-China Women's Federation, "[the organization] absolutely must not become one of those organizations like in other countries for feminists or posh women" ("Though Muffled, China's #MeToo Movement Still Has Support"). By framing feminism as a Western political agenda, the CCP also frames gender inequality as a Western problem, thus indicating that the current Chinese society is free of gender inequality. However, framing Xianzi's activism within the #MeToo movement as mere alignment with Western ideals reveals the reluctance, whether by the nationalists or the authorities, to acknowledge feminism's indigenous roots and significance. While seeking to diminish the movement, such a stance inadvertently testifies to its potency and underscores the transformative potential of feminist thought.

Supporters of Jingyao faced similar criticism, with many of them residing in the United States and receiving education outside of China. Gigi, a Chinese international student in the US, eloquently captured the predicament, noting that "This label is entirely manufactured. Once being labeled as a 'foreign power,' people will be pulled out and criticized just as it was during the

Cultural Revolution. Many feminists do a lot of volunteer work to help the underprivileged, but once they are labeled as such on the internet, the netizens take the moral high ground and all their work and efforts are meaningless” (Zhang and Liu). This irony is palpable, as most #MeToo activists are driven by the pursuit of advancing gender equality in China and fostering a more inclusive environment for future generations, yet they are unjustly labeled as “anti-China.” This leads to a unique phenomenon where #MeToo accusers and feminists repeatedly voice their support for the Chinese government to ensure that netizens view their accusations fairly. This additional labor, undertaken by accusers who already bear significant emotional burdens, has the unintended consequence of deterring women from speaking out. It also hints at the depoliticization of future feminist discourse, as will be further explored in the following chapter.

### **The Cultivation of a Feminist Counter-Hegemony**

Based on the above analysis, Gramsci’s concept of civil society, which consists of institutions supporting the ruling state and is the arena for the struggle over ideological dominance, takes a specific form in China. Here, it is predominantly characterized by a patriarchal hegemony that perpetuates rape culture, dismissing claims of sexual assault and denying agency to women in their sexuality and relationships. It also aligns with conventional misogynistic values that uphold the CCP regime. However, it is essential to note that this civil society is not a monolithic or unchanging entity. Feminists are gradually challenging the predominance of rape culture and constructing a counter-hegemony through a “war of position.”

In a Gramscian framework, achieving the spontaneous consent of cultural hegemony is a prerequisite for a social group to gain power. Without pre-existing hegemony, even the physical

struggle of a “war of maneuver” may not lead to the success of a new social group. Therefore, interpreting Xianzi and Jingyao’s legal battles as a “war of maneuver” against deeply entrenched rape culture in China, the rejection of Xianzi’s appeal, the settlement of Jingyao’s case, and the cyberbullying they endured can be seen as backfires of the war of maneuver, since a feminist counter-hegemony is not yet firmly established, and the patriarchal civil society naturally prop up the actions of powerful men. As one women’s rights lawyer aptly puts it, “Real change will likely not stem from legislation, even if China does end up adopting an anti-sexual harassment law. Some Chinese laws are purposefully written vaguely so that they are difficult to enforce” (Mistreanu). Given that the legal system is part of a civil society dominated by patriarchal Confucian values, the “war of maneuver” is destined to be ineffective. Thus, the only viable avenue for resistance lies in the “war of position,” where women gradually establish their own cultural hegemony and gain public support, thus shifting the dynamics of civil society in China.

Chen and Wang posit that, given this focus, Chinese digital feminist activism tends to be more revolutionary. It consistently challenges gendered power imbalances, pushing the envelope on how much citizens can control the narrative. This “war of position” against patriarchal hegemony is inevitably an incremental process that will encounter setbacks. This is evident when many men instinctively align themselves with Liu and Zhu, viewing their allegiance to the accused as a defense against the feminist war of position, wherein they perceive themselves as victims. Such resistance not only highlights the privileged group’s anxiety over losing their hegemonic status but also underscores the powerful impact of feminist organizing. Thankfully,

the courage of Xianzi and Jingyao has provided thousands of feminists with the opportunity to build a counter-narrative and challenge patriarchal common sense.

As previously mentioned, Xianzi's activism enabled her to create an online community that fights not only for her legal battle but also for numerous sexual harassment victims. The name of her Weibo account, @XianziAndHerFriends (@弦子与她的朋友们), signifies the importance of feminist community organizing and solidarity. Using words from within the community, "Xianzi has brought together countless friends who would otherwise never have met so that their shared vision converges" (Xia). While her top Weibo comments often express skepticism towards her and accusations of her connections with "Western forces," a BERTopic analysis reveals that supportive sentiments for Xianzi are the central theme in her comment section based on data scraped from May 2018 to September 2021 (Gu). This demonstrates the establishment of a coherent and critical feminist good sense recognizing the urgent issue of sexual harassment and supporting Xianzi's legal struggle. The support for Xianzi itself exemplifies the broader feminist involvement in the #MeToo movement.

Xianzi's Weibo comment section also provides a discursive space for introspective feminist dialogues, delving into systemic gender disparities within Chinese society and the pressing need for legal reforms. The WeChat groups rallying behind her trials further amplify this discourse, evolving into a nexus that navigates complex feminist debates, spanning radical feminist activism, Western liberal feminism, and Xianzi's nuanced identity as a nationalist feminist. The impact of such discourse is even more significant when considering the influence



Fig. 1: On the left, Xianzi stands outside the Beijing Haidian Court, clutching the “victory” banner. On the right, Shiori Ito holds her “victory” banner following her successful legal battle for rape lawsuit damages.

of reposts and other feminist posts related to her litigation. These invigorated discussions around feminism lay the groundwork for the feminist activism explored in the subsequent chapter.

Due to the sensitivity of her allegation against Zhu - who worked for the state media - and the active civic engagement of Xianzi and the community that supported her, the account @XianziAndHerFriends was muted by Weibo for 15 days in 2021 and then prohibited from posting for a year due to “violation of national laws and regulations” (Gan). Mainstream, state-controlled media were instructed not to report on Xianzi’s lawsuit, and content related to her

allegations was systematically removed - only narratives supporting Zhu were permitted to prevail (Buckley and Chen; Gu; James). However, the escalated censorship efforts merely spotlight the authorities' unease with the growing strength of a feminist counter-narrative. Far from being a deterrent, such measures have only fueled more innovative forms of feminist activism.

On December 2nd, during the first trial of Zhu's case, supporters of Xianzi created six Wechat groups, comprising nearly three thousand people, to send supportive messages to her. Over a hundred supporters congregated outside the courtroom, displaying symbols of rice and rabbits - China's phonetic rendition of "Me Too" - alongside the rallying cry, "Together, we demand an answer from history" ("Though Muffled"). Such a gathering is extremely rare in the Chinese context, as the Chinese government rarely tolerates any form of collective actions, regardless of their political intent (Zeng). When Xianzi appeared outside the court, someone in the crowd shouted, "Xianzi, catch!" A banner landed squarely in her hand, reading "victory." This banner was clearly inspired by the iconic image of Shiori Ito, a prominent figure in the Japanese #MeToo movement, who held a "victory" banner after winning her case against Yamaguchi, a renowned TV journalist with ties to Shinzo Abe, over charges of sexual assault. Xianzi's picture holding the "victory" banner became widely shared on Weibo, Douban, and WeChat.

This episode is a compelling example of what Tan describes as "digital masquerading." It is a thoughtfully crafted representation designed to navigate around state censorship while emphasizing symbolic elements in the realm of online activism. By refraining from using censor-triggering keywords and instead employing visual cues like the "victory" banner, Xianzi and her

supporters subtly harken back to past legal triumphs in the #MeToo movement, bolstering continued support. Such tactics reshape dominant narratives around sexual assault, fostering open dialogues where feminist voices can resonate and engage. “To masquerade is to pose for the camera,” Tan articulates. This methodical, choreographed “performance” sidesteps censorship, particularly benefiting from the added time it takes for real-life monitors to review and remove images and videos. Moreover, it underlines the conscientious intent and agency of #MeToo proponents. In doing so, they audaciously challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, giving rise to what Nancy Fraser terms “subaltern counterpublics” - spaces that allow marginalized groups to craft alternative interpretations of their identity, aspirations, and necessities (Yin and Sun). This tactful blend of online and offline masquerading symbolizes a duality. While offline activism lays the groundwork for challenging mainstream narratives, its online counterpart offers a parallel yet more expansive platform for the same purpose that reaches more audiences.

In contrast to Zhu, Liu’s position was less politically charged, which allowed discussions surrounding his case to unfold under milder censorship. Instead of politicizing the issue, Liu’s transgressions were framed as personal indiscretions and thus transformed into a public spectacle. Such a backdrop provided the perfect setting for Jingyao’s advocates to harness the extensive public attention. Capitalizing on this widespread interest, Jingyao’s supporters orchestrated a hashtag movement to challenge the prevailing rape culture and the endemic trend of victim blaming. Campaigns like #HereForJingyao and #IAmNotAPerfectVictimEither inspired significant online engagement. The impact of the #IAmNotAPerfectVictimEither initiative was particularly profound, amassing reactions from over 20 million users who shared

heartfelt accounts of sexual assault (RiceBunnyinChina 🍙🐰). Observers have hailed this decentralized hashtag activism as a shift towards feminist “self-organization,” marking a departure from the landscape of feminist advocacy prior to the #MeToo era (Parkin and Feng). This evolution aligns with Gramsci’s conceptualization of organic intellectuals in grassroots movements. These unaffiliated individuals organize a “war of position” that challenge the ruling hegemony and create counter-narratives that allow for future struggle. Through their endeavors, Jingyao’s advocates effectively laid the foundation for further exposés, notably the unfolding of the Kris Wu scandal, detailed in the following chapter.

With its transnational context, Liu’s case galvanized support for Jingyao that transcended borders. Demonstrations of solidarity spanned from the steps of the Hennepin County courthouse to cities in the UK, Australia, and China. For a significant portion of these demonstrators, it was their first foray into a movement championing gender rights. Due to most case documents being in English, ordinary Chinese citizens faced a knowledge gap further deepened by the disparities between US and Chinese legal systems, providing Liu’s team with an avenue to spread disinformation. Nevertheless, dedicated volunteers intervened, serving as alternative and reliable sources of information by meticulously translating documents and updating audiences on trial developments. Their commitment was evident when, due to the pandemic, the third hearing of Liu’s case moved online. Volunteers adeptly assisted Chinese netizens in navigating the virtual attendance process, leading to a significant turnout that Minnesota Judge Edward T. Wahl noted as the most substantial attendance he had ever seen for a hearing (Zhang and Liu). To borrow Chen and Wang’s perspective, supporters of Jingyao are “doing the work of knowledge

production, dissemination, circulation, and documentation with incredible savviness of both the technical and sociopolitical constraints of online platforms as well as the transnational nature of the movement.” This represents a concerted effort by feminist organizers to foster a good sense, gradually altering the ideological center of the Chinese populace regarding sexual harassment. Amidst this drive, the #MeToo proponents fostered a deep-rooted camaraderie that promises to catalyze future initiatives. An international Chinese student traveling from New York to Minnesota to rally behind Jingyao encapsulated this sentiment in an interview with Initium Media: “Not only do we show our solidarity with Jingyao, but it’s a great encouragement for us to be able to meet each other” (Zhang and Liu). The solidarity forged during the advocacy for Jingyao did not merely conclude with the settlement of her case; it also paved the way, providing resources and a discursive platform for the continued momentum of the #MeToo movement. As eloquently articulated in the Support Jingyao Feminist Group’s post-settlement statement, “the case was terminated by the settlement, but the MeToo movement will continue. Feminists will continue to fight against the patriarchal society” (RiceBunnyinChina 🍚🐰).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter delves into the reverberations of two seminal #MeToo cases that punctuated the Chinese movement in 2018 and continue to echo into the present day. In October 2022, Jingyao and Liu reached a settlement, signaling the end of a four-year-long legal confrontation that emerged as a touchstone for China’s #MeToo initiative. Fast forward to September 2023, Xianzi, after an arduous nine-year journey since her initial police report and five years mired in legal

battles, announced that Zhu had retracted his defamation lawsuit against her. While neither case saw a formal legal victory, the agreement between Jingyao and Liu and Zhu's decision to retract his claims against Xianzi are hailed as triumphs for the #MeToo movement in China.

In the eyes of Xianzi's supporters, especially those on Telegram, the expectation of a legal win against Zhu was slim (Xia). Their unwavering support was driven more by the desire to illuminate the lived experiences of Chinese women and spotlight the pervasive issue of sexual harassment in society. As for Jingyao's advocates, they view her settlement as an implied acknowledgment of wrongdoing by Liu. With his considerable resources, he could have staunchly defended his claims of "innocence." As #MeToo advocates aptly questioned, "If Liu is innocent, how would he drop the lawsuit?" (RiceBunnyinChina 🍓🐰; Qin and Che).

Through the trajectories of both cases, feminists have not only confronted cultural and political barriers but also critiqued and deconstructed the deeply gendered interpretation of power dynamics, consent, and the pervasive culture of sexual violence that is ingrained in the CCP's patriarchal hegemony. This feminist struggle to reshape common sense in civil society has significantly raised awareness about women's rights. Yet, the substantial backlash these cases have encountered highlights the persistence of a patriarchal hegemony that continues to perpetuate the subjugation of women. Despite the legal setbacks that have hampered China's #MeToo movement, the bravery of figures like Xianzi and Jingyao has catalyzed a new wave of organic intellectuals among women. Their commitment to upend the patriarchal hegemony is manifested through their innovative strategies, like digital masquerading and collective sense-making, which foster a good sense of anti-sexual harassment. These actions are sowing the seeds

for a more participatory and inclusive #MeToo movement in the years to come, as seen in the unprecedented public support for sexual assault survivors like in Kris Wu's case, which will be further explored in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: AMBIVALENCE IN CIVIL SOCIETY - THE CASE OF KRIS WU

### **Kris Wu's Case: A #MeToo Turning Point?**

Amidst the backdrop of frequent clampdowns and censorship targeting feminist and LGBTQ+ activist groups, as well as conspiracy theories from misogynistic or nationalist trolls questioning #MeToo allegations as demonstrated in the first chapter, the conviction and sentencing of Kris Wu to 13 years for rape represents what may be a pivotal moment in China's handling of sexual assault cases. This significant #MeToo victory is not merely a reflection of changing common sense around the rape culture, gender relations, and sexual assaults within civil society, but it also brings to light the more complex interplay between perceptions of masculinity, nationalism, and the state's intervention in the entertainment industry.

Known as Wu Yifan in China, Kris Wu boasts over 50 million followers on Weibo and is one of the country's most prominent celebrities. Born in China and naturalized in Canada, he shot to stardom as a member of the K-pop boy band EXO, later carving out a successful solo career in China across singing, acting, and modeling. Cited as one of the "top four trending figures" in Chinese fandom, Kris Wu's homecoming from Korea is widely regarded as a defining moment, shaping the climate of China's entertainment scene, buoyed by fervent fan support. Thus, when accusations of rape against him surfaced from a 19-year-old university student, the ensuing shockwaves were immense. The student, Du Meizhu, studying film and television direction, took to Weibo on July 8th, 2021, to publicly accuse Wu of raping her and seven other

women, including two minors. Her allegations were accompanied by screenshots of WeChat conversations that implicate Wu and his team in predatory behaviors - using potential career opportunities as bait for sexual predation on young minors. She further accused him of explicitly targeting high school girls born after the year 2000, treating them as mere objects in his perverse “concubine selection” games.

In a later interview with Netease, Du recounted that when she was 17, she was summoned to Wu’s residence under the guise of an “interview,” where she was pressured into consuming an excessive amount of alcohol until she blacked out. Du attempted to leave, only to be stopped by Wu’s agent, who seized her phone and implied that any displeasure she caused Wu could result in her being blacklisted in the acting industry. She found herself waking up the next day in Wu’s bed in a state of disarray. They dated until March when Wu ceased all communication with Du (Qin and Chen). Since then, Du has heard from seven other women who had been similarly treated, and she said she felt helpless when learning that Wu specifically targeted young women like her: “Indeed, we are all softhearted when we see your innocent expression, but that does not mean that we want to become playthings whom you can deceive!” She wrote in her post on Weibo (Chen).

In response to Du’s grave accusations, Wu quickly denied the claims, dismissing them outright within hours. Nevertheless, Du remained steadfast, continuing to voice her claims on Weibo. She provided additional evidence, such as screenshots of Wu’s team attempting to offer her money to retract her statements and details of a supposed “settlement agreement.” This purported agreement, analyzed by legal experts on the platform, appeared designed to trap Du

and the other survivors in a confession of fraud and blackmail. Signing it could have led to severe legal consequences, potentially imprisoning them for a decade under extortion charges. On July 18th, Du shared more about the threats to her safety she faced and further details of her sexual encounters with Wu. She issued an ultimatum that called for Wu's exit from the entertainment industry and demanded a handwritten public apology to be displayed on Weibo for three consecutive days.

In the previous chapter, I delve into some deep-rooted common senses, or people's traditional conception of the world, that underpin the patriarchal hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Building on the concepts introduced in the introduction, I draw upon Gramsci's theory of power, which is bifurcated into "domination" and "hegemony," with the former corresponding to the coercive mechanisms of the state that enforce conformity among the masses. The latter refers to how the ruling social group leads or directs public opinion, thereby garnering the "spontaneous" consent of their ideology by the broader population (Gramsci 12).

My analysis identifies several vital characteristics of the Chinese patriarchal hegemony:

1. There is an ingrained rape culture, or common sense of the coercive nature of sex contingent on men's social status and power, leading to a societal belief that women are unable to reject sexual propositions from successful men.
2. Success is intrinsically linked to masculinity, implying that women can only ascend the social ladder through relationships with men.

3. There exists an expectation of passive and pure femininity, which vilifies women who vocalize their experiences of violation.
4. Counter-hegemonic feminist ideas are often interpreted as anti-China and delegitimized.

Despite these inveterate beliefs presenting numerous obstacles to the feminist movement in China, the discourse on rape culture and gender roles in China, as explored in the first chapter, has undergone a notable transformation over the past three years, propelled by the #MeToo campaign. This evolution has fostered a consciousness about sexual assault, particularly among well-educated, young urban women. Unlike the initial skepticism faced by Xianzi and Jingyao, the public's response to Du's allegations against Kris Wu was overwhelmingly supportive, a significant reaction considering the scale of the accusations and the entrenched patriarchal norms. Over 24 women eventually came forward with claims of Wu's misconduct, reminiscent of the Weinstein scandal within the context of China's #MeToo movement (Yip). Leveraging digital masquerading strategies from the campaigns supporting Xianzi and Jingyao, Du's advocates effectively used hashtag politics to amplify her case and show solidarity with all survivors.

The hashtag that emerged during Jingyao's allegations against Liu, #IAmNotPerfectVictimEither, resurfaced with a strong presence, gathering over 30 million clicks and more than 67,000 comments (Lü). The #YourSistersAreHere movement, with over a billion interactions, not only advocated for the protection of minor girls' rights but also referenced a disturbing past case of sexual manipulation by a prominent lawyer to his adopted daughter (Li).

One netizen's comment aptly encapsulated the collective sentiment in support of Du: "What can we do when our 19-year-old sister decides to protect her 'younger sisters' and take on the battle alone? We denounce the victim-blaming theories as garbage, and strive to dispel the fears that haunt the victims. That is our duty as bystanders." Amidst this outpouring of support, a survey attached to the hashtag #GirlsHelpGirls posed a straightforward question: "Will you support Du?" An overwhelming 43.1 thousand respondents answered with a resounding "yes." (Zhong et al.).

Wu's denial of the allegations was met with immediate backlash, with the #F\*ckOff hashtag surging to the top of trending lists, indicating strong support for Du and a rejection of attempts to negate survivors' experiences. Moreover, supporters wielded their consumer power, besieging the social media of several high-profile brands with boycott threats unless they severed ties with Wu. The pressure mounted, compelling globally renowned brands like Louis Vuitton, Bulgari, and Porsche to take swift action by publicly dissociating from Wu (Chen). This widespread support for Du marked a significant shift in public opinion in China, moving away from the "perfect victim" narrative and reflecting a changing attitude towards sexual misconduct.

In November 2021, Wu was found guilty of crimes, including raping three women and assembling a crowd to engage in promiscuous activity, and was sentenced a 13 years imprisonment (Chang). Although Du's allegations seemed detached from the #MeToo movement, lacking the explicit use of #MeToo or related hashtags in the online campaign in favor of more neutral and depoliticized tags like #GirlsHelpGirls, many consider this case a significant victory for the #MeToo movement within the Chinese legal framework. "No matter

whether they call it #MeToo or not, the essence is #MeToo...the victims can always manage to find their own ways to speak out,” said Feng Yuan, a feminist activist and scholar (Yeung and Gan). This case, a culmination of prior #MeToo efforts, signifies notable progress in public awareness of sexual harassment and gender norms and kindles hope for the future of feminist advocacy in China. As Lü puts it, “for the last three years, a number of prominent figures have faced #MeToo accusations but nothing ever happened to them. Now with Wu Yifan, #MeToo has finally taken down someone with real power in China - it has shown that no matter how powerful you are, rape is not acceptable” (Qin and Chen).

However, the widespread public support for Du might not exclusively indicate an emerging feminist consciousness; it could also suggest an adherence to traditional views on gender and sexuality intertwined with a hegemonic nationalist masculine narrative, particularly given Wu’s unique identity. The ensuing sections of this chapter will interrogate whether such a legal victory genuinely paves the way for the advancement of women’s rights activism and challenges the deep-rooted heteropatriarchal hegemony or if it inadvertently maintains the very status quo.

### **Reconstructing or Reinforcing Common Sense: The Nationalist Masculinity**

#### *Wu’s “Feminized” Masculinity*

Amid a carefully orchestrated digital campaign, Du and her supporters have skillfully crafted an online spectacular that brings Wu’s scandal into the spotlight and elevates public awareness of sexual violence. Despite the legal victories seemingly indicating a shift in the common sense of sexual assault as discussed before - revealing its prevalence and reducing

stigma for victims - the persistent undertones in the criticism and shaming directed at Wu are troubling, as they are rooted largely in a hegemonic nationalist perspective of masculinity. Specifically, Wu's unique identity traits, including his perceived "feminized" masculinity, his status as a diasporic Chinese, and his celebrity stature, collectively render him more susceptible to condemnation, extending beyond the sexual misconduct allegations themselves. This specificity of Wu's situation implies that similar legal consequences might not be applied universally, casting doubt on whether his sentencing truly reflects a concession by the CCP to growing feminist anti-sexual assault good sense. Conversely, the public discourse surrounding this case may inadvertently reinforce a hegemonic ideal of masculinity and nationalism, one that aligns with the CCP's cultural hegemony. This highlights the state's subtle yet still robust influence in shaping public opinion and controlling civil society.

Du's ultimatum, for instance, contained extensive remarks about Wu's sexual performance and genital attributes. She vividly described that Wu often boasted about his size to his partners, telling them, "Mine is big, bear with it," only for the reality to be mockingly compared to "using a toothpick to pick your nose" (Du; Koreaboo; "Sexual Assault of Minors"). These comments sparked a frenzy of memes and derogatory nicknames, including "Toothpick Wu" and spawning taunts like "jail is big, bear with it." While some criticize Du for grandstanding for attention, her supporters argue that her tactics were necessary to balance the scales of influence between her and Wu, enhancing her chances of holding him accountable. "Du herself had previously made several posts on Weibo, which largely went unnoticed, and she faced backlash for supposedly capitalizing Wu's fame," She expressed in a WeChat official

account post, “the team behind Du understands the law of communication and the public’s sensitivities. Their satire on Wu’s sexual performance, combined with Wu’s status, created an explosive impact.”

However, the frenzy of public reactions revealed the deep-rooted societal commitment to a gendered-based interpretation of masculinity, a common sense that Du’s approach, perhaps inadvertently, continues to uphold. Essentially, Du and her supporters sought to undermine Wu’s legitimacy as a “real man” even outside the context of sexual assaults by leveraging traditional notions of masculinity. As a result, they justify the shaming and censoring of Wu not so much for his predatory behavior as for his failure to live up to society’s expectations of masculinity and broaden the scope of criticism of his sexual misbehavior by making him an object of attackability. In a contrasting scenario, individuals like Zhu Jun, who are perceived as exemplifying positive masculine ideals as discussed in Chapter 1, do not face similar scrutiny for comparable allegations, implying a selective legal response based on an individual’s adherence to gender norms. Therefore, while Du’s approach effectively garners public sympathy and bolsters support for Du, it paradoxically upholds the very patriarchal hegemony it ostensibly opposes.

Before delving into how the portrayal of Wu as lacking traditional masculinity upholds rather than challenges patriarchal hegemony, it is essential to understand the common sense of masculinity that CCP has strived to boost in recent years. Over the past decade, the debates around a perceived “masculinity crisis” in China have gained prominence. This concern, shared by both the CCP and a significant segment of the population, centers around the understanding of the “feminization” of Chinese boys. Many attribute this trend to the rise of androgynous pop

stars, with Wu being a notable example. Since his return from Korea, Wu became a leading figure in the phenomenon of “little fresh meat,” which refers to young, delicate-featured male entertainers with extensive makeup use (Gao). This aesthetic contrasts sharply with traditional, stoic ideals of Chinese masculinity, and the rise of these celebrities has sparked a robust fandom, mainly consisting of young, dedicated female fans who embrace a more “feminine” form of masculinity, along with genres such as gay or Boys Love fiction. The rising popularity of these “effeminate” male celebrities among high school students and urban youth signifies a diversification of gender presentations in post-socialist China, marking a transition in societal perceptions of masculinity (Song). Yet, this shift has also triggered a substantial backlash, including stigmatization of “feminine” males and a state-led crackdown against “effeminate” public figures.

The criticism towards the “effeminate” male celebrities is often deeply rooted in a hegemonic conception of nationalist masculinity. Hu and Guan argue that in the current Chinese cultural narrative, the “male body is used as a site for the projection of Chinese national power” (1). Their “man-as-nation” framework posits that the masculine traits of protagonists in Chinese films are emblematic of the nation’s rejuvenation and strength. The substantial box office success of films featuring hyper-masculine national heroes underscores the public’s consensus on this idea, where masculinity embodies national fortitude. Consequently, male celebrities who deviate from these traditional masculine norms are seen as undermining not only gender norms but also the country’s future.

As China rises as a global power and confronts escalating tensions with Western nations, reinforcing nationalist masculinity - a form of national strength - becomes increasingly crucial. The urgency to uphold hegemonic, nationalistic masculinity amid diversified gender expression is vividly captured in a statement by noted commentator Luo Ye: “countless evidence has proven that a country can develop without sissy idols, pretty boys, celebrities. But if the country has no scientists, soldiers, technical experts and military strength, it will be bullied” (Lam). Celebrities who stray from traditional masculine ideals are derogatorily labeled as “sissies,” and their values are dismissed as they are seen as not aligning with China’s agenda of projecting national power. On the other hand, figures like scientists and soldiers, beneficial for national strength, are upheld as exemplars of ideal masculinity, reinforcing the nationalist undertones of this concept. This narrative is also echoed in state media, which call for China to “man up” in the face of growing US-China tensions and show disdain for the notion of men “shrieking while refreshing their makeup” in times of significant national challenges. The backlash against young individuals’ embracement of greater gender expressions culminated in a state crackdown on effeminate idols and the entertainment industry to “resolutely put an end to sissy men and other abnormal aesthetics” and promote “revolutionary culture” in 2021 (Chowdhury). Therefore, femininity is not only pathologized as “abnormal,” but also constructed as “counter-revolutionary.” This clampdown in the entertainment industry coincided with the time when Du initiated her allegations, prompting the question of whether the state’s actions were a genuine response to calls against sexual harassment or a move aligned with the nationalist agenda of reaffirming traditional hegemonic masculinity.

Returning to the specifics of Du's allegations, the public degradation of Wu's masculinity and the mockery of his sexual prowess amount to a form of social castration, rendering him unmanly and, thus, a liability or even an antagonist to China's development. To some extent, Du and her supporters are tactically leveraging, and even aligning with, the national initiative to reinforce traditional masculine ideals through the crackdown on "effeminated celebrities" in the entertainment industry. Such co-option in itself suggests that Chinese society still largely hesitates to confront sexual violence head-on. It seems that mere accusations of sexual assault are insufficient to ignite public outrage, as Du needed to target Wu's masculinity to garner support for her allegations. This tactic, while effective in undermining Wu's masculinity, inadvertently upholds a gendered narrative that perpetuates rather than dismantles patriarchal hegemony. It is underpinned by a binary gender perspective, equating feminine characteristics with weakness, backwardness, and a colonial past, while masculine traits are associated with strength, advancement, and national rejuvenation. In linking Wu with femininity to diminish his masculinity, the public narrative perpetuates the idea that femininity is a lesser form of gender expression and, by extension, that women are perpetual unpatriotic others. This otherness echoes the nationalist criticism discussed in the first chapter of the #MeToo Movement and feminism as purported agents of Western states intending to destabilize China. The public shaming of Wu thus impairs the struggle against gender-based inequality by reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes, thereby hindering the development of a counter-hegemonic feminist narrative that challenges and seeks to overthrow the patriarchal status quo in China. It also poses the question

of to what extent the perceived transformation of common sense around gender relations and sexual harassment has truly happened.

### *Wu's Foreignness*

The intricate dynamics surrounding Wu's sentencing and its implications for China's evolving common sense and good sense towards gender and sexual assault are further complicated by his foreign status. Prominently highlighted in state media coverage, Wu's foreign nationality is often cited with statements like "a foreign nationality is not a talisman..." and the plan to deport him post-incarceration (Wakabayashi and Fu; Qin and Chen). As Guo suggests, "Wu is not part of an official organization...His nationality facilitated the CCP's ability to maintain its own legitimacy while cracking down on him" ("【404档案馆】"). In other words, Wu's foreign Chinese-ness is exploited by the CCP to reinforce a narrative of nationalist masculinity, overshadowing the core issue of his sexual misconduct.

Firstly, Wu's non-Chinese citizenship allows the state to dissociate his actions from China's image, thus preserving its legitimacy. In contrast to Zhu's case, as discussed in the first chapter, which was heavily censored due to Zhu's connections with the CCP, the exposure of Wu's rape does not tarnish the government's integrity. Instead, it propagates the idea that sexual assault is an external, primarily Western problem, not inherent to the Chinese communist ethos. This belief parallels the perception that the "feminization" of male celebrities, influenced by the herbivorous stars of Japanese and Korean pop culture, is an importation akin to a form of Western colonialism aimed at weakening Asian masculinity (Chowdhury). Wu, with his

Canadian nationality and experience in South Korea, epitomizes this perceived erosion of traditional Chinese masculinity from external forces, thereby legitimizing CCP's push for a more masculine gender expression among Chinese men. The degradation of this diasporic Chinese-ness concurrently bolsters a superior form of Chinese national identity, one that aligns with conventional gender norms and is loyal to the state, further reinforcing the patriarchal hegemony integral to the CCP's governance. This leads to the second point: Wu's imprisonment in China is portrayed as a just action that the Canadian government failed to undertake, reinforcing China's role as an emerging global authority with increasing sway in international justice.

Thirdly, Wu's misconduct and his impact on Chinese fan culture provide a convenient pretext for the CCP's intervention in the entertainment sector. State-run Xinhua news agency has commented that Wu's case should be a "wake-up call" for the industry, advocating for a thorough rectification of "twisted dynamics in China's entertainment industry" (Davidson). New regulations mandate that celebrities not only display overt patriotism and align with state interests but also adhere to traditional gender norms - men showcasing macho masculinity and women maintaining modesty. Some critics, therefore, view Wu's conviction as less about addressing abuse and more about the government's broader agenda to regulate celebrity culture (Davidson). In this context, the handling of Du's allegations becomes contingent upon these national priorities and contrasts starkly with cases like Zhu's, where sexual assault claims, rather than being investigated, are actively suppressed due to Zhu's representation of the CCP. Hence, the extensive public discourse and prompt action in Wu's case may not necessarily signify a progressive shift in China's #MeToo movement. "To truly grasp the state's stance on the #MeToo

movement, one must look at the actions behind-the-scene taken in Xianzi's lawsuit," claim some observers (“【404档案馆】”).

Given these nuances in Wu's criminalization, interpreting Du's legal victory solely as a #MeToo success or a reflection of a profound shift in civil society regarding sexual harassment risks oversimplification. Instead, this victory may inadvertently maintain and even bolster the cultural hegemony of nationalist masculinity. This co-option of the status quo into the societal norm could explain the state's complete censorship of Peng's allegations against Zhang Gaoli in Chapter 3.

### **The Politics of Depoliticization and the Burgeoning of Good Sense**

The public discourse surrounding Wu's case has predominantly focused on its spectacular aspects, notably the public shaming of Wu's masculinity, foreignness, and diminished celebrity status. This focus overshadows the fundamental issue at hand: sexual assault. Feminists have been critical of this diversion by saying that reducing Wu's infamy to mere mockery about his masculinity and degraded Chinese-ness squanders the opportunity to address the critical question of preventing future sexual harassment incidents in the entertainment industry (She). This diversion represents a concerning depoliticization of the sexual assault issue, turning the conversation towards Wu's personal life, thereby individualizing the consequences and neglecting the systematic oppression of women. Meanwhile, the CCP uses Wu's case to justify its intervention in the cultural sector. Nonetheless, Wu's downfall also provides opportunities for the feminist organic intellectuals to mobilize, enabling them to navigate the shrinking civil

society space and to build a counter-hegemonic good sense against the patriarchal endorsement of toxic masculinity and sexual abuse.

The detachment of Wu's case from the broader #MeToo movement, a form of depoliticization, has fostered a widespread coalition supporting Du, challenging the boundaries of what the CCP tolerates and thus opening new avenues for feminist activism. As discussed in the first chapter, feminism and the #MeToo movement in China are often viewed as limited to a small, media-savvy, young urban demographic, politically stigmatized as being manipulated by Western ideologies. The hesitation among many of Du's supporters to embrace the feminist label highlights the ongoing stigma attached to feminist terminology and a broader reluctance among women to engage with politicized feminist causes, often labeled as rebellious and anti-China. Therefore, the decoupling of Du's case from the #MeToo label has prompted a more diverse array of people to engage in discussions about the typically taboo topic of sexual harassment, as seen in the intense online discourse about Wu's misconduct.

Although the depoliticization of sexual harassment allegations carries its own set of issues, as outlined previously, it facilitates greater mobilization and reinforces the fundamental principle that rape is intolerable in Chinese society. This shift can be seen as a strategic "war of position" organized by feminists, aiming to cultivate extensive anti-sexual harassment consciousness through flexible adaptation to the Chinese political context. The gradual infiltration of women previously unaware or indifferent to the sexual harassment discourse and the expansion of access to political positions through the depoliticized version of the #MeToo movement represent an effective war of position toward achieving a feminist cultural hegemony

and changing the general viewpoints within the civil society. “Wu is by far the most famous person who the #RiceBunny (the phonetic translation and rebranding of #MeToo) has ever brought down. When the street is buzzing with Wu’s detention, the #RiceBunny’s influence has reached an unprecedented level, even though people on the streets may not even know about #RiceBunny,” observes Lü. This growing readiness of women to advocate for justice for sexual assault survivors marks the emergence of a potent feminist “good sense.”

Building on the momentum of previous #MeToo efforts, Du’s accusation also fostered what Yang describes as an “affective heterotopia” - a realm of emotional engagement and contestation against patriarchal norms, driven by feelings of anger, fear, and solidarity, and potentially serving tangible feminist objective (3). Both ideologically and emotionally, the downfall of Wu marks a transformation in individuals’ common sense of sexual assault that evolves to an actionable and relatable “good sense” that resonates with many in Chinese society.

The depoliticization also allows #MeToo advocates to gauge the state’s tolerance limits, a strategy of digital masquerading to test and evade censorship. For those #MeToo activists who have faced extensive censorship and personal risks, the attention garnered by Du’s case offers critical insights: accusations that do not directly target the CCP and potentially reinforce state legitimacy are more likely to gain traction. In other words, the hegemony is protecting feminists for their activism as long as they are playing within the tolerance range of the state and helping the state to exercise power for the sake of national interests. This approach is fraught with risks, as it is a method of wielding the master’s tools and, therefore, confined to the dominant power structure. The absence of direct criticism of women’s exploitation within the CCP’s echelons

raises questions about civil society's capacity to transform the hegemonic ideas of the state, especially given the state's control over the censorship machinery. However, it may be a necessary step for feminists to engage in the process of a sustained war of position and creating a counter-hegemony. Mistreanu observes, "They [feminists] avoid associating their work with politics. That has meant some compromises - it's impossible, for instance, to talk about the culture of sexual abuse within some of China's most powerful institutions. But it allows the movement to survive at a time when others have been stamped out." Thus, Wu's case serves as a model for future allegations, as exemplified in the ones discussed in the introduction chapter, allowing activists to distance themselves from politicized labels like #MeToo or feminism while still advocating against gendered oppression. It is fostering a long-march ideological shift in people's common sense regarding sexual assault that creates affordances of war of maneuvers, or the actual frontal confrontation of the patriarchal regime, for women in the future.

### **Conclusion: The Crumbing of a Ruling Hegemony**

This chapter has delved into the complexities surrounding Du's rape allegations against Kris Wu, revealing the ambivalent state of Chinese civil society caught between the rise of a feminist good sense and the enduring patriarchal hegemony of the state. On one side, there is a maintenance of a hegemonic discourse that bolsters nationalism and conventional gender norms inherent to the CCP's governance. This is evident in the public narrative focusing on Wu's "effeminate" characteristics, diasporic identity, and waning celebrity status. On the other hand, capitalizing on nationalist masculinity enables significantly expanded participation in a

depoliticized feminist agenda. This strategic approach facilitates the formation of broader coalitions among women, subtly advancing feminist objectives while remaining beneath the CCP's direct scrutiny. Though seemingly contradictory, the reinforcement and challenge of the Chinese patriarchal hegemony occur concurrently.

While in the short term, feminists' reliance on traditional, binary heteropatriarchal norms might seem to support the CCP regime, the shift in common sense and the growing resolve to support sexual violence survivors mark the rise of a subtly subversive digital social movement. The imprisonment of Kris Wu, coupled with the relatively minimal censorship of related discussions, signals the boundaries of what the state will tolerate, offering valuable information and openings that feminist organic intellectuals can utilize in future campaigns against sexual assault. Presently, feminist initiatives primarily focus on affirming women's rights without directly challenging the CCP. However, the proliferation of "good sense" that questions heteropatriarchy is becoming increasingly provocative. It not only challenges the CCP's dominant hegemony but also raises critical questions about the legitimacy of its gendered rule.

This challenge to the CCP's hegemonic status is already manifesting, as evidenced by the state's intensified intervention in the entertainment industry. The crackdown aimed at "sanitis[ing] the industry" - regulating fandoms and curtailing feminine and queer representations of celebrities under the directive that "art must serve the people and the party's socialist doctrine, and its creators must show love for the mother" - reflects the state's anxiety over safeguarding its dominant patriarchal hegemony and the waning public consensus to such ideas (Davidson). As civil society increasingly diverges from the state's prescribed hegemony, coercive measures

become necessary for the CCP to maintain its governance. This dependence on force, however, only underscores the state hegemony's inherent fragility and vulnerability. As the hegemony crumbles, new paths emerge for feminists to assert rights through their persistent war of position. This evolving dynamic will be further explored in the following chapter, which delves into the case of Zhang Gaoli, China's former vice premier.

## CHAPTER 3: FEMINIST AWAKENING VS. STATE CENSORSHIP - THE DILEMMA OF CHINA'S #METOO MOVEMENT

### The Case That Shows the Limits of Beijing's Control

I witnessed the chaos on Weibo, China's equivalent to Twitter, at the moment when the #MeToo movement touched "the top echelons of the [Chinese] Communist Party for the first time" - when Peng Shuai accused former Chinese vice premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault in her Weibo post (Myers). It was around noon Eastern time, midnight in Beijing on November 2, 2021. I had just gotten out of a class and was scrolling through Weibo, confused that everyone I subscribed to was posting the tennis emoji "🎾." After perusing the comments section of a few posts, I pieced together that the emojis alluded to a tennis player whose name had been censored. I immediately typed a keyword combination - "tennis player Weibo" - into Google, a platform banned in China since 2010, and countless screenshots of a post popped up. In the post, Peng, a tennis player who ranked world number one by the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) in 2014 and renowned in China for her 23 tour-level doubles titles, revealed her years-long on-and-off relationship with Zhang and accused the latter of sexual assault. The original post on Peng's Weibo account was deleted within twenty minutes, and the comments section of her previous post was blocked. By the time I learned of the story, two hours after the initial post, the Chinese internet had effectively purged most references to the incident. The extent of censorship was staggering, with over 600 keywords (relevant or not) being banned to prevent the spread of information - a measure usually reserved for China's most sensitive events like the Tiananmen Square protests (Mozur et al.; China Digital Times). This stringent control meant that unless one

was closely following feminist circles or checking social media immediately after the post's release, they would remain completely unaware of the allegations. "The online discussions were as clean as a blank sheet of paper," says Tian, a former sports reporter in Shanghai, who has to get to the bottom of things through her colleagues' voice messages to avoid censorship (Chien and Stevenson).

In her post, Peng recounted starting a relationship with Zhang over a decade ago, which ceased after his elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee in 2013. Following Zhang's retirement in 2018, the alleged assault occurred after Zhang invited Peng to play tennis with his family. "I never consented that afternoon, crying all the time," Peng wrote in the post. Peng's defiance was apparent while admitting her inability to provide concrete evidence for her claims. She directly addressed Zhang in her post, stating, "I know that for someone of your eminence, Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, you've said that you're not afraid, but even if it's just me, like an egg hitting a rock, or a moth to the flame, courting self-destruction, I'll tell the truth about you" (Myers).

Following her bold accusations, Peng mysteriously vanished from the public eye for nearly three weeks, a disappearance that many suspected was enforced. This absence triggered widespread international criticism, focusing on both the censorship surrounding the incident and the apparent lack of a thorough investigation. Prominent tennis stars like Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka voiced their concerns for Peng's safety, amplifying the issue globally through the hashtag #WhereIsPengShuai. In what seemed like a response to this mounting international pressure, Chinese authorities released an email, purportedly from Peng to Steve Simon, the President of the WTA. Alongside this, videos showed Peng dining with others and attending a

youth tennis tournament. However, far from alleviating global concerns, these communications and visuals only intensified skepticism regarding Peng's safety and freedom. Doubts about the authenticity of the email and the seemingly staged nature of the videos contributed to a growing sentiment that Peng's well-being was still at significant risk.

In December 2021, the WTA made a significant announcement, declaring the suspension of all its events in China. "While we now know where Peng is, I have serious doubts that she is free, safe and not subject to censorship, coercion, and intimidation...we repeat our call for a full and transparent investigation-without censorship-into Peng Shuai's sexual assault accusation," Simon stated in the announcement (Goldkorn). This move positioned the WTA as the first major international sports organization to defy the Chinese government openly. However, it also marked the peak of international efforts to pressure China regarding the case against Zhang. Two years later, searches for "Peng Shuai" on the Chinese internet still yield results only from state media, and in a twist, the WTA resumed its tournaments in China in the 2023 season, citing financial constraints. "After 16 months of suspended tennis competition in China and sustained efforts at achieving our original requests, the situation has shown no sign of changing. We have concluded we will never fully secure those goals, and it will be our players and tournaments who ultimately will be paying an extraordinary price for their sacrifices."

This development seems to reflect a triumph of Chinese state authority over movements advocating against sexual harassment, with the state's censorship mechanisms effectively silencing broader discourse on the case and pressuring international organizations for co-option. Ingle from the Guardian commented that the return of WTA to China "gives us a stark reminder of where the power really lies between sports and oppressive regimes." However, I wonder

whether this narrative comprehensively encompasses Peng Shuai's allegations and their impact on the broader Chinese #MeToo movement.

This accusation against Zhang Gaoli is the first time that sexual misconduct has been leveled publicly against a senior political leader in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which itself marks a historic milestone in China's #MeToo movement (Myers; Hadavas). People eventually started talking about the elephant in the room. Unlike prior instances where allegations of sexual misconduct against government officials were either veiled in secrecy or emerged only as part of corruption investigations - where they were used to strengthen cases against officials out of favor in Xi's anti-corruption campaign - Peng's claim is distinct. Her allegation stands out for directly targeting a high-ranking official solely on the grounds of sexual abuse, breaking the traditionally acquiescent silence on the secrecy surrounding the personal lives of top CCP officials (Gan and Xiong). Before, as discussed in the first chapter, the hegemonic patriarchal culture often normalized sexual transgressions, relegating women to mere symbols of male power and success. In such a framework, sexual violence was only recognized when it served broader national interests, such as being used as evidence against disgraced officials in corruption cases, while the actual suffering of the survivors was overlooked. Therefore, Peng's courageous move transcends the typical narrative of a jilted lover seeking retribution against a powerful man - a stereotype often used to discredit accusers. Instead, her action represents a significant shift in the social discourse, drawing critical attention to and challenging the entrenched systemic issues of sexual violence and gender norms within China's power structures - an essence of the Chinese #MeToo movement.

The charges take on even more significance when viewed in the light of the Kris Wu scandal, which was thoroughly explored in the second chapter. Wu's case, along with other notable #MeToo incidents involving figures like Zhu and Liu, unveiled the pervasive rape culture in Chinese society, sparked an unprecedented public outcry, and drew the public into a social discourse on sexual harassment that represent and further catalyzed significant shifts in public perception and action on the long-stigmatized issue.

This steady yet potent shift in individuals' beliefs embodies Antonio Gramsci's concept of a "war of position," introduced at the outset of this thesis. It is a process where feminist anti-sexual harassment ideas gradually seep into the fabric of civil society, challenging and transforming entrenched norms through activism, even in its depoliticized forms. This ideological struggle aims to dismantle the public consensus upholding the conventional patriarchal hegemony, thereby winning hegemonic status for the feminist group. In this context, feminist activists have adeptly redefined the traditional and uncritical gender-based social beliefs, or what Gramsci termed "common sense," paving the way for a novel, pragmatic understanding - a "feminist good sense." The rise of the feminist anti-sexual assault good sense has powerfully disrupted the patriarchal power structure, compelling the state to take a more assertive stance on sexual assault more seriously, as exemplified by the sentencing of Kris Wu.

The emergence of Peng's allegations against Zhang is only made conceivable by the transformative impact of previous #MeToo movements in China, which have significantly altered the online discourse around gender, revealing the ambivalent state of civil society with a growing awareness of the omnipresent rape culture and official corruption, and rejection of sexual assault increasingly questions customary patriarchal hegemony. This changing tide of

common sense, fostered by the #MeToo campaigns, set the stage for Peng's accusations to receive widespread support and credibility despite the lack of tangible proof. Lü's observations reflect this shift in perception: "Why did people find Peng's story so real? Because everyone assumes that it must be true. In fact, the cadres have always been so rotten and degenerate; they have always exploited women, but it has been hidden in the dark." Bill Bishop also encapsulates this sentiment, stating, "These allegations are not shocking in substance, but are shocking in the target" (Myers). This evolving feminist good sense underscores a pivotal moment in China's social and political landscape, where the previously unassailable are now being confronted with public accountability.

The concurrence of the burgeoning feminist "good sense" within civil society and the state's handling of Peng's allegations against Zhang presents a complex and challenging paradox. On the one hand, the momentum of the #MeToo movement and Peng's bold stance signifies an emerging feminist awareness, pressuring the state to take concrete actions on sexual harassment issues, as seen in the legal pursuit of Kris Wu. On the other, the stark censorship of Peng's accusations by the state points to enduring opposition to challenges against its patriarchal structure. This situation suggests a departure from the Gramscian view of the state as an extension of civil society. Instead, it reveals a profound disjunction between the ideologies of civil society and the ruling party.

Several potential explanations, which could occur concurrently within China's unique context, offer insight into this phenomenon. The state's effort to suppress discussions around Peng's case could indicate that the shift of civil society towards feminist ideals is not as widespread or deeply rooted as it may seem. This dynamic raises critical questions about the

actual depth and reach of the feminist movement within Chinese society. Despite notable advancements, a significant portion of society may still acquiesce to, or even endorse, entrenched patriarchal norms, thereby enabling the state to impose censorship with minimal opposition. Alternatively, this scenario could suggest a more nuanced reality where the feminist movement is indeed making strides, but its influence is curtailed by the constraints of an authoritarian regime, which selectively responds to feminist pressures based on the identity of the accused while safeguarding its own legitimacy.

In the next section of this chapter, I will delve deeper into how censorship, paradoxically, can be seen as a “war of position” in the Chinese #MeToo movement based on a close analysis of Peng’s case. This will further illuminate the nuanced and ambivalent nature of the feminist struggle in China and the state’s anxiety over losing its legitimacy. It implies that the feminist efforts to dismantle patriarchal hegemony are indeed having an effect, subtly reshaping the socio-political landscape even amidst stringent state control.

### **Censorship and Feminist Digital Masquerading**

In the wake of Kris Wu’s case, which seemed to pave the way for increased activism and bolstered a growing feminist consciousness, Zhang’s subsequent case emerged, offering a stark contrast in the state’s approach to similar allegations. Wu’s case was highly publicized and even seen as an exception to the usual censorship in the Chinese #MeToo movement (Davidson; Boyd). This level of visibility and allowance of public discourse was widely interpreted as the state’s responsiveness to feminist advocacy, indicating a successful war of position for women’s rights. It appeared as though the growing feminist good sense successfully informed and even

pressured the state to increasingly tolerate open discourse around gender-based sexual violence and come up with legislative actions. However, Zhang's case, occurring shortly thereafter, shattered such optimism with an unprecedented level of censorship, marking one of the most stringent suppressions in recent memory (“【CDT敏感词周报】”).

This contrast reveals that the state's reaction to #MeToo allegations in China heavily hinges on the accused's identity and status, particularly their connection to the CCP, and whether pursuing the case would reinforce or contest the state's legitimacy. Wu's unique background as a Chinese-Canadian celebrity with connections to South Korea provided the state an opportunity to consolidate its nationalist patriarchal hegemony. As discussed in the previous chapter, by depoliticizing sexual harassment and framing Wu's actions as personal misconduct of a foreign Chinese, the state effectively detached the issue from the Chinese social and political context. This rhetoric reinforced conventional perceptions of nationalist masculinity, with the state portraying itself as a just entity that combats sexual abuse, thereby legitimizing its intervention in the entertainment industry. This move was not just about addressing the individual case of Wu but was a calculated effort to redefine “sexual assault” as a crime predominantly associated with non-state actors or individuals outside the political system, thereby absolving the state from any potential complicity in such offenses. In this way, any criticism or protest against sexual assault becomes, paradoxically, an affirmation of the state's authority and legitimacy.

Supporters of Du, Kris Wu's accuser, astutely utilized the state's depoliticization of sexual violence and nationalistic narrative to their advantage, catalyzing broader participation in anti-sexual harassment activism. This strategic depoliticization effectively rallied individuals who had previously been disengaged or hesitant to align with feminist causes, uniting them

under the banner of fighting sexual violence and affirming their rights. Moreover, the nationalistic rhetoric inadvertently created a safe space for activists to advance a feminist “war of position,” aiming for hegemonic status without being perceived as rebellious or antagonistic to the state.

In the second chapter, I detailed how such co-option and depoliticization of the anti-sexual harassment movement, while effective and fruitful for mobilization and fostering a feminist “good sense,” simultaneously imposes constraints on the movement’s capacity to effectively challenge the patriarchal hegemony ingrained in the ruling party and the political structure. The depoliticization of #MeToo allegations, while accommodating to some feminist objectives, is framed within a nationalistic context, leaving the state’s legislative authority unchallenged. This framework allows the state to retain ultimate control over determining guilt in sexual assault allegations, with decisions often influenced by the accused’s affiliations to the CCP. Celebrating the state’s response to Wu’s case is vital, as the verdict against Wu does represent a concession by the state to the growing feminist outcry against gender-based sexual violence. Yet, it is crucial not to oversimplify this development as an outright victory for the #MeToo movement or as definitive evidence of a feminist counter-hegemony reshaping civil society. Instead, it is critical to recognize that Wu’s sentencing is also a strategic, calculated decision by the state to serve specific national interests. This realization highlights the complexities of navigating feminist activism within China’s unique political dynamic, where state support is contingent and often driven by broader nationalist political agendas.

Consequently, the stringent censorship of Peng’s charges emerges as an almost inevitable outcome when the accused is a prominent figure within the CCP. Such backlash unveils a stark

truth: the feminist counter-hegemony in China is still in its infancy, struggling against the enduring patriarchal hegemony of the CCP, which was further buttressed by the party's exclusive control over coercive mechanisms. This dynamic further accentuates China's stance towards feminism: while there may be occasional points of convergence, feminism is not viewed as a reliable ally by the state. It becomes clear that women's rights can be readily sidelined or sacrificed for political expediency, particularly when they intersect with sensitive matters that challenge the CCP's legitimacy or question its rule.

As explored earlier in the context of Zhu's case in the first chapter, the CCP is deeply invested in cultivating and maintaining a positive public image, often going to great lengths to protect the private lives of its officials. This effort aligns with the party's promotion of "positive energy" - emphasizing content that "puts the Party and government in a positive light" ("Positive Energy"). Within this framework, party members, particularly officials, are not only expected but required to exemplify patriotism, moral integrity, and exemplary behavior, which are seen as direct reflections of the party's commitment to public welfare. Simultaneously, any association of party officials with sexual misconduct is seen as highly immoral, tainting the party's reputation. As such, these transgressions are often only publicized when they involve corrupt or lascivious officials, akin to those targeted in the party's anti-corruption campaigns. This tactic also distances the party from any corrupt elements within its ranks. The profound link between the individual CCP members and the party as a whole implies that any criticism directed at a single party member is, by extension, perceived as a critique of the entire CCP and, consequently, a critique of the nation and the state itself, which are all under the CCP's authority. Therefore, accusations against a high-profile CCP member like Zhang Gaoli represent not just an

individual scandal but one of the most significant crises for the CCP's image in recent years, necessitating a robust suppression strategy.

This culminates in a striking phenomenon highlighted at the beginning of this chapter: an extensive and unparalleled wave of censorship within China. While keyword banning is a usual tactic in the Chinese censorship system, it was elevated to an extent rarely seen in history. Terms as generic as “tennis” and even “melon” (slang for gossip) were prohibited, along with the corresponding emoji (Mozur et al.; Hadavas). Platforms like Peng's Weibo account and various sports forums saw their comment sections disabled, demonstrating the state's efforts to eliminate any potential discussion venue (Wang and Song; Dou). In a more absurd twist, a Korean romance series, “Prime Minister and I,” was banned from China's movie review website, as activists had turned to its review section to discuss Peng's case covertly (Gan and Xiong). A BBC analysis utilizing the Wayback Machine – a digital archive that allows users to view historical versions of web pages – indicated that by the end of the day, all traces of Peng's Weibo post had vanished from Chinese social media (Wang and Song).

What is simultaneously showing in this unprecedentedly level of censorship and swift state repressive response is how activists are innovatively adopting a digital masquerading strategy – tactically modifying messages to bypass censorship and avoid potential criminalization, thereby fostering a united front of activism and transforming public conversation (Tan 171). The extensive censorship is, paradoxically, a testament to the efficacy and resilience of people willing to speak up for Peng. Their creative and resolute expressions of dissent against sexual assault are so compelling and impactful that only a sweeping censorship effort seems capable of attempting to muzzle their voices.

Supporters of Peng have artfully crafted a discourse on the Chinese internet, skirting around bans through ingenious means. They utilized phonetic resemblances, initials (such as PS for Peng Shuai), and metaphors like “a huge melon in the tennis circle” to convey their message and gain feminist traction for this issue (“【CDT敏感词周报】”). Even emojis were coded meaningfully: 🍏 represents Peng, a tennis player, and 🍉 refers to “the gossip,” symbolizing the allegations. This method effectively creates a veil of obscurity, leveraging the wide-ranging implications and emotional nuances of emojis to dodge censorship. This form of coded communication is also less accessible to nationalists and those endorsing patriarchal values, thus reducing the physical risks for individuals engaging in feminist discussions. Yet, for those versed in or curious about feminist activism, such cryptic language is familiar, echoing previous movements like the iconic 🍚🐰 or #RiceBunny, a phonetic play on the Chinese translation of #MeToo, generating possibilities for their participation in the dialogue.

Deciphering these symbols is more than just a communicative exercise; it embodies a process of collective sense-making, forging a distinctive feminist language that unites and empowers the feminist counter-movement. In a context where patriarchal structures strive to isolate women and those advocating for gender equality, forms of action that bring people together take on heightened significance, as any form of solidarity represents resistance. The collective nature of these actions supporting Peng Shuai stands as a potent rebuke to CCP’s patriarchal hegemony, or even more, in this case, domination. Furthermore, this digital masquerading in the discussion of Peng’s case effectively reclaims the room for public discourse on rape, an area the state had once again tried to silence. This process facilitates open discourse

on a traditionally private issue and underscores the resilience and adaptability of feminist activism in the face of authoritarian censorship.

In this analysis, the role of censorship emerges as a crucial battleground where the feminist “war of position” is not just an ideological contest but also a direct encounter with political oppression. For feminist organic intellectuals, the act of circumventing censorship to mobilize support, spread their message, and foster collective understanding is akin to Gramsci’s theory of the “war of position” to gain public consensus and emerge as leaders in the ideological sphere of society. However, this feminist pursuit encounters a starkly different response from the state. The state’s reaction is not just an ideological counter-argument but an application of overt and immediate power through censorship, reflecting a more explicit form of control.

In China’s unique context, the dynamic between civil society and the state has been notably strained, particularly in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement. The state dominates this interaction by exerting formidable control over censorship mechanisms to shape public discourse through deterrence and assert its hegemonic status. Consequently, it is oversimplifying to view censorship and netizens’ responses purely as an ideological clash between the feminist good sense and the hegemony. In China, where there is a robust civil society upholding traditional gender norms, the feminist counter-hegemony faces not only the repercussions from common sense but also the underpinning state force that can suppress counter-hegemonic movements more than ever, especially with the advent of advanced censorship technology and increasingly repressive punishments for those who criticize the rule of the CCP.

This raises critical questions about the feasibility of achieving hegemony through the long march of institutions in environments where those very institutions are threatened by

authoritarian power. What does consent even mean in a context marked by omnipresent state suppression and the internalization of self-censorship? It is not to say that some Chinese people are devoid of agency in acquiescing to oppressive norms, as the action of voluntary consent itself emphasizes individuals' autonomy in decision-making. What I am arguing here is that consent in an authoritarian state like China is inevitably intertwined with the state's overpowering influence and, thereby, more complicated than Gramsci's understanding of simply "spontaneous consent." This complexity is evident in a netizen's social media post following Peng Shuai's allegations: "It's starting again...everyone looks at each other and then keeps quiet, subconsciously taking screenshots of Peng's post and saving them because it's clear what is going to disappear immediately on social media here...scandals of this caliber would be bombshells anywhere, but here they turn into duds. They become little notes we pass privately, phonic abbreviations, emojis, and countless separator characters in private messages. It's fucking crazy" (“【404帖子】”).

This sentiment underscores the violent and profound impact of censorship on individual expression, with widespread dissent stifled by state surveillance and intimidation. This public silence, rather than being a genuine endorsement of the state's patriarchal hegemony, is a conditioned, almost reflexive response to the omnipresence of censorship, driven more by self-preservation than by conviction. This reality starkly contrasts with Gramsci's notion of consent, because while individuals may superficially comply with the censorship mechanisms that uphold the dominant hegemony, their true ideology does not align with the state's patriarchal norms. This is evident in the subtle forms of resistance manifesting in private spheres and through digital masquerading.

In light of this pervasive pressure, the use of encoded language and online activism assumes a far more significant role as a form of feminist resistance in China than it might in the Western world. It entails greater risks and often emerges as the only viable strategy for building a broad coalition of women against systematic gender-based sexual exploitation. The covert nature of this resistance, through emojis, abbreviations, and coded language, speaks volumes about the creativity and resilience of these activists in the face of authoritarian constraints.

### **Unveiling CCP's Fragile Hegemony**

The extensive censorship surrounding Peng's charges against Zhang unveils a significant erosion of the CCP's hegemony, indicating its diminishing ability to command or even appeal for public consent. Gramsci argues that the apparatus of state coercive power serves to "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively," a principle that resonates profoundly with the censorship tactics employed in Zhang's case discussed above (12). Rather than a war of position, censorship is devoid of any underlying ideological persuasion and, therefore, unable to garner spontaneous public consent; instead, it instills a pervasive fear of state power among the populace. The state's escalating dependence on censorship underscores a critical juncture: its traditional hegemony is faltering. No longer can a long-term "war of position" to cultivate and sustain public consent suffice; the state indispensably resorts to force to maintain its hegemonic stance.

This explains why such a powerful state is so afraid of Peng's allegation - such accusations strike at the very core of the party, challenging the CCP's legitimacy and revealing the fragility of its hegemonic control. This anxiety is palpable in the cautious language used by

CCP-affiliated media figures, such as Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of a state newspaper, who referred to Peng's allegations obliquely as "the thing people talked about" on Twitter, avoiding direct mention of the issue. This reticence to even name the rape accusation directly points to the precarious nature of the state's hegemonic status, as the state fears any further association of sexual misconduct will delegitimize its rule. Commenting on the situation, Grant observes, "A young female tennis player is revealing the folly of China's claim to greatness. Until she is allowed to speak openly, publish what she wishes, appear and travel as she likes, then she stands as a reminder that China is indeed a fragile superpower." Peng's bravery in naming her traumatic experience of being violated and the state's response to it not only shakes the CCP's authority but also underscores the inherent instability of its control, revealing the cracks in what is often perceived as an unassailable dominant hegemony.

### **Conclusion: A Future Without Hegemony**

At the conclusion of this chapter, it is beneficial to explore the implications of the state's waning hegemony for the future of the #MeToo movement, drawing upon the insights of another subaltern and post-colonial theorist who have extended Gramsci's ideas. In his seminal work "Dominance Without Hegemony," Ranajit Guha discusses the British colonial rule in India as characterized by dominance without hegemony. This concept refers to the British failure to secure voluntary consent or cultural assimilation from the majority of Indians, relying instead on coercive domination for control. Guha's analysis not only underscores the limitations and inherent fragility of British rule but also highlights the persistent resistance and lack of cultural

integration during the colonial period, elements crucial for understanding India's struggle for independence.

Although Guha's perspectives have been criticized for underestimating the cultural effects of colonization, and despite his focus on a colonial context significantly different from today's digital feminist activism in China, his ideas still offer a glimmer of hope. As the CCP shifts away from seeking voluntary consensus towards increasing reliance on coercive methods to maintain control, the power dynamics in Chinese society may be evolving towards a paradigm of "dominance without hegemony." In this changing landscape, where the state's cultural hegemony weakens, a greater space emerges for not only the #MeToo movement but also various forms of counter-hegemony. These counter-hegemony can organize more effectively and instigate profound transformations in civil society, paving the way for more radical social changes in the future.

## EPILOGUE

The #MeToo Movement continues to influence Chinese social discourse today, despite the escalating censorship and suppression of feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy, evident not only in the silencing of Peng Shuai's allegations but also in the crackdown on feminist and queer organizations like the Beijing LGBT Center in 2023 (Wu). Many feminist activists and #MeToo advocates, such as Lü Pin and Li Maizi of the "Feminist Five," have left China to prioritize their safety and activist goals. Li, silenced by social media bans and heavy surveillance, expressed feeling voiceless and powerless: "If I cannot do any useful activities in mainland China, it's time to leave" ("Chinese Feminists Rebuilding Movement Abroad").

Although the space for feminist organizing is contracting, the #MeToo movement has stimulated a significant shift. As highlighted at the outset of this thesis, new #MeToo allegations against influential figures in various sectors continue to emerge in 2023, demonstrating growing awareness and intolerance of rape culture, sexual violence, and gender inequality. Public support for survivors in power-imbalanced scenarios is increasing. The state's reaction patterns to these sexual assault allegations have also become more discernible. Allegations within the cultural sector, entertainment industry, and business world generally escape censorship, indicating a selective approach by the CCP. The state appears to tolerate these accusations as long as they do not directly undermine its legitimacy. Activists have astutely leveraged this nuanced understanding of the CCP's tolerance threshold, drawing lessons from Peng's case and the crackdown on feminist and LGBTQ+ NGOs. By tactically navigating through the censorship and nationalist narratives, they effectively engage in a prolonged feminist "war of position." This

strategic approach aims to gradually erode the patriarchal hegemony that the CCP is increasingly struggling to uphold.

Feminist counter-hegemony in China is also evolving, manifesting in forms beyond #MeToo activism. While the state emphasizes nationalist Confucian values, as demonstrated in the second chapter, reaffirming the family as a foundational socio-economic unit, many women express their discontent with traditional gender roles - serving in a patrilineal family structure - simply by opting out. This trend parallels the Chinese Tang Ping (躺平), or “lying flat” movement, where Generation Z rejects social norms like hard work, home ownership, and marriage due to economic pressures. The declining marriage rates, with only 6.8 million marriages in 2022 compared to double that number in 2013, and the first population decrease in six decades, underscore this shift (Yeh; “Chinese Feminists Rebuilding Movement Abroad”). The #MeToo movement has not only heightened awareness about gender exploitation but has also encouraged women to explore alternative lifestyles that deviate from long-standing societal expectations.

Amidst increasing restrictions on traditional forms of social movements and activism in China and the clampdown on advocacy NGOs, feminists are also finding new grounds for their movement abroad. Chinese-speaking feminist communities are carving out spaces for free expression through various mediums, including stand-up comedy, film screenings, and demonstrations. This thesis, in itself, is also a feminist effort to address and discuss issues that are considered taboo in Chinese academia.

The thesis has already laid out how the #MeToo movement holds significant volume in China for its enduring role in fostering a feminist counter-hegemony. The escalating censorship

and surveillance of feminist activism are indicative of a fracturing in the CCP's hegemonic control that leads to a reliance on force to maintain its authority. However, the #MeToo movement is not the sole force challenging common sense within Chinese civil society. Various social movements, from the "lying flat" movement, which rejects traditional success metrics, to the "white paper protests" against the CCP's Zero-Covid policy, suggest a waning state hegemony across multiple governance facets. These movements, particularly the "white paper protests," where individuals express dissent without the need for written statements, demonstrate a profound, unvoiced solidarity resonating among thousands in opposition to the state's ruling policies. The state's response, marked by detentions of advocates and increased censorship of counter-narratives, indicates not just a reaction to dissent but a loss of control. As China navigates growing global tensions, economic challenges, and a demographic crisis, the evolution of social movements under tightening restrictions presents a critical area of observation. The response of the Chinese state to these burgeoning counter-hegemonies amidst these complex circumstances will be pivotal in shaping the future landscape of civil society and political discourse in the country.

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