Critical Analysis of the Rifts and Ostracism in an Online Feminist Community in China

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ABSTRACT

The internet being the primary platform for feminist activism in China has led to increased visibility in the
divisions within the feminist community. This research examines this phenomenon based on two case
studies. First, in the digital community that works on feminist topics, individuals who like gay Boys' Love
dramas or novels are labelled as misogynists. Second, feminists who recommend cosmetics are criticised for
their efforts to please male chauvinism and consumerism. This research further explores the reason for this
phenomenon, referring to the theory of 'scapegoat' which explains aggression and hostility within a
community through analysing the interaction between frustration or fear caused by threats from outside the
community and violence or persecution within the community. This article argues that the demand for
purity or unity of the feminist community with certain values or identities upheld as 'true' or 'qualified
feminists' embodies a homogeneity with the authoritarian regime and the core of populism as a global
phenomenon. This finding may shed light on the complex and nuanced impacts of the state and global
politics on civil society and rights activism in an authoritarian regime.

Keywords: feminism, scapegoat, authoritarianism, populism, China

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) in 1949, equality of the sexes was
made a basic state policy in the Maoist era through a range of top-down initiatives aimed at integrating women
into the workforce to build a modern nation. This approach was widely recognised as 'state feminism,' which
embeds a Marxist understanding of women and is criticised for overemphasising class struggle while erasing
feminity or the differences between genders by, for example, promoting masculinised 'iron girls,' to fulfil the state
development goals of China's industrialisation (Xue & Rose, 2022; Lin, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025). In the wake of
China's Reform and Opening up in the 1980s and especially after the Fourth UN Women's Conference held in
Beijing in 1995, China witnessed a golden age for the establishment of women's NGOs. Nevertheless, due to the
tight control by the government over civil society, NGOs usually had to adopt a 'dual approach' by collaborating
with state organisations such as the All-China Women's Federation for 'channelling their efforts into policy and
legal changes' (Tan, 2017; Bao, 2018). Such an approach remains largely top-down and is criticised for rarely seeing
or working with grassroots feminists (Hou, 2015). The development of the internet in China gave rise to a 'new
generation' of feminists since the 2010s. Compared to state feminism or the 'dual approach,' this 'new generation
of feminists' refers mainly to young women born in the 1980s and 1990s who are considered 'self-determining,
rebellious, technologically savvy, and staying outside of the official system' (Mao, 2020). Their feminist activism is

called the 'youth-feminist-action-faction' (*qingnian nüquan xingdongpai*), which is a bottom-up approach invoking various innovative activities such as art performances and street activism (Wang, 2018). Also, their grassroots activism is conducted both offline and online – based on a comparatively freer and participatory space provided by social media, they not only undertook online activism themselves, but also increased the visibility of their feminist activism and appeal to the general public by, for instance, setting up prominent social media accounts (Mao, 2020). However, the offline and online activism initiated and led by the 'new generation of feminists' has been facing increasing challenges along with the ever-deepening authoritarian rules especially after Xi Jinping came to office in 2013. The ever-escalating surveillance and censorship placed by the authorities on the internet more and more often caused leading accounts to close and their influential posts to be deleted. In 2015, the criminal detention of several 'new generation of feminists' for their anti-discrimination activities planned for International Women's Day was widely viewed as the most drastic backlash against the women's rights movement in China after the 1995 Fourth UN Women's Conference (Wang, 2015). At that point, the future of the feminist movement in China was the subject of extensive discussions and concerns both inside and outside of the country.

Yet around 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic's nationwide lockdown and restrictions on physical contact, a new phenomenon or development related to women's rights and feminist activism has been observed in China. Different from the previous feminist activism which used leading social media accounts to advance their causes or 'taking advantage of the Internet to pursue traditional goals,' this new phenomenon or development is highlighted by a visible online bloom of discussions, engagement, and debates that are related to a wide range of feminist issues, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, patriarchal culture, and discrimination in employment (Zhang, 2015). Some observers coined it as 'pan-feminism' (*fan nüquan*), highlighting especially its form of new online consciousness-raising groups or feminist communities composed of strangers (mostly also anonymous) who are not restricted by geographical boundaries and without any leadership (Li, 2022; Lu, 2020). Regarding this new mechanism of community building, as more and more individuals gather online to share information or their own experiences, participate in public discussions or collective actions, and contribute to solving specific or immediate social problems, social media becomes a new social space for community building (Zhang, 2015; Deiri, 2025). Based on the ample research showing social media's contribution and facilitation of the feelings of engagement, Zizi Papacharissi (2015) termed this community building dynamics as 'affective publics' since 'online media may facilitate affective connection of ideologically disparate viewpoints.' And 'once affective connections are interpreted, homophilous spheres may emerge, as the intensity that led to the connection has been cognitively situated' (Papacharissi, 2015). Further, as argued by Papacharissi (2015), such engagement facilitated by social media could activate latent ties underpinning 'networked publics around communities, actual and imaged.'

Nonetheless, in the meantime, the online feminist community was witnessing an increase in rifts and attacks. For instance, those absolutely against surrogacy, sex work, marriage, and reproduction were called radical feminists and they launched cyberbullying even against feminists (and others) who just did not openly support them (Lu, 2020). 'Gender equality fairy' (*pingquan xianzi*) was used to satirise those who called for no confrontation between women and men; 'academic feminists' (*xueyuanpai nüquan*) were those who mostly worked in academia while doing little activism or practice; 'marriage donkey' (*hun lü*) was a demeaning term indicating that married women were muddleheaded as donkeys. The term, Chinese '*Tianyuan* (Bumpkin) feminism/feminists' or 'made-in-China feminism/feminists' was invented to include an 'entrepreneurial strand' that promotes women's power over men (and empowers women to exercise autonomy in the marriage market) and 'non-cooperative feminism' that promotes sexual autonomy by denouncing the prevalent marketisation of marital institutions and highlighting women's earned spots or meritocracy in the class hierarchy (Wu & Dong, 2019). Those 'Chinese *Tianyuan* (Bumpkin) feminism/feminists' or 'made-in-China feminism/feminists' were assaulted as 'feminist bitch' (*nüquan biao*) or 'feminist cancer' (*nüquan ai*) or doing 'women's fists' (pronouncing the same with 'women's rights,' *nüquan*, in Chinese but meaning attacks) online. Meanwhile, the distinction from 'Chinese *Tianyuan* (Bumpkin)' and 'made-in-China' feminism/feminists was stressed to create the so-called 'authentic or orthodox' feminism/feminists, who criticised Chinese *Tianyuan* feminists for not having 'orthodox' (or in some sense, western) knowledge about gender or feminism, thus being a poor parody of their western feminist counterparts (Li, 2022). Some of the netizens who promoted 'authentic or orthodox' feminism/feminist even reported the social media accounts that objected them to the platform authority, requested the authority to close those 'dissident' accounts, and proclaimed that [someone was] 'not qualified to do feminism' (*bupei gao nüquan*).

While most research in the field investigates this community as a whole, albeit there is divergence on strategies or approaches, and from the angle of its resistance to the authorities in the course of calling for women's rights and gender equality, this research aims to provide a rare yet valuable insight into the dynamics and most recent development of feminist community in China from *within* through a close-up of the rifts, divisions, attacks, and ostracism. This approach entails an analysis of power and power relations through a Foucauldian lens, namely, to recognise power and power relations in a more nuanced, fluid, and complex sense as a normalising force embedded in all social relations (Munro, 2007). Being conceptualised by Michel Foucault as 'micro-politics,' which challenges

the radical political and legal theory drawing a sharp and stagnated distinction between those wielding power and those subject to it, and the radical oppressor-oppressed dichotomy maintained by, for example, Catharine MacKinnon, 'micro-politics' allows us to be vigilant and reflect on the power relations that are experienced by specific individuals in every situation, including 'the role played by women themselves in the perpetuation of gender discrimination' and social control (Munro, 2007). The significance of a 'micro-politics' lens has been especially noted in the digital community or activism. When Papacharissi (2015) analyses the digital community facilitated by and formed on social media as inherently democratic connective practices, the fundamental feature of 'collaborative but not collective' is highlighted especially. This is to say, for the digital community or social media spaces to function as spaces of openness that break down barriers that exist offline, it is crucial that connective practices enable individuals to 'express interest in or allegiance to issues without having to enter into complex negotiation of personal versus collective politics' and to 'connect around commonalities without having to compromise their own belief systems' (Papacharissi, 2015).

Some scholarly works have noted the significance of avoiding a suppression-resistance dichotomy for a more nuanced understanding of feminist activism in China. For instance, as argued by Wu and Dong (2019) in their analysis of the challenges facing 'made-in-China feminism,' 'the opponent [of the "made-in-China" feminists] is not the state as much as it is the other collectives attempting to set the rules of identity construction in something like a "civil society".' Although there has been research that documents the various rifts and attacks in online feminism in China, the focus is either on cyberbullying from men or misogynist social media posts, or it is mostly descriptive in showing the dynamics or features of the emerging digital feminism in China (Li, 2022; Lu, 2020; Xue & Rose, 2022). A more in-depth inquiry of the possible reasons and far-reaching implications of the observed rifts and attacks is still missing.

This article aims to fill in this gap by analysing two cases showing rifts, attacks, and ostracism observed on *Weibo*, China's most prominent Twitter-like social media platform. The first part of this article discusses these two cases: first, in the digital community that works on or is concerned about feminist issues, individuals who like gay Boys' Love (BL, or *danmei* in Chinese) dramas or novels are labelled as misogynist. Second, feminists who recommend cosmetics are criticised for their efforts to please male chauvinism and consumerism. The second part explores the possible explanations for the observed phenomenon in the Chinese feminist community, referencing the theory of 'scapegoat' and 'toxicant cats' which explains violence within a community through the link between frustration or fear caused by threats outside of a community and persecution or violence within it. Nevertheless, the effect of 'scapegoat,' which embodies the demand for purity or unity of the feminist community, shares core features with the authoritarian regime of attacking invented crises or enemies in pursuit of a pure monolith. Further, the third part argues that the observed rifts embody the transnational aspect of the global resurgence of populism and its significant as well as nuanced influences on rights activism domestically. The article concludes by arguing that respect, not equality, should be the ultimate goal of feminist activism.

METHODOLOGY

The article is focussed on two case studies, which I will now summarise:

'Those Who Read/Watch *Danmei* Are Not Qualified to Do Feminism'

Danmei (literally 'indulging in the beauty' in Chinese or Boys' Love, BL) is widely acknowledged as a transnational subculture which originated in Japan's comics in the 1970s (Liu, 2009). Both the transnational spread of *danmei* from Japan to China and its quick gain of wide popularity in China in the 1990s rely largely on the development of the internet (Chang & Tian, 2021). Also, from its emergence to its popularity in China, the internet, especially several cyberliterature websites such as Jinjiang Literature City (*jinjiang wenxue cheng*) has almost been the sole outlet for its publication. Although the content of *danmei* is gay love stories between men, it is featured as female-centred and female-authored – the statistics show that the ratio of female registered users to male users on the most prominent *danmei* cyberliterature website *Jinjiang* in 2015 was 93:7 (Lian, 2017).

Some research notes that the development of *danmei* literature has generated an ever-expanding identifiable social group with a collective identity called *funü* (literally 'rotten girls') (Ge, 2024). A collective feminist identity has been formed in their countering of the state-backed and officially promoted heteropatriarchal ideologies (Chang & Tian, 2021; Liu, 2009). For one thing, while the Chinese government has labelled *danmei* content as 'abnormal and immoral,' 'obscene' or 'unhealthy' homosexuality with an array of legal and administrative punishments imposed on *danmei* authors and works (Liu, 2009; Ng & Li, 2020), for circumventing the authorities' censorship and ban, the *funü* group has created their own whole set of rules, vocabulary, jargons and even codes in engagements (Jacobs, 2015; Ng & Li, 2020; Zhang, 2016). There is also reportedly a huge 'black market' online for consuming and exchanging *danmei* materials (Zhang, 2016). This, as argued by Welker (2006), constitutes resistance against 'heteronormative paradigm in the exploration of alternatives.' For another, ample qualitative

research on this *funü* group highlights its impacts on emancipation of women and support for same-sex love as well as gender equality. By and large, there are three main arguments in this regard: first, it means female gaze as it empowers women to control the way they compose and interpret the story (Zhang, 2016). According to these scholars, to see or watch (*guankan*) is a form of power – since there is an inequality of power between those who watch and those who are watched, female gaze connotes a conversion of power (Lian, 2017). This female gaze generates two further significant overlaps between *danmei* and feminism. For one thing, it is female inquisitiveness about sex as *danmei* embodies a 'love for love's sake' relationship as its core which not only challenges the shackle of reproduction imposed on women but also reflects women's desire for equality, freedom and independence in a relationship (Chang & Tian, 2021; Lian, 2017; Zhang, 2016). For another, the writing of *danmei*, ranging from some of its protagonists as men traditionally viewed negatively as 'physically weak' or 'sissy' to its sexual expression fulfilling women's passion in sex and eroticising 'the bottom' is argued as an 'escape' or even 'subversion' of the current gender hierarchy and stereotype (Jacobs, 2015; Liu, 2009). In this sense, *danmei* and the *funü* identity are characterised as a feminist counterculture in China (Saito, 2011).

These key features of *danmei* entail its unique and prominent role in the emerging online feminist community. Debates over the relationship between *danmei* or *funü* and feminism have also started to go viral on social media platforms (Fakunle & Hernandez Delgado, 2026). A close-up of the debates, rifts, and 'justifications' resorted to by those claiming or attempting to weed out the fans of *danmei* or *funü* from the feminist community finds that, unlike the derogation or attacks launched by the Chinese authorities that primarily target *danmei*'s depiction of same-sex love relationships, those within the online feminist community focus on the nature and feature of misogynist attitudes of *danmei* and *funü*. Misogyny is also employed as the main basis for the campaign-style slogan of 'those who read/watch *danmei* are not qualified to do feminism.' For instance, in many discussions on China's three major social media platforms including *Weibo*, *Zhihu* and *Douban*, the criticisms center mostly on *danmei*'s depiction of only men as protagonists and accuse this feature as 'consuming male sex appeal' (*nanse xiaofei*). Thus, according to the criticisms, *danmei* in essence is for women's 'voyeuristic interest in a youthful and sexy male body' and leads to the objectification of male and gays. Also, as *danmei* idols from popular *danmei* novels or TV series produce a culture of *funü* and a fanatical consumption of products related to *danmei* works, it is merely another 'pitfall of consumerism' (Ng & Li, 2020). Some in the feminist community also criticised the role of women in many *danmei* stories – since women are often depicted as either bystanders or even worse, villains as barriers for the male protagonists' relationship. In some *danmei* works, female roles were deliberately created or altered from male roles in the original scripts to add heterosexual content that fits in with the officially promoted patriarchal norms as the writers or directors' method to circumvent the Chinese authorities' censorship or ban on *danmei*. Significantly, many feminists view this way as a 'betrayal' or 'conflict' of *danmei* or *funü* concerning feminism or feminist activism in an authoritarian regime. For these reasons, the online debates are urging those who like *danmei* to be disqualified as feminists and excluded from the feminist community. Facing the rifts and ostracism, many *danmei* fans expressed their frustration or upset and claimed to leave the feminist community and discussions on feminist issues on social media platforms.

'Those who promote cosmetics are not qualified to do feminism'

In China's web-based feminist community, one of the most sensational incidents surrounding the debates over cosmetics may be the attacks online and offline against Liang Yu and some of her supporters. Liang became well-known and influential in the field of women's rights in China during the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 for her successful efforts on social media to collect and provide badly needed sanitary pads for female medical workers across the country (Xue & Ross, 2022). The key dynamic of digital feminism is exemplified by the efforts and success of Liang and her team during the tight lockdown, namely, offline activism is initiated and sparked by the voices and concerns shared by a large number of strangers on the internet. Liang and her team kept up their activities with the extensive attention and support they received in this activism. For instance, they later provided free sanitary pads for girls living in China's economically underdeveloped areas and collaborated with over 100 colleges and universities for a 'women helping women' initiative by placing sanitary pads in washrooms on campus (Zhao, 2020). However, in May 2020, Liang's *Weibo* postings promoting a foundation brand led to a wave of criticism and attacks against her, her team, and netizens who support or simply not oppose her. By and large, Liang was particularly criticised for commodifying and consuming feminism. She was even given the negative label of 'business feminism' (Li, 2022).

In the discussions and debates about the relationship between feminism and cosmetics surrounding the Liang Yu matter, there are voices that can be seen as mainly expressing different opinions. Those criticisms may be summarised as catering to the patriarchal requirement on women, aggravating women's anxiety about appearance, and likewise, a pitfall of consumerism. The criticisms are neither unique in China nor fresh, since cosmetics have widely and long been viewed as existing at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy (Bartky, 1982; Bordo, 1993). The beauty industry was also in the spotlight of the debates between second wave and third wave feminism. For

instance, as maintained by de Beauvoir (1953) in *The Second Sex*, feminine accoutrements such as 'high heels, corsets, hoops… were meant less to accentuate the woman's body's curves than to increase the body's powerlessness…Makeup and jewels were also used for this petrification of the body and face.' Since makeup is often associated with sexualisation which is profoundly framed by and linked to social context and gender-based rules, many scholars in the field – some belonging to the second-wave feminism – argue that wearing make-up, women subject themselves to the male gaze and attempt to gain benefits or power from the patriarchal system by conforming to the oppressive and disciplinary rules (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2021). Moreover, according to the Objectification Theory, cosmetics objectify women by treating them as objects to be judged and endorsed by others following gender-based rules, which in turn internalises an observer's perspective or the male gaze on the self – that is, cosmetics contribute to women's self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Twenge, 1998). Global third-wave feminism has challenged viewpoints as such and proposed a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to makeup. For instance, both 'choice feminism' and 'lipstick feminism' highlight women's individual choices in it as well as their pleasure, enjoyment, and self-expression as an important extension of individual freedom (Lauren & Drenten, 2021). Some also show women's employment of cosmetics as a form of resistance in, for example, deliberately bending the rules, or transforming the given meaning of makeup (Cahill, 2003; Dellinger & Williams, 1997). Significantly, these feminists argue that rather than taking women simply as passive victims or 'cultural dopes of oppressive patriarchal regimes' being imposed on and thus confirming to gendered rules and expectations, we need to recognise women as 'knowledgeable agents faced by asymmetrical power relationships' (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). In sum, by seeing women's agency, third-wave feminists propose to critically examine the relationship between cosmetics and feminism as conveying possibilities of both oppression and empowerment, while some others question women's 'choice' prior to a radical change in the patriarchal system (Mann, 2005).

However, in China's online feminist community, the rifts or divisions go far beyond debates, arguments, disagreements, or divergences as such. Many of the voices against Liang and her team may be characterised as personal attacks and verbal abuses, advocating for the removal of Liang and her supporters from the feminist community. Liang's *Weibo* announcement of joining the Chinese Communist Party (hereinafter the Party) was adding fuel to the fire since this made many further label Liang as an extreme nationalist and blind to the systematic or structural problems causing gender inequality in China. Then, Liang and her colleagues or supporters were labelled as 'state feminism,' which means they 'alienated other feminists' and 'reproduced the binary of legitimate state feminism and dangerous grassroots feminist dissidents' (Li, 2022). Accordingly, there was a surge of calls in the online feminist community to remove Liang and her colleagues and supporters from feminism in the name of defending feminist activism and activists since they were 'not qualified to do feminism' (*bu pei gao nüquan*) as Party members and cosmetics promotors.

Perhaps the most prominent and noteworthy aspect of the 'fight against Liang' is the proactive participation of multiple well-established and renowned feminists, including Lü Pin, who was identified by quite a few netizens as the leader of the (grassroots) feminist activism in China or a symbol of 'orthodox feminism' (*zhengtong nüquan*) and feminist dissidents. For one thing, Lü posted various essays articulating Liang's disqualification and ineligibility for being recognised as a feminist, as well as the far-reaching and fundamental harms that Liang would bring to the feminist community and advocacy in China. For example, in two articles Lü published immediately after Liang's *Weibo* post announcing her joining the Party, Lü (2021a) criticised Liang for 'betraying what is intrinsically vital to feminists: i.e., a non-official, non-institutional, ever critical and defiant stance' and also 'splitting and collapsing the feminist community,' thus pushing the feminists who insist on independence and resistance into a politically insecure zone'. Lü (2021a) then urged all feminists to 'be aware of the significant harm that Liang's actions have caused the feminist community and to draw the line of justice as a feminist.' Liang and her team's success in providing menstrual hygiene products was also attacked as 'political opportunism' for personal gain (Lü, 2021a; Lü, 2021b; Yu, 2021). Along with the escalation of such rifts, many who were active in the online feminist community or netizens taking part in online feminist activism were asked to 'pick a side' – to align with Lü (or not support Liang), while some individuals who did not follow this were enlisted, exposed online, had their social media accounts reported to authorities for removal, and were reportedly subjected to assaults and cyber-violence. Even worse, it was further reported on multiple *Weibo* posts that some netizens had their private information dug up and were then subjected to different forms of harassment both online and offline. Such rifts and ostracism have indeed pressured many to delete their social media accounts and remain silent, in addition to the various troubles reported in life resulting from the leak and spread of privacy and other information. Facing such rifts observed in the emerging online feminist community, some criticised Lü and her colleagues or supporters as 'masters of identifying true or qualified feminists' (*jian nüquan dashi*). And Liang, faced with a wave of attacks in the online feminist community, finally announced on social media that she is withdrawing from feminism. (Zeng & Sabi, 2021).

In a nutshell, in the observed rifts surrounding cosmetics, when feminism is connected to certain qualifications (such as not being a member of the Party or opting out of cosmetics), attacks, ostracism and expelling took place in the feminist community and activism. A feminist activist who was subjected to such ostracism and attacks shared her experiences and feelings:

> *G asked me to 'withdraw from the feminist circle' and 'stop posing as a feminist activist.' But what is the 'feminist circle'? I never applied for 'joining the feminist circle' and there is no membership roster of the 'feminist circle.' Then how can I withdraw from it? I have just been focusing on the issues I care about and doing what makes sense to me. To 'withdraw from the feminist circle' would seem to erase my values, my social networks, and my entire way of life. Those predecessors who I thought were the most courageous and respected greatly have revealed such a dark and mean side of themselves: habitually speculating their peers maliciously, attacking, and crowding out those they do not like. Now I realise that there is no need for coercive force or explicit rules and regulations to form a power structure. This is not gossip or a scrap of the social movement; this is the social movement itself. (Yu, 2024).*

SCAPEGOATS OR 'TOXICANT CATS' - TARGETING IN ONLINE FEMINIST COMMUNITIES

Debates and disagreements on any feminist topics are not the concern of this article. Rather, this article argues that the rifts, polarised views, and ostracism-styled attacks, as well as the online and offline acts aimed at or calling for depriving one of the so-called 'qualification to do feminism', plus the aim to wipe out those considered to be 'aliens' or 'dissidents' from the feminist community, embeds the characteristics of 'scapegoats' or 'toxicant cats' (*duyao mao*) that are shaped or influenced by the authoritarian regime in China. The conception and theory of 'scapegoat' in understanding collective violence is not novel. René Girard (1982) articulated the mechanism of scapegoating as transcultural and universal for analysing the dynamics of collective violence in a society or community. According to the scapegoating framework contended by Girard (1982), when there was a social and cultural crisis, some stereotypical accusations were made against the victims of certain categories which led to collective violence. Regarding the selection of victim, Girard (1972) pointed out the signs of first, physical or moral differences from the rest of the group, and second, not be indispensable to the survival of the group – thus, destroying the scapegoats could make the group believe that they have eliminated the crisis or stain imperiling the group and themselves. Scapegoating is utilised to restore harmony to the community and strengthen the social fabric (Muller, 2021). Douglas (2003) described the process of scapegoating within a society or group as 'essentially a process of purification' in which fear of being contaminated by the transgressions was 'the propelling motivation to seek ways of allaying imminent peril' and 'dispersing that contamination. According to Douglas (2003), in the response to threat or crisis, scapegoating, i.e., 'setting up another to take the blame,' was a deflection technique as 'the impact of a common threat can be so powerful that it overrides even very strong negative feelings and prejudices' and could 'deflect past the actual people responsible for problems and have it placed on others.' Specifically, drawing upon various examples, Douglas (2003) illustrated that when group members thought that their groups would be in substantial difficulties 'unless something was done,' they scapegoated a member of the groups for making this group member to 'bear the blame for all that was going wrong.' This process of scapegoating could then serve the function of maintaining the group (Douglas, 2003). Also, Douglas echoed Girard in stressing 'difference' in the selection of a scapegoat/victim. As argued by Douglas (2003), difference' of a member means 'either more of some characteristic or less of it than the majority of their peers' and it can 'quickly become the focus of fear, dislike, prejudice and ultimately of victimization. By and large, the conception of 'scapegoat' provides a useful and forceful framework to understand the relationship and interaction between what happened outside of a society, community or group (such as external threats and crisis) and what happened within (such as violence and expelling). As poignantly noted by Douglas (2001, p.141) 'When the community is attacked from outside at least the external danger fosters solidarity within. When it is attacked from within by wanton individuals, they can be punished and the structure publicly reaffirmed.'

The theory of scapegoat was referenced by Wang (2021) to explain the violence and aggression seen within the ethnic minority villages in southwestern China. Wang (2021) further proposed a conception of 'toxicant cats' to refer to the 'internal enemy' who is deemed or accused by other groups members as in collusion with the external enemy, who may be more dangerous than scapegoats. In Wang's ethnographic study, 'scapegoats' were innocent people being blamed, and 'toxicant cats' were 'internal enemies,' who were cat demons transformed by women in the villages (i.e., the more vulnerable, marginalised, or minority groups within a community) to cause harm and damage (Wang, 2021). Wang studied the phenomenon of violence against women in the village based on the concept of community identity (*shequn rentong*). For a village as a community, collective activities are significant for moulding and reinforcing a community's identity; while facing threats from outside of the community, the community identity, namely, purity or unity and solidarity of the community would be especially stressed or required for defending against external threats (Wang, 2021). Furthermore, collective activities to eradicate 'toxicant cats,' which were threats or fear around members of the community, could produce the effect of transferring or mitigating the frustration or fear caused by external threats (Wang, 2021). In this sense, the leaders of the community could also exploit such fabricated and imagined internal enemies to strengthen their power and

authority within the community and to consolidate the proclaimed unity or purity of the community (Wang, 2021). Basically, in the mechanism of 'scapegoat,' collective fear stimulated the herd instinct, which tended to fuel ferocity toward those who were not considered members of the herd. Based on the explanation of the mechanisms underlying the observed violence against the deemed 'toxicant cats,' Wang (2021) contended that the demand or pursuit of purity and homogeneity among members within a community was the very root of violence or persecution within a community.

The rifts, ostracism, and attacks observed in China's online feminist community may embed this nexus and interplay between fear towards or caused by the outside or external threats and violence within the community as articulated by Wang. The Chinese authorities' suppression, crackdown, or hostility pose an external threat to the feminist community and activism. The forceful and brutal authoritarian regime's real and imminent threat could lead to an even stronger demand and call for the formation of a pure or unified community identity – as the Chinese human rights defenders often appeal to each other to 'hold together to keep warm' (*bao tuan qunuan*) as a crucial strategy facing the powerful authoritarian regime. The purity or unity of the community identity could then be forged by initiating or mobilising collective activities aiming to eliminate internal 'enemies' (or more often, imaginary 'enemies'). Internal 'enemies' or threats could easily be scapegoated in a suppressing situation. Also, like how and why the village leaders portrayed and labelled the 'toxicant cats' in their village, the leaders or those who are viewed as leaders in the feminist community may enhance or emphasise their dominant or leading roles in the feminist community and activism. Leaders or those who are recognised as leaders have an advantage in speaking the loudest in expelling those deemed internal 'enemies' or threats, such as those who like gay men love stories, promote cosmetics, wear make-up, or join the Party. From a more personal perspective, both the leaders and community members could initiate and participate in such collective activities to combat the 'internal threat,' not just for the purpose of expressing emotions such as anger, frustration, and fear caused by the oppression and suppression of the authoritarian regime, but also, and perhaps more crucially, as a way to make one 'feel the sense of power that comes from having "done something"' – especially, since 'attacking other feminists is easier and the results can be more quickly seen than by attacking amorphous social institutions' (Freeman, 1976).

The attacks, ostracism, and call for 'deprivation of one's qualification to do feminism' could also be viewed as means purported to mould the behaviours and minds of community members. Nevertheless, how to define or identify a feminist? Should it be refraining from wearing cosmetics, not joining the Party, siding with and supporting any feminist leaders, or any other 'qualifications? Or more significantly, who is 'qualified' to provide such definitions or qualifications for a feminist (and then ostracising, expelling, attacking, and weeding out someone who is labelled as 'unqualified')? The general definition of human rights defenders, as stated in Article 1 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, may in itself entail the feature and pursuit of pluralism, inclusivity, and diversity of human rights activism, including activism calling for women's rights and gender equality. Likewise, the scholarly discussions have noted that the web-based feminist community, which is currently emerging in fourth wave feminism worldwide, needs argumentative discussions online and non-hierarchical or no set leaders to thrive (Belvins, 2018).

Research on 'scapegoats' has also noted the trait of authoritarian personality in scapegoaters (Bonikowski, 2017; Salmela & Scheve, 2017; Douglas, 2003). This research further argues that the rifts and ostracism within the online feminist community in China may embody a homogeneity with its external threat, i.e., the authoritarian regime that upholds a monolithic standard or value on gender and sex. In an authoritarian regime, sex is never a private affair or choice; rather, as demonstrated in the Party's policies on sex and sexuality, it is linked with socio-political stability and the Party's legitimacy. As argued by Sigley (2006), since sexual liberalisation is viewed as a forerunner for political liberalisation, the Chinese authorities aim to maintain Party-state authority in the governance and control of sex and sexual relations. The way to achieve this, as conceptualised by Sigley (2006), is 'policing of virtue' – that is, to impose a specific moral order on sexual conducts and sexual relations and to restrict morally acknowledged sexual conducts and sexual relations to monogamous heterosexual unit, i.e., family. Sex and sexuality outside the officially approved context are 'subject to either criminal or administrative sanctions or, in cases such sanctions do not apply to moral condemnation' (Sigley, 2006).

Under the mechanism of 'scapegoats' or 'toxicant cats,' the external threats or troubles facing the feminist community, i.e., the crackdown and suppression by the Chinese authorities, may trigger the motivation or appeal to purify and unify a collective identity through instigating or mobilising collective activities aiming at excluding or diminishing the internal 'enemies' (or imaginary enemies). However, the observed scapegoating in China's online feminist community has shown an inherent homogeneity with its external enemy, i.e., the authoritarian regime, in embracing the sex hierarchy defined and controlled by the authoritarian regime, which lacks sexual variation (Rubin, 2007). For instance, regarding cosmetics, women who do not wear them are considered 'good women' as desexualised socialist comrades according to the Maoist definition of women (He, 2021). That is to say, those 'scapegoats' in the online feminist community are subjected to dual suppression for the alleged monolithic standards or values by both the authoritarian regime and the authoritarian 'leaders' and peers within the

community. In this sense, the rifts, attacks, and ostracism as shown in China's online feminist community may imply the importance for civil society to be vigilant about the possible influence of the authoritarian regime under the influence of the mechanism of scapegoating since 'the one who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon themselves.'

THE INTERWEAVING OF THE RESURGENCE OF POPULISM AS GLOBAL POLITICS AND DOMESTIC RIGHTS ACTIVISMS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The rifts, ostracism, and attacks embodying the mechanism and process of scapegoating were intended to forge or maintain a pure and unified feminist community. This article argues that this effect or feature of 'toxicant cats' or 'scapegoats' observed in China's online feminist community suggests a connection between the resurgence of populism worldwide and rights activism domestically. By suggesting a link with populism and taking into account the abundant discussions and debates surrounding the definition of populism, this article adopts the points made by Müller (2016) regarding the core feature of populism, which is, a moralised form of anti-pluralism presuming or hankering after the 'ideal people,' who are morally pure and holistic. There has been research investigating populism drawing upon the mechanism of scapegoating. Social psychology research indicates that it is humans' basic tendency to form identities in relation to groups and to 'construct the social world in terms of "in-groups" and "out-groups"' (Obradovic et al., 2020). The common identity of 'us' is defined first, the shared grievances perceived to be facing the in-group and second, scapegoating others accused to be responsible for those grievances (Obradovic et al., 2020). When frustration or grievances, originating from socio-political and socio-economic problems arise, an exclusive 'us' is constructed by populist parties in mobilizing collective emotions blaming out-group scapegoats through stressing the status concerns (Obradovic et al., 2020). For example, in the people/elite antagonism, the 'inauthentic,' 'alienated,' and 'bad' elites are scapegoated as the cause of the problems threatening the identity and life of the 'pure', 'ordinary,' and 'virtuous' people (Wojczewski, 2020). In this sense, scapegoating serves as a tool for the propagation of populism as it creates a justification for the creation of outsiders and for the hate speech and prejudice then directed against them (Muller, 2021). Furthermore, scapegoating is discussed by some scholars as the 'emotional root' of populism. In times of crisis when emotions such as resentment, anger, feelings of insecurity, powerlessness and fear of *déclassement* are escalating, those perceived out-groups with different values, attitudes and practices are scapegoated by populist parties for the in-group members' unwanted and undeserving situation (Mancin, 2021; Salmela & Scheve, 2017).

Although currently, populism is mostly researched in the context of democratic settings, multiple scholars have noticed the recent rise of populism among ordinarily netizens on the internet in China. For instance, Chenchen Zhang (2017) observed the heated discussions of Chinese netizens about the 'white leftists' (in 'Western countries') where they mostly derogated or demonised 'white leftists' for their 'weak and feeble' approach towards non-white immigrants or refugees. Drawing upon a qualitative analysis of online postings, Zhang (2020) further pinpointed racial nationalism (manifesting in racism, nativism and Islamophobia) and realist authoritarianism (manifesting in authoritarianism, *realpolitik* and social Darwinism) as the core features of such online debates over both international affairs and domestic socio-economic structures, which, according to Zhang, illustrate the interconnection of populism and authoritarianism in China. Yang and Fang (2021), based also on a qualitative enquiry of *Weibo* postings, spotlighted two key features, namely, invented common crisis of majority culture and transnational metaphor usage in China's *Weibo* postings, that show 'fusions between local and global issues.' According to Yang and Fang (2021), the internet, as a digital channel, carries unique advantages in facilitating such fusions, which helped 'partly explain the rise of the global alt-right phenomenon.' Chen (2021), by examining the fanatical, large-scale and swiftly mobilised attacks waged by those characterised by Chen as 'extremist nationalists' online, contended that such activities and groups exhibit the most fundamental feature of populism, which was, as argued by Müller, anti-pluralism. These nationalists forged a collective identity as patriots and proclaimed this identity as the sole right value while attacking and ostracising those who were identified by them as morally based 'hating-China party' (*hen guo dang*) (Chen, 2021). It confirms to what Müller (2016) refers to as the 'logic of populism,' which is, a moralistic imagination of politics advocating for 'morally pure and fully unified.' Interestingly, these scholarly works indicate that the observed rise of populism among Chinese netizens may also be influenced by the authoritarian regime which attempts to forcibly eliminate all other values except those officially approved as orthodox ones such as 'loving your motherland' (Chen, 2021; Zhang, 2020).

The impacts of populism on China's human rights community or civil society have also been discussed by multiple scholars. For example, Lin (2021) explored the complexity of the Chinese liberal intellectuals, in particular the rifts caused by the 'Trumpian metamorphosis' in the group of liberal intellectuals. In sum, Lin attributed those liberal intellectuals' hostility towards the 'pickier and pickier political correctness' held by those dubbed 'white leftist' (*baizuo*) and idolisation of Donald Trump to these liberal intellectuals' idealisation of an imaged United States as a 'near-perfect political society.' And they held that Trump's hardline stance towards the Chinese Communist Party fit in their anti-Party agenda, which was, according to Lin (2021), their paranoia about 'the Fall

of Western Civilization' caused by non-white immigrants and Muslim – who were deemed as 'inferior barbarian forces.' Pils (2021) elaborated on the rifts and schisms among human rights lawyers in China and argued that the feelings of being marginalised (within the community of lawyers and even within the community of human rights lawyers) and of being abandoned (for the frustration in obtaining resources of the international community) drove some human rights lawyers closer and closer to the conservative political viewpoints. As pointed out further by Pils (2021), with the awareness of the interweaving of China's domestic affairs and the international political development, the conservative human rights defenders showed views or positions supporting populism as it started to gain strengthen globally, especially following Donald Trump's populist politics. Significantly and alarmingly, these conservative human rights lawyers challenged the very idea of human rights in, for example, articulating racial or misogynistic expressions and the goal of human rights activism (Pils, 2021).

The existing discussions about the impacts of populism on a human rights or civil society group in China do not touch directly upon the concept of scapegoat. The mechanism of scapegoating, which may be identified as the root of populism, can also happen and be exploited within a group or community — even a rights activism group or community – like René Girard has stressed, the 'scapegoating impulse' is universal and adheres to the same broad contours 'across all cultures and social orders' (Muller, 2021). This phenomenon may indicate that, in the era of network and social media, domestic human rights and civil society communities or groups are closely connected with and greatly influenced by international politics such as the resurgence of populism today. This may be a trend that requires continued attention and further studies.

CONCLUSION

This article, referring to the micro-political analytical framework of 'scapegoating' sheds light on the complex and nuanced interweaving between the authorities and civil society in an authoritarian regime and examines how authoritarian power may reach and influence civil society. Authoritarian authorities pose external threats that may cause or worsen the impact of scapegoating. Collective calls or actions that were intended or proclaimed to create a 'pure' community, which also represent the fusion between the rise of populism as international politics and ever-deepening authoritarian rules as domestic politics, would ultimately cause further rifts in the feminist community.

This phenomenon can be particularly alarming when there is a convergence of anti-pluralism and populism in an authoritarian regime nowadays. For instance, although there always are official restrictions on homosexual culture materials as cultural products are taken by the Chinese authorities to mainly serve a pedagogical purpose (Ng & Li, 2020; Sigley, 2006), in September 2021, China's National Radio and Television Administration issued an ever-draconian Notice on the entertainment industry which expressly requires the entire industry to 'resolutely ban the feminisation of men, or "sissy" (*niang pao*) and other abnormal aesthetics (*jixing shenmei*),' 'resolutely resist money worship, "sissy," "*danmei*" and other unhealthy culture (*buliang wenhua*)', and to 'adopt political stance and virtue as the criteria for casting' (Up Media, 2021). Soon after this Notice, more popular *danmei* novels and dramas were removed from the internet. Also, consumerism, as closely associated with capitalism, has been under an ever-fierce attack as China's President Xi Jinping announced to achieve the goal of 'common prosperity' in the country in August 2021. Nevertheless, as commented by many China observers, by highlighting how high-income individuals and private enterprises should give back to society mostly through charities rather than addressing the structural economic problems while facing deepening social inequality, Xi's claim of common prosperity is essentially a 'pro-poor gesture to nurture and exploit the rising populism' (Hofman, 2021; Taplin & Wong, 2021). In China today, there has been increasing discontent and opposition among workers and young people, which could lead to widespread social unrest. By and large, when authoritarianism domestically and populism globally are interconnected and interweaved, the influence of the state on civil society and rights activism can become more complex and nuanced, which needs our further study and continuous alert.

By examining the relationships or interplays between the global rising of populism, the intensifying authoritarianism, and the rifts in the online feminist community in China, this article proposes two additional arguments. For one thing, the recognised identity of civil society or human rights activism should not be the grounds for shunning or immunising people from a critical examination. As shown in this paper, emphasising the singularity of identity, which diminishes the diversity of groups and individuals in a community, is inherently consistent with the authoritarian regime's suppression of feminist activists' dissident voices. Accordingly, this article further suggests that equality is not the ultimate end in the activism fighting for gender equality. Rather, by introducing respect as the ultimate goal, as argued by Harry Frankfurt, the feminist movement needs to attend to the circumstances of specific individuals, which focuses on 'genuine self-definition and self-determination' by respecting each person as an end *per se* (Munro, 2007). It is argued by some scholars that the potential threat of pursuing equality as the ultimate goal is the 'comfort of commonality, the promise of impartiality, and too much of "*the same*"' (Munro, 2007). This point also echoes Jo Freeman's reflection on the 'trashing' campaigns in women's rights movements that she experienced and witnessed — that is, 'the Movement's worship of egalitarianism is so strong that it has become confused with sameness' and 'women who remind us that we are not all the same are

trashed because their differentness is interpreted as meaning we are not all equal' (Freeman, 1976). By taking respect as the goal, equality is argued as a precursor or means for providing women with equal empowerment and entitlement to self-determination, and should be 'read through, and in relation to' other vital values such as respect, dignity, responsibility, and care (Munro, 2007). All in all, this article argues that, only by taking each individual seriously as an end in themself and respecting each individual's agency, instead of as a means to accomplish the shared objective of equality with a pure or monolithic identity, can the feminist movement, and more broadly, civil society activism in the authoritarian regime, repel the potential or subtle influence of the authoritarian power and create an online space that thrives as respectful and diverse, and that values equality and human rights for each and for all.

Ethical statement

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Author contributions

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N/A

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