

Project Description

Crystal Zhang

My project is a research paper analysing direct and indirect interventions of Chinese government on internet through a feminist lense. Chinese Government has firm control on Chinese internet not only through blocking, censorship, deleting, but also through government owned newspapers and companies. I analyze how these interventions result in the general public's misperceptions and lack of understanding on feminism in China through two case studies.

The following paper is a mostly complete draft that needs further work on abstract, conclusion, precision, and apa format.

The Direct and Indirect Intervention of Chinese Government on Media to Feminism Issues

Crystal Zhang

“There are no feminism issues in China,” a Chinese classmate claimed in a lecture of introduction to feminist studies when the professor asked on opinions on gender roles, “my mother is the decision maker in the household.” I was quite surprised to hear such a claim, even though it should not be such a surprise for me. After all, before I came to America, my understanding of feminist issues in China was restricted to desire for a male child and obsession with lineage. Before Minguo, Chinese men can have multiple wives if they fulfill the class and financial requirement which varies in different dynasties. If the main wife is unable to bear a male child before the branch ones, people will see her as lacking “morality.” Many key concepts in ancient China such as family, dynasty, and lineage are all tangled with sexist discrimination. Lineage has been a crucial part in Chinese culture, philosophy and society. Only male descendants can pass down the lineage because children follow their fathers’ last names, while female descendants “belong” to the male households after the marriage.

While many ancient exercises of sexism are long abolished by the law, many literature pieces and the stereotypes live on though. One of the important part of Chinese literature class is on articles and poetry written in ancient Chinese (文言文). The government determines the content of mandatory textbooks for every province. Instead of discussing their advantages and limits through critical thinking, we are told to memorize their meanings and standard answers on why they are masterpieces. Due to their time period, the renowned authors are mostly male, and the few female authors’ work are often romance-centered. Many articles enforce gender stereotypes as they

praise women for their obedience and sensitivity, and men for their strength and bravery. For example, Confucianism has a huge presence in our textbooks both directly as abstracts and indirectly through works in that dynasty. There are many stereotypes in Confucianism such as gentlemen should not be close to the kitchen and good women should help their husbands and teach their kids. Despite its sexism, our textbooks only speak positively about Confucianism.

The government's strong control over educational materials results in low level awareness of feminism results in a low level of awareness of feminism, and many feminists' voices are unable to reach the general public. For instance, the lineage problem always comes up first in discussion of feminisms, and in a way, completely overshadows other aspects of feminism such as gender stereotypes, microaggressions, and LGBTQ issues. The public opinions online generally express ignorance and distaste over “minor” feminism criticisms that are not directly related to lineage problems or life-threatening. For example, many parents in rural areas prioritize the boys' education over girls regardless of their grades. Once, a girl asked for help on Zhihu, the Chinese Quora, since her admission letter was destroyed by her parents to save money for her brother. People encouraged and helped the girl to find a way to support herself while criticizing her parents. On the other hand, feminists criticizing a keyboard company which only provides additional prizes for male customers faced negative feedback. The dominant reaction was that the keyboard company is just doing business, and feminists are being over-dramatic and aggressive with a “minor” matter.

My research project will highlight how the Chinese government, through direct and indirect interventions, sways the public opinion and creates obstacles for Chinese feminists. In

this paper, I will first define and categorize direct intervention and indirect intervention of the Chinese government on the internet. Through two cases, this paper will examine how the direct and indirect interventions of Chinese government online creates misconceptions and prejudices in the general public which become huge obstacles in Chinese feminists' resistance. The first case focuses more on direct intervention through analysing news coverage, restrictions, and feedback on the "Feminist Five" and their protest. The second case focuses more on indirect intervention with government-owned newspapers advocating for DiDi's sexist policies and speaking against feminists.

Defining Terms: Direct and Indirect Intervention

Direct intervention is when Chinese government censors or blocks certain contents on the Chinese internet. In China, the communist party is the only party and exerts a firm control on all aspects of China. One of the intervention methods is the great firewall of China, a combination of legislative actions and technologies that block access to certain foreign websites. Countless foreign websites including Google, Facebook, and Twitter are not accessible to Chinese people unless they use virtual private network (VPN) to bypass the firewall. In addition, the government also censors certain sensitive words so if people try to send a message including these words, it will be automatically deleted or these words becomes "***". For example, when Chinese people refer to Jinping Xi, the president of China, on social media posts, they use nicknames or abbreviations, or the post will be blocked or unable to send depending on the website. Furthermore, the government selectively deletes popular posts and articles when they want to suppress certain events' visibility.

Indirect intervention is when the Chinese government manipulates the media and therefore public opinion in ways that are more tacit or subtle. If the internet is a maze, and the direct intervention turns off certain areas' lights to make some paths harder to find, then the indirect intervention put up a signboard to lead the confused people on the path that the government wants. In China, companies exceeding a certain size all need to set a primary-level party organization, which offers guidelines to the companies' decisions, especially those related to publicity. In the Constitution of the Communist Party of China, Article 30 states that companies, schools, and other organizations need to form a primary-level party organization if they have three or more full party members. Since more than 6.5% of Chinese population are full party members, most companies are under the effect of this article. Though there are many newspapers, the most influential ones are all state owned such as Xinhua News Agency and China News Service. Another form of indirect intervention is direct response or lack of response of Chinese government to direct the media flow.

Case 1: From “Occupy Men's Toilet” to “Feminist Five”

In February, 2012, Guangzhou, China group of female college students started a protest called “occupy men's toilet” in Yuexiu Park. They tried to demonstrate the unequal wait time between male and female restrooms and call for a 1:2 distribution in public restroom designs. They gathered before the public restroom of Yuexiu Park, persuaded women to borrow men's bathrooms instead of waiting in line, and explained their reasonings to men. Both chinese and foreign media reported this protest, but they emphasized different things.

Baike is like the Chinese *Wikipedia* but with more authority, and it portrays the incident with different focus compared to the *Wall Street Journal*. The word choice and content of *Baike* shows the indirect intervention of the Chinese government. Two articles portray responses of the general public, especially the male audiences, very differently. In *Baike*, the general public are very supportive and understanding. While some are doubtful and dissatisfied, *Baike* shifts the focus away from the conflict. For example, when it talks about “some men are frustrated because they want to go to the bathroom,” the description stops at the way protestors respond, “politely explain and let them wait just a few minutes before letting them in.” There is no follow up explaining whether these men are satisfied with this solution. *The Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, focuses on the negative response and the conflict between sides a lot. It describes *Sina Weibo* as “been ablaze with comments on the "Occupy the men's bathroom" movement, some of them delighted, others more chagrined.” The article draws attention to negative internet receptions such as “‘People are occupying Wall Street,’ quipped one *Weibo* user writing under the handle Teacher KY. ‘You're occupying toilets. What a loss of face.’”

The *Baike* and the *Wall Street Journal* also focus on different aspects of the government and law. In the *Wall Street Journal*, the article mentions relevant laws in Hong Kong and US to show the rationality of these activists’ demand, as “the ratio of male to female public toilet space currently stands at 1:1.5” in Hong Kong, and “at least 21 states and municipalities in the U.S. have passed similar laws” since 1987. In *Baike*, policies of other countries are not mentioned at all. Instead, it only includes a comment from Jingting Ke, a supporter of the protest and professor from Zhongshan University, “policies on increasing the female to male bathroom ratio are still in the discussion phrase”. However, just before this section, *Baike* describes how lawmakers in

Guangzhou had already passed similar proposals on increasing the female to male bathroom ratio. I would argue that Baike is indirectly invalidating the cause of the protest which will be explored more in the next paragraph.

The movement is partially successful as many cities including Guangzhou expand the area and facilities of women's toilets in 2017. However, there is a lack of recognition of feminists' contribution to this law change. *The People's Daily*, a party newspaper and the largest newspaper in China, has more than ten news articles when searching on bathroom ratio, and none of them mentions "occupy men's toilet". While it praises the decision on adjusting the ratio of male to female public toilet as "for women's welfare," it ignores the feminist activism that led to this change. I would argue that the government agrees with the demand behind "occupy men's toilet", but does not agree with the movement itself. In 2018 (more accurate start date), there is a popular rumor on Weibo about protesters of "occupy men's toilet" trying to destroy things in men's toilets due to anger at lack of approval from the government. Even though the government did respond to demands from "occupy men's toilet", none of the government accounts tried to clear the rumor. Furthermore, many readers believed the rumor as there is little to no visibility on the connection between the protest and the law change and the common perception of protest equals violence.

In my opinion, one of the reasons that the government tries to diminish the influence of "occupy men's toilet" is the sensitive nature of protest and movement in China. Through indirect interventions such as manipulation of words and the absence of consequences, the government avoids giving protests too much attention. In Baike, On Baike and other Chinese news, the protest is marked as a performative art. Technically, protest is listed as a right of Chinese

citizens. However protesters must apply for authorization, which requires tedious procedure and is rarely successful. Without authorization, protestors can be arrested. How Chinese media avoid using words such as protest is a form of indirect intervention, since it erases the idea of protest and minimizes the effect of already occurred protests. In similar fashion, no Chinese news mention that Li, the starter of “occupy men's toilet”, was told not to leave Beijing for two weeks by police. The police put a travel ban on “promotional and recreational” airplane flights within 200 kilometers of Tiananmen Square for main organizers of the protest. Such testimonies are nonexistent on any news or discussions in 2012, and Mai, one of the lead organizers, only mentions her meeting with Beijing police vaguely in an article six years later.

In March, 2015, organizers of “occupy men's toilet” wanted to do a protest on sexual harassment on international women’s day, and got arrested the night before the protest. They were released due to international pressure after 37 days of imprisonment. This case gained international awareness and the women became known as the “Feminist Five”. However, there was little national news coverage except one official statement from Huanqiu.com in China. When searching “feminist five” with both Chinese and English on Google, many results such as news, commentaries and papers pop up with details and timelines of this event. However, when doing the same search on Baidu, there are only eight actual relevant results when searching with Chinese, two with English, and two of the links become unavailable when click on them. Similarly, when the feminist five were released, none of the Chinese media reported on their release or details on the investigation process. Only the police released a statement that claims that these “five people [were] released due to legal process, not international pressure.” Since

there were little chinese news on “feminist five”, and the government banned articles that express support and solidarity, this is mostly direct intervention.

To strengthen the effect of the direct intervention, the state-owned Huanqiu.com published an article as indirect intervention. The article is titled “upholding feminism is not a pass for protest on the street freely”, but its central argument is western media is twisting the truth for malicious reasons. This statement is a combination of direct and indirect intervention. The article only comments on the arrest briefly, which is they are still investigating without any context or details. The focus quickly derails to how “the western media use ‘human rights’ as an excuse’ to propaganda against Chinese government before releasing the details of the arrest.” This piece serves as an indirect intervention to redirect the public's attention, but the redirection only works because of the heavy censorship in direct intervention of China. For example, in the article, it mentions how Hillary “[asked] for the ‘immediate release’ of five people” which “increase the popularity of denouncing [the Chinese government]”. While it is technically true, the hashtag of “releasing the feminist five” is on twitter, which is blocked by the Great Firewall. The general public in China is unable to see any other voices, and therefore, unable to counter argue. Then, the government lowered the visibility of the case by being silent. “The western media are interviewing the lawyers of defendants before the Chinese government releases relevant information” is an argument in the article. This claim is rather absurd since the Chinese government never releases so called relevant information since this article. However, the lack of coverage on the incident does result in ignorance of the general public on this matter. Even after the release of feminist five, they are closely monitored, and only one of them still has an active account on weibo, a huge social media platform in China, and others’ have been censored.

Case 2: Controversy on DiDi's Taxi Rules

In August, 2018, Peichen Zhao was raped and murdered on a DiDi taxi. DiDi is a taxi platform similar to Uber, and it temporarily stopped its service to ensure female passengers' safety, since Zhao wasn't the first victim on DiDi. The newspaper reported more than fifty incidents of sexual assault, robbery, and rape prior to the murder of Zhao. When DiDi resumed its service, there was a policy change on the service time of taxis. For male users, the service closes at 11pm, and for female users, the service closes at 9pm. DiDi claimed that the difference in service time is for the protection of female users, but the claim induced a huge backlash from female users. Therefore, DiDi changed their policy again so that male users' service time ended at 9pm as well. After the second policy change, the news coverage mostly speaks negatively towards feminists who spoke against the first policy change. The indirect intervention of Chinese government factors largely in it.

Many articles and commentaries from official government websites speak against the feminists and support DiDi's initial decision. An article from Chinacourt, the official website representing courthouses of China, argues that DiDi did not intend to discriminate against women, and the public should not only blame the company. The article argues that feminists make things worse off for everyone since now men's service hours are shortened, too. The article implies the actions of feminists is the cause of this unfavorable result under the disguise of a neutral commentary. While the title says the company is not solely to blame, the entire article centers around DiDi's importance and contribution to society, and feminists' "overreaction". Similarly, XingJing News argues that "a feminist lens is not the right way to discuss the rules of

DiDi”. These articles all serve as indirect intervention, since they are influential state-owned news. By shifting the focus and blame, many readers, especially male users who are affected by the second policy change, direct their anger towards feminists.

These indirect interventions cleverly shifts the focus away from how absurd and unreasonable the service time gap is. Though protection of the female users is the most common excuses in the news, they forgot or intentionally ignored why people believed female users required protection - the murder of Zhao. The murder of Zhao did not happen during the time gap, 9-11pm, it happened at 3pm. The negligence of DiDi staff and failures of background check was the reason for the service adjustment, and it can not be solved by restricting women’s service time.

In addition, constant emphasis on how women need protection further enhances the stereotype of weak women needing rescue. However, before the murder of Zhao, the murderer Yuan Zhong was already reported by his prior female customers. One of the female customer reported to DiDi on how zhong attempt to sexual assault her, but DiDi did not respond to this report. Similarly, Zhao send “help” to her friends on Wechat before her murder, but DiDi refused to provide information on Zhong. These victims all made efforts of resistance, and it is the negligence of the platform that resulted in such tragedy. The framing of helpless women need protection by restricting their service is not only illogical, but also insulting to efforts of women who tried to call attention sexual assault issue of DiDi long before the murder.

The CEO of DiDi, Qin Liu made an announcement on Weibo after the policy change to answer for the criticism. It mainly talks about how “people’s criticism is received” and though DiDi is “not very convenient to young women”, “please give them more time” to make it safer.

In the first sentence, Liu addresses her identity as a successful female worker by saying “myself as an experienced female white collar”. While the identity as a women is not a free pass from gender discrimination, it is a common misconception of many readers without knowledge on feminism that a woman can not discriminate women. However, the previous manager of DiDi ride sharing was also a woman. In fact, JieLi Huang had spoken about making DiDi taxi into a “sexy situation” with the DiDi app having more dating-like functions such as free ride function. There were advertisements such as “the romantic story of our first meeting” and “ had a free ride the first time we met, I will be yours someday” which Liu also approved. According to DiDi data, the chance of a male driver to give female passengers a free ride is twice as high compared to male passengers.

These direct and indirect interventions not only avert the social gaze from DiDi’s mistakes, they also contribute to the stigmatization of feminism. In the statement of Liu, there is no direct addressing of gender issues except the mention of inconvenience of the women, but the comments below are almost all attacks towards feminists. This Weibo has 4.5K comments and 62.2K likes. The top comment is “some people are being led on [by feminists]. If we use their logic, some children in amusement parks can not use certain rides. Does that count as discrimination, too? Nonsense.” The comment has more than five hundred likes and 392 sub-comments debating on the issue. Some other hot comments with hundreds of likes are “[I] don’t know what is the issue with these so-called feminists. (dog emoji)” and “I don’t think it’s discrimination, and it’s just a trial run anyway. My husband tells me to come home early everyday, and I don’t see that as discrimination”. Every comment with more than one hundred likes is either encouraging DiDi or attacking feminists. One of the reasons that the hot comments

are so one-sided is because both Liu and Weibo are able to delete the comments they dislike. On the repost section, the comments are more divided with both criticism and support of the statement. However, these comments still shows many people's common misconception of feminism and lack of knowledge on discrimination.

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