Article

Unveiling the Contested Digital Feminism: Advocacy, Self-Promotion, and State Oversight Among Chinese Beauty Influencers on Weibo

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Abstract

Through a qualitative analysis of feminist posts shared by Chinese beauty influencers, this study explores the political potential and limitations of their engagements in digital feminism on Weibo. Chinese beauty influencers show the potential to shape everyday feminist discourses and promote female solidarity on Weibo. However, beauty influencers' feminist practices represent a form of contested activism, situated at the intersection of state governance, platform power, and entrepreneurial demands, subtly reconfiguring digital feminism in China. By converting feminist sentiments into brand assets through self-branding and promotional activities, influencers' feminist practices feed into the platform's profit motives and their own career advancements. Moreover, beauty influencers adopted what we call "state-aligned, soft activism," inadvertently perpetuating the non-emancipatory gender discourses endorsed by state governance. Their engagement with digital feminism exemplifies the ambivalent feminist politics within the Chinese digital space dominated by state control and commercial logic, reflecting inherent contradictions and broader tensions in conducting meaningful feminist activism within a constrained environment.

Keywords

China, digital feminism, feminist activism, beauty influencer, self-branding

Introduction

A notable trend has recently surfaced on Chinese social media, with an increasing number of beauty influencers engaging in digital feminism. In 2022, the Tangshan restaurant attack, where a group of men violently assaulted four women, sparked widespread public outrage (BBC News, 2022). Many beauty influencers participated in online activism by sharing posts like "No Anger, No Justice" on Weibo to condemn gender-based violence. In the same year, another shocking event occurred in Feng County—the "Iron Chain Woman" incident—where a mentally ill woman was unlawfully detained and forced to bear eight children (Yuan, 2022). Beauty influencers, along with many other netizens, similarly rallied to advocate for justice. Whether supporting victims or advancing feminist causes, promoting gender equality has become a prominent theme on beauty influencers' Weibo feeds.

The rise of Chinese beauty influencers coincided with the rapid development of the wanghong economy in the mid-2010s. Wanghong, a Chinese colloquialism, refers to individuals who achieve fame online and monetize their presence (Abidin, 2018). The term wanghong is multifaceted and cannot

be directly equated with English terms such as "internet celebrities" or "microcelebrities" (Abidin, 2018). In this article, we consider beauty influencers a subset under the broader wanghong umbrella. Beauty influencers are digital content creators who gain followers and fame by producing content on platforms. They also play the role of influencers, described as "microcelebrity with a following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives, upon which paid advertorials—advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions—for products and services are premised" (Abidin, 2016, p. 92). Self-promotion, visibility, and audience engagement are crucial to beauty influencers' digital entrepreneurship (Guan, 2021). They place significant importance on their relationships with followers, engaging in an ongoing process of self-branding that entails

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"packaging self-identities, crafting them as a unique self-image, and selling it on the labor market" (Hu, 2021, p. 360). With the rapid expansion of e-commerce, beauty influencers have emerged as key players in the wanghong economy, wielding considerable influence over consumer behavior and beauty trends in China (Sun, 2023).

Existing academic discussions on digital feminism primarily focus on the nuances of its political efficacy, often characterized by a dualism "that expressed either a sense of hopefulness about the participatory potential of new technologies or a pervasive skepticism about these technologies as tools of commodification, surveillance, and repression" (Baer, 2021, p. 1383). Common debates, such as "activism vs. slacktivism" (Clark-Parsons, 2019) and the "utopic/dystopic" views of social media (Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021) capture the intricate dynamics within digital feminism. As elsewhere, digital feminism in China represents a convergence of feminist protest, online activism, and media campaigns, where feminism is facilitated by "digital media in the form of networked and/or collective actions toward transformative changes of unequal power structures" (Yin & Sun, 2021, p. 1179).

On Weibo, Chinese beauty influencers paint a nuanced picture of digital activism, oscillating between promoting and dismantling feminism. With vast followings and outspoken voices, these influencers herald a new potential for online feminism. Yet, their political advocacy is simultaneously shaped by external forces. Driven by capitalist logic, platforms like Weibo are incentives to capitalize on feminist politics (Liao, 2024). Scharff (2024) and others noted the intensifying trends of the monetization of feminist activism on digital platforms. Pruchniewska (2018) also emphasized that "digital feminism is intricately connected with the contemporary cult of self-branding" (p. 824). An increasing number of freelancers, content creators, and influencers integrate feminist sentiments into their self-promotion, turning it into a marketable entity rather than a purely activist agenda. More importantly, unlike digital feminist activism in Anglocentric contexts, Chinese beauty influencers operate within a top-down, state-centric digital space. The state's current stance toward digital feminism is somewhat negative, as evidenced by the censorship, constant policing of vocal feminists, and the suspensions of feminist accounts (Xue & Rose, 2022). On Weibo, digital feminism has been confined to "a very narrow discursive space, where thorough, in-depth public discussions addressing structural problems are mostly discouraged if not restrained" (Wang & Chang, 2023, p. 16).

Past scholarship on digital feminism has predominantly focused on Anglo-centric regions, with an emphasis on critiquing the neoliberalism and platforms of Silicon Valley (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Moreover, past studies on Chinese beauty influencers have mainly addressed postfeminism and consumerist feminism (Liao, 2019; Sun, 2023), with relatively scant attention given to their role in digital activism. The commercial nature of beauty influencers, their career goals centered on traffic monetization, and the state-led digital space, make it challenging to classify their engagement in digital feminism as activism in the strictest sense. The authenticity and efficacy of influencers' feminist practices are somewhat questionable, as they often blur the lines between genuinely advocating for digital feminism and leveraging feminism for profit or career advancement. These nonconventional activists have the potential to reconfigure normative understandings and established practices around online feminist activism, adding new possibilities and vulnerabilities to the evolving landscape of Chinese digital feminism. In this article, we aim to uncover the complex nature of digital feminist engagement by conducting a qualitative analysis of feminist posts shared by Chinese beauty influencers. We aim to enrich the field of digital feminism from a non-Western perspective and to investigate the broader challenges these influencers face in promoting feminist activism within a tightly regulated digital space. To begin with, we provide a brief overview of digital feminism on Weibo.

Chinese Digital Feminism on Weibo

As demonstrated by global movements like #MeToo, past scholars have highlighted that the communicative affordances of digital platforms have propelled exponential growth in various forms of activism, ranging from hashtag feminism and online protests to collective callouts (Baer, 2021). Digital platforms, through their algorithmic trending processes, transcend geographical and social boundaries, offering unprecedented reach and visibility to gender issues, thereby creating spaces for voices that might otherwise remain unheard (Clark-Parsons, 2019). Moreover, affect and feelings play crucial roles in the dynamics of digital feminism (Coffey & Kanai, 2021); feminist movements like MeToo "can be highly affective, even when participants disclose very little emotion or detail" (Nau et al., 2023, p. 2046). The politicization of personal experiences and affective expressions facilitates resonance and collective identity, aiding in the establishment of connected communities and further enhancing the sustainability of feminist action (Jiang et al., 2022).

The rise of digital feminism in China can be traced back to the early 2010s, gaining significant momentum with the global spread of the #MeToo movement in 2018 (Hou, 2020; Yin & Sun, 2021). As exemplified by high-profile cases such as the Xianzi Incident, Weibo has been widely recognized as an important battleground for Chinese digital feminism (Xue & Rose, 2022). Despite the progress, Chinese digital feminism confronts significant difficulties and structural limitations. Yin and Sun (2021) noted that Chinese digital feminism fails to represent the voices of marginalized women, with rural and working-class women being underrepresented compared to their urban middle-class counterparts. In parallel, Chinese digital feminism suffers from severe misogyny, with the platformization of

misogyny "[stigmatizing] feminism as a radical misandric discourse" to gain traffic (Liao, 2024, p. 199). Different forms of anti-feminism and feminist phobia have become commonplace on Weibo. Derogatory terms such as "feminist bitch" (nv quan biao) and "feminist dog" (nv quan gou) escalate feminist discussions into mindless tirades (Wang & Chang, 2023). On top of that, many concepts advocated by digital feminism (such as democracy and freedom) and movements (e.g., #MeToo) are of "Western" origin. Online feminist activism is often slandered as "extremism" and/or "complicity with the foreign forces," while Chinese feminists are maligned as irrational women or xenophobic traitors undermining traditional Chinese moral values (Hou, 2020, p. 348).

Moreover, China's state-led digital space poses challenges to digital feminism. While most posts or actions related to digital feminism seldom explicitly criticize the state or cautiously avoid doing so, feminist activism in China faces constant surveillance and sometimes crackdowns, as the state seeks to prevent any form of social unrest or challenge to its authority (Wallis, 2015). Despite a short-lived feminist triumph around 2018 (Xue & Rose, 2022), with the state tightening its grip on feminist activism, Weibo quickly became a tool to "shore up the central government's legitimacy" (Tan, 2017, p. 172). Various platform management and technological means such as government-certified accounts, blacklist systems, and IP address tracking have been commonly used to "remove and/or mitigate the influence of social topics with the potential to cross the state's 'red lines'" (Liao, 2024, p. 196). The prevalent state scrutiny over online feminist activism hinders the formation of counterforces against patriarchal systems (Chang et al., 2018).

"*Feminist*" Beauty Influencers

Beauty influencers have faced academic criticism as exemplars of gendered labor, often associated with postfeminist culture and consumerist feminism (Liao, 2019). Past scholarship has suggested that postfeminism represents a contemporary sensibility characterized by individualism, self-empowerment, and personal choice. Women are portrayed as knowing, autonomous agents, ostensibly free from yet paradoxically subjected to self-discipline (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). As Gill (2007) noted, individuals (primarily women) are instilled with the belief that their lives are flawed and can be remedied by "following the advice of relationship, design, or lifestyle experts and adopting appropriately modified consumption habits" (p. 156). In China, Peng (2020) identified a form of pseudo-feminism rooted in consumerism and postfeminist notions, presenting an illusion of women's autonomy. This pseudo-feminism has become prevalent in the Chinese consumer market, marked by the rise of consumerist feminism—a commercialized form of feminism that equates the freedom to purchase goods or adopt a lifestyle with feminist empowerment (See Meng & Huang, 2017). Echoing postfeminism, this

variant of pseudo-feminism not only intensifies women's self-surveillance and control but also shifts structural inequalities to individual challenges (McRobbie, 2009). This logic extends into the realm of beauty influencers, who embody and propagate this market-driven pseudo-feminism. In Chinese wanghong culture, beauty influencers operate at "the intersection of self-branding and relational marketing with gender identity and digital culture, thereby giving rise to an ambivalent articulation of womanhood as self-regulated, defined by class, and sexualized but also creative, entrepreneurial, and independent" (Liao, 2019, p. 665). Beauty influencers actively engage in body makeovers and marketing campaigns to invite netizens (primarily urban middle-class female consumers) to engage in consumption, while also perpetuating traditional gender norms and beauty standards (see Sun, 2023).

Like their counterparts on Instagram and YouTube, Chinese beauty influencers operate within an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018)—cultural and economic system where public attention and visibility are paramount, and visibility itself becomes a form of currency that can be exploited for economic gain. In this context, the "celebrity capital" of beauty influencers is built upon their visibility (Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2021, p. 1803). Take Weibo for instance. Since the mid-2010s, Weibo has established extensive business territories, positioning itself as the leading commercial platform in China. The content promotion and revenue of influencers rely on the monetization pathways designated by Weibo (Jia & Han, 2020). A series of quantitative indicators (e.g., the number of followers, likes, and comments) has become "the central axes on which power and resources are exchanged—in the form of sponsorships, brand deals, collaborations, and so forth" (Duffy et al., 2021, p. 3). Beauty influencers need to constantly adapt to and leverage the algorithms and market rules set by Weibo to gain visibility. That said, the engagement of beauty influencers in digital feminism is complicated by the platforms they operate on and their roles as influencers, rendering them susceptible to platform governance and commercial logic.

Just as Glatt and Banet-Weiser (2021) refused to confine the feminist potential of using social media for social change within "a utopic/dystopic binary" (p. 42)—where they are either depicted as free spaces promoting social changes or as capitalized platforms driven by profit motives, we similarly do not categorize beauty influencers as "pseudo-feminists" or simply label their engagement with digital feminism as "good or bad," as this binary potentially oversimplifies the multifaceted dimensions of feminist activism across the globe. At the core of beauty influencers' engagement in digital feminism lies an inherent paradox: the gendered labor of influencers, their entrepreneurial needs, and commercial demands juxtaposed with their feminist advocacy. Particularly, consumerist feminism, postfeminism, and traditional beauty norms — which these influencers propagate and commercialize—often clash with the feminist activism that challenges these very norms. It is precisely these contradictions that complicate

influencers' feminist engagements, potentially altering their political efficacy in feminist activism. Taken together, we explore the political potential and limitations of beauty influencers' engagement in digital feminism by answering: How do Chinese beauty influencers engage with digital feminism on Weibo, and to what extent, if any, can their participation in digital feminism contest China's patriarchal culture? What insights can we gain from their engagement in digital feminism?

Method

Weibo serves as a crucial site for Chinese digital feminism, renowned as a significant gathering place for the "notorious extreme feminists" (Xue & Rose, 2022, p. 5). With over 500 million active users, Weibo's expansive and diverse user base and interactive features make it an ideal site for examining the dynamics of digital feminism and influencer culture (Wang & Chang, 2023). Our sample was drawn from the official list of Top 100 Beauty Influencers of 2022 released by Weibo. This list, curated by Weibo, honored its popular beauty influencers of 2022 based on various factors such as commercial value, follower count, engagement rate (likes, comments, shares), and content quality (Weibo, 2023).

Our data collection began with an initial screening process. We first examined Weibo posts from the top 100 beauty influencers from January 2021 to October 2023, identifying their digital feminist activities on Weibo. Drawing insights from scholars such as Dixon (2014), Clark-Parsons (2019), and others, we reviewed the posts to identify feminist posts, ensuring that the selected posts adhered to a broad definition of digital feminism. The URLs were then archived for data reference. By feminist posts, we refer to a collection of posts in which beauty influencers engage in digital feminism. Common topics of the posts included (but are not limited to) (1) feminist hashtags/campaigns; (2) discourses about sexism, misogyny, or discrimination to shed light on the real-life impact of gender issues; (3) sharing resources, such as news, artwork, or opinion pieces on feminist issues; (4) political advocacy: discussing and advocating for policies, women rights, and gender equity within the political landscape; (5) call to action: hosting or encouraging actions, such as signing petitions, protests, or donations. Weibo enables users to share various content types, including images, videos, and external links, leading to a diverse range of post lengths and formats. The collected posts varied in content, format, and duration, ranging from well-crafted content creations with clear themes to more informal posts such as chat videos or brief comments.

Among these 100 influencers, we collected a total of 352 posts shared by 75 influencers between the 2 years. The posting frequency of these influencers varied, with the least active influencer posting once while the most active posted six times. We consider digital feminism engagement not solely event-based, which is why we selected a broader 2-year timeframe to observe the feminist participation of these influencers. Our

data collection spanned several significant social events (such as the Tangshan assault) and subsequent periods. The collected data indicate that these influencers generally maintained consistent feminist engagement in public discourse, with increased activity observed during such events. This timeframe allows us to capture their sustained attention to relevant gender issues in public discourse, while also providing insights into their interplay with social events and trending news. Moreover, we found that most posts typically encompassed multiple, intersecting elements of digital feminism (e.g., commercial activities coexisting with feminist actions such as petitions and donations). Therefore, attempting to quantify these posts may not yield productive insights due to their multifaceted nature and varied purposes. Given this, our subsequent analysis adopted a grounded theory approach, focusing on a more nuanced examination of power dynamics and the political implications of beauty influencers' feminist engagements. The grounded theory approach links "analysis and data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser, 1992, p. 16). Its flexibility and inductive nature make it suitable for studying political issues like digital feminism, allowing us to gain a nuanced understanding of how influencers' feminist engagement without preconceived assumptions. We started by labeling each data segment to identify recurring themes, helping us grasp the wider context of feminist discussions. We then organized these themes into categories and subcategories, exploring their interrelationships. Through constant comparison, we refined these categories to achieve theoretical saturation. Based on our analysis, three major themes emerged. The following sections discuss each theme and its implications.

In conducting this research, we adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the privacy and rights of the influencers involved. Although the data used were publicly available digital content, we encountered challenges in obtaining informed consent from each influencer. This underscores the common ethical issues in an internet-mediated social context. Consent for using social media data in research is seldom obtained through informed choice but is assumed based on the users' decision to make their data public (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018). Given the ambiguity and complexity of ethical challenges, we decided to use pseudonyms for storing and writing up. In addition, we employed "ethical fabrication" (Markham, 2012), wherein text posts from social media, forums, and comment sections were rewritten to reduce traceability.

Findings

Affective Engagement and Monetization of Feminist Activism

Our findings reveal that Chinese beauty influencers made various efforts to advocate for gender equality. Unlike the past practices of misappropriating International Women's Day to promote consumerist feminism, many influencers invited

discussions challenging traditional gender norms. For instance, Simon expressed her vision for a better world where no one assumed that girls must "marry out" and motherhood was no longer seen as a woman's duty. Moreover, many influencers engaged in everyday activism and resistance by advocating for tangible changes in women's lives. These included equal employment opportunities, the need for more women's restrooms, menstrual stigma, and opposition to commercial egg donation and surrogacy. Importantly, beauty influencers did not just discuss gender issues online; they took concrete actions. Upon noticing advertisements for commercial egg donation in public restrooms, Maimaijun created stickers that read, "Do not believe it! The consequences are unimaginable! Take care of yourself," and distributed them for free to netizens willing to join the cause. Such active participation helped create a counter-public sphere where feminist ideas and agendas were disseminated and openly debated. Influencers' engagement expanded the scope of the feminist counter-publics that emerged in China during the MeToo movement, which initially comprised activists, NGOs, and scholars. However, influencers' posts primarily focus on the concerns of urban women and rarely represent the interests of rural and working-class women. These influencers have yet to address the intersectional challenges within Chinese digital feminism, highlighting significant gaps in representation in their advocacy.

In addition, most posts shared by influencers were laden with emotional expressions such as anger, shock, or sympathy. These emotional responses are crucial for deciding how and when to engage in feminist practices, fostering feminist solidarity, and mobilizing offline action. As highlighted by Coffey and Kanai (2021), "Feelings and affects are important as they directly mediate the modes of engagement and orientations related to feminist conflict and debates online" (p. 639). On Weibo, numerous emotionally charged posts were observed where influencers condemned gender violence, urged collective support, and expressed solidarity with those affected. A typical example is when Mao Dan reposted the Tangshan attack video and shared her own traumatic experience of being harassed by a naked man. She resonated with the victims and wrote: "I'm at a loss for words, filled with anger, and just want to cry my heart out." These emotionally charged posts are not isolated; they are part of a broader discourse on gender justice. Influencers' affective engagement can "be radicalized under certain social circumstances and transformed into collective identity through sharing and transmitting common emotional experiences" (Jiang et al., 2022, p. 3). Through sharing common experiences, these influencers leveraged a shared sense of "we-ness," demonstrating the potential of digital feminism to create "a virtual space where victims of inequality can coexist together in a space that acknowledges their pain, narrative, and isolation" (Dixon, 2014, p. 34).

These types of emotionally charged posts often peaked during high-profile social events. Beauty influencers, with their large followings, help amplify awareness of gender issues and promote solidarity with victims, potentially leading to improved policy responses. Although we recognize that heightened visibility could contribute to transformative power and offline action, these influencers seemed to believe in "the power of visibility itself" (Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2021, p. 1800). In other words, they believed the transformative effect of spreading posts among a large audience, as if encouraging shares and increasing the exposure of an event will facilitate affective solidarity and help bring about something positive to gender justice. Their responses, however, were often limited to "spreading the word" or emotional expressions, without going further, Echoing Banet-Weiser's (2018) critique, the aggregated emotional response of beauty influencers appeared to be both "the beginning and the end of political action" (p. 13).

Equally important, beauty influencers' feminist engagement showcased a commercial synergy with brands. We identified many posts with strong commercial intentions, where influencers applied market principles to their activist efforts. These influencers adeptly blended their feminist sentiments with commercial activities, ranging from product sales to corporate sponsorships, leveraging the shared feminist values and sympathies of netizens for economic gain. For instance, Eagle, in collaboration with Marie Claire magazine, organized an event titled "Regeneration: Women and Body Exhibition," advocating for body freedom. She used the exhibition's striking visuals to share diverse women's bodies, sparking empathy and a desire for change among viewers. By encouraging netizens to follow her for ticket giveaways, and to click, like, and upload photos of their attendance, Eagle converted netizens' longing for body freedom into tangible market metrics that benefit both her sponsors and her own brand.

Overall, influencers' Weibo feeds reflect how digital feminism could be leveraged as a brandable asset and further monetized by both influencers and brands/corporations alike. The inherent commercial attributes of beauty influencers—especially their reliance on traffic monetization and advertising revenue—fit comfortably with the profit-driven motives of the brands. By doing digital feminism, influencers can attract audiences supportive of feminist causes and earn revenue in a manner consistent with their feminist values, while brands value highly engaged, emotionally invested audiences. They can capitalize on the traffic amassed by influencers to fulfill their commercial objectives. In this regard, beauty influencers both advance digital feminism and profit from it. However, when feminist activism is circulated in commodified forms on platforms, it risks becoming a form of activism with little impact on structural changes (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

The Perils of Visibility and Self-Promotion on Weibo

In the Chinese wanghong culture, beauty influencers often curate their personas through marketable tropes such as aspirational lifestyle and highly gendered, classed feminine

ideals (Liao, 2019). While not entirely disagreeing with this perspective, our findings reveal that digital feminism has become entwined with the self-branding and promotional activities of influencers on Weibo. The feminist engagement of beauty influencers is deeply intertwined with their curated roles as progressive feminists and their professional pursuits as influencers, feeling into their entrepreneurial needs for visibility and commercial gain.

Echoing existing studies on digital feminist activism (e.g., Hou, 2020; Pruchniewska, 2018), self-branding has emerged as a facet of influencers' feminist activism. Adopting a seemingly progressive feminist persona proves advantageous for influencers, allowing them to resonate with audiences who embrace feminist values while distinguishing themselves from their peers, especially when their audience is predominantly female (Pruchniewska, 2018). Weibo's platform design has become a crucial tool for beauty influencers to curate their feminist personas, enabling them to showcase the progressive selves they desire to be appreciated. With extensive editing and publishing features, as well as multimedia capabilities (including images, text, live streaming, and video content), influencers can edit images, apply filters, and add hashtags and trending topics to suit their needs. Influencers leveraged these platform features to integrate feminist values into visual imagery and self-presentation through various beauty creations. On special days like International Women's Day, many embraced trending topics and hashtags associated with feminist ethos, launching bold, unconventional makeup styles that challenge traditional beauty standards or break gender stereotypes. For example, Dapei crafted a makeup look on "how to wear makeup NOT to attract men." She used editing tools to enhance visual appeal, strategically employing filters to emphasize the dramatic shadows (symbolizing the male gaze) in her makeup.

As influencers, these beauty gurus are naturally incentivized to adhere to the platform requirements to boost visibility through personalized content. According to Jia and Han (2020), Weibo's algorithm prioritizes trending topics and strong engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and user interactions to ensure that users see more content from accounts they are interested in. Following this logic, we observed a significant surge in posts related to digital feminism after major social events, with beauty influencers collectively reposting, commenting on, and promoting trending hashtags associated with these events. Concurrently, many influencers skillfully incorporated popular media products—books, movies, and TV shows—into their content creation. With the release of the Barbie movie, the debate, "Is Barbie truly feminism?" heated up on Weibo, drawing many to join the Barbie craze by engaging with the hot trends. In addition, these influencers posted interactive content related to gender issues, such as Q&A sessions about menstrual health and HPV, to boost audience engagement. Some initiated "poll posts" to encourage netizens to voice their opinions on social debates. For instance, PrettyEasy posted the provocative

question: "Is this policy pushing women to become full-time caregivers, deterring companies from hiring women? Yes, or no? Leave your answer." Posts resonating with hot debates typically garnered a significant number of likes, shares, and comments, helping maintain visibility and connecting with like-minded communities.

Equally important, entrepreneurship and professional identity are prominent themes for beauty influencers engaging in digital feminism. These influencers frequently linked their entrepreneurial journeys and career prospects with their feminist identities. Regardless of the form, the narratives shared by these influencers typically follow a similar arc—starting from revealing past experiences of gender discrimination, trauma, or vulnerability, to tales of self-empowerment through entrepreneurial efforts or personal growth. Their posts were filled with personalized narratives, especially when advocating for victims of gender-based violence and sexual harassment or reflecting on gender issues. For example, as the sexual assault case involving an Alibaba employee unfolded on Weibo, many influencers discussed gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. Xiaoduo recounted her painful experience of being expected to entertain men at a dinner, where she endured verbal harassment and inappropriate touching. Following this, Xiao Duo shared her story of self-empowerment, how she bravely left the company, started her own business, and achieved feminist growth. In recounting their stories, these influencers' narratives elucidate the link between self-branding and authenticity, where their branded and authentic selves blur together and seamlessly integrate into their self-branding practices when engaging in digital feminism. As Banet-Weiser (2012) noted, the success of self-branding is grounded in its reliance on self-disclosure to convey "who I am" to the target audience in a trustworthy manner that elicits a desired emotional response (p. 7). To achieve a successful feminist self-brand, influencers need to navigate the tensions between career success and their commitment to collectivist feminist goals by creating a sense of authenticity. It is through self-disclosure and personal storytelling that beauty influencers can brand themselves as "truly" feminists and present an image of sincerity resonating with their followers while aligning their self-branding/promotional activities with feminist commitments.

We also found that influencers tended to focus more on showcasing their feminist identities or progressiveness through their personal growth rather than critiquing the structural foundations upon which these identities are built. Although we acknowledge the importance of "the personal is political" (Hou, 2020, p. 337), these influencers inherently adhere to post-feminist values of empowerment and individualism. Whether attributing sexual harassment to youthful ignorance or a lack of gender education, most influencers barely touched on the need for collective struggles. Instead, they converged on self-empowerment, exhibiting a strong individualization of gender politics. But this seems somewhat

inevitable, as both the feminist identity displayed by these influencers and the feminist content they disseminate are fundamentally intertwined with their self-branding on Weibo. In other words, the engagement of beauty influencers in digital feminism arises at the confluence of their feminist identities and self-promotion as social media influencers, thereby naturally manifesting itself through individualized forms. However, when digital feminism is presented through personalized narratives, it shifts public attention from systemic inequalities to individual successes or failures, potentially hindering structural change (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

State-Aligned, Soft Activism

Our findings reveal that beauty influencers have pioneered a unique form of feminist resistance, which we refer to as "state-aligned, soft activism." Unlike more assertive forms of online activism, this soft activism neither boldly calls for the overthrow of patriarchy nor aligns with the radical advocacy for gender equality and freedom often seen in Western feminist ideals. Instead, state-aligned, soft activism represents a safer form of feminist activism that operates within the bounds of state-approved discursive spaces, where influencers touch on gender politics in a restrained manner while aligning with state governance, advocating for gender justice under state oversight. Specifically, this soft activism is manifested in three aspects: the endorsement of state intervention, the use of censorship-safe language, and the aspiration for social harmony.

Most beauty influencers' participation in digital feminism dovetails well with the state, as they called for a high level of government involvement in championing gender justice. This was predominately reflected in influencers' widespread endorsement of authoritative voices, especially government accounts or state-owned media outlets. Following the Tangshan restaurant attack, the most shared posts by beauty influencers were from state-affiliated media, such as People's Daily, expressing support for the Tangshan police in apprehending the suspects involved. Many strongly desired the state to take the lead in advancing gender equality agendas. After the exposure of the human trafficking incident in Feng County, one of the most influential collective actions was the collaboration of beauty influencers to urge netizens to amplify the spread of a petition to reach 200,000 shares. The goal was to reach the threshold of significant public opinion, thereby necessitating the government to dispatch an investigation team to probe into the local human trafficking industry.

While in most cases influencers expressed "trust" toward the state, a few influencers exhibited a skeptical attitude toward the existing legal system and local authorities. For instance, Pannaixue emphasized the importance of women's representation in positions of power so that "'she' will not be overlooked when assessing the severity of a crime just because 'he' was drunk." However, such critical voices were rare. When expressing critiques, most influencers showcased

a keen awareness of government censorship by consciously opting for censorship-safe language. We found that some influencers opted to eschew politically sensitive vocabularies like "rights" and instead employed the fist emoji (as "fist" is a homophone for "rights" in Mandarin) to convey their political sentiments. In another instance, when Marui spoke out against gender-based violence, he resonated with the past by using a poem by Lu Xun, a renowned Chinese civil rights activist. Marui called on netizens to speak up for gender justice by quoting Lu's words: "With every bit of warmth, emit a bit of light, like a firefly that can illuminate in the darkness without waiting for a torch." Quoting others, especially authoritative figures like Lu Xun who has received recognition from the state, not only lends legitimacy to the expressed viewpoints but also offers a shield against censorship.

Another notable aspect of the soft feminist activism of Chinese beauty influencers is their alignment of gender issues with the state strategy of social harmony. The Chinese concept of harmony, or hexie (和谐), is primarily associated with the idea of social harmony, or a vision of a balanced and cohesive society. Inspired by Confucian values, the Chinese concept of harmony emphasizes social order, mutual respect, and balanced interpersonal relationships (Leung, 2003). China's former President Hu Jintao proposed the national goal of building a harmonious society in 2006. This initiative sought to address the growing economic disparities and social anxieties that accompanied China's rapid economic development, aiming to mitigate social conflicts, suppress discontent, and promote peaceful coexistence among the population (He, 2015). Echoing the state goal of social harmony, the concept of "smiling Chinese feminism" was introduced to promote "the harmonious development of the two sexes (liang xing he xie) (Spakowski, 2011, p. 41). The concept of harmony appears to be well embraced by Chinese beauty influencers, with many expressing a strong desire to resolve gender conflicts through achieving social harmony. In response to domestic violence, some influencers linked the concept of harmony with gender issues of sexual harassment and violence against women. In conjunction with terms such as "respect" "peace," and "non-antagonistic," they opposed gender antagonism and advocated for mutual respect and harmonious coexistence between genders. On the contrary, issues such as violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender inequality in opportunities, were euphemized as "disharmonious elements." When discussing the resolution of "disharmonious" issues, many influencers maintained that feminist progress must build upon harmonizing gender relations, where everyone can respect and take responsibility for others.

Given that digital feminism is strictly monitored under state scrutiny, its visibility on Weibo largely depends on how well it aligns with the CCP's governance (Wang & Chang, 2023). Utilizing the concept of harmony allows influencers to minimize the risk of being perceived as "destabilizing." Beauty influencers' pursuit of harmony signifies "a unique

form of Chinese digital feminism that takes 'harmony' as its ultimate goal" (Chang et al., 2018, p. 336). At first glance, the original Confucian thought, rooted in patriarchal traditions, is often considered incompatible with contemporary feminism, especially the feminist ideology based on Western liberalism (Leung, 2003). However, the Confucian concept of harmony refers to "he er bu tong" or "harmony in diversity," rather than the often-misunderstood notions of uniformity and sameness (Lee, 2018). In this sense, Confucian harmony advocates for diversity and introduces collectivism to maintain gender relations by integrating differences through care, respect, and acknowledgment of social responsibilities. Although neither the original Confucian concept nor the state strategy prioritizes gender equality as ends in themselves, their goals both point toward achieving harmony in gender relations and quelling unrest related to gender inequality, whether in the domestic or societal realm. In this sense, the Chinese concept of harmony somewhat accommodates the revolutionary discourse of gender equality (i.e., men and women are equal). It thus feeds into a form of soft feminism with Chinese characteristics, which does not aim for "the stark Western-style sloganeering of 'burning down the patriarchy' or 'woman power', but at adopting a gentle, rational yet resolute stance that finds its rightful place in the 'harmonious society' enshrined in Chinese ideals" (Chang et al., 2018, p. 337).

While the vision of harmony aligns to some extent with the goals of feminism, the use of harmony by beauty influencers in digital feminism carries inherent risks. The Chinese concept of harmony envisions "a society built on an intricate, supposedly benevolent hierarchy of interpersonal relationships progressing steadily along an orderly path" (Chang et al., 2018, p. 337). In essence, it prioritizes social stability and hierarchical relationships, which denies feminist voices perceived as challenging the status quo. As a state strategy, the concept of harmony has served as a discipline to suppress social dissent and gender justice. As Xie et al. (2017)'s study on domestic violence in rural Northern China suggested, the concept of harmony was appropriated by local authorities to suppress the rights of women survivors. When influencers align with the state's goal of social harmony, they are constrained in challenging "the pervasiveness of highly orthodox and non-emancipatory gender discourses in China" (Wallis, 2015, p. 235). The emphasis on collectivism and social responsibility within the concept of harmony may further dilute feminist resistance in Chinese society.

Concluding Remarks

The findings indicate that digital feminism in China is no longer confined to traditional activist-driven movements. Instead, it has become increasingly participatory and multifaceted, seamlessly integrating into wanghong culture. While beauty influencers may not be activists in the strictest sense, their feminist engagement can raise awareness and shape everyday feminist discourse on Weibo. However, it must be noted that

beauty influencers' feminist participation remains contested. The intertwined roles of state and platform have shaped the political potential and set boundaries of beauty influencers' feminist engagements. Platforms like Weibo exert control over algorithms, content policies, and visibility metrics, which influence what feminist messages gain prominence and the reach of feminist messages conveyed by beauty influencers. In most cases, they tend to capitalize on feminist sentiments by leveraging the engagement generated by feminist content to drive traffic and increase user activity. This dynamic aligns seamlessly with the self-branding and entrepreneurial demands of beauty influencers. Their feminist practices blur the lines between genuine advocacy and promotional activities, as they also convert feminist sentiments into brand assets through self-branding to enhance their visibility and profitability.

Furthermore, despite the state's declared commitment to gender equality since the Mao era, political considerations aimed at maintaining legitimacy through ensuring social stability and order have overshadowed these ideals. This explains why the state views feminist activism such as #MeToo with hostility or at least cautious restraint. The state's concerns that digital feminism may disrupt social stability and its political authority have already set boundaries for the activism of beauty influencers. Despite some critical voices, the feminist advocacy of these influencers largely works in harmony with state governance. While state-aligned, soft activism may help reduce censorship, it can lead to outcomes that contradict their feminist goals, as they perpetuate the non-emancipatory gender discourses endorsed by state governance and avoid addressing a key aspect that impedes digital feminism in China: the role of the patriarchal state (Meng & Huang, 2017). Their reliance on state-approved rhetoric can dilute the feminist message, transforming it into a form that is more palatable to the authorities but less potent in challenging the underlying power structures that perpetuate gender inequities. Such soft activism underscores the inherent paradoxes within Chinese digital feminism and its implications are a significant challenge faced by Chinese feminists. The premise for engaging in feminist activism hinges on how participants respond and adapt to state-approved boundaries. Activists need to constantly gauge the limits of permissible discourse, often resorting to nuanced and indirect methods of expression to avoid censorship and potential repercussions. This severely limits the transformative potential of digital feminism in China, unlike in many Western countries where dissent and critical engagement typically enjoy greater freedom.

As Hemmings (2018) highlighted, contemporary feminist politics are often fraught with contradictions, resulting from "a complex set of negotiations all gendered subjects make and that cannot always be resolved" (p. 35). We also consider beauty influencers' engagement with digital feminism a manifestation of ambivalent feminist politics within the Chinese context, where their feminist advocacy sits at the intersection of state governance, platform power, and their entrepreneurial demands. As state power and platforms (along with other

capitalist forces) intersect to set boundaries for influencers' feminist expressions, their engagement in digital feminism responds to these intersecting power dynamics. Traditional notions of activism typically involve direct challenges to authority, advocating for social change, or seeking justice through public protests and political actions. However, beauty influencers' feminist engagement disrupts the meaning of "activism," where they blend feminist advocacy with influencer culture and commercial interests, reconfiguring digital feminism in China and giving rise to a form of contested activism marked by paradox: aligning with patriarchal state and platform interests while simultaneously resisting patriarchal norms and heterosexual agendas. As previously discussed, assessing the pros and cons of beauty influencers' feminist engagement seems of limited significance; rather, we hope to draw attention to these nuances that reflect inherent contradictions and broader tensions within contemporary Chinese digital feminism. They underscore the challenge of initiating meaningful feminist activism within a constrained environment. Finally, we call for further research to explore the nuanced ways in which digital feminism is practiced within the Chinese context, particularly the boundaries of permissible feminist expression, and how the evolving digital platforms offer new possibilities for Chinese digital feminism.

Author Contributions

Q.S. contributed to conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing (original draft). R.D. contributed to conceptualization, data collection, review & editing. This study was jointly completed by Q.S. and R.D. Q.S., as the first author, initiated this study and was involved in the entire process of data collection, conceptualization, and data analysis. Q.S. also undertook the majority of the writing for the report, ensuring that the research findings were clearly presented. R.D., the second author, was responsible for collecting the data and provided significant insights and assistance in data analysis.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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