

Aviva Xue and Kate Rose. *Weibo Feminism: Expression, Activism, and Social Media in China*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. 224 pp. \$81.00/£58.50 hardcover, ISBN 9781350231511; \$26.95/£19.79 paperback, ISBN 9781350231511.

Amid the widespread penetration of social media, feminist activism has now gone digital. Since 2017, following a series of sexual abuse allegations against film tycoon Harvey Weinstein, we have witnessed the #MeToo Movement taking off on Twitter, leading to a resurgence of feminist momentum across Euro-American nations.<sup>1</sup> A similar situation may be observed on Weibo, the Chinese-language equivalent of Twitter, appropriated by grassroots activists to advance their agendas.<sup>2</sup> Aviva Xue and Kate Rose's book *Weibo Feminism: Expression, Activism, and Social Media in China*, emerges as a timely scholarly intervention that offers insightful analyses of how social-mediated feminist activism plays out within the Chinese context.

Unlike conventional academic titles, the book does not start with an overarching, systematic review of existing literature to outline its own theoretical approach. Moving straight into the analysis of high-profile cases, it presents a total of five chapters (apart from the introduction and the concluding remarks), each addressing specific issues facing China's feminist activism based on the authors' first-hand observations of activists' on-the-ground experiences. In this way, the book endeavours to define the specifics of China's social media feminist activism by advancing Weibo feminism as an umbrella term.

Chapter 1 relates a series of incidents illustrative of how official women's organisations hijacked grassroots activists' campaigns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis here distinguishes grassroots activists' initiatives from top-down institutionalised efforts which serve, rather than challenge, the Party-state's patriarchal agendas. It advances an understanding of the grassroots nature of Weibo feminism and its incompatibility with state-led campaigns.

Chapter 2 continues with an analysis of Weibo feminists' activist practices in action, foregrounding two specific trajectories of intervention centred upon the rediscovery of China's historical archives to account for women's contributions, and the pursuit of contemporarily relevant political agendas to empower

1 Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism, and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation," *Feminist Theory* 21.1 (2020): 3-24.

2 Sara Liao and Luwei Rose Luqiu, "#MeToo in China: The Dynamic of Digital Activism against Sexual Assault and Harassment in Higher Education," *Signs* 47. 3 (2022): 741-64.

women in societal processes, respectively. Both trajectories share a common goal of challenging official narratives and state policymaking that serve to entrench the patriarchal status quo.

Chapter 3 further scrutinises the dynamic interplay between state and gender politics by focusing on women's reproductive rights. Critiquing China's seemingly inconsistent fertility policies, the analysis reveals the consistent patriarchal logic behind the scenes, bringing women's autonomy, self-reflexivity, and agency to the forefront of analyses regarding population reproduction.

Chapter 4 reports how grassroots activists from a variety of professional backgrounds, personal interests, and socioeconomic statuses rally around feminist causes, collectively challenging the misogyny and male dominance in Chinese society. This analysis highlights how women, including those from the most marginalised ethnic-minority or working-class backgrounds, negotiate their positions of power within the status quo, aiming to create alternative spaces for women's empowerment on social media.

Chapter 5 is particularly thought-provoking. Beginning with a synopsis of a writer's traumatic and tragic personal experiences, the re-telling of this person's encounters deconstructs the deeply ingrained patriarchal values in Chinese society. This is done through an examination of Weibo feminists' pursuit of equality in language use. The chapter also critiques literature writing and popular cultural production, where male hegemony remains visible and relevant, even in its subtle forms.

As a title mainly focusing on Weibo-based feminist activism, the book is not characterised by the density of theory in its presentation. Instead, the authors offer their first-hand observations of grassroots activists' on-the-ground experiences to unpack how they strive to voice their critiques of asymmetrical gender power relations specific to contemporary Chinese society. To this end, the authors propose a context-specific lens to scrutinise grassroots feminist activists' practices in the Chinese context. While recognising the alignment between China's political establishment and patriarchal socioeconomic structures, such practices do not present themselves as an imminent threat to the continuity of the Party-state polity, aiming to retain their longevity and outreach.

Emphasising the notion of "moving one pawn each time" (p. 8), these grassroots activists explore every available opportunity to challenge gradually the boundaries of patriarchy on all fronts. Such practices do not encourage direct confrontations with the Communist Party but subtly oppose its authority in the context of everyday lives. This paradigm of practice defines a salient feature of social-mediated feminist movements specific to China, as a result of the government's implementation of sophisticated censorship and surveillance

systems and continuous crackdowns on civil liberties, which have made street activism almost impossible within China.

Focusing on an analysis of such everyday feminist practices, the book presents rich empirical materials to account for grassroots activists' resistance in the Chinese-language digital public sphere, where the patriarchal socioeconomic structure and political system are entrenched but not omniscient.<sup>3</sup> The authors suggest future scholarly and activist interventions to foster the building of a more equal and inclusive sociocultural milieu in China that is not only for men but also for women.

*Weibo Feminism* also has issues that are worthy of critical scrutiny. First, the book tends to offer generalised assessments of observed empirical cases, labelling all activists under the rubric of a homogenous "Weibo feminism." This approach risks oversimplified framing of various decentralised grassroots campaigns, marginalising analyses of their participants' differing agendas, approaches, and discourses.<sup>4</sup> Second, without sufficient engagement with existing literature, the book shows a tendency to overly glorify "Weibo feminism," which limits critical scrutiny of its inclusion of diverse practices. This issue is particularly evident when the authors discuss LGBTQ+-related issues. While some "Weibo feminists" appear to have portrayed members of the gay community as the binary opposite of feminists, such problematic rhetoric is documented without in-depth, reflexive assessment. This alludes to a sex essentialist view on gender embedded in the narrative, which needs to be held accountable.<sup>5</sup>

Third, while pointing out the stereotypical portrayal of China's gender politics by Euro-American observers, *Weibo Feminism* falls into a similar trap from time to time. Specifically, by using the term "Western feminism," the book frames liberal feminism as the mainstream without appreciating the complexities of and differences between feminist theories and practices in the Western context. It fails to recognise scholarly voices that vigorously criticise the liberal and neoliberal turns of popular feminist discourses.<sup>6</sup> Such labelling practices are arguably as problematic as an oversimplified understanding

3 Xiao Han, "Uncovering the Low-Profile #MeToo Movement: Towards a Discursive Politics of Empowerment on Chinese Social Media," *Global Media and China* 6. 3 (2021): 364-80.

4 Altman Yuzhu Peng, *A Feminist Reading of China's Digital Public Sphere* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

6 Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of "Resilience"* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (2009): 97-117.

of China issues perpetuated in Western media and scholarship discourses, as they conceal more than they reveal, leading to misinterpretations of the complex situation.

It should be noted that the aforementioned limitations do not undermine the value of the book. The title is still highly recommended for students and researchers who wish to study the latest feminist activist practices on Chinese social media. However, readers are advised to approach this interesting book with their critical antennas always turned on, in order to avoid unreflexively accepting some of the less critical arguments it puts forward.

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