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Media as a core political resource: the young feminist* movements in China

Jun Li^{a*} and Xiaoqin Li^b

^a*Department of Sociology, FSS, University of Macau, Taipa, Macau;* ^b*Department of Communication, FSS, University of Macau, Taipa, Macau*

In 2012, a group of young activists changed the landscape of the Chinese feminist movement. These activists placed women's rights in the mainstream public discourse by drawing the media's attention to their "performance art". This study compares the intergenerational differences between China's first generation of women's NGOs, which were mostly founded or flourished in the wake of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, and a new generation that burst on the scene in 2012. The study argues that their main differences lie in their mobilization models and their ability to access key political resources, both of which were heavily influenced, and even decided, by their relationship with the state. Moreover, the change in the relationship between the state and feminist movements is reflected in the differences in the relationship with the media of the two generations of feminist movements. Because of the differences in their organizational models, resource conditions, and status, the two generations of feminists adopted different media strategies in their promotion of women's rights. Using the "performance art" of the "Occupy Men's Toilet" campaign as an example, we examine the media strategies employed by young feminists and illustrate how they legitimated the movements, aroused public attention, imposed pressure from the outside, and finally gained policy responses from the government. The study proposes the tripartite relationship between the state, media, and the two generations of the women's movement in China, and concludes that the relationship between media and the women's movements examined here was influenced and even decided by their respective relationships with the state.

Keywords: young feminist movement; market-oriented media reform; women non-governmental organizations (NGOs); resource mobilization; tripartite relationship between the state, media and social movement

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), which was held in Beijing in 1995, was a turning point in the rise of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs), was arguably the most important event since 1989 (Howell, 2015; Zheng, 1996). Encouraged by the independent NGO forum of the FWCW and sponsored by overseas funds, China's first generation of feminist NGOs came into being or began to flourish; thereafter, feminist movements were generally considered politically safe. However, on the eve of International Women's Day in 2015 and two decades after the Beijing FWCW, five young feminists in different cities were arrested and held in criminal detention because they planned a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. This study

*Corresponding author. Email: yb17318@umac.mo

Young feminists are termed "young feminist activists" in the media, referring to those who came to sight of the public through the large amount of media reporting after 2012. Most of them are students and social "newbies" who are labeled as feminists in a high-profile who expose gender discrimination and violence mainly through media reporting by means of performance art, impact litigation, and government accountability.

intends to examine the development of the women's movement in China and the role of the media in the process in attempting to determine the reasons for the change in the situation for the women's movement.

In March 2012, a few young women who claimed to be "young feminist activists" attracted public attention because of their performance art, which was called *Zhan ling nan ce suo* or "Occupy Men's Toilets". Although it was neither the first reported feminist act in China nor the first time that women's rights had got public attention, the event has special significance in that it marked the beginning of a "feminist era" as proclaimed by these activists with the intent to establish a social movement. The young women occupied public spaces and fought against gender discrimination in the name of "culture" and "art". With the market-oriented newspapers as their major media platform, they successfully carved a new model for the feminist movement in Mainland China.

Veteran or "FWCW-generation" feminists in China and the NGOs that they created (hereafter referred to as "long-standing women's NGOs") are capable of collaborating with the government, mobilizing institutional resources, and conducting experiments and reforms regarding women's issues. In comparison, the young feminists lack social capital, networks, and relevant professional qualification. Consequently, they tend to resort to strategies rarely taken by their predecessors, including public mobilization, demands for accountability, impact litigation, and "street performance art" in order to advance women's issues. Using market-oriented media is one of their major strategies.

Since 2014, media control has intensified, and feminist issues have been explicitly forbidden in the media in Guangdong Province. In 2012 and 2013, when feminist activists first came into the public eye, commercialized traditional media (mainly print and mainly in Guangdong) served as the major communication channels and agenda-setters for the movement. Although feminist media events occurred in both old and new types of media, this study focuses on how the fledgling feminist movement used the traditional media to gain public support and extract government responses while instilling the feminist concept into the public sphere.

The current research has shown that market-oriented traditional media have served as the most important political space for the new model of feminist mobilization, enabling legal and policy advocacy of feminists who have little or no institutional resources. In a sense, media facilitated the initiation of the mass mobilization for feminist movements in China. This research analyzes how two different resource mobilization models (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) inform the relationship between feminist movements and the media, with a focus on the interaction between young feminist movements and the media, as well as the significance and effects the movements and the media exert on each other.

Media as a political resource in social movements

Media are among the indispensable resources utilized by social movements. The role of media in social movements is to some extent self-evident: media identify the movement (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) and inform the public of its existence (Molotch, 1979), thereby influencing the public's cognition and setting the agenda for policy-making. In the course of its development, a social movement constantly negotiates with media regarding meaning (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) and such negotiation exerts influence on the movement (Gitlin, 1980; Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986; Ryan, 1991). To a considerable extent, media discourses construct and shape the process of a social movement (Melucci, 1985; Van Zoonen, 1992).

However, how the meaning is constructed is open to argument. Some researchers believe that media as a whole are not well disposed toward social movements (e.g.,

Molotch, 1979). Ryan (1991) argued that social movements replay their own framework and evoke reactions among the public through the strategic utilization of news media. Others suggested that media have their own sets of logics and values (Van Dijk, 1988). Tuchman cited Enzensberger's description of media as the "consciousness industry" (cited in Tuchman, 1978), which means that media reproduce and naturalize the ideas, values, and ideologies of the existing social hierarchy for consumers. However, she also pointed out that media can mediate between the public and the government, even taking the side of disadvantaged groups if doing so is to their commercial advantage.

Gitlin (1980) referred to the problem of the media's inability to articulate or present social movements adequately. In his analysis of the interaction between mainstream media and the New Left movement, he illustrated that in many and even most cases, media undermined the movement because the former had numerous economic, organizational, and ideological ties to institutions and the forces in power and therefore were complicit with the capitalist hegemony.

In focusing on the two branches of the women's movement in the US and their relation with media, Barker-Plummer (1995) attempted to combine Gitlin's hegemonic model and other theories that emphasized media strategies (e.g., Ryan, 1991). She argued that there are different "dialogue models" of the relationship between a social movement and the mass media, and political identity and organizational forms determine these relationships. Van Zoonen's (1992) and Tuchman's (1978) research on women's movements and media found that the relationship between the two changed on the basis of the different organizational routes, ideologies, and historical phases of the movement. Lastly, along with the expansion and legitimization of women's movement, the reporting of the movement also changes (Tuchman, 1978).

With regard to the literature on the relationships between Chinese media, NGOs, and social movements, in a conversation with Gitlin, Lin and Zhao (2008) argued that the relationship between media and social movements in China differed from that in the West. In China, the development of market-oriented media is a social movement in its own right: due to a lack of the universal hegemonic ideology that exists in the liberal pluralism system of capitalism, journalists in China, unlike their Western counterparts, refuse to uphold existing systems but challenge them and actively engage in social movements. For example, in the environmental and land rights movements, the media became participants after initially serving as mediators (Huang & Zeng, 2011; Lu, 2012).

With regard to the relationships between media and social movements and its effects, some researchers have attempted to analyze the relationship between hierarchical and cultural capital and social movements (Li & Yang, 2013; Zeng, Huang, & Li, 2012), how NGOs spread their movements by using different media strategies (Zeng, 2006), and how media serve as a mediator between the government and the society through accumulative reporting and the integration of frameworks to promote the deliberation of public policies (Zeng, 2013). Previous studies emphasized the "Chinese characteristics" of the relation between media and social protest. The media gained a professional reputation through their coverage of the owner rights movement (He & Zhong, 2013). According to Zeng and Huang (2015), the reporting of social movements also contributes to the increased autonomy of media.

Only a few studies have examined the relationship between feminist movements and media in China. Scholars who have conducted studies on the subject typically focused on the work experience and reflections of women's communication NGOs (e.g., Cai, Feng, & Guo, 2001). Although a few studies examined the use of the media by FWCW-generation

feminists (Milwertz, 2002), no specific research question was posed or addressed. Wei (2015) analyzed the “street performance art” of young feminist activists and its effect on the repertoire of contention, but did not discuss its relationship with media.

Although there has been considerable research on the relationship between social movements and media in China, the focus has been on environmental rights and property owner rights protection movements. In general, previous studies examined either individual events or the same contentious topics, and their perceptions of the role of media as a mediator between state and society are consistent. However, the activists in the same field often adopt entirely different media strategies, and different agendas of the same social movement often received different responses from the media. Overall, compared with the abundant literature on movements over other issues, both case studies and comparative studies between generations or groups are rare regarding the relationships among women’s movements, the government, and media in China. This research constitutes an attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

Methods

We collected a large quantity of field data, and we conducted a content analysis of relevant news reports and the frequency of keywords. The data were gathered from the following four sources:

Field interviews: interviews were conducted with 10 participants. The participants included two leaders of long-standing women’s NGOs, one gender project officer of a foundation, three journalists in market-oriented traditional media, and four young feminist activists. Given the current circumstances of NGOs in mainland China, the specific status of each interviewee is concealed for the sake of their safety. Data were mainly obtained through face-to-face and in-depth interviews, and partly through other forms of communication including telephone, e-mail, and *WeChat*. The duration of an interview varied from 10 minutes to five hours.

Ethnographic notes: in addition to being an observer, partner, and project trainer, the first author of this study is also an activist in charge of a feminist NGO. Her dual capacity as a researcher and a feminist activist substantially facilitated the data collection.

Working documents: the documents provided by the participants included articles they wrote as well as the materials and working reports that they prepared and used. These documents conveyed what they did and why they did it.

Media coverage: in recent years, women’s movements in China have attracted considerable media attention, which has resulted in their substantial coverage. Media reports of the movements form an important part of the current research. We conducted a systematic quantitative content analysis on one outstanding feminist protest in China, the so-called “Occupy Men’s Toilets” movement, which helped illustrate the general background of relevant media coverage and served as a framework for the analysis of accountability attribution, thus providing empirical evidence for the study.

Two different mobilization models of feminist movements in China

In accordance with Weber’s ideal type,¹ feminist movements in China after the FWCW could be divided into two types based on their methods of mobilizing resources. The first type conforms to the concept of “embedded activism” (Ho & Edmonds, 2007) or “transactional activism” (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). The term “embedded activism” was derived from the study of environmental movements in China, which focuses on the ambiguous

relationship between NGOs and the government. The NGOs expand their activity space and work with the government to accomplish their tasks, usually through NGO members who also hold government posts, and through unofficial strategies and relationships in the premise of their consciously depolitical orientation. Transactional activism refers to the NGO strategies used in Eastern European countries in the post-socialist period. In these countries, NGOs cannot mobilize the masses by way of traditional participatory channels; however, through strategic networking and interaction with policy-makers and the government, they are able to solve problems. Overall, activists of this type mobilize resources within rather than outside the establishment.

Long-standing women's NGOs in China are of the above-mentioned type and have the following characteristics: (i) the leaders of the NGOs possess senior professional qualifications, hold high-level administrative positions within the system, and therefore have connections within the administration; (ii) the NGOs typically mobilize resources with funding support from overseas foundations, and their leaders use their own social network resources to approach the government, legislation, and government information experts; (iii) in carrying out projects, the NGOs cooperate with the government and creatively insert the issues of women's rights into the mainstream agendas to attract the government's attention.

After launching pilot projects in selected sites, these NGOs would roll out policies or engage in legislative lobbying to promote the projects on a wider scale and for greater impact, striving to establish a long-term mechanism. The legitimacy of the movements depends largely on their cooperation with the government and the Women's Federation (WF). The targets of their human resource mobilization are people who have responsibility or professional competence in related fields. A noteworthy strategy they have adopted is to avoid using words such as "feminism" or "feminist" in their rhetoric and to combine gender equality with the official discourse to reduce the sensitivity of the issue in discussion, thus maintaining mutual trust between the NGOs and the government.

In contrast, the young feminists who came into public view after 2012 have adopted a different resource mobilization strategy. The activists in this camp are mainly female youth volunteers and students. Compared with their counterparts in long-standing NGOs, the young feminists lack social capital, social networks, and professional qualifications within the system. Moreover, they do not have research findings based on field studies. "Making news" is their major means of mobilization, and "news" is made through "performance art", impact litigation, and demand for government information disclosure.

Long-standing women's NGOs try to influence government policy and law-making from within the establishment. However, given this professional path of lobbying from within the system, it is hard for these NGOs to enlist the help of non-professionals. There is thus a gap between the mobilizers and the community their mobilization targets to benefit. The young feminist movement fills this gap and creates a pressure mechanism that seeks accountability from the government by means of civic participation.

Table 1 presents a brief summary of the differences between these two types of feminist movements in China by focusing on their different mobilization paradigms. However, some NGOs and activists use a mix of the two approaches to advance their courses.

Differences in resource mobilization are also reflected in the media strategies. While the FWCW has significantly advanced and changed the development of women's NGOs in China, the Chinese media realm has also undergone tremendous reform. The process has not only brought about a market-oriented, localized, and city-centered newspaper system but also a new journalistic paradigm (e.g., Pan & Lu, 2003). Journalists please the market by improving the quality of reports, rationalizing the part beyond the propaganda system

Table 1. Two different resource mobilization models of feminist movements.

	Long-standing women NGOs	Young feminist groups
Participant	Expert, scholar	Stakeholder, volunteer
Occupation and social identity of core members	Staff of women's federations of different administrative levels, media organizations affiliated to women's federation, research institutions and universities	Freelancer, student of higher educational institutions
Organizational status	Affiliated to women's federations of different administrative levels, colleges/universities and official's associations from the beginning	Independent, registered as industrial/commercial entities or as NGOs
Intergenerational characteristics of leaders	Mostly born in the 1950s or 1960s	Mostly born between 1970 and 1990; from "one-child" families
Area of influence	Most in Beijing and areas selected for pilot projects, including provincial capitals and rural communities	Major cities with active and relatively liberal media
Targets of mobilization	Government officials	The general public and media
Political resources	Unofficial networks, mostly within the system	Market-oriented media
Objective of movements	To change the opinions of people in charge	To arouse public attention and exert pressure on the government for policy change
Major mobilization channels	Research findings, pilot projects, internal information release, think tanks, lobbying	Demanding for government information disclosure, impact litigation, street performance art, opinion pressure through media coverage

with reference to Western journalistic practices, and place more emphasis on objectivity and speaking for the people, while at the same time quoting the Confucian moral principles (Chan, Pan, & Lee, 2004; Pan & Lu, 2003).

Consequently, media in China have diverged into roughly two streams: the official media and the market-oriented or commercialized media. The audience of the official media mainly consists of government officials and institutional subscribers, while the public is inclined to pay for commercialized media for news and entertainment. In terms of content, the official media are tasked to uphold the reigning ideology and promote government achievements, with few reporting that reflects negatively on the establishment. In contrast, market-oriented media strive to attract readership by all means deemed legitimate under the current system, including the reporting of political and social events that expose the inadequacy of local government, which leads to demands for accountability.

The first generation of women's NGOs rarely took advantage of the market-oriented media. Using the Wiser Information Portal, we found 116 newspaper reports with "anti-domestic violence" (*fan jia bao*) in the first three years after the establishment of the Anti-Domestic Violence Network in 2000. Of these, 59 appeared in *China Women's News*,

an official newspaper run by All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), 19 were published in local organ newspapers, and 37 were reports published in market-oriented evening or daily metropolitan papers. By contrast, our quantitative analysis of print media coverage of the "Occupying Men's Toilet" movement showed that of the 127 reports found through the Wiser Information Portal, only 23 were in local government organ newspapers, whereas the remaining 104 appeared in commercialized newspapers (morning and evening papers and metropolitan dailies).

Although successful in some areas, long-standing women's NGOs have achieved little in terms of spreading feminist ideologies and publicizing relevant events through the mass media, even though they value their relationship with the media just as the young feminists do. This lack of achievement is partly due to their tendency to cooperate with media within the government system and Party organs, such as the *Chinese Women Newspaper*, *Country Girls* magazine, and the CCTV *Half the Sky* show, which are politically "safe" and helpful to their work.

The media relations maintained by long-standing women's NGOs exhibit a few common salient points. First, a large number of the members of long-standing women's NGOs from ACWF and its organ media. Thus, their social network and habit of media use mainly focus on official media.

Second, long-standing women's NGOs are critical toward market-oriented media as a whole because the latter lean toward libertarianism and generally treat women's emancipation as a failed agenda of socialist era (Li, 2013).

Third, from a journalistic perspective, market-oriented media pay more attention to events and individuals (Tuchman, 1978, p. 134) rather than "social issues"; thus, the relatively static projects conducted by long-standing women's NGO were regarded as lacking in "news value". Because of their commercial interests, these media focus on cities and middle-class audiences, showing scant interest in the rural projects initiated by women's NGOs. In contrast, long-standing women's NGOs occasionally urge market-oriented media to be more sensitive about gender issues and supportive of women, usually to no avail.

Last, and most importantly, the relationship between long-standing women's NGOs and the state limits their relation with market-oriented media. This restriction is partly reflected in the NGO's expectations of what media should be or should do, such as the following: be positive (most of the time, if not always); follow the official line and rhetoric; praise and encourage the system, government organizations, and officials; cause no controversies. In addition, the reporting framework preferred by long-standing women's NGOs is the publicity of political achievements and national policies. Only by satisfying these expectations will the media be able to help NGOs to inspire government actors and to maintain their cooperation with the government. Nevertheless, these requirements rarely sit well with market-oriented media, and they often run counter to the professionalism to which market-oriented media aspire.

Out of fears of a "color revolution", the state has intensified the incorporation of professionals and the surveillance of activists while severing ties between some women's NGOs and the institutions (e.g., colleges, government departments and organizations, etc.) with which they affiliate (Li, 2014). The development model of long-standing women's NGOs is not reproducible for the next generation. On the other hand, young feminists have more diversified social and organizational backgrounds and lifestyles. They are less reliant on institutions and are mobilized through "wild", unofficial networks, including training camps on gender equality and human rights, drama groups, and public gatherings of all sorts. Through the cooperation of activists and volunteers in issues of common interest, a new model of feminist movement model was developed in 2012, which attracted intense media coverage.

Young feminist movements and the media: “making news” as a core strategy

Young Chinese feminists hold the same radical stance as young branches of US feminists (Barker-Plummer, 1995). However, young Chinese feminists refuse to adopt the strategy of “media subversion” (i.e., distrustful and critical attitudes to mainstream media) adopted by their US counterparts. Instead, they use the journalistic routine of the market-oriented media realistically to expand the influence of feminism. Compared with the veteran generation who stayed within the boundaries set by the establishment, young feminists impose pressure from the outside and create the force of public opinion through making news in the attempt to influence decision-makers.

Similar to Moyer’s (1987) proposal, the difference between young feminists and long-standing women’s NGOs in China lies in the notion of “people power”. According to Moyer:

People power is the model used by social movements. The movement’s strategy is not only to use normal channels in an effort to persuade power holders... but also to alert, educate, and mobilize a discontented, impassioned, and determined grassroots population.

In order to make contact with the public, activists must be seen by the public, which requires the assistance of the market-oriented media that have the largest audiences.

Catering to the news routine

Since the FWCW, one of the major activities of Chinese women’s NGOs that focus on communication, has been to monitor and criticize the media for its gender discrimination and even misogyny. However, this focus changed when the anti-discrimination organization P² entered the field, bringing with it a new media strategy. One activist (Interviewee 003) compared the different attitudes between long-standing women’s organizations and the P organization as follows:

It [P organization] is very practical. To get its news published, it never criticizes the media ... the traditional women’s organizations [W]hen they reach out to the media, what they want to get published is usually something like research findings. They have nothing to do with hot topics and thus enjoy little publicity Considering the utilitarian orientation of the mass media, it is impossible to overthrow the power system by criticizing the media Bringing their concerns to mass media is not helpful, [but] making them newsworthy is the point. The [long-standing] women’s organizations haven’t recognized that.

In other words, the veteran generation of feminists adopted the attitude of media criticism, while the new generation tries hard to create news events and work closely with the market-oriented media.

Issues of gender discrimination in the labor market and in education, which are a major focus of young feminist movements, have existed ever since China began to embrace the market economy. From a journalistic perspective, these issues are “social problems” rather than news events. The strategy of young feminists is to use “performance art” to turn social problems into news stories.

At the beginning of 2012, young feminists launched visual performances about gender discrimination and violence against women in big cities where commercialized media are well developed. Young women, especially female college students, vocalized while holding signboards and acting out dramas. They sang and danced in public spaces and near

government office buildings, using symbolic visual equipment and focusing on a certain topic or story. They also uttered humorous, vivid, and bold slogans.

The reason these young feminists succeeded in attracting media attention lies in the way they presented their subject matter, namely by shaping their stories according to the two major news criteria upheld by market-oriented media.

One criterion is the principle of journalistic professionalism, which dictates that media serve as watchdogs for society and report news to help guide and supervise the government. The feminists resorted to the accountability framework favored by media in designing their action scenarios. These scenarios may have been one or a combination of the following: an event highlighting some social problem relating to gender discrimination; poor administration; inappropriate policy; and the absence of justice. Typical follow-up activities of “performance art” included demands for government information disclosure, suggestions and open letters, administrative complaints, letters of attorney, lobbying law-makers and/or members of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and impact litigation. These activities are all within the existing legal framework and are not subjects forbidden to the media. Therefore, the media’s reporting of these activities served as a “mediator” in the process and added to the pressure on the government to respond. Young feminists recognized and used the market-oriented media’s self-appointed role as a watchdog and mediator, which explains why Guangzhou was chosen as the initial location of “Occupy Men’s Toilets”. Before that, a series of public activities conducted by young people had won media support in Guangzhou. Journalists in this relatively liberal metropolis are generally “supportive and protective” regarding such events (Interviewee 019).

The commercial nature of the market-oriented media also makes it easy for young feminists to gain attention and reduce political sensitivity. Identities such as “college girls”, “female youths”, and “the 1990s generation girls” are favored by commercialized media as main characters in soft news. Young feminists cater to this orientation of the media to get more coverage.

“Performance art” can be a subterfuge, disguising the reasons for actions in public spaces and any visualization of social issues. The exaggerated visual effects and humor of “performance art” not only help draw media attention and boost coverage, but also reduce the political pungency of such acts, which serves to avoid news censorship.

Information subsidy strategy

The P organization has been fighting against discrimination for many years. With access to media resources, it has developed a set of procedures for information subsidy (Gandy, 1982); that is, being reported by providing journalists with raw materials for reporting and interviews. First, the P organization has also developed its own style of press releases, which take into full consideration the media’s requirements, thus forming its own news production line. The press releases provide personal stories and opinions relevant to the event. As the participants explained in an anonymous internal document: “The press release should be written in the name of the interested party instead of the organization, reflecting both the idea and viewpoints that we uphold.” Writing from a personal perspective avoids the suspicion of “organizational action”, and at the same time meets the media’s requirements. When it comes to national topics, the P organization incorporates stories and opinions of concerned people in different provinces and cities in the news release. Local media can choose what they want to relate in the national news and what happened in other places to local concerns. Furthermore, this media strategy creates the effects of “national

linkage” and “multi-city linkage”, which mobilizes more people to participate, resulting in a wider social reaction.

Second, the P organization attempts to legitimize events through the use of experts. On the one hand, quoting experts could help reduce the political sensitivity of the topic. On the other, considering the fact that objectivity is a basic requirement, it is necessary to draw on expert and third party comments. Lawyers and scholars are invited to comment on social movements and issues, and their words form part of the press release. This is very important because it can be quite difficult for journalists themselves to find appropriate experts when they are pressed for time. Besides, this also helps to avoid having experts who have little knowledge of the action or who adopt a stand that is contrary to the movement to be quoted.

Journalists are provided with the contact information of the experts who are quoted in the press release as well as that of relevant government departments. Therefore, before a news story goes to print, the journalists only need to make a few phone calls and go into the field to observe the event. This work lays a solid foundation for the smooth cooperation of the activists and the media.

In addition to news releases, the feminists add images to the news when they plan movements (e.g., pictures of the logo of Chinese Post or postboxes and affixing onto the envelopes words of “advice” or “open information” in large font). The “performance art” is dramatic in its own right, suitable for the cameras of the commercialized media.

In order to get media exposure as soon as possible, young feminists learn about news organizations’ production timelines and rules in order to make proper arrangements. For example, for the morning daily paper, the activity will be arranged in the morning so that the journalists receive press releases in the afternoon. The activists also avoid staging acts on Fridays and Saturdays when few journalists are working.

Gaining legitimacy through media coverage

For feminists, the first and foremost function of media coverage is to legitimize their behavior and the relevant issues. This function can be viewed from another perspective: the feminists interviewed in this study revealed that domestic media were their first choice because overseas media cannot reach the masses in China, nor could they interact with the government in a positive way because of their “anti-China” tags (Interviewee 010, 015). However, because of the government’s control of the domestic media, the reporting of a certain issue means the need to overcome censorship and allow for the public discussion of relevant policies, which expedites policy responses from the government. Based on these considerations, “political correctness” is the first consideration when young feminists try to obtain media coverage of their movements:

[T]he topics that we construct must be novel and contentious, but more importantly, they should be based on consensus values and universal justice. Put another way, they should be politically correct. Only in this way can they be widely disseminated by the mass media.³

How do young feminists achieve political correctness through media coverage? First, although gender equality is a basic state policy and enjoys legitimacy, social activities such as protests, demands for accountability, and organizational movements carry high political risk in China. When an activity is perceived to be outside the boundary, media will not touch it, and the organizers of the activity will find the most important channel to get their message across shut.

Therefore, controlling political risk is the first step towards achieving the legitimacy of an activity so that it must be reported by the mainstream media. Moreover, the most important part of this risk control process lies in topic selection, which partly explains why feminist movements in China are generally concerned with “people’s livelihood” rather than political or ideological topics such as democracy. The former is far less politically sensitive and subject to much lighter censorship.

The next step is target selection. Feminists tend to target government departments that are in a relatively “disadvantaged position” or already under public pressure; the education department and urban management bureau are salient examples. Journalists perceive that these departments are “close to people’s daily lives” and involve fewer taboos in media coverage. The market-oriented media rarely report negative aspects of the industry and commerce departments, and they never refer to the Party’s organization (Interviewee 002).

The third step involves location. Before the protest is undertaken, the degree of development and openness of the local media and the extent of social control are assessed. A woman who participated in the “Occupy Men’s Toilets” movement explained the selection of Guangzhou as the location: “The movement made a hit in Guangzhou, and the reason for choosing Guangzhou is because of the [local] media. If this movement works there, it will open a new situation nationwide. But in Beijing, it would be more difficult.” (Interviewee 003).

The fourth step is timing. News events and topics can serve as breakthrough points. For example, after the Dongguan anti-pornography campaign,⁴ the abolishment of “detaining education”, which was mainly applied to sex workers, became one of the major tasks of feminist groups.

The fifth and last major step in the media strategy is to personalize feminist activities. In order to avoid the inherent political risk of organized movements, activities that come into direct contact with the government – including applying for public information and making propositions – are often launched by feminists in a personal capacity. The endorsement by expert opinions helps to explain the meaning of these activities from the perspective of the group.⁵

Traditional media’s role as mediator

Young feminists have actively been a “presence on the media” since the beginning of 2012, when the print media came under pressure from the mobile web. However, the “old” media, such as newspapers, still play a major part in news agenda setting, and they remain key producers of media content. Online media are still no match for traditional media in terms of their size and number. The contents of news websites and news apps are mainly forwarded from traditional newsrooms.

The young activists interviewed for this study listed three functions of the media that bolstered their feminist activities: Influencing policy agenda-setting, mobilizing and educating the public, and enhancing government accountability.⁶ In the emergence of young feminist groups, the media outlets that were the best equipped to meet these needs were the traditional type, especially commercialized newspapers and some city TV stations in large cities. These media succeeded in turning the agendas proposed by young feminists without institutional resources into events that drew government attention and pressed for official response.

The core purpose of “performance art” is to make newsworthy events in accordance with journalistic practices. In China’s media system, the traditional media, although already largely commercialized, are still expected to follow and support the establishment

and help government departments monitor and supervise their subordinate organs as well as the masses. Therefore, media coverage constructs a space for the public discussion of relevant policies and expedites the government's responses to the events and topics they report. Consequently, the media are inclined to follow an event or topic that presents a clear framework that is suitable for policy deliberation.

Reporting framework and policy responsiveness

All feminist activities and movements covered by the media on a large scale have clear policy goals. The news reporting of "performance art" turns "topics" into "events" and allows follow-up activities to be covered. Media coverage of "performance art" and related follow-up events usually stay within the framework of "governmental responsibility".

An example is the national movement, "Occupying Men's Toilet", which started in February 2012. With the cooperation of pre-selected male sympathizers, feminist volunteers helped female citizens borrow a men's toilet every three minutes. This dramatic act resulted in positive communication effects and aroused resonance among the public and media: the shortage of female toilet cubicles in public spaces is a long-standing problem that is the result of public space management, and it smacks of gender discrimination against women. The movement attempted to persuade urban administrators to increase the number of toilet cubicles for women and build more asexual toilets so that women no longer have to line up at public toilets. Subsequently, the movement spread to nine other cities and appeared in the metropolitan newspapers of all cities, as well as in official newspapers such as *People's Daily* and *China Daily* (front page). On the Internet, it ranked among the "hot issues" of Sina *Weibo*, and a search of *Baidu* news yielded about 2970 pieces of news about the event.⁷

We conducted a quantitative analysis of the traditional media coverage of "Occupy Men's Toilets". A total of 127 reports were found through Wisers Information Portal using "Occupy Men's Toilets" as the key word. Our findings are described as follows:

1. The market-oriented media based in Guangzhou is the main news channel. Reports on commercialized newspapers in the city of Guangzhou constituted the largest group (66, 52.0%); national and market-oriented newspapers ranked second (38, 29.9%); and government organ papers in different provinces and cities (except *Guangzhou Daily*) ranked third (23, 18.1%). Obviously, the young feminists selected the right city in which to launch the movement.
2. The media coverage of "Occupy Men's Toilets" consisted of news reports (79, 62.2%), commentaries (44, 34.6%) and editorials (4, 3.1%), which mainly criticized the problem of gender discrimination as a social phenomenon (79, 62.2%). Only 13 pieces (10.2%) mildly criticized poor local administration.
3. With regard to the legitimacy of the movement and the major reasons for activists to initiate it, most reports cited public interest (107, 84.3%), thus giving legitimacy to the movement.
4. With regard to the issue, most media coverage attributed the shortage of female toilet cubicles to "mixed factors" or social situations (76, 59.8%). Some (22, 17.3%) offered no specific explanation, and only 16 (12.6%) clearly directed criticism toward the government. However, in terms of how the problem should be handled, most said that the relevant government departments were accountable (42, 33.1%), and some suggested that it should be solved through legal means (31, 24.4%).

In other words, within the moderate frame of “government accountability”, the media reported the young feminist movement and helped to make a relatively mild appeal to the government.

The “Occupy Men’s Toilet” movement was the first battle in which feminists gained media attention nationwide. Most follow-up measures have also obtained sound policy responses. Several cities have claimed to have rectified the toilet problem, and a few colleges expanding the number of women’s toilets on their campuses.

The results of our analysis indicate that government accountability is the major framework adopted by the traditional media in covering this young feminist movement. The media also set an agenda to arouse public attention and create the pressure of public opinion, thus bringing about policy responsiveness. The media helped place the social movement in a “safe zone” and shape it into an institutionalized process of policy deliberation.

Media as observers or allies?

How do media workers assess the “news value” of “performance art” by activists? The feminists interviewed for this study argued that journalists typically cover a story for its news value rather than to support an issue. The journalists interviewed also revealed that news value was their first consideration and that the young feminists “clearly knew exactly what the media need”, which was reflected in their press releases. In today’s fast media production, press releases equipped with all the elements of news reporting would help relieve the pressure on media workers and enable them to plan topic pages in advance. In this case, the young feminists easily won the cooperation of journalists.

However, the media still reserve judgment about the newsworthiness of an activist event. In our study, the journalists said that “Occupy Men’s Toilets” was “newsworthy” because the idea was innovative; moreover, it had multi-city linkage and clear problem statements and policy appeals. However, when the same “performance art” was staged month after month, the newsroom refused to report these events because they lacked freshness (Interviewees 019 and 020). Therefore, activists also need to ensure that their protests are “extraordinary”, “special”, or “fresh”.

In addition, for an event to be important enough to appear on the front page, it needs to be of “public interest” and within the sphere allowed by the current legal and political systems, in line with the public’s view of the issue, and have specific government departments as accountable agents. Journalists regarded this principle of news selection as being realistic or “staying on the ground” (*jie diqi*) (Interviewee 019), and they believed that they should try their best to be “objective and neutral” in reporting these events. One interviewee (Interviewee 021), who maintains a positive and friendly relationship with feminists, complained of the following:

As to the not-so-good part [of the movement] ... those we interviewed always brought their law consultants along and their viewpoints are quite one-sided. This runs counter to the basic journalistic principles of balance and objectivity.

However, journalists in the market-oriented media have a progressive tendency in line with the commercial orientation of their employers. Many of them have consciously or unconsciously become allies of social movements. The same journalist quoted above expressed his “neutral” stance:

Speaking for myself, I always bring some events and topics worthy of discussion to readers in the hope of evoking public concern and debate and playing out media's role as helping the people to monitor the government and provide guidance to public opinion. Once relevant government departments receive appeals from the public through the media, they will ask the media to release their response and find ways to solve or alleviate the problem as long as it is within their power. In fact, officials in large cities dare not ignore the appeals expressed in movements. Otherwise, they cannot justify themselves when it comes to accountability.

However, the interviewee acknowledged his activist tendencies and position: "[the reporting of feminist movements is] probably because I myself am involved in this field and feel that we journalists have the capacity or obligation to push for social improvement in many areas".

Media professionalism demands that for news coverage to be "neutral and balanced", reports that are critical of the government should include responses from relevant government departments, and dialog between the government and the people are necessary. Nevertheless, media activism requires the media to reveal social problems as a way to promote improvement in the government's work. Many examples illustrate how the two forces have made journalists potential allies of the feminist movement. It is part of the daily work of journalists to judge and weigh political risks, public and commercial interests and to fight against censorship and bureaucracy. From the perspective of journalists, activists provide facts that differ from those presented by the government, and the movements express different opinions on public issues. By reporting these facts and opinions, journalists are not merely propagandists for the government, and this gives them a sense that they are fulfilling social responsibility. Consequently, the traditional media actively work between activists and government departments and help connect the activists to institutional resources.

Conclusion and discussion: the tripartite relationship among the state, media, and women's movements

Reviewing Gitlin's argument of the hegemony model and the different responses and discussions of Barker-Plummer (1995), Lin and Zhao (2008), we propose that a tripartite relationship exists between the state, media, and social movements. The relationship between media and the state decides the former's relation with social movements, and the relationship of social movements with the media is heavily influenced by their relationship with the state. The entangled relation of media and social movements with the state both involve different forms and branches, which adds to the complexity of the status quo.

Two generations of the Chinese women's movement adopted different media strategies and chose different kinds of media. To better understand the women's movement in China, it should be placed in a historical context to show the shifting relationship between the state and movements, because this relationship determines the relationship between such movements and the media. When activists mainly mobilize the resources within the establishment, the language they use and the knowledge they impart ostensibly conform to the official mainstream discourse, and the media strategies they employ align with the working style of the government's departments. Naturally, this leads to a weak relationship between the veteran feminists and market-oriented media.

However, the young feminists in China try to work in accordance with commercialized media's practices, and they adopt "making news" as their core strategy, which helps legitimize "feminism" in the area of mass communication. The expert resources used by feminists also contribute to the building of a public sphere that supports gender equity.

China's long-standing women's NGOs were familiar with official media before the boom of market-oriented media. They found it difficult to understand the commercial nature of the media and believed that market-oriented media were incapable of handling serious social issues fairly. In contrast, young feminists in China have no access to resources within the system. Therefore, to challenge the accountability of the establishment, they conduct their advocacy activities as ordinary citizens, which conform to the recognition of the market-oriented media as the "watchdog" in the context of journalistic professionalism.

However, the relationship between state and media decides the relationship between media and movements. The intermediary role played by traditional media in the process of policy deliberation has been examined in a host of studies. The integration of media's identity "within the system" and marketization legitimize media's role as mediator between the government and the public, as well as their motivations.

Therefore, the communication strategy used by young feminists is shaped by the activists themselves, but it is also constrained by the movement's structure. Their specific media strategy, contrary to being an entirely personal choice, is the result of their efforts to combine their resource status and their specific political identity with the commercial, political, and professional command of market-oriented media, which could be considered inevitable.

The government imposes pressure on civil society and the media. Against this backdrop, young feminists who adopt an attitude of supervision and accountability toward the state refuse to choose overseas media as the main channel to advance their cause. They are convinced that foreign media would negatively affect their relationship with the government. Domestic media, although they are under the control of the government, could help ensure that social movements work within the established order, which would help them gain legitimacy. This is how the young feminists manage political risks through the media. Although their movements are restricted within the existing legal system, and they stay clear of political minefields, they still face the same suppression as many other civil society organizations and liberal groups. It was suppression like this that triggered the "Free the Five" event in 2015 after the arrest of five feminists.

Future research: social issue dimension and media

Young feminists in China actively engage the media and strive for the government's policy responses. The topics of their movements that have achieved partial success mainly concentrated on economic rights and personal rights, including gender discrimination in employment and education, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. These topics have specific targets, and easily strike a sympathetic chord among the public. As indicated in Barker-Plummer's (1995) research, being incorporated into the media's agenda means restrictions on further developing their own discourse and agendas, leaving only those accepted by the public.

However, many feminist movements have crossed the boundary and obtained exposure through unconventional media, such as the online activity of "uncovered breasts" against domestic violence, and the protest against the "spring gala" full of discrimination episodes. All these fell beyond the limits of traditional media in a political or culture sense. Thereupon, analyzing events and subjects that have not been reported by commercialized mainstream media is essential for us to understand the relationship between the feminist movement and the media.

The appeal of feminism lies not only in safeguarding women's rights, which are well acknowledged by the current legal system, although far from fully recognized and respected in practice, nor is it restricted to seeking accountability in the public sphere. The appeal of feminism also stems from the challenge for the cultural canonical system, especially patriarchal rule in the private domain. Moreover, feminists criticize and deny the mainstream theoretical

concept of liberalism, namely the separation of the public and private spheres (Okin, 1989; Pateman, 1989). Their agendas contrast dramatically with the mainstream ideology and are often viewed as radical, sometimes leading to objections in the mainstream media and the public. However, the arrival and increasing popularity of the internet and social media have shed new light on the relationship between young feminist movements and the media. Some politically sensitive issues and topics pertaining to body politics and sexual rights have been exposed on social network websites. Because the movement–media interaction has become increasingly complicated, it deserves further attention in future research.

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Notes

1. An ideal type is an analytical construct proposed by Max Weber for comparative research. It is not equivalent to social phenomena in reality but a generalization of abstract elements in real life and the logical integration of different discrepancies. See Weber's *Economy and society: An outline of interpretative sociology* [Wirtschaft und gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden soziologie]. G. Roth & C. Wittich (Eds. and Trans.) (pp. 19–22). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
2. The P organization is a Chinese non-profit organization founded in 2006, whose initial goals were to eliminate employment and educational discrimination against people infected with Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS and people with disabilities, and to promote the building of barrier-free facilities. The P organization achieved the success in anti-discrimination movement through high impact and strategic litigation, law and rights education, policy advocacy, surveys, and research.
3. Anonymous internal document referred to above.
4. A crackdown on the sex trade in Dongguan, a city well known for its large-scale sex industry. On 9 January 2014, when CCTV exposed the sex trade in Dongguan, a crackdown ensued, leading to heated discussions on whether to legitimize the sex trade in China.
5. The experts' roles in the media strategies of the two generations are not the same. The old generation tends to employ the "problem-solving" framework, i.e., promoting successful experiences in helping the government resolve social problems when the latter has already taken measures that have had some effects. In contrast, the younger generation's strategy is "exposing problems," which prompts the government to take action as the result of media and public attention.
6. Anonymous internal document.
7. Ibid.

Notes on contributors

Jun Li is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Macau, and a feminist activist and media commentator based in Mainland China. Her research interests include media and civil society, gender studies, ideology, and public opinion.

Xiaoqin Li is an assistant professor of communication in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau. Her current research interests include Chinese (e-)journalism and media studies, media effects, new media and science communication research.

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