



Feminism in a Restricted Landscape: The Rise and Impact of Pink Feminism in China

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Abstract

This paper investigates what has been called "Pink Feminism" in China, or the strategic practice of intersperse feminist discourse with Chinese online nationalism. In a highly restricted digital and political space, this practice allows for feminist expression by using patriotic rhetoric, relying on official narratives, and recuperating indigenous feminist history. While serving to extend the diversity of Chinese feminisms and achieving concrete progress in many areas such as consumers' rights, and increased visibility for female role models, "Pink Feminism" has its limitations as well as critique for potentially compromising its critical perspective and also reinforcing state authoritarianism and neoliberal forms of consumerism. What this paper is interrogates how "Pink Feminism" reconciles two ideologies often seen in opposition to each other—feminism and nationalism—through themes of Marxist (or socialist) feminism, conditional nationalism, post-colonial feminism, and constructive (patriotic) patriotism. In the end, this paper seeks to elevate and talk about the contradictory and complex "Pink Feminism" as a strategy for survival which has led to some positive change but has also limited, major challenges to face,

1. Introduction

"Pink Feminism" has emerged as a term of academic and public interest in China; not as an identification of individuals or a camp but, rather, as a pejorative term. It refers to feminism that is consciously situated in feminist discourse and ideology, while allying itself with online nationalist sentiments (often referred to simply as "little pinks" 小粉红) in China. The name itself indicates the salience of the issue: few individuals would dare to identify as a "pink feminist", which means that "pink feminism" is largely applied by an outside party - and those who aren't in agreement with this approach. This denial of legitimate feminist status through the imposition of "Pink Feminism" reveals an important power dynamic in Chinese feminist discourse reflecting a power struggle over discursive representation with the foibles of being categorized as particular feminist movements that are working in authoritarian regimes. That the scholars identifying this phenomenon from a critical stance, denotes the tensions of ideology internally, and that this discourse continues partly from openly named differences between feminist perspectives. It is still reflective of internal tensions and disagreements between different feminist factions.

Media scholar Eva Liu offers "Pink Feminism" as a calculated way of practicing feminism in a very constrained space. This is an important definition, because "Pink Feminism" is meant to represent a strategy, as opposed to a set way of thinking. It implies that pink feminism emerges out of the unique socio-political environment of China, where direct and confrontational feminist practices often experience harsh repressions. Consequently, the term represents a complicated amalgamation of ideological commitment, careful negotiation of pragmatism and issues of digital censorship. The ongoing conversations often ask if the ideological agreement that is suggested is an actual fusion of ideologies, or, is this really just a practical "marriage of convenience" for digital feminists who want to have a voice without being punish by the government.

How can we make sense of Pink Feminism? It is important for understanding how gender activism in an authoritarian regime is changing. Pink Feminism represents a way for feminist engagement to develop in China's rapidly constricting political and digital environment. Over the past decade, the state has ramped up crackdowns on independent civil society and implemented increasingly restrictive laws regulating domestic NGOs which has extinguished virtually all traditional forms of activism. With activism greatly stifled in this context, online platforms have become essential ingredients in feminist discourse, and should be used cautiously in terms of the political surveillance that exists. It is interesting to

note, while other forms of social justice issue areas, like labour rights or political freedoms, will be heavily censored, feminism and gender equality has emerged as "possibly the only topic the state will permit" on Chinese digital platforms. This selective tolerance creates a strategic gap that "Pink Feminism" is intended to fill - a survival mechanism that allows feminist voices to have tenuous visibility without being actively silenced. This report will peel apart Pink Feminism into layers. In no particular order, we will consider: some definitions of Pink Feminism; how it is performed across different digital and consumer cultures; both the enabling and constraining impact of Pink Feminism; and the relationship of Pink Feminism to other strands of Chinese feminism. By unpacking these layers, we hope to provide a more nuanced perspective of how feminist values are pursued and represented under unique geopolitical situations.

2. Defining "Pink Feminism": Characteristics and Strategic Adaptation

2.1. Key Definition and Contested Identity

As discussed previously, "Pink Feminism" is conceptualized largely as a practice or a way of doing feminism or a feminist practice, and as I noted at the very beginning, it is not a "feminist camp" or an identity, especially within the highly regulated socio-political environment imposed by China. The term "Pink Feminism" is used predominantly by critics, which itself highlights the contested nature of both its definitional boundaries, legitimacy, and efficacy within a broader Chinese feminist movement. The application of such an externally imposed category, here, "Pink Feminism," reflects a power relation that envelops the definition of feminism, and ultimately, the classification and categorization of feminist movements within an authoritarian condition. This suggests that an external audience, or other feminist groups still documenting and legitimating this way of activism, have a degree of power in how these forms of activism are negotiated, and legitimized or delegitimized based on their perceived shortcomings or corroborations. This contest over the narrative is an important prism for how different feminisms get articulated, and contested, inside, and outside of China.

2.2. Key Attributes and Modes of Function

"Pink Feminism" has a few key modes of functioning that allow it to act and have limited significance within China's constrained landscape: Counteracting Censorship and Nationalism: One characteristic is the strategic wrapping of feminism in the language of "little pink" nationalism, allowing practitioners to articulate feminist concerns without incurring the ire of the state, generating a voice in a tightly manipulated digital domain.

- **Convergence with Nationalist Sentiments:** "Pink Feminism" often takes shape in the active engagement of female citizens in nationalist campaigns. For example, during the 2021 Xinjiang cotton issue, women showed their patriotism to challenge a male-centred nationalist narrative, which now includes female citizens as co-"patriotism". This type of strategic display of patriotism may serve as some level of protection or legitimacy for their feminist expressions.
- **Deliberate Use of Official Rhetoric:** Proponents of "Pink Feminism" can draw on official media rhetoric to defend individuals that are described as feminist and nationalistic. For example, Eileen Gu, a well-known elite athlete, was defended as both empowering (feminist) and patriotic (nationalist) for representing China. Her female supporters used various forms of official media to push back against criticism by male netizens. This reflects a deliberate use of narratives officially endorsed by the state to legitimize a feminist position.
- **Re-examining Indigenous History:** A key strategy is to encourage young feminists to re-examine and "rediscover" China's indigenous feminist history and figures like Qiu Jin and He-Yin Zhen, and socialist feminists too. This is making space for local feminist predecessors, and it is a way to actively resist Western hegemonic ways of knowing feminism and combat the Western myth that feminism is only a Western idea. Re-examining is a strategy to legitimize their discourse within a nationalist frame that pushes back against the state's assertion that feminism is a "Western import." By displaying a deep-rooted, indigenous Chinese feminist tradition, "Pink Feminists" hope to create a space for activism that is less vulnerable to the state and make their compromises a strategic (though morally murky) mode of survival.
- **Compromise on Critical Edge:** One critical limitation of this approach is that participants - no matter how serious they are about nationalism - have to refrain from strong criticism of state policies, which entails compromising the critical, transformative edge of feminism, to raise their chances of operating safely in restrictive space.
- **Possibility for Power Structures Reinforcement:** Some of the 'pink feminist' approaches may accidentally bolster neoliberal consumerism and state authoritarianism. For example, when opposed to sexist marketing communications feminists may ultimately rely on some type of economic boycott, or they may contact some authorities as citizens; in other words, express political power as consumers. Yet, to be sure, gender-conscious consumerism often requires class privilege. There is also concern about uncritical acceptance

of government action; just because the government does not act does not mean feminists' concerns are unreasonable, and provided the government does act, procedural justice need not be overlooked.

3. The Reconciliation of Pink Feminism and nationalism

Since 2020, "Pink Feminism" has surfaced in China challenging the conventional view of feminism as incompatible with nationalism as it forges a path where both are embraced simultaneously. The reconciliation and the examination, of those two positions can be explored through a number of themes:

- **Pink Feminism as Marxist/Socialist Feminism:** This perspective interprets "Pink Feminism" as a contemporary version of Marxist or socialist feminism, with a historical link to state-led "women's liberation" in China, which embedded women's roles with national interests. This allows "Pink Feminism" to assert indigenous legitimacy and to sidestep state censorship by framing itself as a "patriotic" form of gender advocacy which is distinct from "Western" liberal feminist ideology that is mistrusted by authorities.
- **Conditional Nationalism:** "Pink Feminism" functions under an umbrella of conditional nationalism, meaning that feminist expressions are embedded in nationalist rhetoric - making their voices heard in a limited space online in a context of conditional nationalism across activist spaces. Together, they engage in nationalist campaigns, and disrupt male-led notions of nationalism by representing female citizens in equally and sometimes more "patriotic" roles.
- **Pink Feminism as Post-Colonial Feminism:** this theme suggests that "Pink Feminism" disrupts Western hegemonic definitions of feminism in relation to feminism by re-evaluating and "reclaiming" China's own feminist history and figures. This strategy also works to counter the idea that feminism is implied to be merely a Western ideology, as well as validate their discourse within a nationalist framework, rendering them less susceptible to state suppression.
- **"China" as a Multi-Faceted Idea and Constructive Patriotism:** This classification of "China" will not be interpreted as one entity. Instead, it is a multi-faceted idea that can allow for constructive patriotism to include feminist issues. In this way, digital feminists can collaborate with cyber nationalism to combat patriarchy and legitimize feminist discourse around "China" in digital and net space, even in the face of severe state censorship and nationalistic backlash.

4. Impacts and critiques

4.1 Positive impacts and effectiveness

Even while missing some significant limitations, "Pink Feminism" has also done some practical good and accomplished some good for women's rights and the broader issue of gender equality in China. First, it makes a positive contribution to the plurality of Chinese feminisms by providing a way for groups to express a diversity of feminist voices and to legitimize some feminist discourses within a nationalist context, which might have otherwise been repressed. By taking on this strategy, at least some feminist conversation strategies will be able to exist in the public domain.

Secondly, it is clear that "Pink Feminism" has been successful in providing visibility to female role models and consequently disrupting some patriarchal narratives. Discussions on social media, discussing the achievements of female Chinese athletes like Eileen Gu create opportunities for public visibility, access to publicly visible role models, and encourages girls to aspire to these athletes for active lifestyles and to reject negative body ideals, which all equate to tangible steps in fostering equitable female representation in sports.

In addition, this process has enabled the resolution of concrete problems via service-oriented activism. A key example is Liang Yu's Action for Sisters Fighting the Pandemic, which successfully raised 2.532 million RMB and delivered almost 1.1 million menstrual products to some 85,000 female medical workers on the frontline. Following that, her Give Her a Hand charitable foundation continued to fight "menstrual poverty" and advance sexual education in rural areas, demonstrating affirmative material impacts by collaborating the state-owned enterprises and branches of the Communist Youth League. This kind of cooperation allows "Pink Feminists" to work "within the red line" and generate material outcomes that may be impossible for more confrontational groups. Although as a pragmatic framework, (which doesn't break the mould as a feminist intervention framework) "Pink Feminism" makes minimal albeit valuable strides for women. The "positive outcomes" of "Pink Feminism," are first and foremost that the pragmatic achievements will navigate and negotiate to work within the state's "red line", not challenging patriarchy based power structures fundamentally. The measure of efficacy will be based on what one is able to achieve in seriously constraining authoritarian conditions, often meaning significant compromise on the critical edge of feminism.

4.2 Limitations and Critiques

In spite of the pragmatic successes of "Pink Feminism," there are serious constraints and critiques. Chief among concerns is the loss of its critical edge: participants are often expected not to explicitly critique state policies, thus sacrificing the feminist critique of state and industry policies in the sake of staying safe and to keep working. Self-censorship can further weaken core feminist messages and prevent meaningful structural critiques.

Furthermore, Pink Feminism's practices can reinforce existing power structures around neoliberal consumerism and state authoritarianism. Feminists utilizing economic boycotts or reporting issues to authorities rely on consumer and citizen power. Yet, this requires class privilege as well as implicating the government in its decisions that were not fully resolved via government action. This underestimates the government's demonstration of its patriarchal roles through the practice of justifying its authority over the concerns of feminists instead of thinking critically and strategically about the state's patriarchal power.

"Happy feminism," evidenced in the publicly conducted thrill surrounding female athletes, can easily become state propaganda and undermine the critique of structural problems. The limited place the state allows for the public promotion of "model 'pink feminists,'" such as Liang Yu is significant in terms of absorbability and how that advertising, mediated by state relationships, is produced. The state helps to create an image of progress and exists to contain genuinely independent and critical feminism. Every time the state marginalizes those critics, creates rival feminism, those who want to take independent, separate, individual approaches to feminist practice lose out even more as those attempts are marginalized.

Moreover, pervasive censorship and suppression may have led "Pink Feminists" to be disconnected from the struggles and experiences of prior generations of women's rights activists and limited their scope of understanding the larger historical contexts of Chinese feminism. Internally, "Pink Feminists" have been known to accuse other feminists of being "pseudo female boxers" or "not doing real work" which has created internal rifts, which actively silenced and stigmatized true grassroots whistle-blowers. This fragmentation has weakened the feminist movement's collective power. Moreover, policies prioritizing pro-regime credentials can inadvertently prevent intersectional investigation into other social justice issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, as illustrated in their surrogacy position statement.

The paradox of "Pink Feminism" is embedded in its survival strategy: alignment with nationalism. At the same time, this strategy detracts from the transformative potential of Pink Feminism, leading to a compartmentalized and highly co-opted feminist field. Although it allows for some limited space for political expression, it sacrifices a critical position that would allow for the types of changes it wanted to achieve and also merely reinforces the actual power relationships it espouses to disrupt. In the end, the movement may be able to mark some superficial gains - but will fail to address the root causes of patriarchal oppression, especially state authoritarianism.

4 Conclusion: Towards a Nuanced Understanding

The conversation around "Pink Feminism" in China exposes a complex and variable phenomenon, born out of the particular socio-political constraints and even more constrictive digital landscape offered to women by the authorities. With no single definition, it is a group of strategic practices adopted by feminists to best navigate a highly restrictive environment. These practices require a tightrope walk between framing feminist beliefs to get a voice in nationalist language, and sacrificing one of feminism's key criticisms (the bias of the state use of nationalism) in order for safety and the ability to exist.

The evaluation identifies the ambiguous role of "Pink Feminism." On the one hand, it allows some feminist voices and makes limited progress, like improving consumer rights and the public's engagement with gender issues. Conversely, the benefits of the rhetorical maneuvering of aligning with nationalism/state funding run the risk of failure, as feminists locate themselves in the co-optation of reproducing entrenched power, positioning "Pink Feminism" as the desired alignment. The critical use of "Pink Feminism" by other feminists highlights the ideological divide and struggle over what constitutes valid feminist activism in China. These dynamics must be taken seriously, and we must not jump to conclusions about authentic belief or strategic legitimization.

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