

Due to the sensitivity of the topic of feminism in China, the interviewees in this story are anonymous because they do not want to reveal their real names.

Leilei, a 28-year-old doctoral student in the UK, described what has been like to be a Chinese feminist in the past few years – walking on steel wire – malice and danger everywhere. Therefore, in order to not put oneself in any kind of danger, as a feminist, one must move very carefully and slowly forward in a small area that seems safe, and the lightest mistake can put you in danger of being blocked on social media and cyberbully.

“You don’t know what you may face,” said Leilei. Leilei came to UK in 2016 to study history and she is one of the early members of VaChina, a Chinese feminist group composed of Chinese students studying abroad based in the UK. VaChina is a basement for these students to spread feminist ideas and oppose gender violence through plays, book readings and workshop, and are committed to form a Chinese feminism network with other Chinese feminist groups in other countries.

In 2015, the arrests of five feminists marked the beginning of a public crackdown on feminist activism. In 2018, The Feminist Voice (女權之聲), a gender-affirmative media outlet with hundreds of thousands of followers was blocked by WeChat and Weibo one day after International Women’s Day. As some well-known feminists have gone overseas for further studies and the number of students studying abroad has increased in recent years, the seeds of Chinese feminism are sprouting in more fertile soil overseas. But in what ways can they nourish Chinese feminism that is struggling to move forward in a challenging political environment?

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995, feminism in China has entered a period of relatively stable development. From NGOs caring women’ right set up by feminist scholars to women's research institutes in universities, to young feminist activists taking to the streets in the form of performance art to call for equality in education and against domestic violence. All of this was gradually tightened in 2015.

In 2015, feminists’ activists in China planned a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation on the eve of Women’s Day. However, the day before March 8, five feminist activists were suddenly arrested by police in different cities for “picking quarrels and provoking troubles”, which is often used by those in power to silence dissidents in China, and they were released after 37 days of detention. The arrest was a serious blow to feminist activities offline. Several of the activists involved have been under constant surveillance by national security.

“It feels like they have a long reach. They do not let me do anything,” Li Tingting, one of the arrested feminists, said.

A year after her release, when Li Tingting was asked by the BBC whether the state national measures had worked and whether she was worried, she replied very directly that yes, she could not do street activities at the moment.

In the following years, the surveillance of feminist issues on the internet became more stringent than before. The most famous feminist platform, Feminist Voice, which once had 180,000 fans, was permanently blocked by Weibo on the second day of Women’s Day 2018.

“This is a sad calmness,” Xiong Jing said, in an interview with the Initium Media. She has been working for the Feminist Voice after obtaining Master degree in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She said for a long time, she was in a state of confusion, and she started feeling bad after a few days, “I have been working for this platform for 7 years, I saw our fans grow from a thousand to more than 100,000. But all of sudden, everything is gone.”

According to statistics organized by the Initium Meida, at the end of March, 2021, dozens of feminism Weibo accounts supporting Xiao Meili were blocked. At the beginning of April, dozens of feminism-related groups were dismissed. In 2021, nearly 20 influential LGBT community public accounts in different universities were blocked on WeChat platform overnight.

Lü Pin, founder of Feminist Voice, said in an interview with VOA, "The government certainly doesn't want you to have a structural criticism of society or to claim your rights on your own, and in that sense, the government is not destined to like feminism. The government prefers that women remain in a more traditional domestic role. This one is better for the stability of government rule."

“It is getting harder for us to speak out on social media. First of all, people who attack you on social media are not very likely to be punished. But people who speak out are punished very badly. It is terrible to get accounts blocked,” Leilei said. She said when a group of her friends defended Xiao Meili, a Chinese feminist, for resisting second-hand smoke on Weibo, they were cyberbullied by anonymous internet users. Xiao Mei Mei uploaded a video on Weibo of her dissuading a man from smoking in a hot pot restaurant, only to be splashed with tea by the other side. Soon after, some Weibo users found a photo of her cheering for Hong Kong during the

Umbrella Movement and slandered her as an independent Hong Kong citizen, exposing her to online violence.

“Now the bottom line is becoming lower and lower, whatever you do is dangerous, there is no one thing that is absolutely safe,” Leilei said. She mentioned that some of the feminism friends including their parents, have been warned by the Chinese polices not to spread rumors on the internet for talking about feminist-related issues.

“There is plenty of resistance on the internet like account blocking, ban of posting. I have experienced these a lot,” Song said. She is a 27-year-old girl who works in a game development company, “And there are a lot of quarrels with people, which is quite self-consuming.”

In addition to the attacks on feminism on the Internet, there are also malicious attacks on feminism in real life. Song said the most difficult thing is to spread the idea of gender equality with people around herself. She talked about the mocking attitude of her male colleagues about women getting a half day off on Women’s Day, “I don’t know why they had such an attitude. I was really sick of it.”

As the former Feminist Five Sisters went abroad for further studies and the number of Chinese student studying abroad increased, Chinese feminist activists gradually opened overseas battlefields in different countries. VaChina is one example.

As described by Leilei, VaChina was founded in 2017 by Li Tingting and other feminists who came to UK for study. Their goal is to build a network that can allow them to develop Chinese feminism in the UK. So they registered this organization at SOAS, but as the group grew, the membership gradually expanded to other schools. During the pandemic, online activities attracted more people from China and North America to participate.

In December, 2019, members of VaChina held an action in solidarity with Jingyao after learning that Jingyao v. Liu Qiangdong, CEO of Jing Dong enterprise, sexual assault case would be heard again in Public. Since Liu Jingyao, a student of University of Minnesota, accused Liu of sexually assaulting her on the night of August 30, 2018, she has been subjected to slut-shaming on the internet. Numerous edited videos have appeared on the internet implying that Jingyao seduced Liu to defraud him of his money, and even some mainstream media hold similar points of view. Voices supporting Jingyao were constantly suppressed.

Members gathered to design banners and posters in support of Jingyao, and then they went to different places such as the London Eye, China Town, Underground stations and Piccadilly Circus to show their support for Jingyao to more people.

“Jingyao’s case was a relatively controversial case back then. So it was not easy for people to stand out and express support for her at that time,” Leilei said, “I felt quite touched that there were friends willing to do this together, because I was worried that no one would come. At that time, although the participants were all from VaChina, we were not very familiar with each other, but we were still willing to come together, participating in this activity for Jingyao.”

“ I am grateful that with such a group of people, we can still hold on to some beliefs,” Leilei said.

Although the members’ time in the UK is limited due to their studies, the impact VaChina has had on them is indelible. On their website, Little Ear, a member of VaChina, described this organization as a big garden, each of them is a seed.

“We came together in London for a little privilege and condensed our values, the things we believe in, into this seed. When the wind blows we will float around the world and germinate in more and more places. That’s what we’re all about,” Little Ear said.

Now, a lot of members have returned to China for different reasons. Some of them feel that they still have to go to where they are most needed for the feminist movement. When their Indian classmates heard this, they said to them, "Just go. Back to the battlefield. Back to your battlefield."

Fei Bai and Tian Zuoyi met in VaChina, and upon their return to China, they opened a gender-friendly bar called Muchroom in Chengdu last year.

“The offline space for feminists’ public activities has been compressed, as if we have lost the square and the street. So I wondered if it was possible to find and create spaces that seemed less public, yet could be explored for publicness,” said Fei Bai in a podcast episode of Women Power World (女力天下).

In her conception, this is not a space that shuts feminists out of society, but a pluralistic and inclusive place where different people can connect, where all kinds of people can be accepted.

In addition functions as a bar, Muchroom also organizes book readings and provides a stage for female stand-up comedians, which can be seen on its WeChat public page.

Xiao Meili set up a podcast with Zhang Leilei and Tian Zuoyi in 2019. Their podcast covers a wide range of topics: from cyber violence to open sexual relationships, from racism to appearance anxiety.

“it is not that you have to do some specific offline activities to practice feminism,” Leilei said, “I think one can always live a feminist life under any circumstances.”

Will Chinese feminism embrace a better tomorrow?

“I think we have to properly let go of this kind of what is better, because feminism says to see the individual sense of vulnerability. To see the present moment, and then to embrace the moment, is to embrace a diversity of equality and respect. So I think it is enough for us to do our best at this moment,” said Tang Ling, a doctor of Oriental Studies in Oxford, who is now teaching in Baptist University of Hong Kong.