Q&A: Li Tingting on #RiceBunny, China's #MeToo behind the Great Firewall

The online #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment was one of the biggest global social phenomena of 2017. In China authorities have targeted the movement, censoring social media posts, hashtags, and even entire articles. Women are working around this using code words and self-filtering online posts.

WikiTribune's interviewed prominent Chinese feminist activist Li Tingting, who was arrested three years ago for protesting against sexual harassment, to get a sense of how #MeToo is getting around the great firewall of China.

Quarrels and creativity

Late on March 6, 2015, Li, who goes by the pseudonym Li Maizi, was detained by police along with four other activists, known as the "Feminist Five." They were held for 37 days on suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" after planning protests in multiple cities against sexual harassment on public transport.

Exposure of sexual harassment in China was reignited this year after the scandal around Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein raised awareness of the issue of harassment worldwide.

China's #MeToo movement stemmed from college campuses, when the hashtag #WoYeShi (#MeToo) was deployed from students' computers, with many young women across the country sharing stories. Academic Luo Xixi told of an alleged assault by a professor when she was in her 20s in an open letter on Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter, in late January. Her account went viral with more than 4 million views and 17,000 likes *(Washington Post),* prompting other alleged victims to come forward. Professor Chen Xiaowu, was dismissed by Beihang University in Beijing for violating professional ethics. China's education ministry also said it would look to set up anti-harassment policies.

The #MeToo hashtag collected more than 4.5 million hits (*The Atlantic*) on Weibo and there have been more than 70 open letters, started by female students and teachers and signed calling for campus sexual harassment prevention.

But Chinese authorities have been suppressing online posts in support of #MeToo including the primary hashtag of China's campaign, #MeTooInChina, which was blocked *(The Conversation).* Phrases like "anti-sexual harassment" and petitions were deleted from the internet (*New Yorker*). Universities also warned student campaigners to tone down their activism. This led to the astute use of code words and emojis to continue the campaign.

"Our #MeToo campaign in China, it's full of creativity," Li Tingting told WikiTribune. "I think that is the advantage of young women. [They] can be very creative." Participants in the #MeToo campaign are getting around key words that are banned by China's internet regulators by changing words to evade censors, she says.

The movement against sexual harassment is gaining traction in China, but it's yet to be widespread, she says. "It's become more and more popular but it's far away from mainstream issues … [Sexual harassment is getting] more

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and more visibility. In the past, it's more like a black hole. No one would talk about it."

China Daily, a newspaper run by the ruling Communist Party, officially responded to wider #MeToo movement by publishing an article (*New Yorker*) stating that sexual misconduct was comparatively uncommon there due to superior virtues in Chinese culture.

#RiceBunny sounds like...

#MeToo is just one example of internet censorship in China. But online censorship there is becoming more frequent and unpredictable, says Li Tingting. "The whole political situation has become more and more cramped," she explains, describing China's internet restrictions as a "double-sided grid wall".

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Women's rights and LGBT activist Li Tingting, aka Li Maizi, protesting for more women's bathrooms in buildings. Photo courtesy of Li Tingting

Measures have been taken by the Chinese government, led by general secretary Xi Jinping, to limit digital content and internet access in China, earning it the nickname "The Great Firewall of China". Over 60 regulations have been rolled out, most recently with a crackdown on VPN (virtual private network) services (*The Guardian*), a broad new cybersecurity law and the ending of online anonymity (*Washington Post*) last year.

The 29-year-old has been involved in several public equal rights demonstrations in China, including when she walked down a street in Beijing on Valentine's Day in 2012 wearing a bridal dress covered with blood stains to protest against domestic violence. She gives talks and participates in panel discussions on feminism and gender rights, and was labeled "one of China's loudest feminist voices" by women's publication *Broadly*.

Li is studying at the University of Essex in England for a year and spoke with *WikiTribune* on the phone.

***WikiTribune*: Would you say the MeToo movement is mainstream in China?**

Li Tingting: No. It's become more and more popular but it's far away from mainstream issues.

The Luo Xixi case is a very important case. It's a cornerstone for MeToo campaign in China. Basically there's a good foundation in North America and in the European countries about anti-sexual harassment, because there's a lot of debates about anti-slut shaming, anti-gender based violence.

> "Women's rights in China has a lot of more crap to face" – Li Tingting

And the French government department is working on gender equality. But in China, women's rights in the government department is very vulnerable and also in civil society … it has a lot of more crap to face.

Those professors use their position rank to sexually assault women students. It's very common actually in China but it's like a black hole. People won't speak out.

Could you explain what's happening with the censorship of China's #MeToo movement?

It's a little bit complicated. It's not only about the gender issue and not only about the sexual harassment issue. Sometimes, the internet censorship department, they just randomly silence all information that will draw a lot of attention.

But there's multi-departmental corporations between the censorship system. Sometimes the communication is not very good. People in charge of censorship, they have different powers overlap each other. So it's very hard to figure out which department [is censoring].

There's a lot of university volunteers [calling] for the anti-sexual harassment mechanism in their own university. Some students, they have pressure by the school. And ask them to delete those articles on their WeChat (the social media app) public accounts. Some people they just follow the directions because they are students and the school is more powerful. But most posts are deleted automatically by the 'internet police' I think.

Is there an algorithm that deletes posts?

It's the keyword filter. So, "sexual harassment" is a keyword. And then the filter is okay, "sexual harassment", "feminism". There's a high volume doing that in the new year, in 2018. It's only my guess, but I think the internet police they just jump on this word 'sexual harassment.' And then they just delete.

How often is online activism censored?

It's very often. It's more and more frequent. Because the whole political situation has become more and more cramped. There's a lot of laws released during the last two years. Anti-spy law, national security law, anti-terrorism law, the Overseas NGO Management Law, the regulation of the ban of the VPN. So you can see the tendency.

And the law governs Facebook and Twitter. A lot of politically sensitive websites got blocked by the Chinese government. And the Great Wall also blocks the foreigners from visiting some Chinese department websites.

When I live overseas, I tried to search some information on our government websites. I can't get access. That's the reason why I know it. So it's a double-side Great Wall.

Women's rights and LGBT rights activist Li Tingting protesting in China for more women's bathrooms. Photo courtesy Li Tingting

#RiceBunny, which sounds like "me too" in Chinese, was used as a hashtag to circumvent censorship. Is it quite common for people to use hashtags to get around censorship?

Sometimes it's very hard. Chinese is a small language, even though there's a lot of people speak it. There's a barrier for people to understand Chinese. So that is our #MeToo campaign in China. It's full of creativity.

I think that is the advantage of young women. They can be very creative.

People try very hard. Sometimes if you have some keywords [blocked], you can't post a hashtag. So what you need to do is self-censorship. You need to self-censor your article and then try to change some words. It's a really frustrating process. Because you don't know which word is the keyword.

> "Censorship very randomly censors some articles.
> Sometimes it's very ridiculous, but you cannot fight back"
> – Li Tingting

When you go to post your article you can't post it because [a notification says] "You have some keywords which is not allowed by the law or regulations." Then you have to try to figure out which word is the keyword.

So what you need to do is try again, try again, and try again. It's very frustrating.

What's the effect of internet censorship on movements like #MeToo and others?

It's a political censorship issue. There's no space for [politics] on social media and the mainstream media.

The authority didn't equate the #MeToo campaign in China as a threaten to the state. But if there's some other issues between, or if they threaten our stability, there's no space for those issues. Often, censorship very randomly censors some articles. Sometimes it's very ridiculous, but you cannot fight back.

A lot of entertainment news got censored last year. We can't figure out what happened. We don't know. We can only guess. That's the problem. Sometimes the censorship becomes more and more unpredictable.

It creates a feeling that nobody is safe, no one is safe in this country.

Why is China so strict, if you had to explain it in a few sentences?

Because the economic development is vitally important for the Chinese government. Anything that can become the barrier to economic development will be the bad things [in the eyes of the government].

In the past, there were a lot of street petitioners, or activists on the street. Now they just disappeared. And internet control is also very important. They need to strengthen their power on the internet censorship. All of those serve economic development.

What is your experience of gender-based violence in China?

It's a worldwide issue. The good thing is in 2015 we got anti-domestic violence law. It's a good signal for us to looking forward to the #MeToo campaign in China.

[It's getting] more and more visibility. In the past, it's more like a black hole. No one would talk about it. There's no supportive public space to talk about it, because of slut-shaming and the rude culture. But we cannot deny the gender-based violence in China is still a very severe problem. But it's also very progressive from my perspective.

There's a lot of people that are younger than me, and they already set out to do something to accuse the gender-based violence in China. It's very progressive.

The interview has been edited for clarity.

Read *WikiTribune*'s coverage of the wider #MeToo movement here.

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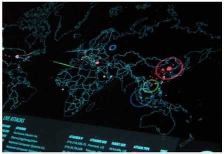

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