State and Government Surveillance

Digital Surveillance and Control of Chinese Feminists and a Transnational Response

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Abstract: Using a case study of violence against Chinese feminists, this article illustrates how contemporary and historic surveillance technologies (digital and pre-digital) specifically impact transnational, non-western communities and how transnational studies support or complicate feminist insights on the rhetorical contours of surveillance. Applying the concept of deep circulation (Edwards), I chart the contemporary strategies of surveilling Chinese feminists through textual, affective, and infrastructural dimensions. These surveillance strategies use the rhetorics of "Da Zi Bao" (Big Character Posters) from China's Cultural Revolution era to label feminists as traitors to the nation, which thrive in a nationalist affective economy supported by political and technological infrastructures that use technological instrumental power to control information circulation. The article ends with a brief discussion of Chinese feminists' transnational response, disengaging from the discourse based on nationalism, and a call for action for Western audiences to examine the global impacts of Western technologies.

Introduction

On March 30, 2021, Xiao Meili[1] and some friends went to a hotpot restaurant in Chengdu, the capital city of China's Sichuan Province, to enjoy a nice dinner. But their meal was disrupted when a man at an adjacent table started smoking. He refused to put out his cigarette when Xiao Meili politely asked him to do so, especially given the restaurant's policy of no smoking and the city's ordinance on no smoking in public spaces. The man became enraged after repeatedly refusing to stop smoking and then poured some liquid from a cup on the table toward Xiao Meili and her friends. An altercation escalated. Even after the police arrived, he was still yelling profanities and claiming his freedom to smoke, interfering with the police's intervention into the incident.

This event was recorded by Xiao Meili and then posted on the popular social media platform Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like microblogging site) and became viral with the Weibo hashtag "woman trying to persuade a neighboring table to stop smoking was poured unidentified liquid." She was interviewed by local media and the trending topic on social media prompted many sympathetic responses that supported her actions and condemned the man's rude behavior. For a brief moment, the event reminded people of the harmful

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1   I use the convention for Chinese names: Last Name First Name for all Chinese names in the article.

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effects of public smoking.

This outcry against public smoking didn't last long and the gender-based attacks started by this man became part of a broader campaign against women and feminists, after some Weibo users pointed out that Xiao Meili is a "feminist," a term carrying strong negative connotations on the platform, and then accused her of being a supporter of Hong Kong independence.

All of a sudden, she and her fellow supporters (including me) were called "nation's traitors," influenced by or sellouts to "foreign forces." It seemed that by simply being women or feminists, Xiao Meili and her supporters were deemed as against the national government and anti-patriotic. Despite the fact that the smoker apologized to her two days after the event at the request of the police and compensated her with 1000 yuan, Weibo deleted Xiao Meili's account while many of the trolls who wrongfully accused her are still around (Wee).

Chinese feminists have been the subject of a "surveillance assemblage" (Haggerty and Ericson) both in China and globally, especially since the development of transnational feminist activism around #MeToo (Chen and Wang). While feminist thoughts and activism have always existed in China, #MeToo brought to China a digital feminist awakening that both broadened its reach and complicated how people might understand feminism, particularly in digital spaces where backlashes against feminists and women in general increased significantly (Huang). Popularized ideas of feminism emphasizing women's economic independence challenged hegemonic norms (Wu and Dong) while public efforts for combatting sexual violence propelled by the #MeToo movement were seen as "potential threats to China's political stability" (Han 739). In particular, one such strategy is "identifying feminists as betraying the nation" (Huang 8). Under the historical and political context wherein the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been increasingly promoting nationalist values through internal Party communication such as Document 9 (ChinaFile), facilitated by the intensified and complicated information control and censorship system, a surveillance assemblage emerges that expands to transnational spaces directly targeting Chinese feminists and feminist activists.

While Western audiences may be generally familiar with the control of internet discourse in China through the term "The Great Firewall" (a metaphorical term to describe Chinese government's media censorship and information control blocking some Western sites such as Google, Facebook, etc.), they may be less familiar with how the historic strategies of surveillance from the Cultural Revolution period are translated into contemporary manifestations in interacting with digital technologies.

In this article, I illustrate the contemporary surveillance assemblage of Chinese feminists by applying the concept of "deep circulation ecology" developed by Dustin Edwards. I analyze how these means of surveillance interpolate Chinese feminists as traitors, thus delegitimizing feminism and feminists (Charland). According to the dominant ideology of the CCP, there's only one right way of advocating for women's rights—through state-sanctioned means and avenues, without interrogating how these systems are designed

to see women as "docile" patriotic bodies. Feminist surveillance studies scholars Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana A. Magnet have argued that surveillance practices "remake the body" (9) and thus create different ways of seeing or not seeing women. In the context of this case study in China, feminists are constructed as colluding with western forces, distinguished from mainstream women's rights advocacy. While legislative and policy changes for gender equality are crucial (Chen), this rhetorical interpellation of feminists enacted through surveillance diminishes the agency of feminist activists for self-definition and self-positioning and narrows the general public's understanding of "feminism."

Deep Circulation and Surveillance Assemblage

Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of assemblage that fixes a free-flowing phenomena temporarily and spatially driven by desire, Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson demonstrate how "a range of desires now energize and serve to coalesce the surveillant assemblage, including the desires for control, governance, security, profit and entertainment" (609). In this vein, rather than focusing on discrete surveillance technologies, an assemblage approach allows us to pay attention to how a variety of agents (e.g. technologies, systems, government institutions, tech companies) can coalesce through connections facilitated by technological advancement and policy development. In turn, the monitored body becomes reassembled into one where the flesh/information flows of the human body can be standardized.

Edwards defines deep circulation as encompassing three dimensions: textual, affective, and infrastructural. Textual circulation "describes how composed texts across genres and media enter networks of broader circulation once they are distributed in particular moments and venues" (Edwards 80). This dimension considers how text, or any kind of symbolic artifacts, may contribute values to the public arena and communities. Edwards defines affective circulation as "a dimensionality of circulation that can be easily felt but difficult to render into representation" (77). His understanding of affect aligns with what Sara Ahmed calls "movement between signs or objects" (Ahmed 45). The more signs and bodies circulate, the more intensive the affect becomes. Thus, Edwards argues that "as having generative force, provoking, inciting, overwhelming, or suspending," affective spaces "can mobilize habits, trajectories, and practices" (80). Finally, and perhaps most importantly in this case here, is the infrastructural dimension of circulation. Edwards emphasizes that infrastructures of circulation include the "complex technical-material assemblages involved in carrying, ordering, and filtering flows of information" (81). As relevant to this article, Edwards argues that "infrastructures of circulation are key for advanced surveillance today" (81). The infrastructure of a platform like Weibo is shaped by technical, material and ideological forces as it is subject to the erratic information control systems of the Chinese government.

In the next section, I map out the deep circulation dimensions of the attacks on Xiao Meili and her supporters. Specifically, I chart the deep circulation ecology (Edwards) enacted by this surveillance assemblage, grounded in a Foucauldian conceptualization of "discipline" that includes both contemporary technological instruments/strategies (Green et al.; Roberts) and the historic practice of Da Zi Bao "大字报" (also

known as "big character poster," a practice from the Chinese Cultural Revolution of detailing an individual's 'sins' against the Communist Party) as a form of surveillance. This discursive practice thrives in an affective economy driven by nationalist and patriotic desires and supported by a complex and unpredictable infrastructure backed by both governmental power and the tech industry in China.

Digital surveillance and control of Chinese feminists

Discursive Dimension

One of Xiao Meili's attackers is a Key Opinion Leader (KOL) on Weibo @ZiWuXiaShi. With a large following, his posts labeling Xiao and her supporters as "anti-regime" garnered much attention. Here, I examine how, in nine serialized, long posts detailing the history and background of Chinese feminist activists, he employed rhetorical strategies akin to the Da Zi Bao or "big character posts" from the era of Cultural Revolution, such as: using syllogistic reasoning, expressions of emotion, aggression and profanity, and constructing conspiracy theories about feminist activists.

Da Zi Bao, or "big character posters" or "wall posters" is a communication genre popularized in China during the Cultural Revolution as a method of mass mobilization where people could express their opinions in interpersonal political battles (Li). They were usually "three feet wide by eight feet high and were printed in stylized calligraphy" (Lu 73). During the Cultural Revolution, these wall posters were seen everywhere in China and often served the rhetorical purposes of condemning anyone deemed "class enemies" or opponents of Maoist ideology. In some ways, it can be seen as akin to the contemporary digital cancel culture discourse where the author of the text might perceive the action as noble, but the rhetoric employed can be actually less than sound.

According to Lu, the rhetorical features of the wall posters include using syllogistic reasoning, expressions of emotion, aggression, profanity, and using metaphors to present moral/ethical appeals aligned with Chairman Mao's ideologies and to construct conspiracy theories about people who were deemed enemies. Such rhetoric permeated both public and private spaces in China, creating a culture of fear and hatred fertilized by lateral surveillance practices where people would write Da Zi Bao condemning their co-workers, neighbors, even parents. One of the stylistic features of Da Zi Bao is to find and expose new evidence or ulterior motives to prove political crimes already presented as a foregone conclusion, often by digging into someone's family history. For example, one could be deemed a class enemy if their ancestors were landlords.

In contemporary China, while some may see Da Zi Bao in the forms of user-generated internet content (Li), it's important not to forget the rhetorical functions of shaming associated with this genre (Canalli). I see Da Zi Bao in other communication genres such as "anonymous letters" or internet trolling. Anonymous letters are often used by ordinary citizens to share with the government wrongdoings of government officials or civil servants (Lu). These days, such letters can take the form of digital messaging or online vid-

eos where people sometimes give up anonymity to show the authenticity of their information. However, digital trolls don't always reveal their true identities but rather adopt rhetorical strategies similar to those of Da Zi Bao. As such, contemporary digital versions of Da Zi Bao find affiliations with "cancel culture." Rodrigo L. Canalli argues that both share common rhetorical features, such as "absolute moral certainty, promotion of dogmatic and polarized thinking, mythmaking, conspiracy theories, aggressive language and radicalism" (97). As a result, this type of rhetoric purports to make an evidence-based argument while actually supporting foregone conclusions already predetermined by the author's values.

A prominent example of syllogistic reasoning in ZiWuXiaShi's posts is done through framing feminist activists as nation's traitors because they have been affiliated with NGOs and Western organizations. Similar to how Da Zi Bao writers would dig into someone's family history during the Cultural Revolution, ZiWuXiaShi digs through their history of feminist activism. For example, he uses serialized posts to reveal the history of Xiao Meili's "associates," such as Lü Pin, a prominent Chinese feminist activist now in exile in the United States (U.S.). He reveals Lü's history of feminist activism work, such as founding Feminist Voices, creating accounts on Facebook to call for justice for "Feminist Five" (the five Chinese feminists who were arrested in 2015 and later released under international pressure), participating in various feminist activist events such as "Occupy Male Bathrooms." Notably different from the Da Zi Bao style, however, is that when listing such history, ZiWuXiaShi uses not only passionate and aggressive language but also words that indicate logical reasoning and careful investigation, such as "据知情人透露" (according to insiders) or "另据一个未经证实的消息源称" (according to another unverified information source). Such rhetorical gestures signal the investigator's cautious attitude, thus suggesting his allegations were well-founded.

At the same time, he also uses different styles of language to highlight the supposedly nefarious nature of feminist activism, effectively drawing a foregone conclusion that these feminists' ultimate motive is to overthrow the Chinese government, including emotional language, internet jargon, and military and espionage terms, often in an exaggerated manner. Throughout his posts, he regularly refers to feminist activists associated with Xiao Meili, such as "the Feminist Five" and feminist scholar Leta Hong Fincher, as "同伙 tong huo" (accomplice) and "女拳 nü quan" (feminist fist, a pejorative term to refer to feminists). To describe their connections, he would refer to Lü Pin as Xiao's "上线 shang xian" (a term used to describe an upper-level spy in an espionage system) in their "组织 zu zhi" (organization but used in a pejorative way as if describing a crime organization). "Feminist fists" in Chinese (nü quan) sound exactly the same as "feminism" and have been used consistently as a term online to attack feminists by people who believe feminism is about pitting women against men and who dismiss its legitimacy due to its western origin. Using this term here along with other political and criminal terms constructs a discourse of violence against feminists and delegitimates feminist ideas. Finally, I'll note that, just as multiple copies of Da Zi Bao might be posted about the same person, here ZiWuXiaShi also posted his diatribe in a serialized manner, documenting each post with a number to further solidify the legitimacy of his posts, making it appear as if there were a lot of evidence against feminists.

Affective Dimension

Such discursive acts can only thrive in an affective economy that promotes nationalist values and sees Western forces as enemies. According to Jude Blanchette, Xi's attempt to consolidate the narrative about the Party's history and position from Mao Zedong (the founding of China) to Deng Xiaoping (Reform and Open era) in part aligns with the neo-Maoist desire to maintain China's socialist ideological stance. Going even further, Xi reinforces the national and cultural pride of China, claiming that the Chinese should "return to our beginning" and that they don't need Western support or foreign knowledge. What's important to understand here is that decisions made by the CCP, and its propaganda and information control offices are ultimately influenced by two goals: to maintain the legitimacy of the party and to keep the society stabilized, characteristic of the surveillance state of a dictatorship (Pei).

Further, "Document 9," which was issued during the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2013 as a communiqué among party leaders, reveals the CCP's concern over Western infiltration through media and culture, which they see as attempting to undermine China's socialist ideological and political foundation (ChinaFile). With this broader ideological context, we can assume the CCP information control system would tolerate and perhaps even welcome the anti-feminist rhetorics of KOLs like ZiWuXiaShi as long as it's done under the argument to support the unity of the country and the Chinese government, and as long as it doesn't incite social instability. As long as they frame feminists as a sinister organized group whose aim is to challenge social stability through collusion with Western forces, it's difficult not to sow seeds of doubt in the internet sphere. For a social media platform like Weibo, which makes its censorship decisions largely through guessing what the government wants, it makes sense that it would promote accounts such as ZiWuXiaShi due to their ideological stance. Ironically, it's also interesting to note that ZiWuXiaShi's images in this series of posts often have signs of being altered in order to dodge censorship. It's hard to say whether that was done as a show (given that Weibo would probably not censor these posts) or if it's simply a sign of the erratic and unpredictable censorship system. For example, he reposted the photo of Xiao holding a sign during 2014 as evidence that she supports Hong Kong independence, with a red cross over the photo to dodge censorship, further supporting his argument that the photo itself was problematic.

This rhetoric is an example of what scholars of affective politics Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis call "the affective weaponization of information" through "the exploitation, manipulation, and surveillance of emotions" (2). On Weibo, love of the home country is above all other emotions. But the love here is insidious. I understand this national love in Sara Ahmed's sense as "bound up with how bodies inhabit the nation in relation to an ideal" (133). This love must also be understood as in relation to grief, where the love stems from a desire for what the nation should be: fully united not only in government structure but also in ideology, where Hong Kong and Taiwan are all part of China, the father nation's children. Charlie Yi Zhang theorizes love in contemporary dominant Chinese social and political discourse by calling the political affective construction of the neoliberal China as "Loveland." Zhang argues that the Loveland is constructed

with classed and gendered biopolitics such that the neoliberal love for the motherland/fatherland is manifested or promulgated with the construction of gendered identity that puts women in a double bind; they are required to be modern, professional, successful career women while still upholding the traditional role as caretakers and homemakers. At the same time, as Zhang's analysis of the PRC's Sixtieth Anniversary Ceremony shows where female performers represented docile citizens grateful for the sovereign power of the father nation, gender becomes a means to reconnect the government with its people, erasing the social inequities caused by neoliberalism. Therefore, a woman's role has always been to uphold the patriarchal nation-state structure where they are interpellated to not only be loyal citizens, but also objectified as nationalist love is expressed. It is this "dreadful desire," as Zhang calls it, that enhances the appeals of nationalist trolls like ZiWuXiaShi and his digital Da Zi Bao. Working in tandem with technological infrastructures and policies, feminist bodies are effectively surveilled for their rebellion against a nation they should "love."

Infrastructural dimension

It's difficult to study China's censorship strategies systematically, but a number of scholars and organizations have attempted (Green et al.; Pei; Roberts). Earlier discussion of the affective dimension of deep circulation has suggested why ZiWuXiaShi's damning posts would be popular on Weibo and thus not censored. In this section, I use the infrastructural dimension to show why such posts might not be censored, while the Weibo accounts of feminists such as Xiao Meili and her supporter Liang Xiaomen were deleted by the company.

From a technical and material perspective, Chinese social media platforms employ erratic information censorship and control strategies in order to align with the central government's policies and ideological and political preferences (Green et al.). Margaret Roberts has theorized this censorship system as "porous," including three types of strategies: fear, friction, and flooding (1). This porous system is more complex than simply deleting posts and accounts. Rather, direct-deleting content is a tactic to instill fear in users, aimed to create Foucauldian disciplined bodies, where people begin to second-guess what makes something they said or did censorable, possibly leading to self-censoring. On the other hand, methods of friction and flooding aim to direct public attention away from undesirable content by making it difficult to access it (friction) or by flooding the internet with more desirable, i.e., officially-authorized content. Ultimately, this system is aimed to control: controlling who has the power to say, "the truth" and what's considered as truth.

Infrastructurally speaking, the technical, material, and ideological forces underpinning this erratic control are shaped by an assemblage of China's recent history of techno-development and the resulting instrumental power (Lei). Ya-Wen Lei defines "instrumental power" as power "based on technology over people in postindustrial society" (3), which reflects the transitions from a "labor-intensive, explore-oriented manufacturing to 'techno-state capitalism'" (22). While western surveillance scholar Shoshana Zuboff has argued for the rise of instrumentarian power deriving from the commodification of people's behavioral data by companies such as Google and Amazon, driven by the need for profits and innovation, the situation in

China is one where "the proliferation of technical and legal instruments established by the state and large tech companies [regulate] work and life, and enhance legibility, valuation, efficiency, and behavior modification" (Lei 22). What this means is that Chinese people are subject to the instrumental power from both the nation-state and the tech industry, the latter of which is also subject to the control and regulation of the former. More broadly, this instrumental power is facilitated by the broader "multilayered surveillance system" that involves far-reaching organization structures ranging from central government apparatuses such as The Ministry of State Security to the "institutions and organizations directly controlled by the party-state, such as neighborhood committees, state-owned enterprises, government bureaucracies, state-affiliated social organizations (such as official labor unions and religious groups), and universities" (Pei 240).

From this perspective, we can understand a bit more why the information censorship and control strategies might appear so erratic and difficult to study. Because the government intentionally shifts and recalibrates its strategies depending on the situation, tech companies must constantly guess and even over-comply just to stay safe. This constant adjustment is why posts commemorating the COVID-19 whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang were initially deleted en masse while later he was enshrined as a martyr by the government (Green et al.; Zhang Chenchen). One can imagine that when Weibo sees ZiWuXiaShi's Da Zi Bao, it would probably rather "play safe" than stand on the side of "nü quan" (feminist fists, a pejorative term for feminists).

Conclusion

I end with a brief discussion of how a transnational feminist perspective can be a productive response to this deep circulation ecology of surveillance. In Lü Pin's "white paper" commenting on the nationalistic attacks on Xiao Meili and her supporters, she highlights the localized nature of China's feminist movement, making visible how the transnational, intersectional feminist rhetorical praxis of the Chinese diasporic community challenged the systemic oppressive forces of nation-states, patriarchy, geopolitical global tensions, and power imbalances (Texler Segal and Chow). On research about online aggression, Reyman and Sparby call for "an ethic of responsibility" that requires "more engagement"; designing for protection against digital harassment rather than after-the-fact cleanup"; and "for accountability and tactical response rather than civility within digital contexts" (7). In the context of violence against Chinese feminists, to enact systemic and design change can be difficult, faced with the political challenges. Thus, in response to this nationalist attack on feminism, Chinese transnational feminists employed a rhetoric of disengagement and a tactical way of flooding digital spaces in order to reframe issues and to advance their arguments for feminist activism in China.

In the context of increasing tensions between the U.S. and China, labeling feminists as nation's traitors becomes a syllogistic argument that cannot be engaged. It doesn't matter whether feminists love China or not; it doesn't matter whether trolls like ZiWuXiaShi love China or not. These attacks are simply a force of violence against feminists that takes advantage of this geopolitical tension and the Chinese state's patriar-

chal political ideology and its resulting affective economy. The goals of this violence, as Lü illustrates, are to fight the "gender war" that trolls perceive to have been started by feminists and to frame advocacy for women's rights and equality as men hating. I view what Lü does here as a rhetoric of disengagement. As an activist in exile, her writing like this can only be accessed outside the Great Firewall on sites such as China Digital Times, a space dedicated to document censored voices and experiences in China.

This rhetoric of disengagement doesn't mean that Chinese feminists would either stop or continue posting on Chinese social media such as Weibo, as Lü points out that her voices will always be heard by the Chinese feminist (diasporic) community no matter where she is and whether her Chinese social media accounts are deleted or not. Rather, this disengagement refers to disengaging from the nationalistic perspective toward feminism. Faced with various censorship strategies, they respond with similar tactics to flood the platforms with their messages even if they might be deleted later. In Xiao's case, I joined many Chinese feminists inside and outside China in a Weibo campaign with the hashtags #RefuseSecondhandSmoke; #RejectGenderViolenceInPublicSpace; #IStandWithXiaoMeili. We posted pictures of ourselves wearing masks with a "no smoke" sign drawn on it. In doing so, we tried to reorient the "controversy" back to the issue at hand, attempting to illustrate how secondhand smoking in public was tied with gender violence. These tactics aimed to redress the deep circulation of violence against feminists in all three dimensions. Discursively and affectively, they reframed the discussion away from nationalism-based attacks to issues of gender violence; infrastructurally, they helped spread the messaging even while faced with harsh censorship.

Regardless of how I feel about Xiao Meili personally or politically, I refuse to allow internet trolls to frame the issue in such a way and I refuse to acknowledge the validity of such arguments made by ZiWuXiaShi and the like. Chinese women and feminists are also citizens of China, and their fight for women's rights and discursive space is not waged as a means to "overthrow" the government but to challenge an oppressive affective economy and political and information infrastructure that stymies feminist voices advocating for justice. In my post supporting Xiao, one Weibo user commented that they weren't surprised to see me supporting a "nation's traitor" because my location data reveals I'm in the U.S. I did not respond to the comment, disengaging from an argument I would not win.

Rather, I document this experience through scholarship, as a feminist rhetorical response to this violence and the dimensions of its deep circulation. To my (predominantly) Western audience, I would also urge you to not engage in nationalist discourse such as the rampant anti-China sentiments in the U.S., nor to paint Chinese dissidents/feminists as all enemies of the PRC. Instead, I urge you to examine the geopolitical tensions that contextualize the lives of Chinese diasporic communities, and more importantly, interrogate the technological instrumental power facilitated by global technology companies and their profit-driven policies and algorithms. As I finish this manuscript, an X (formerly Twitter) account[2] documenting in Chinese stories and voices of dissent from China has released a post warning his followers that Chinese government agents have been manually combing through his followers' list and visiting those located in China. I couldn't help

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2   I'm deliberately not mentioning his name to avoid unwanted attention.

but ask, what's the role that X is playing here? How has the governance of the platform failed these users? And how can a platform better protect such users?

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