

**MCROBBIE'S THEORY OF POST-FEMINIST DISARTICULATION AND THE  
PRECARIOUSNESS IN CHINESE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes the theoretical transferring of post-feminism and the concept of “disarticulation” from western feminism discourses to the Chinese contemporary media landscape. By introducing the connotation of post-feminism and its disarticulated precarious consequence to the feminism agenda, the paper argues that Chinese native feminism discourses represented the precariousness of post-feminism in the way which de-politicized, decentralized and self-governed individualization has dominated the narratives of feminists. The paper proposes that there is a new Chinese feminist ecology widely growing on media platforms with the characteristics of stigmatization of feminists, breaking down the unity of all feminist groups as well as women as a whole by labeling and gazing upon them, and further disarticulated feminist groups from the primary activism agenda and political alliance. The paper warned that due to the peculiarity of Chinese politics, namely, the long absence of official recognition of feminism and authoritative oppression of it, the precarious consequence of disarticulation pervades contemporary Chinese media landscapes by saturating the online feminism discourses and interrupts its developmental courses.

**Key Words:** Post-feminism; Chinese native feminism; disarticulation; media landscape.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Disarticulation introduced by Angela McRobbie (2008) has warned about the precariousness embedded in the post-feminism ethos: the illusion of feminism being done and its practical deteriorating consequences of the exploitation of women, especially younger generations in popular culture, and the foreclosure on the possibility or likelihood of various expansive intersections and inter-generational feminist transmissions. I argue that in Chinese contemporary society, there is no such illusion as "feminism is done" as China lacked the significant feminist achievement gained from feminism movements (which were absent from Chinese history as well). Instead, the post-feminism ethos is straightly represented as the stigma of feminists and the breaking down of solidarity among women. Subsequently, the stigma and nonunity are further coerced into patriarchal values and Chinese traditionalism. However, the peculiarity of Chinese contemporary society makes it harder to recognize and further examine such a struggle, thus facing a higher risk of depoliticizing and depowering women.

**Post-feminist disarticulation and its consequences**

In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* to explain her idea of “feminism undone”, Angela McRobbie introduced the term “disarticulation” to help understand “how some of the institutional gains made by feminism over a period of 30 years are now being eroded” (2008, p. 24). According to McRobbie, the idea of disarticulation serves two purposes: first, it is the objective of a new kind of regime of gender power, which functions to foreclose on the possibility or likelihood of various expansive intersections and inter-generational feminist transmissions. Namely, feminism is undone in a way in which its alliances with other forms of radical politics, such as anti-racist and radical sexuality, are being reversed and broken off with a resultant limitation of the sexual politics and forms of collectivity available to young women (and others). As a result, women of different ages, ethnicities, and economic groups are prevented from forming a united power base or exchanging information that could assist in making any significant gains against the new regime, and the idea of a new feminist political imaginary becomes increasingly inconceivable. Secondly, disarticulation works as a kind of dispersal strategy, which disconnects young women from rather traditional feminism to the neoliberal order: young women have a special role to play in the next stage of modernization—as docile workers and consumers in a service-based economy—and hence their allegiance to a genuine feminist politics must be discouraged. Consequently, they are offered a substitute by the state, a faux feminist of seeing freedom and equality.

The two dimensions of the end of disarticulation could be concluded as: on the one hand, feminism is undone in effect, as multiple postfeminism scholars have argued (McRobbie, 2008; Gill, 2006; Rottenberg, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018); On the other hand, since the fantasy of “feminism is done” has dismissed the structural and institutional issues such as gendered inequality, hyper-visibility of values of individualism has been endowed. If women suffer discrimination in the workplace, for instance, it is not because gendered inequality remains haunted but because female individuals did not fully cultivate their skills back to university or did not occupy specialized competence at work. The latter is particularly distinct in contemporary culture accompanied by the spirit of a neoliberal market economy, which emphasizes individualism and self-improvement. In this way, disarticulation embodies the dismantling and interruption of feminism, which could have had a chance “to speak again to a wider constituency of women” (McRobbie, 2008, p. 26) and make further and bolder social progress.

However, embracing the logic of neoliberalism as the empowerment of females is problematic. On the one hand, those who actually can have a choice remain exclusive in the privileged group (namely the white, young, and middle-class females in the Western context). And the choices available are exclusive, filtered by the gaze from the social structure of the neoliberal market economy and the patriarchal logic behind it, which means seemingly diversified choices are subtly designed to cope with the demands of the neoliberal market economy to produce a maximum of social wealth. On the other hand, the self-pleasing prompt faces the same patriarchal logic problem. To what extent the self-betterment of females can please females themselves, or is it through pleasing males around that females could acquire the sense of self-please? Furthermore, if tracing back to the root, we could question the standard of the sense of please: for instance, who decides the standard of beauty or success? Who set the paradigm of a “desirable” life for women? The Examples of Lean in and Why women still can’t have it all discussed by Rottenberg(2018) and

Banet-Weiser(2018) have proven that the discursive and recognition system of human society had always been and continues to be male/white/middle-class dominated, who had long before embedded their aesthetic value and desire into social orders and normalize them as commonsense. In this case, “empowerment” is incomplete and deceitful because what would please a female as being successful or feeling good about herself is nothing more than a protective layer of the neoliberal and conservative order.

### **The native discourse of feminism in China: de-politicized, decentralized, and self-governed individual narratives**

Feminism did not indigenously take its roots in China; rather, it is introduced from western societies into China in the late 19th century (Yan Liu, 2017), the painful time point at which China struggled to fight its independence from the colonization of Western imperialism. Instead of inspiring further feminist movements, however, the possibility of women's emancipation had been set aside to the urgent crisis of fighting against colonization as well as political reformation in China. It is worth noting that deep-rooted hierarchy and patriarchal values bore great responsibility in explaining the miscarriage of feminism ethos in China society in the 19th century (Yan Liu, 2017), as the traditionalism ideologies ruling China owned a history of more than 10 thousand years and had been so persuasive and pervasive that fundamentally erased the social construction of the identity of women even radical political and social reformation taking place. In another word, emancipating the mind did not emancipate women in China. It was not until the 1980s with the Reformation and Opening Policy in China that Western feminism came back to the public's sight and regained its vigor to encourage women to fight for their political, economic, and educational rights, etc (Jiaran Zheng, 2016). However, such an attempt did not necessarily end up in the expected direction toward sufficiently emancipating women; rather, encountered the peculiarity of Chinese institutional structures and power relations which continued the dominance of patriarchal legacy, varying localization of the feminism theories and thoughts pointed it to even contradictory positions: on the one hand, the natural mission of feminism to fight against patriarchy challenged the Chinese dominant ideology, thus incurred intense rejection from the public discourse (Brownell et al., 2002); on the other hand, and as a result of fighting against patriarchy, the tendency of anarchy incurred even more widespread yet rather invisible rejection from Chinese institutional authorities, fearing that advancing feminism would threaten their dominance. Consequently, the native discourses of feminism in China have long been coerced by patriarchal values as well as traditionalism highlighting the "submissive nature" of women and reinforcing the gendered labor division. Adding to the fact that radical and wide-ranging feminism movements were absent from Chinese modern history, the incomplete, unconfident, superficial characteristics of native feminism discourses in China are understandable yet precarious, as no significant achievement was viewed as being gained from such movements--which is the reason why there were long-held debates in Chinese academy that the achievements in women emancipation were gained by liberation of the nation rather than the awakening of female consciousness (Yan Liu, 2017)--and there were continuous doubts on the rationality and consistency of feminism. Such skepticism has led to more invisible, de-politicized, and fragmented localization of feminist discourses. On the one hand, strict political censorship in China has largely smothered feminism debates in public spheres both online and offline (Samuel Yang, 2021)--a vivid representation of

how Chinese institutional power dynamics embedded by patriarchy endeavored to erase the voices of feminism and subsequently to direct native feminism discourse to serve the interests of the dominant. As a result, feminism and debates of female consciousness could only focus on the bright side of women's achieved rights and freedom, even though such power relations of patriarchal institutions in essence aimed at silent women. On the other hand, prolonged legislative ambiguity in China regarding the prevention and penalty for sexual abuse and domestic violence reinforced the subordination of women, which led to the predicament of native feminists to express their appeals or further awaken female consciousness in public discourses. Lack of historical observation of the feminism movement accompanied by the absence of historical feminism movements has produced a peculiarity of post-feminism disarticulation in the native Chinese feminism discourses: there's no such illusion of feminism is done; however backlash against feminism and strong coercion with the dominance of patriarchy has prevailed.

The fragmentation represented in the fact that spontaneous feminism activities clustered in privileged groups of urban and educated women (Meng Wu, 2018), and the agenda tended to focus on the freedom of dressing or makeup, moral debates to liberate women from household or marriage (Angelica S., 2021); only recent years after the #Metoo activities has the debates extended to appeals to institutionalize a rational protection mechanism for women (Meng Wu, 2018). However, the de-politicized and decentralized characteristics persist as authoritative speech censorship has thoroughly penetrated online space where the political appeals mainly take place, therefore to combat the strict censorship, radical rhetoric had no choice but appealed to the de-politicized form of speech. On the other hand, victims in #Metoo activities and subsequent anti-sexism activism expressing their personal experiences tend to focus on individual narratives and demanding punishment for targeted individual abusers. While individual narratives are more emotionally persuasive and easily communicated among the mass audience, the risk of shifting the focus away from the institutional reformation to the penalty to just individual members within the institution disarticulates the primary agenda of feminism.

Another factor influencing the native discourses of Chinese feminism is the strong infusion of consumerism and neoliberalism entering the millennium, which further deconstructs the spirit of feminism. Commercial advertisements and marketing propaganda sweeping mass media and popular culture were conveying the idea of "girl crush" and "can-do-girls" (McRobbie, 2008) by buying certain products or services further substitute the political requests of feminism to a hyper-visible postfeminism gendered power dynamics: "a highly conservative mode of feminine empowerment"

(McRobbie, 2008, p. 27). As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, contemporary popular feminism reimagines and redirects what "empowerment" means, and thus is restricting feminist politics within the neoliberal culture. In Chinese contemporary culture, the core affective politics of neoliberalism—"entrepreneurial spirit, resilience and gumption" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 20 ) have been recognized as a distorted form of "empowerment", which emphasizes that females have multiple options and enough freedom to choose all that they want to be and that females make choices not for serving others but for pleasing and satisfying themselves. The individualist spirit of neoliberalism has saturated Chinese native feminism discourses highlighting self-choice and

taking responsibility for women's own sake, and has been vividly contextualized in contemporary lifestyles: by cultivating competence, females aim to feed their career ambition; by earning more, females aim to provide themselves a decent life; by self-regulating such as working out regularly and insisting on a diet, females aim to maintain their physical health and improve their appearance. However, such misappropriation of "empowerment" further de-politicized women and emptied their ambitions as the focus has been a shift from the possibility of radical political progress to precisely and rigidly self-governability, subsequently point to a predicament that those who failed to take control of themselves are shamefully less successful women. By overtly exploiting yet disguised by "women's own choice", the disarticulation of postfeminism internalized male-created aesthetic rules and trained women to harder self-regulate: pay more attention to firm abs rather than protesting sexual harassment in the workplace. Chinese social media landscape has been saturated with such discourses of Naomi Wolf's "beauty oppression" (1990): the objectifying male gaze was internalized to form a new disciplinary regime as well as the exploitation of women based on patriarchal standards, which was contrarily justified as empowerment.

Chinese peculiarity in political restriction and censorship of speech in the public sphere led to deliberate neglect of critics or recognition of the "feminist faux" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 6) in native feminism discourses. Combined with the invisibility of patriarchal institutional power relations and the disproportional distribution in privileged groups, Chinese native feminism discourses are slightest thoroughly and de-politicized, with overwhelming postfeminism disarticulation at large within.

### **The new ecology of feminism in Chinese contemporary society: stigmatization, nonunity, and disarticulation**

Similar to J. Lenore Wright's argument that there has been a strong backlash against feminism that declining the visibility and acceptance of pro-women positions made by feminists (2012), stigmatization of feminists widely existed in Chinese contemporary. What distinguished it from the western societies that Wright discussed is that due to the absence of feminism movements, as well as theorization or institutionalization of localized feminism knowledge, there is no post-feminism illusion that feminism is done in China; instead, the stigmatization is caused by historically incomplete of feminism development and an institutional silence, accompanied with hyper-powerful dominance of patriarchal values and traditionalism. As such, I argue that the stigma is displayed in two ways: in the institutional power structure and public discourses. And it is stigmatization within the public discourses that led to heavy severing among women groups.

Institutional suppression of feminism has been more and more fiercely and swiftly repeated since 2015 when the Chinese government arrested 5 women protesting sexual harassment on the bus, under the charge of picking quarrels and provoking troubles which kept them in criminal detention

for 37 days with dehumanized treatments (BBC News, 2015 & New York Times, 2015). The political concern of the Chinese Communist party was used to justify the repression, stating that such an anti-sexual harassment campaign would disturb social order. The event marked both the abuse of policing power from the institution and the authorized stigmatization of feminism (Jeremy Goldkorn, 2021). With the increasingly tightening of policy controls and intensifying levels of

censorship, there has been less and less space for Chinese feminists both online and offline. Mass protests or campaigns on the streets have long been banned and heavily punished since 2015 (Mimiya, 2021); online surveillance backed up by Chinese authorities, on the other hand, has been gradually strengthened aiming at the clearance of social media accounts of feminists and contents related to feminism (Samuel Yang, 2021). In addition to the ban or deletion of the Weibo accounts, one of the most influential Chinese social media platforms, of more than 20 feminist activists, another Chinese social networking site Douban, also suffered the abrupt disbanding of more than a dozen

**Feminist-related groups, under the charge of that these groups "contain extremism, radical political and ideological content" (William Yang, 2021).**

The silence and brutal crackdown from institutional authorities not only impeded any visible feminist activities but also officially stigmatized feminists and their expression of their thoughts and appeals by sentencing them as betraying the country, disturbing the public order, or spreading harmful ideas threatening the younger generation. Justification from authorities tended to focus on the political stance of some of the feminists, for example, by recognizing them as "Hong Kong Independence Camp", thus charging them as standing on the side of splitting the nation (BBC News, 2017 & Michigan News, 2015). Such charges of traumatic association between feminists with traitors to their nation bear a strong resemblance with the stigmatization proposed by Eagle Forum in the US society, which accused feminists as traitors to America and murderers of women (J. Lenore Wright, 2012). However, the fact that such stigmatization in China came straightly from authorities was still astonishing and powerful enough to make it impossible for the common group of feminism to gather (Pin Lv, 2021). More precarious is the fact that with the erasing of histories of feminism development in authoritative narratives, Chinese younger generations would have a rare chance to earn a basic understanding of the context of previous Chinese native feminism discourses, nor could they get into historical observation via such historical faulting.

Another institutional oppression appeared as the blurring and even erasing of gender factors in official reports of crimes, especially those of domestic violence and social malignant violence (Xinhuanet, 2021; Sina News, 2021; CCTV News, 2022; Chinese News, 2022). Authoritative eagerness to blame thugs rather than sexism partially was due to the prioritization of political security and social stability by the Chinese Communist party (Yuchen Liu, 2021), in which way societal ills tended to be treated as problems of national security and politics. The explanation could be extended to understand erasing gender factors from official reports of crimes that under the underdeveloped judicial system and legislation, women seek protection and acquire equal rights largely from movements and activism outside of the party's control (Economist, 2022). By shunning away from and remaining silent about sexism, Chinese authoritative institutions tacitly maintained the subtle repression of the slightest symptom of a trend of feminism discourses, thus invisibly reinforcing the deeply entrenched traditional values and dominance of patriarchy.

Similar to the institutional sentence of betraying the country, the charging of "foreign hostile forces" of feminists has pervaded Chinese public discourse in recent years (BBC News, 2021). That public opinion judgment interfered with the course of the judicial procedure has not been a novelty, though, in Chinese cases where the public discourses simply extended and allied with the

authoritative ideology to attack feminists. But a more prevailing tendency emerging in public spheres is various labeling of feminism under the decentralized and historically erased development of native feminism discourses and authoritative stigmatization. When contextualized in the social media landscape, there is a smearing yet insulting appellation of feminism as "feminism boxer"--in the way that two words pronounced the same in Mandarin, however, the "boxer" in this context means doing nothing more than provoking gender opposition and hatred. Such phonological transition in appellation not only has worsened the stigmatization of feminism, but also gone so virus and abused that all topics related to gender issues in Chinese media platforms risked being called "feminism boxer", and expressions of feminism risked insultingly being called "punching". With the penetration of consumerism and logic of economics that Internet popularity would ultimately be cashed, "feminism boxers" are publicly accused of drawing attention and gaining popularity to boost their business value instead of devoting themselves to the career of feminism movements (BBC News, 2021). Under such stigmatization in general, various sub-labels of feminism generated and split the unity of women as a whole. Numerous examples included "feminazi", referring to groups resistant to marriage and having children; "cynical feminism", referring to groups seeking to privilege women, especially in the economy, rather than equal rights; "equal-rights fairy", referring to groups mildly talking about equal rights but unwilling to be involved in any activism; and "patriotic feminism", referring to groups supporting authoritative rhetoric of protecting women's rights and advocating the stop of hatred toward men (Angelica S., 2021). I argue that all of these labels are representations of the disarticulation of post-feminism contextualized in Chinese contemporary society, especially in media platforms where debates and discourses still have a slight chance to emerge under omnipresent surveillance and oppression. "Feminazi", for example, aims at waking up each female individual by highlighting the downside of marriage and fertility, usually accompanied by focuses on domestic abuse, inequality of domestic labor division, and overtly common sexual crimes committed by men. However, their starting point of advocating individual change rather than requiring institutional change (e.g. improvement of legislation against domestic abuse) corresponds with the neoliberal spirit of individualism, highlighting personal choices and self-responsibility. While the insufficiency of cognition and rhetoric is due to the Chinese political atmosphere to a great extent, and such rather radical rhetoric could be viewed as an emotional venting toward a disappointing reality dominated by patriarchal values (Angelica S., 2021), it should not be neglected that the neoliberalism ideology has penetrated the contemporary discourses of Chinese feminism, and with such rhetoric going virus and recruiting proponents Internet-wide, the political pursuance of structural reformation is disarticulated further from feminism debates--focus has been shifted from institutional and hierarchical power to individuals.

There is a growing voice, though, of embracing the appellation of "feminazi" among the so-called radical feminists or their supports, stating that so long as they are making clear about their claim of strong rejection of marriage and having children, they would pay no attention to what they are called actually (Angelica S., 2021). Also, there is an ideal hope embedded in it, that so long as more people are aware of the justification of their claims and are awakened, the appellation matters in the slightest way (Angelica S., 2021). I argue that while such a view represents a powerful rejection of the stigmatization by psychologically not giving it the slightest chance to even be a

stigma, and while such a view nurtures the possibility of reinforcing the cohesion among feminists to fight back, it still does not escape the predicament endowed by neoliberal individualism: personal choice still prioritize instead of a wider consideration of the reformation of marriage law to protect women, or paid parental leave policies to solve the problem of inequality of labor division based on gendered role. On the other hand, the example of "cynical feminism" is a more thorough turn to individualism, accompanied by the acceptance of patriarchal structures and embracing the post-feminism camouflage of "women's power". The rhetoric of "cynical feminism" focuses on self-governing

tenets to make a female attractive enough to find a financially reliable partner to fully support her life. Not only objectification of women is embedded, viewing females as products to "sell a good price", but once again, emphasis on the individual rather than questioning the whole system draws attention away from institutional change to individual behavior and personal choice. Ironically, scholars are analyzing "cynical feminism" academically to seek the "orthodox" of feminism and alert their difference (Fan Yang, 2021; Jiayuan Wang, 2022; Rui Tian, 2022). I argue that such recognition in academia not only in effect reinforced the stigmatization of feminism with institutional power with rich resources and connections from educational institutions, but also reproduced post-feminism rhetoric and disarticulation embedded in it.

As for another example, the "equal-right fairy", extensive critics recognize it as conciliation and appeasing rhetoric from patriarchal perspectives, stating that not only does it ignore the reality of China of feminism is far less than done considering the authoritative oppression, but it also implicitly embrace the supposition that men have done enough for women and it is high time women abandon hatred to men. The ideal proposal representing the advocacy of equal rights disarticulates with narratives and expressions of women's suffering and grief under Chinese circumstances, which in turn coincide with the fact that feminism is, in effect, never done in China.

It is worth noting that females tend not to self-identify themselves into any label mentioned above; rather, they are judged and labeled according to their speeches on media platforms--an Internetization gaze upon females. As a result, those who are labeled either feel discontented with the category that they are put in or be hostile to other labels. Subsequently, debates arise either justifying themselves or attacking other groups of labels being irrational. Split generates from the online debates and leads to nonunity of women, not only between self-identified feminists and those who don't but also between groups of each label who are all identified as feminists. And few may realize that it is not the labeling itself that should be to blame--while focusing on the instance it could be--but the power dynamics of gaze and the patriarchal tradition of gazing upon females that needs to be responsible. Therefore, contrary to the differentiation of feminism schools in the academy, the wildly growing labeling tendency accelerated and deteriorate nonunity among women and further disarticulates the possibility of pushing forward the feminism agenda of politically improving the livelihood or legal status of women. The absence of historical observation of localized feminism development and authoritative oppression have largely vacuumed the space of feminism discourses and pushed them into online media platforms, where the unity of feminist groups is dismantled with each facing stigmatization and consequent disarticulation of finding allies to narrate their motions, troubles or grievances (Pin Lv, 2021).

## 2. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the connotation and representation of the concept of disarticulation (Angela McRobbie, 2008) in post-feminism discourses. Disarticulation is viewed as a deprivation of the political agenda of feminism and the potential to unify women under a multiplicity of oppression; meanwhile, it is a strong yet subtly disguised backlash against feminism, embracing the values and powers of patriarchy and traditionalism. I argue that disarticulation circulated in the localization of Chinese feminism discourses, which underwent the predicament of the absence of feminism movements and acknowledged achievements, as well as brutal authoritative suppression and surveillance. Under the Chinese peculiarity of politics, I suggest that there is no such illusion that feminism is done; rather, disarticulation represented in the stigmatization from both authoritative crackdown and public discourses, which aimed at erasing the political potential of feminism and sustaining the male-dominant rules and ideology. The new ecology of feminism discourses in Chinese contemporary society, especially when contextualized on online media platforms, has been thoroughly penetrated by the stigmatization of feminists and feminist expressions, leading to various labeling of feminist groups. Such imposed categorization and debates triggered have further disarticulated political envision, drawn the attention away to neoliberal logic of economic exchange, to individualistic narratives instead of collective expression of institutional reformation, and deconstructed the unity among women from different classes and statuses in society. While new opportunities are fostered within widely growing online debates of feminism and individual narratives expressing their fights for anti-sexism, I argue that the lack of historical observation of feminism movements along with increasingly tightened authoritative oppression policies makes it harder to alleviate or eliminate the stigmatization or reunite women to fight against patriarchal ideology and institutional power dynamics.

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