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#BABY SUPPLEMENTARY FOOD AS CYBER SHIELD: GROUNDED PERSPECTIVES ON CHINESE DIGITAL FEMINISM ON REDNOTE

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In recent years, hashtag activism has become a vital strategy for feminist counter publics in digital spaces. Campaigns such as #MeToo and #SayHerName have used hashtags to carve out discursive spaces for affective expression and political solidarity. Increasingly, these counter publics engage in forms of non-confrontational resistance, relying on affect, aesthetics, and coded visibility. Hashtag movements like #BlackGirlMagic and #GirlsLikeUs exemplify this shift.

While hashtag activism in open media ecologies often relies on visibility and direct articulation, similar practices in authoritarian contexts carry different stakes. In China, feminist hashtag use has gained traction but remains vulnerable to censorship and online misogyny (Cui, 2023). Rather than confront constraints head-on, users adopt subtle tactics of redirection and withdrawal. On RedNote, a female-dominated lifestyle platform with over 300 million users, such strategies have flourished. A notable example is the reappropriation of the hashtag #Baby Supplementary Food (#BSF), originally used for parenting content. By tagging personal posts—selfies, pet photos, emotional reflections—with #BSF, users evade male attention through algorithmic camouflage. The tactic is simple but effective: most men are presumed uninterested in parenting, making #BSF a gendered filter that shields posts from unwanted views.

This tactic creates a women-centered counterpublic—an alternative discursive space shaped through cultural re-signification and platform-savvy use. By appropriating #BSF, users sidestep the male gaze while fostering intimacy,

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solidarity, and shared affect. Hashtags here act not just as tools of categorisation (Losh, 2019; Kreiss & McGregor, 2024), but as feminist techniques of spatialisation, forming safe, networked counterpublics (Fraser, 1992; Jackson et al., 2020; Kanai & McGrane, 2020). These practices reflect what Bucher (2016) calls algorithmic imaginaries—vernacular understandings of algorithmic systems tactically repurposed for cultural ends (Schulz, 2022; Gran et al., 2020).

This study uses the #BSF hashtag on RedNote to explore how such resistance is practiced, felt, and negotiated. It applies traditional and computational grounded theory (CALM) to analyse 1,580 posts (Carlsen & Ralund, 2022), using GSDMM clustering, open coding, and fine-tuned BERT classification to identify five thematic categories: Food Itself, Pets, Women's Burdens, Girls' Aesthetics of Everyday Becoming, and Technofantasies of Intimacy. We then follow critical discourse traditions (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), examining how tone, stylistic cues, and visual framing shape gendered subjectivities, emotional norms, and intimate imaginaries within RedNote's algorithmic ecology.

In this article, we propose the concept of girlhood feminism as a mode of vernacular feminist resistance that takes shape through affective withdrawal, algorithmic play, and strategic self-infantilisation on Chinese digital platforms. Unlike liberal feminist approaches, which primarily confront gender inequality within modern institutional frameworks, girlhood feminism emerges as a refusal of normative life scripts rooted in Confucian and feudal family structures—particularly those of motherhood, heterosexual coupling, and patriarchal obligation. Rather than seeking recognition or systemic reform, it builds protective zones of intimacy, irony, and emotional resonance. This refusal is deeply shaped by the historical and sociopolitical conditions of contemporary China, where feminist discourse has unfolded within the contradictions of compressed modernity (Chang, 2011). Since the post-socialist market reform, state policy has alternated between promoting women's public participation and reinforcing their familial obligations, reviving Confucian ideals of patrilineal kinship and intergenerational caregiving (Leung, 2003; Wu and Dong, 2019). At the same time, the rollback of welfare services has intensified women's unpaid care work within the household, while consumer capitalism has promoted a depoliticized version of femininity centered on beauty, lifestyle, and self-regulation. Within this shifting terrain, feminism is often framed as a threat to social harmony, subjected to digital censorship, and delegitimized through online misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ye & Huang, 2022; Tan & Liu, 2024)

Against this backdrop, girlhood feminism does not seek legitimacy through institutional recognition or rational-critical debate. Instead, it engages in strategic ambiguity and emotionally coded expression to construct zones of gendered intimacy and soft resistance. The use of hashtags like #BSF on platforms such as RedNote exemplifies this shift—repurposing domestic or apolitical language to shield feminist sentiment under algorithmic governance.

Our analysis identifies two core dynamics within this formation. First, self-infantilisation functions not as immaturity but as affective disidentification—a coded way of saying: I am not a mother/wife, and I will not become one—at least not within the feudal family structure. Second, girlhood feminism gives rise to a non-institutional, emotionally mediated counterpublic, grounded in aesthetic improvisation and everyday acts of soft resistance. Meanwhile, unlike more consolidated cultural formations such as Japanese shōjo culture or western liberal feminism (Ryan, 1992), girlhood feminism in China is fragmented, context-specific, and vernacular—emerging from the rhythms of daily life rather than a shared ideology or aesthetic repertoire.

This conceptual intervention contributes to feminist digital media studies by highlighting how affective and non-confrontational tactics function as legitimate modes of resistance; to platform governance and algorithmic publics by illustrating how users creatively rework platform architectures to evade surveillance and visibility; and to East Asian media and gender studies by theorising a regionally grounded feminist formation shaped by the contradictions of compressed modernity. This approach therefore, also challenges liberal models of feminist resistance, which often overlook the informal, emotionally mediated, and locally grounded strategies that emerge in contexts like China (Peng, 2018; Yang & Guo, 2023). In centering platform-based vernacular feminism, this study expands the analytical vocabulary through which gendered resistance in algorithmic spaces can be understood.

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