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FANSUBBING AS FEMINIST DISRUPTION IN CHINA

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Introduction

Over the last decade and a half, China has seen the emergence of various forms of feminism that are independent, meaning they exist outside official channels. These feminisms are practiced by young women who use various tactics to bring attention to negative phenomena affecting Chinese women. One earlier iteration of such feminism arose in the early 2010s in large Chinese cities, where young feminist activists combined spectacular performance art with the savvy use of social media to challenge sexism and misogyny in the public sphere. Their tactics initially gained support from Chinese state media (Li and Li 2017). However, in March 2015, five of these activists were arrested and detained for organizing a campaign aimed at combatting sexual harassment on public transportation. The same year, the Chinese government passed a National Security Law that criminalized activism, signaling that the days of activists pushing the limits of the authoritarian state had ended. Since then, proactive, rather than reactive, censorship has become the norm (Fu and Distelhorst 2018). In an increasingly repressive environment, where the government uses the discourse of "positive energy" as a coercive and regulatory measure, feminist efforts at societal transformation in China now exist almost entirely online.

This paper examines how young feminists dispersed across China engage in fansubbing, or translating and subtitling digital content, as feminist praxis. Feminist fansubbing shares similarities with other fansubbing practices in that its content can be entertaining and the act of fansubbing can create community among its practitioners. However, it also differs in that the motivation does not necessarily derive from actual fandom. Rather, it is driven by feelings and emotions arising from a deep sense of gender injustice and an ethical commitment to social change in an authoritarian context. Its purpose is to educate, encourage, and inspire others to become feminists. For this reason, I call it "femsubbing."

Fansubbing Studies

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Studies of fandom generally argue that fans are active, agentic, resistant, and are part of a participatory culture that can even lead to political activism (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b). Fansubbing/translation groups in China have many of these same qualities – they hold to an ethos of volunteerism and sharing and they are knowledge communities and communities of practice based on passions and mutual interests (Wang 2017; Zhang 2016; Zhang and Mao 2013). Not everything from western fan studies can be mapped onto Chinese fan practices, however, given the party-state's tight information control and extensive censorship. Weiyu Zhang (2016) argues that although political participation in China in the western sense isn't possible, certain fan practices are modes of civic action, meaning they have educational or social value. Other scholars have looked at fansubbing by marginalized groups, in particular LGBTQ individuals (Zhao 2024; Yang and Yu 2017). Guo and Evans (2020), researching queer fansubbing, argue that translation is both "interpretation" and "reformulation" and a means of trying to change society because it makes representations and narratives available that are often inaccessible in state-sanctioned media (520). I situate my study in these conceptualizations of subtitling/translating as civic action, community, and attempts at social change.

Ordinary Affect and Ethics

Theoretically, this paper engages with ordinary affects, defined by Kathleen Stewart (2007) as the "varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergence" (1–2) and Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on what emotions do and her notion of the "feminist killjoy" (2010). I also draw on ordinary ethics, or the practical reason and evaluations involved in everyday ethical decisions and judgments (Lambek 2010, 2015).

Methods

This paper builds on a prior brief analysis of a fansubbed US television talk show by a small group of Chinese feminists (Wallis 2025). It is part of a larger project based on interviews with members of three different feminist fansubbing groups of various sizes and textual analysis of their translated and subtitled content. Here I focus on a group I call Hope and consider their motivations, practices, strategies, and challenges as they engaged in femsubbing.

Femsubbing as Feminist Praxis

Many feminist fansubbers view their practice as more than a hobby or a mode of entertainment. "We wanted to do something to help ourselves and inspire others" said one member. They also sought to harness the power of networked communication and algorithmic recommendation systems to spread explicitly feminist messages as an ordinary ethical act.

In terms of content, the women searched for videos on YouTube and Twitter/X for "what was popular" and expressed feminist issues and ideas. This included TED talks, news reports, comedy sketches, and the like. The Hope group's account had 16 videos, and

15 were translated/subtitled. They ranged in length from roughly 2 to 30 minutes (most were three to five minutes). Videos garnered anywhere from 80 to 48,000 views.

The Hope group also engaged in a variety of strategies to attract, educate inspire, and move viewers. As has been found in previous fansubbing research (Guo and Evans 2020), they translated but also interpreted and added content. One way was to modify the video title. For example, a *New York Times* video about Ruth Bader Ginsburg was simply entitled "Remembering Ruth Bader Ginsburg." However, the Hope group called it "In Memory of the 'Notorious Ginsburg'" to make it more eye-catching. They also used the description under the video and the comment section to deliver messages. On the NYT's YouTube Channel, the description was simply, "Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court's feminist icon, not only changed the law, but she also transformed the roles of men and women in society." The femsubbers wrote "Ruth Bader Ginsburg, an American jurist and the first Jewish female Supreme Court Justice, dedicated much of her legal career to advocating for gender equality and women's rights, earning her the affectionate nickname 'Notorious Ginsburg' by her supporters. Why is she so beloved in pop culture as a Supreme Court Justice? … This video answers all your questions about RBG…" In other cases, they sought to connect the history of western feminism to that in China, discussing women such as Deng Yingchao, who was instrumental in the creation of China's 1950 Marriage Law.

Although the group members were dedicated feminists, after four years the group dissolved. Their challenges came from without and within. Of course, they had to be careful with censorship. To evade censors, they blurred images that might be considered provocative and used alternate vocabulary for "sensitive" words (e.g., human rights). Because feminism is often the object of scorn in state and popular discourse, not surprisingly, at times trolls came to the comments section, and one even harassed one of the members for several months. But challenges also came from within. For example, a couple of members started to identify with the Korean 6B4T movement, which, among other things, rejects marriage, dating, and childbirth. "This caused tension in the group," said one woman and was a large factor in its demise.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how femsubbing, emerging from young feminists' embodied passions and ethical judgments, was aimed at if not societal, then individual transformation. In an authoritarian context, femsubbing should be understood as a small but important means of disrupting often state-sanctioned sexism and misogyny.

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