

Disorderly conduct: Feminist nudity in Chinese protest movements

Sexualities

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Abstract

The essay contributes to Cultural Studies as an evaluation of changing practices of media and social activism while highlighting theories of feminism and dialogic aesthetics. More specifically, it discusses women's use of online self-photography as a protest medium and a platform for feminist activism within two distinctive protest movements, the Umbrella Movement of Fall 2014 and the mainland Chinese feminist movement of 2012–2013. Forerunners of these movements in mainland China can be found in the work of performance artists and sex bloggers such as Ye Haiyan and Muzimei, who have used bulletin board systems and blogs to lay bare their sex lives and the cultural mechanisms of misogyny. Their performances in public spaces and their online postings have also elicited public brawls and significant responses within governmental agencies (Farrer, 2007; Tong, 2011).

The article posits that these discourses also have a historical lineage in the 'light' or 'fleeting' dissident writings of the Cultural Revolution that generated large-scale responses but did not aim at becoming earnest or solidified works of art (Voci, 2010). In this vein, nudity is employed to titillate and stir fellow netizens rather than offering a coherent and embodied stance. It offers flippant gestures and statements that come to signify ideology within online social movements.

Keywords

China, feminism, media studies, nudity, social activism

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Introduction

Within the rhetoric of people's autonomy and expressivity through social media, Manuel Castells has posited that 'social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement' and that the internet and social media have stirred social movements as 'the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication' (2012: 15). Castells's book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, acts as a comprehensive accounting of the impact of five years of online networking in various citizen protest occupations around the world. As will be shown, the Chinese feminist movements described in this essay belong to this 'new species' of social movements. At the same time, critics of Castells such as Paolo Gerbaudo have already thoroughly deconstructed the idea of seamless social media. Gerbaudo (2012) outlines that protest occupation movements have suffered tremendously from insipid surveillance and technological breakdowns, hence it is only a diversity of communicative and cultural practices that can lead to a choreography of assembly or revolution. Starting from this exchange about the new species of social movements, the essay scrutinizes the specific contributions of feminist bodily aesthetics as a somewhat ignored tool of emotional cleansing and sexual debate.

Poala Voci (2010) has pointed out that social debate by means of photography, short videos or animations are very common on the Chinese internet and could also be seen as 'light' media that actually do not aim at becoming solidified statements or art works. According to Voci, lightness is a strategy that has been used throughout Chinese history as an outlet for satire and unsanctioned creativity at times when the forms of mass media were under the full control of a tyrannical hegemony. For instance, writers during the Cultural Revolution distributed banned hand-copied erotic materials amongst friends and added their own notations. (Voci, 2010). Almost all erotic expressions or references to sexual affairs in life or art were highly monitored if not in fact forbidden. Yet there was an underground collaborative production of erotica by idling anonymous writers, such as the hand-written book, *Girl's Heart*, which contains overt descriptions of sexual actions (Li, 2010). These products belong to an older tradition of participatory art works and develop anti-establishment jargons that can slip through the cracks of state-sponsored censorship.

The contemporary photographs under discussion emerged in mainland China in 2012–2013 and during the Hong Kong Umbrella movement of Fall 2014. One such Hong Kong action, entitled *Protest. Female Bodies. Future*, was initiated on the social network Facebook and proposed feminist interjections within the city-wide pro-democracy protest occupations. The Umbrella movement had a huge impact on education and civil rights in Hong Kong, while also being reported on extensively in the local and global media outlets. On the mainland in 2012–2013, Chinese feminists in different locations uploaded statements that included nudity onto social media sites, adorning their bodies with graffiti-like messages in support of sexual pleasure and anti-abuse legislation.

As will be shown, the political frameworks of both of these actions varies, but there are similarities in how they are constructed as disorderly mediums that constitute and create meaning by soliciting feedback and affective encounters. This essay will give an overview of nudity imagery and its cultural backdrops, as well as engaging in dialogues with two of the primary activists, Ai Xiaoming from China, and Azure Blue from Hong Kong. The main purpose will be not to diagnose the effectiveness of these actions in terms of political resolutions but to unravel them as unique types of activism suited to Chinese and Hong Kong politics of the body. As will be explained in a theory of disorderly aesthetics, the actions are successful if they solicit reflection and dispute about the issues at hand. In this article I attempt to ground this theoretical model by sampling some of the audience reactions. These were not collected in a systematic manner in this study, but they were analyzed in their own manners by feminist scholars Hou Lixian, Serena Lam and Zeng YinJang, whose research will be referenced. The political backdrops of these actions will be further analyzed through my own observations within the Umbrella movement and in-depth interviews with activists Ai Xiaoming and Azure Blue.

The Hong Kong nudity activists were able to persist in their activities until the protest occupation movements dwindled and were disbanded in December 2014; the activists' Facebook group was eventually partially censored, not by the Hong Kong Obscenities Tribunal (as might be expected) but by Facebook itself. The mainland Chinese actions happened a year prior to the Umbrella movement but had to go underground in March 2015 because of the well-publicized case of the Chinese government detaining five leading feminist activists, which included Li Tingting, Wei Tingting, Wang Man, Zheng Churan and Wu Rongrong. The activists were interned for 38 days on the eve of International Women's Day in March of 2015. Li Tingting had been directly involved in the 2013 nudity actions described in this essay, while the others had indirect connections to them as well. The five feminists were officially released in April 2015, but they are still being questioned, tracked and harassed by government authorities. Their detainment has also led to a nationwide ban within mainland universities of feminist topics of education and discourses. The five women had planned to participate in International Women's Day by posting signs against sexual harassment on subways and public transportation as well as on social media sites. The action was disrupted when unidentified police arrested them without warrant and charged them with 'picking quarrels and creating a disturbance' as the annual National People's Congress was at the same time holding its closely watched annual session in Beijing. Ironically, that closed meeting is traditionally meant to solicit feedback and civic participation and included a news conference on gender equality and women's rights issues in China (Jacobs, 2015).

All of the cited Chinese feminists have engaged in a type of 'fleeting' guerilla theatre or performance art in which they used their bodies, along with costumes and props, in order to intervene in public spaces. Their decision to make sporadic appearances in public spaces intended to evade the overall ban on street protests as

well as creating an alternative space of expression besides that of online activism. In this vein, in 2014 feminist activist Xiao Meini initiated a long walk through several Chinese provinces as a means of performance art and protest. As she explains:

Since public protests and demonstrations are banned, we rely on a unique platform—performance art—to challenge social conditions. We've taken our message to the streets and subways and fought for a safe public space for women. . . Last year, I trekked more than 1,200 miles, crossing 55 cities to raise awareness about the high rates of child sex-abuse in China's schools. The government, rather than fixing the system and punishing the perpetrators, simply blames the victims. (Meini, 2015)

In prior proposals that attempted to address gender inequality and sexual abuse in China, feminists had shaved their heads to berate sexist college entrance policies or had donned blood-stained wedding gowns to protest against domestic violence. In an action that was directly inspired by Occupy Wall Street, they occupied male public toilets in order to highlight a shortage of female toilets in most Chinese cities. Women in different cities lined up in front of and then occupied a male toilet for a length of ten minutes at a time (Jacobs, 2015; Sile, 2015).

In response to the detainment in March 2015, activists and netizens in China posted selfies on Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr while holding slogans of support. This trend was replicated by feminists in Hong Kong, India, Korea, Japan and the USA. People wrote messages on their bodies and also circulated images of same-sex love.¹ Some supporters boldly revealed their faces, while others wore masks of the detained women's faces while walking through different urban locations. One could read these 'walking photos' as a desire to grant freedom and mobility to the assaulted individuals and the feminist movement at large. As explained by Wang Zeng in an extensive Facebook message posted after the release of the five activists, a petition to liberate the women was organized by a supple network of grassroots collectives, a trans-cultural social force that made use of social media to support locally criminalized individuals and groups.² Of course we can state here that many of these supporters made safe statements without having to confront actual abuse or even to identify as feminists within their local cultures. Even so the transcultural thrust and speed of circulation of these statements did get noted by legislators in China and abroad, which indeed put pressure on local Chinese governments to rethink their rash anti-feminist actions, which they were never able to explain in a transparent manner.

Feminist nudity as disorderly aesthetics

This article posits online nudity activism as a type of transient statement that stirs people to think about the body and its sexual pleasures or discontents. Online activism is partially motivated by the mission to simply provoke and debate as it is part of a larger cultural transformation towards participatory art and media.

In the field of contemporary art theory, Grant Kester has defined dialogic art practices as those that go beyond the goal of formal innovation by means of a confrontation with existing ideologies and audiences. These practices constitute meaning not by challenging or subverting the formal qualities of art, but by facilitating unpremeditated social encounters or ideological debates. Kester derives his concept from the literary theorist Bakhtin who argued that the work of art ‘can be viewed as a kind of conversation—a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view’ (Kester, 2013: 10). This type of conversational exchange is motivated by a search for shared meaning and affect around the work of art. This moment of reflection is further defined as a ‘relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to ‘speak back’ to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself’ (Kester, 2000). The affective feedback loop becomes a way of inhabiting art and decentring artistic output by fostering an ongoing intervention by the audience (Kester, 2013: 77). Claire Bishop and James Farrer have argued further that dialogic art intends to elicit raw confrontation and disruption, rather than fulfilling a more peaceful humanitarian mission to include the voices of ‘others’ (Bishop, 2012; Farrer, 2008). Both scholars believe that this type of confrontation leads to significant collective reflection and debate that is typical of the internet age.

Amelia Jones has defended a similar type of dialogic aesthetics produced by early American feminist body artists and performance artists, in which nudity was portrayed and acted out to become a medium for discordant rapport and feedback. Jones believes that women’s body art pieces of the 1960s and 1970s were at the forefront of a novel type of eroticism that would later result in novel types of erotica and pornography. These also intended to sexualize post-formalist art forms, which had already greatly expanded their media of expression but which still maintained ways to deny or obfuscate the sexual body. Jones’s concept also brings to mind the early French feminist concept of ‘écriture féminine,’ or feminine writing, as a politicized state of language or alternative discourse that inscribes the body and femininity within language and text. The task of ‘feminine writing’ was to disrupt patriarchal discourses while soliciting readers to recognize its mode as knowledge production (Jones, 1998: 3).

According to Kester, dialogic art practices often fail to please audiences and art critics alike for lacking visual gratification for those involved with assessing or reacting to it. Rather, these art works are affective mediums that force viewers to interrogate their own subjectivity and emotions in relationship to other subjects and other social formations. One of the most significant political backdrops for this larger change in aesthetics, according to Kester, is the privatization of the public sphere in tandem with new practices of stigmatizing ethnic minorities and/or the lower classes, as we have most recently seen in the protests against police violence in the USA (Kester, 2000). In mainland China, netizen activists have contributed to disorderly aesthetics by experimenting with a home-made terminology of resistance, including vulgar words, humorous obscenities and *double-entendres*.

As explained by Xiao Qiang and Perry Link: ‘Originally appearing as back-talk and sarcasm, this language is developing some new forms—new words, even new grammar—in part to avoid Internet censorship, but in part too, as ways for people who have grown up with the Internet to assert their distinctive identities’ (2013: 85). The USA-based digital media organization *China Digital Times* has issued an ebook *Decoding the Chinese Internet: A Glossary of Political Slang* to archive and annotate an expanding vocabulary of netizen activism. In China, netizens are eager to distinguish themselves from the one party-state and have come up with ironic self-derogatory labels such as ‘fart people’ (pimin) or ordinary people who are confidently different from privileged people (guiguo). ‘Fart people’ became a popular term after a videotaped incident in which a citizen talked back to a bullying government official who denounced the citizen for being ‘just a fart person.’ Netizens also deconstruct party-state power mechanisms through ironical labels for the country itself, such as Mystical Country (Shenqi de Guodu), a space filled with absurd and illogical incidents, or Celestial Empire (Tianchao), a space where leaders are self-important and can only have China-centric views of the world. One such vulgarized term is Crotch Central Committee (Dang Zhongyang) in which the character for ‘party’ is replaced by that of the homonym ‘crotch’ to denote the phallic rule and power of the party (Qiang and Link, 2014). As will be shown, feminist activism engages with these languages of resistance by projecting a search for sexual pleasure while documenting stories of personal and officially unacknowledged abuse. The individuals who participate in these online discourses can keep a safe distance from outspoken political dissidence, but meanwhile they do initiate a transcultural mechanism of reflection and support.

Feminist nudity in occupied Hong Kong

When the pro-democracy Umbrella movement spontaneously occupied and camped out in three major thoroughfares in the city for an extended period of time, it impacted many sectors of higher education as well as the mass media and social media sphere at large. The movement had initially erupted to demand a new electoral system for Hong Kong that would operate independently of tight control by the mainland Chinese Communist Party. The movement also extended beyond this initial goal as people made efforts to fight for Hong Kong’s free-speech culture and media sphere, which included discussions about women’s rights and queer sexuality. Many students left their university classrooms to join sit-ins and camp-ins while others became empathic towards the new street-level civil society and frequently visited the protest occupation sites. The movement caused a large-scale political crisis which engendered provisional realignments within educational institutions, some of whom released statements of support, partially closed down operations, allowed students and faculty to join the movement or to hang up pro-democracy banners on campus. Some faculty members also visited students in order to try to convince them to withdraw peacefully before they would be violently expelled and/or arrested. One large group of Hong Kong academics (about 120)

openly supported the Umbrella movement and organized and delivered lectures and dialogues through a 'mobile democracy classroom.' These lectures contained multi-disciplinary views on aspects of the Chinese law and histories of civil disobedience, media cultures and art forms, ethnic minority involvement, queer rights and gender equality. There was an unusual interlocking of political ideology and sexuality debates, such as the large groups of young women (*fujoshis* or Boys' Love fans) who supported the movement by publishing fantasies about the gay sex lives of student leaders.

It was also reported in the global news media that besides joining these make-shift classrooms, protesters were overall projecting a studious identity and students were making efforts to keep up with their regular homework (Barber, 2015). What is significant for my argument is that they were also using the occupied zones to revitalize modes of public education by challenging a corporate-Confucian ethic of workaholism. They invented a large repertoire of 'arts of resistance' such as slogans, jokes, memes, sculptures, songs and performances. In this way they were contesting the anti-intellectual rhetoric of the 'practical' opposition such as the pro-Beijing constituencies, or corporations and small businesses who were impacted by the protest occupations and preparing legal routes for clearance. In short, this was an unusually multi-tiered movement in terms of a coalescence of different activist groups, age groups, ethnic and sexual minorities, media outlets, artist collectives and personalities who all at once were trying out various methods of activism. Since the city-state of Hong Kong is a very compact geographic region and the occupied sites were widely dispersed over the city, it was fairly easy for people to be immersed both through their walks in the city as well as hourly updates on social media. As is typical of protest occupation movements, the occupied sites were very closely tracked by what they call in Cantonese 'keyboard fighters' (*kin pun ji si*)—online activists and news reporters, citizen journalists, artists, and academics who provided minute commentaries even though they may not have made great efforts to support the movement in other manners.

In his essay about Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Michael Taussig sketches the seductive quality or 'erotic materialism' of the sites of city occupation, in which divergent people invented sensual-performative methods to make bold political statements and create emotional release. He predicates his account of OWS with the Nietzschean saying that critical scholarship has to try to resonate the stylistic turbulence of these occupying agents. He also admits being frustrated trying to do that in writing and to evoke 'an effervescent atmosphere of invention and reinvention' that is typical of occupying sites and discourses (Taussig, 2012: 4). For instance, at the main site of the Umbrella movement, which was a highway adjacent to the government headquarters or 'Tamar Park,' people assembled a large democracy wall with millions of messages written on sticky notes (later named the 'Lennon Wall'). This icon of unhinged writerly energy came about in a matter of days and exemplified a space of collaborative outburst against the adjacent callous and sterile government buildings. The rituals of long-term protest occupation also resulted in a strategic debasement of the occupied streets, as the concrete

architecture of streets and bridges became cluttered with endless signage and anti-authority art works or actual tiny gardens, all of which were circulated as images on social media.

The Hong Kong nudity campaign, which entered this scene of the Umbrella movement, kicked off after the city had been occupied for one month. It was a direct response to a case of sexual harassment taking place on the occupied sites and a way of projecting sexual pride and women's empowerment despite these incidents. It was launched during Hong Kong's Slutwalk 2014, a global action for women's right to walk the streets while wearing provocative or sexy clothing, which took place during the 29th day of the Umbrella movement. The activists, who are nicknamed Azure Blue and Glamourita Noir, produced photographs of their naked bodies with several props and graffiti-like pro-Umbrella slogans such as 'We want real universal suffrage' and 'Add Oil, Hong Kong!' (which is a Chinese slogan of encouragement). They collaborated with photographer Boud'moi Boudoir in portraying their naked bodies as canvases to project testimonies and evoke reactions. Their first action entailed printing out these photos of their bodies on foamboard and asking people to 'wear' them during Slutwalk as 'ad hoc dresses.' After the Slutwalk ended, the foamboard-backed photos were transported to the main occupied site of Admiralty where they were stationed amongst thousands of other slogans and artworks. One day later the artists also started uploading these photographs on the Facebook group *Protest. Female Bodies. Future* while additionally asking viewers to leave responses.³

During the next weeks, they sporadically visited the occupied sites but mostly posted their self-photography on Facebook. The use of their naked bodies was inspired by their insights into gender theory and by their extensive training in modern dance and burlesque performance. I interviewed one of the members of this group, Azure Blue, who is a graduate student at one of Hong Kong's universities, and who stated that she was looking for a novel medium of expression to apply her feminist ideas. She found that her academic training was too distant from the actual realities of politics and people. As she stated:

I was trained as a burlesque dancer in Japan and I am also researching dance and bodily aesthetics in my PhD research. I was influenced by a format of expression initiated by an international organization called Dr Sketchy, in which dancers are invited to perform very short dances and artists are invited to draw sketches of them. So I found out how burlesque dancers, who also tend to have curvaceous bodies, use bodily aesthetics and costumes, and how these bodies can be represented in art. So I was constantly trying to think about these uses of the body within my PhD research. While I was also reading a lot of gender theories at that time I wanted to explore how I could put these theories into practice. I kept asking myself how I could put these ideas into motion and try to work towards some kind of social change, a change inside the audiences as well as inside myself. I wanted to reach out to all kinds of people, which is also the reason why we uploaded the images on Facebook. (Personal interview, 2015)

Throughout the rest of the occupation period, the group commented on the movement's feminist issues by uploading photographs of their backs and buttocks with various slogans impulsively written upon them. Their Facebook page included a mission statement which said that 'female bodies are a tool of activism, that female bodies should be free of sexual violence during protests, and... that they are not protesting for themselves, but for the future and future generations of Hong Kong.' This last claim was made by means of photos showing the stomach of Azure Blue who was pregnant at the time and the hyper-feminine curvy body of Glamourita Noir with various pro-Umbrella symbols such as tiny sculptures made of sticky notes or yellow scarves. Azure Blue, being an expectant mother, was provoked to take radical action in order to support her own child's future and, more generally, the future generations of Hong Kong. While many of the pro-Beijing political camps were arguing that Hong Kong democracy was an item that had to be delayed (or 'pocketed' as phrased in Hong Kong English), she believed that this interminable delaying was a backwards attitude. As she exclaimed during the interview: 'I don't think that we should pocket it at all. What if our future generation would blame us for 'pocketing' it because that is not what they wanted? The current proposal by the Chinese Communist Party is not a genuine one so we have to reject it by all means' (Personal interview, 2015).

The provocative icons of procreation and soft eroticism were set against a backdrop of ideological warfare, police violence and sexual abuse. For instance, Azure Blue used an image of her pregnant body wrapped in cling wrap and then covered with pepper spray. This was a direct reference to the early days of the movement when clashes took place at the Hong Kong government quarters ('Tamar Park') as secondary school and university student protesters were met with an exorbitant and careless level of police violence, who used pepper spray and teargas to disperse the crowds.⁴ The photos also commented on the issue of women's harassment during the Occupy movement, a circumstance that had caused much debate and outrage on social media. Many deplored the 'blue ribbon' molesters (the anti-universal suffrage faction in Hong Kong, who were known to grope women during street clashes) and the police, while others were angered by the fact that female activists were being stereotyped as powerless victims. They were eager to represent themselves as 'resilient' and 'tough' while deconstructing the gender binary that had been set up in the mass media between male heroism and female vulnerability (Lam, 2014).

When posting their photos on Facebook, the nudity activists garnered mostly positive responses, but this changed when their action was covered by the pro-democracy news site *Apple Daily*.⁵ The newspaper labeled the bodies more narrowly as a sexualized striptease for the male gaze (*yin mo*) and it included one of the nudity images of Glamourita Noir. Azure Blue explains that the newspaper respected their pro-democracy fight but still put a sensationalist spin on the action by not dealing with the main image of a pregnant body making a statement about the future of Hong Kong (Personal interview, 2015). The article also solicited raw

and negative comments. As Serena Lam has shown, the commentators argued that the bodies were 'not qualified to perform' and were not a successful striptease, saying things like 'Don't show your wrinkled skin to us,' or 'Her skin proves that she is older than 55.' Some were more aggressive and blamed the women for acting like sex workers, for 'spreading social diseases' and for 'promoting lewdness.' The activists were also accused of being members of a triad, as Chinese gangsters often display their affiliation by means of tattoos. The activists did not take great offense in those criticisms of their mature-aged bodies but realized that the main aim of the action had been misrepresented:

They seemed to praise us, saying, 'you got thinner,' or 'you look pretty,' but we didn't care about those things. Just because they said these things to me, I wouldn't go and lose weight or change the angles of my photos. (Lam, 2014)

They did become more hesitant to widely publicize their actions in the mass media but were also relieved that the comments were overall non-violent. They only received very hostile comments on Facebook several weeks after the movement had ended. Azure Blue explained in our interview that these were probably posted by paid pro-China commentators of the '50 cents army' who trail social media sites to spy on and openly denounce topics considered sensitive to mainland China (Personal interview, 2015). Around the same time, the site was also partially censored by Facebook itself because the profile picture showed a nipple, while both the activists were given a warning because they were not using their actual names. According to a new Facebook policy on online identity, they were asked to verify their identity, which Azure Blue managed to do while Glamourita Noir's identity was taken down as she could not.

The naked torso of a mature aged professor

In 'Desiring change: A decade of Chinese feminists' body politics,' Sufeng Song details a similar wave of online nudity activism and dialogic aesthetics that took place in mainland China in November 2012 (Song, 2013). These acts of feminist public protest were motivated by well-publicized cases of domestic violence against women, such as the famous case of Li Yang who had assaulted his American wife Kim Lee Li. Leta Hong-Fincher has written a detailed account of this case and has also interviewed Kim Lee after she was granted a divorce on the ground of domestic violence. Kim Lee had become so desperate about finding legal support within the court system that she uploaded pictures of her head injuries on Sina Weibo. The pictures went viral and she started receiving an 'outpouring of private messages from other Chinese women who had suffered horrific violence at the hand of their partners' (Hong-Fincher, 2014: 152).

Activists responded by writing the slogan 'Anti-Domestic Violence, Call for Legislation, Now We Are Collecting Signatures from a Million People' on their naked bodies and then uploading them on the social network Sina Weibo. In this

way they rallied for empathy with abuse victims while also defending women's right to nudity and eroticism. For instance, the anti-abuse campaign encouraged women to diverge from the main slogan and to include personal and sexualized statements. The first series of online portraits included one by queer activist Xiao Meini who revealed her gender-fluid appearance, or her 'flat chest', and wrote on it that 'domestic violence is shameful but a flat chest is a matter of glory.' The photo radiated pride about her tiny breasts and masculine or gender-fluid torso, and netizens responded by thoroughly examining her chest and arguing about her gender. In a later photo-collage made for a one-day feminist art exhibition held in Guangzhou, Xiao Meini used a different strategy by digitally dotting nipples all over her naked torso. The work was accompanied by a text with several questions about women's public nudity, such as 'What is the permissible line for women exposing their bodies?' or 'Is it not porn when the nipples are covered?' or 'In what way are women's nipples different from men's?' She also posted the photo on the popular internet community Douban to test the limits of censorship, as a picture of her breast and nipples would be automatically censored by the authorities if they believed that she was a woman.

In many other self-portraits in this series, the naked activists combined a stance against abuse with personalized statements of sexual pride. For example, two activists paired up, strapped bloody menstrual pads on their bodies and announced to viewers that menstruation should not be shameful. Other activists used bloodied marks and stains on their bodies to denote violence and pain, while simultaneously radiating sexual pride. Two self-portraits by empathic males wanted to challenge gender essentialism, or the idea that women only are victims of abuse; one held a pot of flowers in front of his genitals and expressed a wish to join the action, while another self-proclaimed 'sissy' boy stated that he could be a feminine boy but there would be no reason to beat him. These portraits showed that feminist body art should not be reserved to biological females and invited men and transgendered people to join the action. In short, the semiotics of these anti-abuse photos started to break open as they unleashed 'desire and pleasure that had tended to be overlooked and overridden in local feminists' activism' (Song, 2014).

Song concludes that these actions used bodily aesthetics to ridicule the mechanisms of frigidity and state-censorship. Hou Lixian in 'Feminism on fire on Weibo,' reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the portraits 'opened up a new battlefield... as Weibo offered feminists a queer space to make a new genre of body politics—instead of talking about it mainly in academic theories within the campus, they visualized their un-beautified and undisciplined bodies—the 'ugly, "fat" bodies with small boobs and armpit hair as anti-male gaze, anti-commercialization and anti-objectification' (Hou, 2014). Hou further interprets the conflation of anti-violence activism and eroticism as a powerful decentering force that operated 'from individual to individual' and that mobilized different types of people, including non-feminists.

The campaign was also revitalized six months later through the participation of Professor Ai Xiaoming, a well-known feminist literary scholar and documentary filmmaker. The angry message that she scribbled on her naked chest was in support

of another long-standing feminist activist Ye Haiyan, who had engaged in a wide range of sex activism and who had been detained by the authorities on 31 May 2013. Ye Haiyan was detained after she protested in Wanning, Hainan outside a school where the principal and a government clerk were accused of raping four girls, aged 11 to 14 (Frontline Defenders, 2013). On 27 May 2013, after returning from Hainan, she initiated a further online campaign on Sina Weibo.⁶ Thousands of netizens forwarded Ye Haiyan's portraits and also posted their own portraits with similar slogans on social media.

Professor Ai responded to these developments by posting her own naked self-photo with the pick-up line, 'Get a hotel room with me, release Ye Haiyan.' She also held a pair of scissors in her hand as a prop, suggesting that she was a powerful woman and could hurt or castrate somebody. The photograph was censored immediately because of its sexually explicit content, but it was also quickly reposted on high traffic Chinese social media sites such as Sina Weibo, while also being reported in news media in Hong Kong and abroad, therefore the message was widely circulated despite the efforts to ban it. As observed by Zeng Jinyan, Ai Xiaoming was overcome with extreme emotions and anger and it all came to a 'boiling point.' She had had enough of the violence against feminist crusaders, as well as the curtailing and silencing of sexual abuse in the courts, and thus she decided to take distance from the academic establishment and put her own body on the line. She realized that in order to make a more powerful statement, she had to change her methods of expression, as she explained in the interview: 'The problem was *how* to protect kids and *how* to engage in community education. The most important aspect was *how* to make the government realize its responsibility' (Personal interview, 2013). In the end Professor Ai used a coarse and angry message inscribed on her body to attract attention and to provoke response (Zeng, 2014a).

Professor Ai was about to retire from her position of full professor at Sun Yat-Sen University. She gathered courage to reflect on her own ageing body and to shoot this explicit message into various social media sites. The body, as a disorderly medium, was fostering political criticism in a different manner. She explained it this way:

I wanted to think of another medium besides holding a banner. Since holding banner is also prohibited in China, what else we can do? We can use our body, to write what we want to say on our bodies. We do not think too much when we show words on our bodies, for our bodies belong to us and we can control them; that's what I thought.

And I think that feminism should go into the public sphere, into vulnerable groups and social movements, instead of textbooks and classrooms. There is no way out for feminism as an adornment of academic knowledge. (Personal interview, 2013)

The strategy worked as people scrutinized her ageing body and were roused by her nakedness, as summarized by Zeng: 'They argued that they wanted to see a scholar's academic publishings instead of her breasts; they wanted to see young

woman's breasts not of those of an older woman or they said that the breasts of a woman should only be seen by her husband, and not by the public' (Zeng, 2014b). As in the case of the Hong Kong activists, the image of mature-aged nudity provoked knee-jerk reactions but also evinced a ripple of support and thoughtful emotional intelligence. Many people empathized with her new method and wrote appropriately heartfelt responses. Zeng explains that the message stirred a very significant response by China's celebrated writer Sha Yexin:

Professor Ai is my best friend. She has the age of a grandma. She is forced to cry out (in such a way to protest). I cry for social decay; I cry for society losing its base line; I cry for (social) volcanoes being everywhere; I cry for silenced ethics; I cry for no real man standing up in the country land. Return rights to the people. Implement constitutionalism. Don't force people's uprising.⁷

As a well-known writer, playwright and political activist, Sha Yexin had received praise for his work, but he had also sacrificed his job and life-long tenure by pronouncing that writers should never please the authorities. His response to Ai's photo on Weibo received 19,158 re-tweets and 8400 comments in the first 16 hours.

Other netizens on Sina Weibo supported Professor Ai by posting artworks, which were modified versions of the original photograph. Artist Rui Zhang posted an oil painting in which Professor Ai looks threatening and dignified with 'Leave Her Alone' (in English) written on her stomach. Political Cartoonist Badiucao posted a humorous cartoon in which Ai has become a big pair of scissors, while gun barrels are protruding from her nipples. The slogan on the stomach here becomes the simplified credo that 'Women are Powerful'.

The original photo itself was immediately censored by the all the major website companies following the state censorship's guidelines to delete it as part of the campaign to clean up all sexually explicit imagery. On top of that, Ai Xiaoming's name was banned on Sina Weibo's search engine while some of the accounts of supporters were deleted or hacked in order to post insulting comments. Her home was put under surveillance, her internet connection and mobile phone were cut off for several days and she received visits from the state police.

This heightened surveillance was also due to the fact that besides her academic work, she had become a well-known documentary filmmaker whose movies had addressed the highly sensitive topics of political corruption and citizens' uprisings. Since 2003 she had been posting articles on internet forums and had also collaborated with documentary filmmaker Hu Jie who produced an adaptation of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, based on a play that Professor Ai had staged at Sun Yat-sen University. Hu Jie had become well known for making *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* (2003), about a young female student at Beijing University who was imprisoned during the Anti-Rightist campaign in the late 1950s and who continued writing counterrevolutionary poems in prison using her own blood until she was executed in 1968. A gifted poet, whose poetry parodied that of Chairman Mao, and

early fighter for a democratic society, Lin Zhao argued that Mao was wearing ‘emperor’s clothes’ and wanted to enslave all free thinkers. She used a hairpin to puncture her arms to produce the blood that she needed to write, often doing so while her hands were chained. She later managed to copy the large manuscript into ink characters, which form the foundation for Hu Jie’s documentary.

As Professor Ai explains in an interview in *New Left Review*, she was deeply influenced by this work and then taught herself camera techniques in order to make documentaries. She started working on a documentary about Huang Jing, a music teacher at an elementary school who died after being raped by her boyfriend, but whose death, after an official examination, was labeled as a ‘cardiac arrest’. After this first documentary *Garden In Heaven* (2005) she made several other documentaries about highly sensitive topics, such as *Taishi Village* (2005) about farmers’ uprisings in Guanzhou, *Epic of the Central Plains* (2006) and *Care and Love* (2007) about villagers in Henan and Hebei who contracted AIDS through blood transfusions, along with several documentary films about the aftermath of the Sichuan 2008 earthquake, some of them produced in collaboration with the well-known artist Ai Weiwei.

Reflecting on her transition from written works to documentaries, most of which are banned in China, she states that she chose this less conceptual and more direct mode of expression. She explains that the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 was a turning point in how online imagery functioned in China’s public sphere. In the first place, they became important relics for those who had lost their homes and families; and additionally, they started being used as evidence in local protest movements. As she explains: ‘Many citizens had witnessed how the buildings collapsed, and they held up their digital cameras, video cameras and mobile phones to record it happening... And when parents protested the poor construction of the school building—the ‘tofu-dreg projects’—they marched holding up photos of their children’ (Chang and Qian, 2011: 73). Professor Ai started being intensely scrutinized by the authorities when she was making her documentary in Taishi village. She was eventually classified as a dissident activist and lost her right to travel abroad, as well as her ability to travel and lecture in China.

The photo of Professor Ai’s body with ‘sagging breasts’ was the first-time she used disorderly nudity as a form of activism and the photo immediately went viral on social media platforms. Besides evincing dismissive responses, it conversely coalesced support and created an unusual transcultural response in overseas media as well as connectivity between younger and older mainland Chinese feminists. It could be seen as a sensual guerilla tactic and bonding device that became infectious and is well understood by netizens who are craving online jargons and audio-visual imagery as contemporary methods of social activism.

Conclusion

This essay has posited feminist naked self-photography as a light art practice that solicits empathy and feedback from audiences. These actions begin to create

meaning when encountering online conversational forces—netizens who take to the internet at once, activists who love or hate feminist transgressions, censors who spy on these actions, and feminists around the world who debate women's use of nudity as a means to subvert patriarchal signifiers. Nudity's main *modus operandi* is to cast a wide net of responses, to instigate the popular voices of eroticism and sex talk, and finally, to do so while referencing the pain of coercion and suppression.

The feminist actions in mainland China have invented a collective jargon that contests the frigid rhetoric of the state and its heightened censorship of civic actions. These feminist displays of nudity are also posited as a way to feminize or sexualize languages of resistance, all the way from the bloody prison writings of Lin Zhao to the naked torso of Ai Xiaoming. It is a contemporary type of activism that is often criticized for being too transient and non-committal, but it is posited here as a subtle transcultural tool of reflection and support. In the streets of occupied Hong Kong, feminist activists defended women's right to pleasure as one of the goals of the democracy movement, and defined it as succulent and non-normative bodies ready to stand up to implied or actual threats of violence and abuse. The mainland Chinese activists used their bodies as a way to intervene in cases of sexual abuse, while additionally making public appearances as performance artists. Their work and strategies are currently still under constant scrutiny by the government, but they have also established a wave of grassroots support that is boisterous and less prone to persecution.

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Notes

1. The Tumblr and Facebook sites are located at <http://freethethefive.tumblr.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/chinesefeminists> (accessed 15 April 2015).
2. Professor Wang's Facebook message was posted on 13 April 2015 at <https://www.facebook.com/chinesefeminists>. The conditional release and partial house arrest of the five activists was followed by official statements by the EU delegation to China and the US Mission to the United Nations for their unconditional release and a request to drop all charges against them. The statements can be found at the US mission to the UN website at: <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/240696.htm> and the EU external action service at: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150414_en.htm (all accessed 15 April 2015).

3. The Facebook group is located at <https://www.facebook.com/Protest.FemaleBodies.Future> (accessed 15 May 2015).
4. It was the broadcasting of police violence against students using their umbrellas to fend off pepper spray that stirred larger crowds of people to join and eventually occupy the streets around Tamar Park. This action 'Occupy Central' had been prepared for years by a team of academics, who had at times been too hesitant and pessimistic to start up, but whose long-awaited action finally erupted amongst student clashes going on around the headquarters.
5. This article about the nudity action can be found at Apple Daily, on <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20141027/18914151> (accessed 15 May 2015).
6. The Sina Weibo campaign of Ye Haiyan can be found on the following site, <https://freeweibo.com/weibo/3584019142401413> (accessed 10 June 2014).
7. The post was deleted by the censors but a snapshot of it still circulates online. The Sina Weibo account of Sha Yexin can be found at <http://weibo.com/baxifp> (accessed 10 June 2014).

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