

# How Does Thinking About Contemporary China Challenge our Understanding of Contemporary Society and Culture More Generally?

Jinglong Li

University of Sheffield Western Bank, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2TN UK

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**Abstract:** The continued development of the Internet has changed human life in an unprecedented way. In terms of information dissemination, it has changed how people traditionally receive and disseminate information, providing a virtual place for people to circulate information. Internet censorship is an essential and unavoidable part of distributing large amounts of information. Considering differences in education levels and other factors, people typically understand online censorship differently. Roberts (2020) mentioned that network censorship implies that when information is perceived to have the ability to undermine authority by being accountable to the public, authorities impose restrictions on the public's public expression or access to information. These restrictions include Fear (intimidating people and thus limiting their behavior by imposing harsh penalties on those who make undesirable statements), Fiction (making it more difficult to access or even remove information that authorities consider sensitive), and Flooding (burying information that authorities consider sensitive under a mass of irrelevant information). For the Chinese, Roberts' view is inconsistent with the concept of "serving the people and focusing on the people" claimed by the Chinese government, which has subverted most Chinese people's optimistic view of the country and caused them to think deeply.

**Keywords:** Contemporary China; Challenge; Social and cultural; Understanding

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This essay will apply connected action as a theory and take the online #Metoo movement in China as a case study, aiming to investigate how the cases of the contemporary online #Metoo movement in China have challenged people's understanding of online censorship.

## 1. Concept definition and mini literature review:

The theory of connected action was initially proposed by Bennett and Segerberg. Both Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have highlighted in the connection logic, taking public action or contributing to the common interest becomes a kind of personal expression and recognition or self-verification behavior, which is realized by sharing ideas and actions in the trust relationship. Everyone can contribute by sharing internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with others on the Internet. The action network characterized by this logic can rapidly expand its scale through the combination of the personal action framework that is easy to spread and the digital technology that enables this communication. Nevertheless, this theory has also been criticized by some scholars as brief and unsustainable.

## 2. Case study background:

The unique social and political background has brought significant challenges to developing the #Metoo movement in China. Liu and Chan (1999) point out that the long-standing authoritarian form of patriarchy and the acceptance of women's subordinate status in Chinese society have contributed to sexual violence against them. With the continuous progress of society, more and more people are paying attention to protecting women's rights. The government has also realized its importance and continuously introduced and improved laws related to the protection of women. However, the study by Hsiung and Wong (1998) revealed that although Chinese women formally enjoy legal rights, these rights are often compromised in reality. The rise of social media provides opportunities for women to defend their rights. Nevertheless, in China, the enormous digital divide has led to many people losing the opportunity

to participate in various online social movements. Yin and Yu (2020) added that the digital divide is mainly reflected in remote areas and people with lower household incomes. Consequently, rural and working-class women are primarily marginalized and underrepresented. Moreover, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) point out that regardless of the political nature, the Chinese government rarely tolerates any form of collective action to maintain the stability of society. Since the #MeToo movement is a collective social movement associated with women, it is bound to be severely suppressed by the government. It implies that it is almost impossible to maintain the #MeToo exercise offline. Thereby, people have launched an online #MeToo campaign to replace it. However, many hashtags related to #MeToo on the internet are limited by Fear, Fiction, and Flooding. These restrictions have led to the deletion of relevant labels and the burial of irrelevant information. Furthermore, the social media accounts of well-known feminist activists have been strictly monitored, and some accounts have even been permanently banned. The strict online censorship system has made participants in the movement feel strong resistance.

### **3. How the case study relates to the concept:**

Denyer and Wang (2018) mentioned that on January 1, 2018, inspired by the #MeToo movement overseas, a former student of China's Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Luo Xixi, took to Chinese social media to make allegations against her then-mentor. According to Luo's post, she was repeatedly harassed by her mentor during her doctoral studies. The post subsequently garnered millions of views and quickly led to the mentor's dismissal. "This allegation marked the time when the #MeToo movement took off in China. In the twelve months to follow, many more Chinese women, encouraged by the triumph of Luo's allegations, broke their silence and shared their own experiences of sexual abuse online" (Zeng, J., 2020). There is no doubt that these statements, which are considered sensitive by the government, have been severely suppressed by online censorship. After numerous online accusations, the #MeTooMovementInChina hashtag has been censored on social media, leading to some information being unable to be viewed or deleted, and accounts that publish information being warned and banned. These restrictions all prove that the government's use of online censorship systems to delete information has caused friction in the process of users receiving information, which slows down the speed of information dissemination.

Connected action theory has played an essential role in countering and challenging the understanding of online censorship. It has led to the mobilization of online users everywhere to fight against strict online censorship. A study by Chadwick (2017) found that collaboration between loosely connected individuals in connected actions can be spontaneous, flexible, and constantly adjusted and readopted based on the goals pursued. A range of anti-censorship tactics has emerged through the connection of personalized contributions from large-scale Internet users. Applying homophones to bypass text censorship systems is the most common and influential among them. Since MeToo is pronounced close to mitu in Chinese, the corresponding Chinese characters for mitu mean rice and bunny. Therefore, netizens use #mitu instead of #MeToo to avoid censorship. What is more, the different dialects of each region can also serve as anti-censorship. For example, in Sichuan and Chongqing dialects, laoziyeshi means me too. Hence, some internet users also use #laoziyeshi as a hashtag for #MeToo. Consequently, Internet users also disrupt the censorship system's recognition of text in images by flipping them. Moreover, posting information on GitHub (a platform used primarily by programmers to share and manage code), which the Chinese government does not control, is a reliable means of doing so. The emergence of these methods allowed information deemed sensitive by the government to eventually avoid censorship, thus allowing the movement to go viral. Thereby, Internet users gained a greater sense of control over the repressive Internet.

### **4. Answer the essay question:**

The online #MeToo movement in China has challenged the early impression that online censorship can completely control the dissemination of information. From an initial inability to avoid strict online censorship and having to compromise, today, there are multiple means of bypassing censorship to disseminate sensitive or perceived sensitive information. Among them, homophones, dialects, flipped images, and other methods have all challenged online censorship systems and authoritative institutions, freeing people from the constraints of censorship. Besides, Yang (2014) reveals that people's attempts to evade censorship are motivated by political frustration and an inherent need for collective meaning creation. The oppressive internet environment has nurtured a generation of internet users who enjoy a rich culture of using encoding language, puns, and satire to express their ideas and unite and support each other on controversial issues. Meng (2011) added that using homophonic or dialect anti-censorship methods to avoid censorship indicates contempt for the power structure, regaining control for users in imbalanced power dynamics, and conveying values to others as an emotional bond. Furthermore, the online #MeToo movement in China has challenged the fairness of online censorship in people's minds. The concept of "serving the people and focusing on the people" that the Chinese government has been promoting has, to a certain extent, given people a sense of identity and pride in the country. In order to maintain this image, the

government regularly uses online censorship to block and crack down on harmful information to prove and strengthen its impartiality and authority. However, the Chinese government has sometimes abused its censorship powers to achieve specific goals or interests, resulting in the unfair suppression of progressive social movements. Taking the online #MeToo movement as an example, after demonstrating a positive attitude towards safeguarding women's rights, the government still suppresses the movement through offline repression and online censorship. Therefore, beneficial social movements such as #MeToo have become victims of resistance to factors such as maintaining social stability.

## Conclusion:

On balance, this essay introduces the close relationship between internet information transmission and network censorship. A detailed introduction was given to China's unique social and political background of male dominance and zero tolerance for collective movements. In addition, the author draws on connective action theory to explain its importance during the development of China's online #MeToo movement and cites a range of ways in which Internet users are fighting online censorship, such as using homophones, dialects, flipped images, and GitHub to circumvent and cheat the censorship system. In the last part of the essay, I present two aspects of this social movement case that challenge people's understanding of online censorship. Namely, the online #MeToo movement in China challenged the early perception that online censorship has complete control over the direction of information and challenged the impartiality of online censorship in people's minds. Although compared with the direct resistance of the offline #MeToo movement, this way is fragmented, less confrontational, and destructive, its importance should not be ignored. As a result, more people are also breaking with traditional perceptions of online censorship. However, there is still a long way to go before we can break free from the shackles of online censorship and understand it on a deeper level.

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