

‘Anti-domestic violence little vaccine’: A Wuhan-based feminist activist campaign during COVID-19

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First reported in Wuhan in late 2019, COVID-19 has now spread around the world and become a global pandemic. In this historical moment when many governments are doing their best to tackle the public health emergency, many social issues are neglected, and the negligence can lead to great social costs. One of the issues that have surfaced in the quarantine is a rise in domestic violence against women. Life under lockdown has been difficult for many women who live in abusive relationships or who suffer from domestic violence (Taub 2020). These victims often have nowhere to go because of the strict quarantine measures imposed on them. Necessary police intervention as well as legal and social help may not be readily available during this period, either. It is therefore crucial to raise public awareness of domestic violence, offer support to victims, and issue warnings and even mete out punishments to perpetrators.

From January to April, many Chinese cities including Wuhan were locked down in a state of emergency. The lockdowns triggered and exacerbated some social problems including domestic violence against women. Under the Blue Sky, an anti-domestic-violence NGO (non-governmental organisation) based in Hubei’s Lijian County, received 175 reports of domestic violence in February, three times the number of such complaints during the same month in 2019 (Feng 2020). To address the issue of the rising domestic violence, some feminist activists in China connected with each other and formed support groups for women online. One such group was led by Guo Jing, a feminist activist and social worker based in Wuhan.¹ They launched an activist campaign called ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ to raise public awareness of the issue of domestic violence and women’s rights.

In this short essay, I introduce the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ campaign in China during the COVID-19. After a brief introduction of the campaign by using first-person accounts from the organiser Guo Jing, I will then sum up some of the activist strategies used in the campaign.² I will also

¹ I use the *hanyu pinyin* type of romanisation and the Chinese convention to present Chinese-language names: family names usually appear before given names. For example, in the case of the name Guo Jing, Guo is the surname and Jing is the given name.

² Guo’s accounts have been taken from her published diary. The diary was first published online on Guo’s social media and on the Chinese-language news media Matters. It was later published in print, titled *Wuhan Lockdown Diary* (Guo 2020), by Taipei-based Linking Publishing. Although nominally a diary, Guo’s writing can be more appropriately understood as a blog, publicly shared with friends and followers and widely circulated online and offline. Guo uses public circulation of her writing as a form to engage with feminism and connect with other

discuss how the campaign engages with the quarantined public space. I hope that these strategies can inspire activists around the world to find strength and solidarity, and also to seek solutions to tackle the global pandemic. I also suggest that rather than seeing the pandemic as an obstacle to social movements, we can use the pandemic as a good opportunity to experiment with flexible and creative modes of social and political activism.

‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’

Guo Jing, a resident of Wuhan, is a 29-year-old feminist activist and social worker. In 2014, she was involved in China’s first lawsuit regarding gender discrimination in employment and subsequently won the lawsuit against the employer (Legal Information Institute 2014). Inspired by the success, Guo set up a legal aid helpline for women facing gender discrimination in the workplace. On her social media sites, she frequently advertises the helpline (Figure 1). During the Wuhan lockdown, Guo was in quarantine in a small flat for seventy-seven days from 23 January to 8 April 2020, when she communicated regularly with her feminist friends online. At the same time, she kept a diary on her social media and shared her diary with friends and social media followers; she also ran the legal aid helpline and answered questions from callers every evening during the Wuhan lockdown.

people. The public nature and the realist and activist style of the diary makes it an important document for the pandemic and the social movements during the pandemic.



Figure 1. Guo Jing's business card, on which the helpline information is displayed.

At the beginning, Guo and her feminist friends all felt vulnerable and helpless, as the infection rate and death toll rose dramatically, and as the situation in Wuhan got out of control. However, after a while, they decided to act together to overcome the sense of helplessness. They set up a feminist activist WeChat (a Chinese-language social media) support group and talked to each other through voice and video chat for a couple of hours every evening, encouraging and supporting each other along the way. In these chats, the group examined the lockdown from feminist perspectives, discussed ways of engaging with social issues, and explored possible strategies to ‘help individuals overcome a sense of vulnerability’, especially for young women like themselves (Guo 26 January 2020).³

In their discussion, they realised that the epidemic was having a gendered effect. Indeed, in comparing fighting the coronavirus to fighting a war, public health

³ All the dated quotes are taken from Guo's diary (Guo 2020). The dates refer to the time when these entries were first published online.

intervention often prioritises a masculinist perspective by valorising men’s role in combatting the virus. It neglects women’s lives and their needs by relegating women to the domestic and private sphere. In doing so, it reinforces the traditionally men/women and the public/private dichotomies characterising a patriarchal and heteronormative society. At the same time, the epidemic condition has exacerbated sexual discrimination and domestic violence against women. Trapped in a confined physical space for an extended period of time, many men use their family members to vent out their pent-up frustrations. Women who live in abusive relationships are particularly vulnerable. When domestic violence occurs, women usually have no escape because of the quarantine situation. Guo reports in her diary: ‘The lockdown increased the difficulty for victims to get help and support; it also increased the practical difficulty for us in being able to offer our own intervention.’ (Guo 28 February 2020)

To raise public awareness of the issue, Guo organised an online workshop. In the workshop, feminist activist Feng Yuan shared her experience of and gave the audience advice on how to deal with domestic violence. The live broadcast and its recording attracted 1,200 viewings on that day, with positive feedback from participants and viewers (Guo 29 February 2020).



Figure 2. ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ social media account

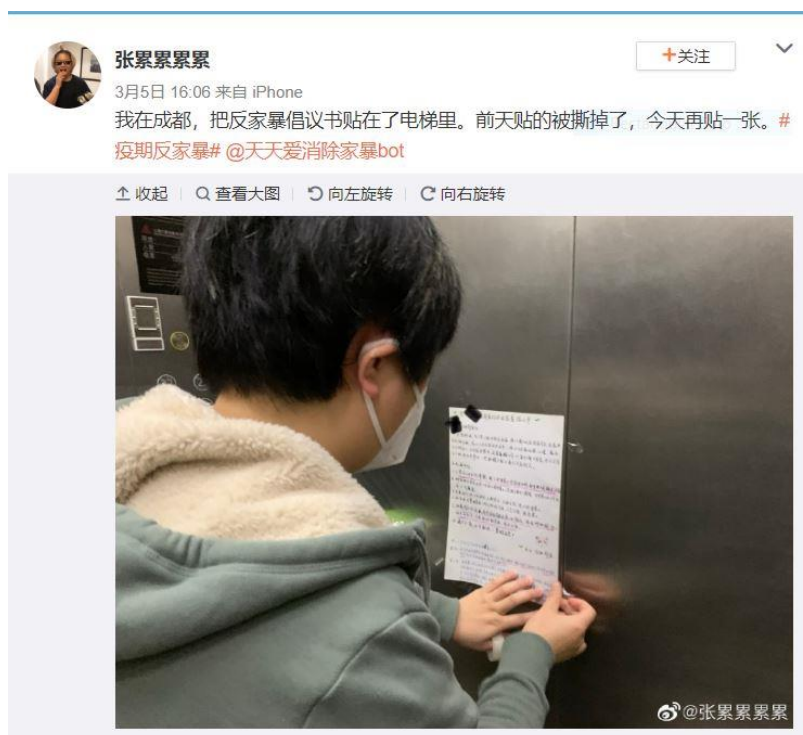


Figure 3. An activist posted a hand-written ‘anti-domestic violence open letter’ on the door of a lift.

Building on the success of the workshop and in collaboration with the Rural Women Development Foundation Guangdong, the anti-domestic violence workgroup led by Guo launched an ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign (Figure 2). The campaign called on women to act up and raise public awareness of domestic violence. The group published an open letter online, calling to the public for an end to domestic violence. It then encouraged people to copy or print out the open letter and post them in public spaces (Figure 3). The response was overwhelmingly positive: ‘In just a few hours, several thousand people volunteered to become “little vaccines” [meaning volunteers].’ (Guo 2 March 2020) Many people also came up with creative ways for public advocacy:

Since the start of the campaign, many people have posted the open letter in their own neighbourhoods. Some have even redesigned the open letter and made it into a beautiful poster. Some dialled the telephone number of the Women’s Rights Hotline run by the All-China Women’s Federation to make sure that the hotline is in operation. Others shared their own experience of falling victim to domestic violence.

The aim of the campaign is to make domestic violence visible and make its victims feel supported. Now thousands of people have volunteered to become

‘anti-domestic violence little vaccines. I hope that many people can get involved in this and the number can reach ten thousand, so that ‘anti-domestic violence little vaccines’ can be spread in more neighbourhoods. (Guo 4 March 2020)

Designing campaign strategies

The strategies used in the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign are well worth noting. The first question that the group encountered is how to ensure the safety of a campaign and its participants. Feminist activism is a politically sensitive issue in the PRC (People’s Republic of China) since the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ – five young feminist activists who planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment leaflets on public transport on the International Women’s Day in 2015 (Fincher 2018). Despite this, the language of ‘anti-domestic violence’ has its own legitimacy in the PRC’s public discourse. China’s legislative body passed its own anti-domestic violence law in 2015 (Mak 2020). China’s national organisation representing women, the All-China Women’s Federation, also runs a helpline for women, advising callers on how to deal with domestic violence. It is, therefore, possible to address the issue of domestic violence without explicitly talking about ‘feminist activism’. In other words, a campaign should be carried out in a non-explicitly political, non-aggressive, and non-confrontational way. This would require some rethinking of activist strategies based on the social context of the quarantine and the cultural specificity of the PRC. Although China’s feminist activism constitutes an integral part of the international #metoo movement, copying activist experiences directly from their Western counterparts without localising activist strategies is not an option for Chinese feminists.



Figure 4. ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ campaign logo

The design of the campaign logo and slogan has effectively considered the social context of the epidemic and the geographical location of China in East Asia. It therefore speaks effectively to a target audience – primarily young people in urban China – without making the campaign sound explicitly political. At the centre of the campaign logo is the standing cartoon figure of a green-coloured cat dressed in a short skirt, wearing a surgical mask, holding a huge syringe with one hand/paw, and pushing the top of the syringe with the other (Figure 4). A gentle shot of green liquid, resembling a green grass shoot in shape, appears on the tip of the needle. The image manifests an aesthetics of *kawaii* (‘cuteness’ in Japanese) and *xiaoqingxin* (‘little freshness’ in Mandarin Chinese) popular among urban youths in East Asia. The cat image is characterised by a fresh, pleasant and dynamic visual style and at the same time appears non-militant and non-threatening. The words on the left-hand side of the picture read: ‘anti-domestic violence little vaccine’; and on the right hand-side, ‘caring for each other in the lockdown’. This slogan taps into a culture of solidarity and mutual care in the epidemic. The term ‘little vaccine’ also speaks to the epidemic condition in which ‘vaccines’ are welcome and needed. Also, by calling the volunteers who participated in this campaign ‘little vaccines’, the campaign also bypasses politically sensitive terms such as feminist activists and reduces potential risks for participants.

Being veteran feminist activists, Guo and her friends are aware of the importance of participation; they also recognise ordinary people’s agency in making decisions and taking actions to change their own lives and society. The campaign strategies are designed in such a way that people are encouraged to ‘act up’, because one’s confidence and agency can be effectively boosted in the process of ‘acting up’. But this ‘acting up’ should not be prescriptive, that is, following strict guidelines and rules. Instead, they should be open and flexible enough so that individuals can decide their own ways of participation and devise their own activist strategies. Different individuals may have their own perceived places in the movement; a movement should be able to help these individuals negotiate the grey zone between finding and challenging their own comfort zones. Flexibility in ‘acting up’ also helps to protect new participants and give them time and space to try out new things and gain confidence at their own pace.

An activist strategy should recognise participants’ agency and help them exercise their own agency. How to mobilise the participants’ agency is therefore crucial to a movement, and this process usually involves embodied participation, which is obviously under constraint in a quarantine environment but is not impossible. A well-designed activist strategy can mobilise participants physically, psychologically and emotionally. For example, the major action point of this campaign is for participants to make an ‘anti-domestic violence open letter’ public. This is a good task because it is easy, doable, and flexible; it also leaves ample space for individual creativity. Participants can post the open letter online and on social media. If they are brave enough, they can post the letter in

the public spaces of their neighbourhoods. Most people disseminate an e-version or a print version of this pre-drafted open letter. Those who are determined enough or those who do not have a printer at home can choose to hand copy the letter. Those who are artistically gifted can even redesign the poster. In other words, the task of ‘posting an open letter’ can activate people’s agency and creativity; in doing so, it boosts participants’ confidence and gives them a sense of accomplishment. After sharing their experiences online with others, participants develop a sense of belonging in an activist community – although their relationship to and position within the community may differ – and feel that they are contributing to an ongoing social movement, or a social cause they feel that they can support. The constant shifts of a campaign from online to offline and then back online, aided by the active involvement of one’s embodied and affective participation, are therefore crucial for the success and sustainability of a social movement.

Most importantly, the campaign organisers have not called themselves and the participants ‘feminists’ or ‘activists’. This is an example of a type of politics based on specific social issues (i.e. anti-domestic violence) instead of political identities. The campaign has therefore attracted some male participants and even garnered support from some participants’ parents. By focusing on specific issues, activist campaigns become more inclusive and therefore have a greater social impact.

Engagement with the public space

The lockdown condition offers ample opportunities for activist campaigns because many people – mostly the ‘non-essential’ workers in the public policy discourse – now have more time and enthusiasm for social participation. Also, the pent-up energy and emotional intensity during the lockdown can be released through social participation. During a pandemic, most people are eager to do something useful to help others and to contribute to society, but many cannot find a suitable way. The public health discourse during the pandemic often centres on the notion of an individual who stays at home and takes care of themselves and their families. This highly individualised and home-centred narrative neglects people’s need for social interaction and their social responsibilities. Forging a collective subjectivity and shaping a form of publicness is therefore crucial for a social movement.

The quarantine condition poses unprecedented challenges to bring out a sense of publicness – both in terms of people’s concern for political and social issues and in terms of bringing issues from the private sphere to the public sphere. Offline gatherings become difficult, although this experience can to a certain extent be remedied by using digital media and technologies. In order to bring a movement from the private and domestic sphere to a public space – understood in both physical and virtual terms, a movement needs to adjust its conventional activist strategies by taking into account the cultural specificity of the public space in China.

The notion of ‘public space’ has a vexed history in China, because of the conflation of the public and the private in the Mao era and its aftermath. Public spaces in a city are often controlled with surveillance by authorities, and the use of these spaces are often politicised and even commercialised. A bulletin board in a residential compound is often occupied by political posters and commercial advertisements, and the residents’ use of these spaces is often forbidden or strictly scrutinised. The act of posting an open letter in these public spaces therefore marks an act of transgression and the reclaiming of the ordinary people’s entitlement to these spaces. Guo reflected in her diary, aware that many participants of the campaign were among her readers:

Many people said they were very nervous when they posted the open letter in public spaces, as if they were doing something wrong. In contrast, many perpetrators of domestic violence did not feel any unease at all when they committed physical violence in public. They would not tone down their voice. The victims were usually more worried about being seen and humiliated by others. Such a public space tolerates and encourages violence against women.

To whom do public spaces belong? Today, our urban spaces are overwhelmingly occupied by homogenous propaganda slogans and commercial advertisements. [...]

It is thus easy to understand people’s nervousness. We seldom use public spaces, and do not claim ownership to these public spaces. The campaign of posting anti-domestic violence open letters in fact has two objectives: firstly, to raise public awareness of domestic violence and to offer support to victims; secondly, to exercise our right to use public spaces, and to improve the social environment where such practices exist, and to send a warning message to the perpetrators. (Guo 6 March 2020)

Guo believes in the power of individual and collective action in empowering marginalised people in society; she also sees the potential of ordinary people’s agency once they feel that they can do something to change their lives and to change society. She wrote on 8 March, the International Women’s Day, also the fifth anniversary of the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ (Fincher 2018; Wu, Yuan and Lansdowne 2018): ‘Many people have been looking for light and connections in darkness and lockdown. They have never given up their desire for social change. This can release tremendous strength and power.’ (Guo 8 March 2020)

Conclusion

The ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign offers a good example for social movements in a time of crisis and a ‘state of emergency’. COVID-19 brings unprecedented opportunities and challenges to contemporary social movements across the world. The pandemic has exposed and magnified existing problems such as structural equality, government inefficiency and weak

social welfare systems. Many people are suffering from illness, death and poverty as a result of these problems. But this situation has also raised the public’s awareness of these problems and issued an urgent call for these problems to be addressed. Social movements addressing these problems are therefore more likely to garner support from people and invite wide participation in society. Although the quarantine measures have made public gatherings and physical contacts between people difficult, the Internet and social media have facilitated social mobilisation and political activism in significant ways. For example, a large part of the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign took place online and on social media. Physical isolation, therefore, does not bring an end to social movements. The collective spirit and emotional intensity generated in a time of crisis can be mobilised for activist purposes, and their impacts are likely to be greater now than in ordinary times.

This case study has also helped us to imagine social movements in non-Western contexts. Social movements studies have for a long time primarily drawn on and theorised Western experiences. People sometimes assume that activists from all over the world actively learn from their Western counterparts. The practice of how Chinese feminists have devised innovative activist strategies to engage with the issues of domestic violence and women’s rights during the pandemic preceded many similar pandemic activist practices in the West. This, on the one hand, can be attributed to the fact that China was the first country that had to cope with the epidemic, and this pushed Chinese activists to the forefront of the pandemic activism. On the other, it is yet another example which shows that activists in non-Western parts of the world have always been experimenting with innovative activist strategies, perhaps more than what they have been given credit for. There is no denying that Chinese feminist activists also draw on experiences from other countries, and all of this contribute to transnational feminist movements. There is, however, an urgent need for activist experiences in non-Western parts of the world to be documented, reflected upon, and theorised. In this sense, we are contributing to the de-Westernisation of activist knowledge and social movement studies by taking the experiences from the Global South seriously.

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