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Athira B. K. (she/her) & Jue Jiang (she/her)

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Reports from the field of digital feminism: the uses of online spaces by Muslim women in India and the "genesis of online feminism" in China

Athira B. K. (she/her)[a] and Jue Jiang (she/her) 🆔 [b*]

[a]Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India;
[b]School of Law, Gender and Media, SOAS University of London, London, UK

Introduction

As a form of conversation seeking to share ongoing digital feminist research, two active researchers share their notes from their field. Athira B. K. is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, working in the Indian digital space as a part of her doctoral project on Muslim women and bodily practices. Jue Jiang is a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow and Teaching Fellow at the School of Law, Gender and Media at SOAS University of London, who studies Chinese digital activism. Together, they provide snapshots from their respective fields and derive a joint conclusion to draw out insights that can be gleaned from looking at the two fields together.

Who are we as researchers?

Athira B. K.

My entry into the broad field of anthropology of Islam in India and focus on bodily practices had much to do with my biography as someone who grew up with Muslim teachers and Muslim friends in the Palakkad district of Kerala.[1] Though my initial research interests were aligned toward the bodily practices of Hindu women in India, which I had pursued during my

CONTACT Jue Jiang ✉ jj20@soas.ac.uk; jiangjuejiangjue@gmail.com 🖃 School of Law, Gender and Media, SOAS University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London, WC1H 0XG, UK
*The authors are listed alphabetically and contributed equally.

MPhil, certain incidents happened during the period between 2021 and 2022 that urged me to shift my focus to Muslim communities in India in general, and Muslim women who speak Malayalam from the Kerala region in particular. These incidents included the opposition of certain Muslim organizations in Kerala to the introduction of gender-neutral uniforms in Kerala in 2022 and the Karnataka *hijab* row. My stay in New Delhi, the capital of India and a northern sprawling urban center, over a long time during my Master's and MPhil studies and my exposure to explicit religious prejudices during this period informed my understanding of the diverse historical trajectories of Muslims from the southern and northern regions of India (see Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan 2023). They made me realize the importance of broadening out from taking a northern Indian case to be representative of Muslim lives across the sub-continent, and of documenting the lives of Muslims from other parts of the country in our discussions on Indian Muslims, an argument put forth by Safwan Amir (2019) in his study of Muslim barbers in Kerala. This led to my exploration of the case of Muslim women in the southern part of India, of their religious lives, and of the extent to which Islam works as a patriarchal tool in the region. My study of digital media practices among these Muslim women is a corollary to my broader research framework on Malayali Muslim women.

Jue Jiang

Though my main research area is law, I worked with Chinese human rights activists for a long time, which prompted my interest in gender equality and feminism. For some time after the internet had assumed a key role in activism, Chinese human rights or civil society activism remained mostly centered on offline activities, with the internet employed to facilitate offline activities. In other words, for observers and activists, online activism was viewed as secondary or ancillary to offline activism. Offline and in-person activism has been considered so important that in 2015, following the arrests of several feminists by the Chinese authorities for their activities on International Women's Day, concerns about the future of the women's rights movements in China were rampant both inside and outside of the country.

In January 2020, I traveled back to China for the Lunar New Year, but was trapped in a draconian lockdown due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, while spending much more time on the internet, I observed some rather interesting phenomena. For one thing, social media platforms were abuzz with discussions and debates on a diverse range of topics and cases regarding women's rights and gender equality. For another, feminist activism, such as the collection and provision of badly-needed sanitary pads for women medical workers, was still being carried out with remarkable success. Some observers identified 2020 as

marking the "genesis of online feminism" (*wangluo nüquan yuannian*) in China. These observations triggered my thinking about the role or significance of social media and digital spaces in empowering individuals and promoting social change, especially given digital feminism's vitality and resilience demonstrated in the lockdown. Thus, I delved deeper into my observations to explore how digital feminism is evolving in China.

Reports from the field

Malayali Muslim women on digital platforms

Athira B. K.

Introduction

Early anthropological conceptions of Islam and Muslim societies have largely been shaped by the objectives and trajectories set in motion by scholars who sit outside these societies and their ideological locations (Marranci 2008). When gender consciousness was introduced to modern India, it had the figure of the Muslim woman at its center as the victim of sexualized oppression by the Muslim man (Mubarak 2022). We have seen a shift in this discourse, with Muslim women ethnographers beginning to write Muslim women's stories (Varisco 2005). The recent focus of Muslim women's writing has been on subjects such as fashion, technology, leisure, digital media engagements, and citizenship, especially since the 2010s. I position my observations on the digital media engagements of Muslim women in line with these conversations.

As part of my doctoral project on Muslim womanhood in Kerala, I conducted ethnographic research between February 2022 and February 2023 to understand how young Muslim women there are using social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to express themselves and their views. The ethnographic research involved in-depth interviews with 20 women, chosen through a snowball method of sampling, who were students aged between 18 and 32, enrolled on diverse courses across various higher education institutions in different parts of India. They were from different districts of Kerala and identified themselves as being from the middle class, lower-middle class, and lower class. My interpretive approach was grounded in feminism, which requires researchers to reflect on their own biases and to acknowledge "that the researcher's perspective is always informed by intersections of social class, gender, ethnicity, religion etc." (Hurley 2023, 791). In other words, feminist research requires that the researcher pays attention to their privileges and disadvantages in the process of accessing the field with respect to their social location. Similarly, it compels them to reflect on their position as a researcher while interacting

with the interlocutors and in the process of interpreting data. I therefore share a brief methodological point before I continue: my non-Muslim identity and lack of lived experience as a Muslim woman must have acted as a hindrance while drawing the framework of this study. However, my gender identity, along with my linguistic identity, enabled me to reflect and elucidate on the experiences of the interlocutors in a way that other researchers could not. I was able to ask questions on relationship break-ups, and there were references to their sex lives during interviews in certain cases. Given cultural norms, I think that this might not have happened, or would have been difficult, had it been a man researcher in my place.

The context in which I started my research journey is also worth noting. In recent times, a re-emergence of themes such as polygamy, *purdah*, and piety has been evident in socio-political as well as academic discourses in India. A conflation of Islam with patriarchy and a concomitant religious oppression faced by Muslim women has predominated in such discourses, especially those in politics and the media. However, such narratives have often overlooked what I think are significant questions, such as "Which Muslim women?" or "What is the nature of oppression to which they are subjected?" or "How are these concerns manifested in new ecologies, such as digital media spaces?" I believe that it is important to understand the category of Muslim women with respect to their diverse sociocultural locations and regional differences, without subscribing to the essentialized image of a "muted" Muslim woman who "needs saving."

Beyond religion as an essential constraint

In India, there are certain factors that mark the digitally mediated advocacy of feminism as distinct from its previous forms. Recent studies of the use of digital media platforms signal the need to consider these platforms as emerging spaces that invigorate marginalized groups as they navigate their class and caste identities, along with actively taking part in conversations that resist dominant cultural norms. This is against the backdrop of a proliferation of right-wing media in the country, which are majoritarian in nature (Bhat 2023) Despite this, digital media platforms continue to be alternative and counter-hegemonic spaces (Kumar 2011). My research with Malayali Muslim women focused on how digital media platforms have arguably enabled novel means of constructing dialogues with a diverse group of social media users and of expressing oppositional consciousness for disadvantaged groups.

Muslim women's bodily practices[2] have become one of the most debated topics in recent times (Arafath and Arunima 2022). The Malayali Muslim women I studied use digital spaces to critique the Orientalist narratives of Islamic patriarchy, to contest dominant narratives on their clothing practices, and to question oppressive practices within Muslim political

collectives, particularly in non-Muslim-majoritarian contexts. I observed in my interviews that the challenges reported by interlocutors correspond with various concerns, including appearance, faith practices, and patriarchal experiences. The young Malayali women I studied have to navigate quotidian experiences of not only being Muslim and a woman but also being a Muslim woman in India. However, the social categories and tenets of discrimination that these women identified to be oppressive or constraining range from class- to caste-based differences, and do not only relate to their religious identity as Muslims. In other words, how they identify and curate themselves as Muslim women against the backdrop of Hindu majoritarianism in the country results in a variety of discriminatory forms refracted by class, caste, and other differences. Since the identification of oppressive forces by each interlocutor was dependent on her specific location in the gender, caste, or class hierarchy, the emphasis attached to each social category and its significance as a constraining factor varied from case to case.

To illustrate, I include some examples from my interviews. One of my interlocutors, a Master's student studying at a university in Telangana, remembered how she dealt with an unpleasant incident on Instagram:

> I believe I have rights over my body and it is my choice to decide what kind of clothes I should wear and what kind of posts I should share on my Instagram page. There was this guy on my followers list who sent me certain detestable messages asking me questions like "How can you wear a sleeveless dress while being a Muslim?" I did not respond to the person. I took a screenshot of that conversation and shared it as a story, hiding his name. Of course, I did not want to reveal the identity of that person, but I wanted him to know that we have options of naming and shaming people on social media these days, which can potentially harm his "image" as a progressive guy on social media.

A doctoral student from a university in New Delhi explained her encounter with an activist from an Ambedkarite group from Kerala that advocates the anti-caste teachings of B. R. Ambedkar:[3]

> It may not be direct, but certain actions affect you. I find social media platforms useful for sharing news, but it is taxing at times. It upsets me how some people handle gender-related issues. I have encountered this in my close circles. I was friends with a Malayali guy because I found many of his ideas to be impressive. He was an Ambedkarite, and most of the time his take on Dalit issues in Kerala was on point. He used to raise micro aspects of caste-based discrimination in the region. But it was appalling to see how he responded to a #MeToo allegation against him, by making paedophilic comments against the girl. I did not go into any kind of arguments on this on social media. I just unfriended and unfollowed him on my pages.

While the notion of Islamic feminism was identified as an empowering project by some of the women, it was also described as an "oxymoron" or

"impossible trajectory" by others. Another doctoral student from Kerala, now based in New Delhi, explained some of her issues with Islamic feminism:

> I think if you find issues with Quranic teachings or similar things, you should be allowed to question that. I have faced immense criticism for opting [for] a haircut or dress style [that] many of my family members thought does not align with Islam. I am still trying to understand it.

How digital communities shape local and global connections

Honing in on the specific case of digital media participation and the local–global connections, the interlocutors expressed a strong sense of "belonging" to this regional or local space, and their Malayali identity, along with a strong assertion of national identity, particularly when questioned on their minority identity. During one of my interviews, a doctoral student from a university in New Delhi observed how regional religious practices are evidently different from those of Muslims in northern parts of India. She gave me examples, such as the variations on wedding rituals, Malayalam terms used for religious practices, and the differences in the Islamic schools of thought followed across the country. She said:

> I write in English and Malayalam since I have friends from different states of India. But when I have to talk about some issue from Kerala, or to share something related to any political group from Kerala on social media, I prefer to do it in Malayalam. I think it becomes easy with the language or satirical usages that we Malayalis share.

I found her point intriguing since it hints at how one's regional and linguistic identities are curated when it comes to digital media representations. Scholars who have studied Muslim groups from Kerala reiterate their relationship with the "Arab Other" (Osella 2013), which can be traced back to the trans-oceanic trade relationships since the 1200s and the Gulf migration since the 1970s. This is something that I observed in my ethnographic research on Muslim women and sartorial practices in Kozhikode, where practices from the Arab region are also popular. However, my conversations with these young women provided me with a "complicated" image of the relationship that Malayali Muslims have with the "Arab Other" (see Osella 2013), in terms of their national and regional identities.

I had an interesting conversation with one of the interlocutors in which an *abaya* was understood as an Arabian (and therefore foreign) garment or part of another Muslim community's culture. However, I also observed another interlocutor wearing an *abaya* on her Instagram page. Similarly, the images of certain interlocutors wearing a Keralan *saree* (which is often identified with Hindu Malayali identity) or a bridal *lehenga* (which used to be worn primarily by brides from northern parts of India) undermines the imaginary of a single female Muslim identity with which the majority of them identify. It is

quite evident that most of the interlocutors incorporate various cultural elements such as items of clothing (especially those that make their Muslim identity distinct from that of other Muslim groups) into their own imaginary of a Muslim woman. This is quite visible in their self-representations on digital media platforms. However, such incorporation of "Muslim" elements and their representation on social media platforms differ from woman to woman, and are context specific and based on their understanding of religion, gender rights, and contemporary political discourses. When it came to the self-representations of the interlocutors, I observed a strong assertion of this regional identity, where they share information regarding the intra-university Muslim student collectives on WhatsApp, exclusively for Malayali students, where they engage in conversations, mostly on regional politics and events. However, in the wake of recent events, such as protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, which is notable for its anti-Muslim elements, the recent *hijab* ban controversies (see B. K. and Balyan 2023), and an increased othering of Muslims, Malayali women have also started to reassert their national identity and an identification with other Muslims across India. This sense of national identity comes in the form of minority rights. For instance, during the protest against the *hijab* ban, I observed them sharing posts and views associating body concealment with patriarchal oppression, and highlighting their constitutional rights as citizens of India.

Issues of inequalities and hierarchies in digital citizenship and empowerment

It is of the utmost importance to respond to the way in which hierarchies are created and reinforced through digital media platforms. I would like to bring in the case of class differences here, a point highlighted by Tanweer Fazal (2022) in his study of the Muslim middle class in India. As I observed from my conversations with the interlocutors, their opinions on certain topics that emerge from their social media exchanges are also mediated by their class identities, or caste identities in particular cases. Though the interlocutors made hardly any reference to caste identity, these factors overlapped in their description regarding the identification of the most urgent issues. Nevertheless, I observed that their reflections on these issues are again mediated by their different positionalities in the social hierarchy, based on caste, class, and gender.

The instant view, instant response, and immediate circulation features enabled by digital media communication platforms and expanding technological innovations play a consequential role in shaping these young Muslim women's preference for online platforms over offline media. However, I would argue that the social media self-representations of these women are characterized by either an endorsement or a refusal of the norm of "respectable femininity" (Hussein 2017, 1). While some of the

interlocutors conform to the (supposedly) religious and cultural prescriptions associated with gender norms, there is another group of young women who identify these elements as constraining while they navigate their day-to-day lives. However, it could be discerned from the conversations that all of the interlocutors align with some variant of women's rights, based on their lived experiences, making caste- or class-based elements a core concern, primarily for those belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned above, this calls for taking the multiplicity of hierarchies and their functioning in specific contexts into account when thinking of Muslim women and digital feminism, rather than reiterating narratives based on patriarchy underpinned by religion.

As I was told by a Master's student, whose parents are laborers on a tea plantation in Wayanad:

> I don't find sufficient engagement on topics like poverty among Malayali Muslims, or landlessness among this group. I have hardly come across any discussions on the privileged groups among Malayali Muslims or any conversations on privilege based on social and cultural capital. I try to discuss these things when I write or share something on my social media accounts. I think I should speak for myself. I have access to technology, and I can speak English. I know young Muslim students who do not have enough family support when it comes to accessing good schooling like the privileged. The caste and class differences that exist among Malayali Muslims are a reality – a reality nobody wants to talk about.

Shifting our focus to areas where greater collective action is needed, it becomes imperative for feminist discussions on Muslim women in India to broaden the scope for inter-group engagements. For instance, there are differences on the issue of marital separation and triple *talaq* (see Das and Singh 2017) between organizations such as Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (the Indian Muslim Women's Movement) and other Muslim women's organizations. The right-wing parties' position on veiling practices, polygamy, and *talaq* could be seen to be receiving support from such organizations. In such contexts, I think that it is consequential to identify and respond to what anthropologists call "femonationalism" (Farris 2012), the mobilization of feminist ideas by neoliberal governments, and how conversations around these issues are shaped and circulated through digital media platforms. We feminists live in a context where we need to shift our discussions on gender and technology to topics such as women robots or the feminization of artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact across geographies (see Kumar and Choudhury 2022). Here, a documentation of digital media access and digital media conversations can aid us in discerning how women, especially those from unprivileged groups, instrumentalize accessible technologies to reflect on their lives, as partners in intimate relationships, or as citizens of their country.

Digital feminism in China: a new mechanism of self-empowerment and communal activism

Jue Jiang

The nature of digital feminism: "the personal is political" and "the personal is communal"

In my study, digital feminism is identified as a new form of feminist sensibility and activism that is driven and facilitated by digital technology (Chang and Tian 2021). Digital feminism mainly takes place on the internet and aims to catalyze – or in some cases actually does catalyze – offline activism and social change. Nowadays, technically speaking, anyone can use social media to express their daily experiences of sexism and misogyny. These platforms provide a wide range of channels for everyone, in theory, to voice and share their experiences, feelings, and views. In the grander trajectory of the feminist movement's push toward the goal of gender equality, individual voices or stories may be overlooked as minor or trivial. Digital feminism, which is emerging worldwide, embodies the slogan "the personal is political" coined by second-wave feminists. However, unlike second-wave feminism, it emphasizes and opens up the understanding that women are not a homogeneous group (Munro 2013); rather, it adopts a Foucauldian understanding of power relations and sexism as "micro-politics" by seeing, respecting, and valuing every individual per se. This is also a new way of community building. According to Antimo Farro and Henri Lustiger-Thaler (2014, 3), "the collective is becoming more and more of an individualised phenomenon in its projected sentiments, expressions, practices, techniques, memories, and most importantly the personal values upon which individuals base their commitments." That is, "the personal is communal" (Tan 2023). Hence, community building is a key part of digital feminism, such as through online consciousness-raising groups or feminist communities composed of strangers (mostly also anonymous) that overcome geographic limitations (Li 2022, 68; Lu 2020, 6). Accordingly, there has also been a shift in how people get involved in activism, which was previously usually done in person. In digital feminism's new web-based communities, associations and activism can be – and, in many cases, are – anonymous and decentralized, with no formal means of agreement or conformity. In this way, a community is a more fluid and open-ended social body with voluntary and flexible participation, involvement, engagement, and collaboration of like-minded individuals (Zhang 2015, 108). Community building tends to be looser, less structured, and freer. Alongside and closely associated with this new community-building mechanism is an absence of hierarchy or formal leadership (Blevins 2018, 96).

In China, during the pandemic, I observed a significant increase in online discussions, engagement, and debates concerning a wide range of feminist

issues, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, harassment, patriarchal culture, and discrimination in employment. Women sharing ordinary experiences of sexism and misogyny can help to foster empathy toward each other and increase awareness and recognition of common values. This phenomenon is termed "pan-feminism" (*fan nüquan*) by some observers in China, which indicates not only the much wider and enthusiastic participation of women "netizens" in discussing, debating, and promoting gender-equality-related issues via social media platforms, but also a trend for anti-elitism. Moreover, there have for a long time previously been visible leading and influential social media accounts, or "self-media practitioners" (*zi meiti*) or "opinion leaders" (such as "Big V" bloggers on Weibo), in various feminist discussions and activism in China. Yet, the new form of association and activism has made digital feminism more equal and freer. Everyone, particularly those who are more marginalized or invisible, can have an equal outlet and position to share their stories and express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions – and, furthermore, to initiate and take part in activism.

Transnational activism in digital spaces

Examples of transnational activism can be used to illustrate how digital feminism has both local and global connections, embedding the dynamics of "the personal is political" and "the personal is communal." Though popular social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are blocked and banned in China, the younger generation (or those living or studying abroad) keep an eye on gender-related news and issues on those platforms, and translate posts, stories, and discussions across the "Great Firewall" and language barriers on China's most popular social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat (Xue and Rose 2022, 112). For instance, there is a keen interest in and attention to cases of women and girls being trafficked from Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos, and sold in China as brides. Netizens gather under these posts to provide collective help and support, including exposing the problems and calling on the Chinese police to take action (Xue and Rose 2022, 112). Furthermore, some gender-based discriminatory or violent incidents and cases that have happened in recent years in adjacent jurisdictions have provoked extensive discussions and had significant resonance on Weibo. For instance, South Korea's "Nth Room" case, which involved sex crimes and sexual exploitation through the Telegram app, sparked an outpouring of anger on Chinese social media. Netizens not only expressed solidarity on their Weibo accounts but also started to expose similar online chatrooms or websites in China and report them to China's Internet Crime Reporting Centre (Xue and Rose 2022, 114). To take another example, one of Taiwan's most influential books of the #MeToo movement, *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise*, written by Lin Yi-Han and based on her own experience of being subjected to long-term sexual assault by her teacher when she

was a teenage girl, led to the creation of various online reading groups. Netizens gathered in those virtual groups not only to discuss this book and Lin's trauma, but also to associate the problems revealed in the book with relevant cases in China, and to call for legal reforms (just as Lin's case and accompanying activism led to legal reforms in Taiwan). Such widespread efforts and engagement contributed enormously to the amendment of China's Criminal Law at the end of 2020; a new clause was finally added to address rape and sexual assault committed by individuals who have a duty of care for their victims.

The transnational flow of the #MeToo movement, which originated in the United States (US), embodies this approach and connection as well. The much wider and more equal involvement and endeavor facilitated by social media platforms not only created a "call-out" culture worldwide against sexism and misogyny, but also (and very significantly) fueled a global community of feminist netizens, to share experiences, discussions, and activism (Munro 2013). In 2018, inspired by the #MeToo movement in the US, a Chinese woman, Luo Qianqian, who was living in the US, had the courage to recount on Weibo her experience of being sexually harassed by her supervisor 12 years previously when she was a doctoral student in Beijing. Her experience and call for justice were widely reported and commented on as the beginning of the #MeToo movement in China (Yin and Sun 2021, 1182). Notably, Luo's action encouraged more and more women to stand up and speak up on Weibo and WeChat. Netizens set up online groups and accounts to share stories, experiences, commentaries, and discussions. They expressed their emotions, conveyed their support, and discussed wider issues such as gender inequality, sexual violence, and victim blaming, calling for measures to tackle these problems. They also created their own Chinese version of the hashtag, #米兔 (literally "rice rabbit" in Chinese, with the same pronunciation as "#MeToo"), to circumvent censorship as the discussions touched on politically sensitive topics such as feminist activism, human rights, and the hegemonic masculinity embodied in Chinese authorities. All of these activities have facilitated the formation of counter-publics with feminist awareness and identity in digital spaces. It is also noteworthy that these counter-publics reflect a much wider network and expansive participation of ordinary individuals in society. For instance, a professor used the hashtag #Iwillbeyourvoice# on Weibo to amplify many stories shared by more silent and invisible women, such as those living in rural China, about their experiences of being subjected to sexual violence (Yin and Sun 2021, 1184).

These examples further show that digital feminism is a mechanism of individual empowerment; articulating and sharing one's experiences, engaging in discussions, debates, and commentaries, and expressing empathy, support, and solidarity are all crucial means or pathways for self-empowerment. Then, multiple instances of self-empowerment form

collective empowerment, which results in collective activism and the formation of counter-publics.

Digital feminism's resilience in the authoritarian regime

Another noteworthy feature of the individual empowerment and collective empowerment in digital feminism in China is its resilience despite the constantly shrinking physical space of civil society due to the authorities' escalating suppression and crackdown. This feature of resilience inherently aligns with human rights and civil society activism in the digital world more generally. The internet has long been a hub for Chinese netizens' resistance, satire, irony, and critique of the Chinese government and the authoritarian regime, expressed through a wide range of puns, parodies, jokes, and jargon. This has been a crucial way for Chinese people to express – under the authorities' restrictions and restraints on expression – resistance and defiance against public power through their boundless creativity and ingenuity. As put by George Orwell, "every joke is a tiny revolution … Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And bigger they fall, the bigger the joke" (quoted in Li 2011, 72). In the first year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase of 80 million new internet users (Chen 2022). Against this backdrop, we witnessed large-scale and spontaneous cyber-assemblies in mourning for Dr Li Wenliang, who is viewed as a whistle-blower of the pandemic, on his Weibo posts after his death. More recently, at the end of 2022, along with Chinese citizens' protest in Urumqi against the government's draconian lockdown under the zero-COVID policy, netizens launched a much larger wave of protest on social media by sharing songs such as *Do You Hear the People Sing*, slogans such as "Get up, Stand Up." and photographs and videos of demonstrations on the streets (Conrad 2022). In this protest, netizens held up A4-sized white sheets of paper, as a symbol to demonstrate their opposition to the authorities' censorship and suppression of freedoms, and to mourn those who died in the pandemic. This protest has not only spread nationwide in China, but also crossed the Great Firewall to reach various cities abroad. This netizens/citizens' protest is termed the "White Paper Movement" or the "White Paper Revolution," with mostly China's younger generation taking the lead and participating. In a nutshell, the internet, and social media in particular, provides Chinese netizens with a significant civic space for their public expression, demanding and exercising their rights as citizens, which has become more and more difficult offline.

In the field of digital feminism, a noteworthy example embedding this feature of resilience is the digital community composed of people writing, reading, and liking *danmei* in China. *Danmei* (literally "indulging in the beauty" in Chinese) is a kind of popular literature created predominantly by and for women about homosexual male romance (Xue and Rose 2022,

151). Since lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) relationships have always been identified by the Chinese authorities as abnormal and immoral, ever since the emergence of *danmei* culture in China, it has been subject to suppression and clampdown. The actions taken against *danmei* include the banning of its publication or dissemination, the shutting down of significant websites or online forums and blogs that act as hubs for its authors, works, and readers, the criminal arrests of authors, the dispersal of fandom gatherings or activities offline, and the stigmatization or criticism of authors and fans in the state media (Yi 2013). Previously, when such things happened, it would lead to an impression or feeling that "the community collapsed" (Yi 2013). However, the internet and digital technology provide a significant discursive space and a somewhat "grey zone" for the resilience and further development of this *danmei* culture in the authoritarian regime (Chang and Tian 2021). For instance, *danmei* authors and fans produce cartoons on their social media platforms satirizing the heteropatriarchal cultural works and roles broadcast in the official media (Yi 2013). Furthermore, they share not only their own *danmei* works but also their personal stories and lives with each other on their social media; they have collectively created their own set of rules, vocabulary, slang, and even codes for engagements (Jacobs 2015, 112; Ng and Li 2020, 486–489; Zhang 2016, 261); and they produce a specific artistic style to articulate homosexual behavior between men (Chang and Tian 2021, 613). There is also reportedly a huge online black market for consuming and exchanging *danmei* materials (Zhang 2016, 261). All of these activities and media strategies contribute to forging a collective feminist identity that empowers women to challenge the state-backed heteropatriarchal culture and ideologies as well as a feminist counterculture that resists the hegemonic discourse of gender norms imposed by the Chinese state (Chang and Tian 2021, 613–616). This "grey zone" ensures that digital feminism is more resilient than conventional forms, as, despite the authorities' online censorship, the nature and features of the internet mean that they cannot disrupt or destroy the online space as they can the offline community and activities. Moreover, as shown above, Chinese netizens have come up with innovative ways to circumvent censorship. The resilience of *danmei* is attributed by some scholars to the fact that Chinese netizens are "accustomed to or adept at engaging in public expression in a manner that does not directly oppose the regime" with a "protective colour" (Cao, Zeng, and Evans 2022, 163). In this sense, *danmei* is identified as a crucial cultural approach to understanding feminist politics versus both censorship and gender norms implemented by the Chinese government and the authoritarian regime in the cause of gender equality in the digital age.

Nevertheless, even with all of the promising characteristics and dynamics discussed above, digital feminism is not a utopia for feminism or feminists

(and women/girls). On the one hand, feminists and women/girls more broadly are subjected to rampant cyber-violence and online trolling on a daily basis, which is no less serious than the assaults that they encounter offline. The current legal regulations and policies are still not effective in addressing these problems. On the other hand, rifts and attacks have been observed within the emerging digital feminist community in China. For instance, *danmei* fans who engage in feminist discussions and activism are accused of misogyny. Likewise, some feminists who recommend cosmetics are criticized for pandering to the male gaze. They are then "exposed" on social media platforms by other feminists and criticized as "not being qualified to conduct feminism." Perhaps the most extreme actions are those taken against some feminists who are found to also be members of the Chinese Communist Party; there are online and offline activities launched by feminists allegedly to weed them out of the feminist community. Hence, I highlight again that a Foucauldian micro-politics perspective is of great value in examining and reflecting on the power relations in each instance and endured by specific individuals, including the roles played by women and/ or by feminists themselves. This perspective further challenges the fundamental assumption or pursuit of an inherently united female sexual identity and opens space for pluralism in understanding gender, power relations, and resistance to domination (Munro 2007, 91–95). Digital feminism should embed dignity, respect, equality, and diversity, seeing each individual per se, while working toward grand or common goals such as gender equality and women's rights. In my opinion, a diverse, pluralistic, and tolerant digital feminist community that respects each individual on an equal footing is essential for the feminist movement to combat cyber-violence and online trolling that are the products of existing hierarchical power structures and the embodiment of hegemonic values.

Conclusion

Much of the existing research on digital activism, drawing on the framework of traditional contentious politics, regards social media merely as a digital tool that facilitates the interaction between online and offline activism. Furthermore, with this dichotomy between online/offline and virtual/real space, its focus or emphasis remains on offline activism, which is maintained to be better or more significant in empowering individuals and promoting social change (Cao, Zeng, and Evans 2022, 161). Digital feminism or "micro-politics" has also been criticized for being focused on individuals and trivializing feminist movements or deviating from the focus on structural disparity and inequality. These views may underestimate the potential or power of discourse in the digital community. The cases that we have considered from India and China, as two diverse contexts, underline a common feminist

tenet that the personal is inextricably part of larger socio-political and cultural structures. These studies reinvigorate the argument that patriarchy in general, and social media misogyny in particular, are aided as well as challenged through an interaction of a variety of social categories (such as religion, national identity, class position, and formal education) of the user as well as the audience. The two studies highlight the value of taking into account cultural politics in the digital age.

On a broad level, these platforms disrupt the "tyranny of the written text" and how it is being "challenged by visual and acoustic modes of knowledge furtherance and sense perception" (Kumar 2011, 33). If we consider the case of young Malayali women, their social media participation makes obvious hierarchies that the majoritarian view in Indian society tries to erase, and we note interesting subversive moves especially around cultural identity. While conversations on experiences of patriarchy, assertions of Muslim identity, and criticisms of religion definitely take place in intimate circles, it is on social media platforms that diverse modes of resistance can be found, such as opposition to class or caste hierarchies. These platforms importantly allow the women to speak about, discuss, and circulate their experiences and opinions on topics that are otherwise publicly taboo, such as menstrual health, sexual pleasure, and sex education, by providing them with anonymity if required through editing options. In addition to the textual context, images and icons are also quite often found in the messages being circulated. Through images of menstrual pads, vaginas, or symbols of female orgasm, the platforms have also increased the "visibility" of such taboo topics in the region. Even liking or sharing an image associated with such themes becomes a feminist act in cultures where women's bodies are controlled and gender-based affirmative actions are overlooked by patriarchal narratives.

This resonates with the findings from Jue's Chinese case study, which underscore how personal experiences can be communal, as can feminist solutions. As she has argued, social media itself "has created new contexts for activism" and is an "organizing agent" that "allows individuals to engage with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances" (Cao, Zeng, and Evans 2022, 162). Such dynamics in digital feminism are characterized as "the personal is political" and "the personal is communal." As detailed in the examples of the #MeToo movement and the *danmei* community, as well as other national and transnational activism that started and takes place mainly on the internet, digital feminism in China has demonstrated its unique features and promising strengths. Digital feminism is a transnationally connected independent feminist space for feminist activism that can spark offline activism and bring about social change. Jue's observations further indicate that digital feminism holds special importance and value in an authoritarian regime such as China due to its persistent resilience based on the creativity of netizens who face various suppressions from the

Chinese authorities. As shown in the example of *danmei*, the internet has created a discursive space and a somewhat "grey zone" for *danmei* fans' continuous and creative communication and networking. The development of the *danmei* digital community has created a feminist counterculture that challenges the gender culture and ideology promoted by the Chinese authorities. Furthermore, due to its loose organization and absence of leaders, digital feminism emphasizes the importance of scattered, equal, expansive, creative, and strategic participation. As a post titled "In the #MeToo Movement in China, What Can We Ordinary People Do?" says, "to care for an individual victim" is "to care for all human beings" and to "resist power abuse" in our daily lives (Yin and Sun 2021, 1183). This is much evident in the Indian cases that Athira has discussed, where the young Muslim women align those factors that they identify as constraints in their personal lives with broad structural issues, thereby making themselves a part of those transcultural discussions on social hierarchies. The themes taken up by the young Malayali Muslim women are not limited to their encounters with patriarchy at a personal or collective level within the bounds of a nation; they also counter anti-Muslim narratives on prominent media platforms or anti-feminist content being shared on digital media by Instagram "influencers" beyond India, thereby opening up transnational feminist countercultural possibilities.

The global diffusion of the #MeToo movement highlights the importance of studying patriarchy, misogyny, power abuses, and sexual violence as a global challenge facing women regardless of where/who they are. In the meantime, we need to explore the various ways and obstacles in different jurisdictions – and, very importantly, the role played by the internet, and social media in particular, in the era of digital feminism in addressing these problems in different regimes and also across geopolitical boundaries. As pointed out by Geetanjali Gangoli (2023) in her study based on the #MeToo movement in India (though not specific to the case of Muslim women), the movement is able to give voice to complainants of abuse, by amplifying them over "powerful" perpetrators, despite intergenerational conflicts among the Indian feminists on this. Here, it is of utmost importance to also acknowledge hashtags and slogans that may originate in the Global South but be contingent on the broader global feminist trajectory. One example could be the case of the hashtag #Avalkkoppam (*Times of India* 2020), which was begun in solidarity with a Malayali actress and her legal fight against those who are involved in a case of abduction and assault. However, we should consider how far women from underprivileged groups, including Malayali Muslim women, succeed in articulating and sustaining their protests in the midst of diverse structural forces (Pan 2023). Jue also notes some rifts and attacks within the web-based feminist community and activism. This calls for feminism's relentless efforts to "speak frankly to itself," as a perhaps "far more important activity than speak[ing]

truth to power" (Srinivasan 2022, 17). The #MeToo movement's most recent expansion into Chinese human rights activism and the activist community is a crucial development in this regard. Though victims in the #MeToo movement are usually subjected to "dual revictimization" – namely, not only the attacks that victims have to face, but also "special" accusations such as that they are "acting as agents of the Chinese government to sabotage human rights defenders and movements" – more and more women still have the courage to call out these quite renowned human rights "big names," tell their stories, share their experiences, and, in this way, establish supportive networks and loose communities to further activism in pursuit of accountability and justice.

Not only are these #MeToo cases sites for the further study of digital feminism, they also underscore the pivotal role played by the "micro-politics" lens in analyzing and reflecting on power relations and dynamics, including in the realm of digital feminism. These points hold true regardless of the dichotomy of East and West and of differences between political regimes – though there are criticisms regarding the #MeToo movement's spotlight on privileged white women (mainly in the West) and research indicating the critical impacts of domestic political opportunity on women's engagement in the movement (Lee and Murdie 2021). We hope that our field reports on digital feminism in India and China provide some inspiration for studying digital feminism as a global phenomenon while also noting nuances in specific jurisdictions. Examining gender representations on social media platforms could enable us to understand how gender hierarchies are reproduced and perpetuated in digital spaces. For instance, in the case of Athira's ongoing engagement with bridehood and digital media spaces in India, the intersection of market, media, caste, and class structures could be located. Such anthropological investigations with reference to a particular regional or cultural group can also assist feminist trajectories and transcultural goals by providing an improved understanding of how structural components work at the local level.

Another significant issue for the future study of digital feminism is the backlash against it in various jurisdictions and globally along with its development. For instance, in China, as the emergence of digital feminism has led to "pan-feminism," which refers to increased attention to and discussion of feminist topics, as well as transnational connections and activism, it has inevitably triggered more digital surveillance, censorship, and suppression from the Chinese authorities. Moreover, multiple researchers have noted that since the internet has unique advantages in linking local and global issues, digital spaces in China have connected the global phenomenon of populism with Chinese authoritarianism (Yang and Fang 2023; Zhang 2020). Hence, digital feminism in China faces the same misogynistic attacks and challenges as feminist activism worldwide. The above report highlights the resilience of digital feminism in China against the authorities' censorship and suppression, but it is worthwhile to continue observing the backlash and

tension between digital feminism and the authorities in China as a case study of the development and dynamics of digital feminism in an authoritarian regime and in the digital era. It was observed that, in India, along with democratizing women's political participation and offering room for community building, online media spaces require women to navigate challenges from trolling and harassment (Raj 2023). As has been highlighted, the degree of backlash and surveillance from online users, sociocultural groups, or the state in the form of censorship is also dependent on those factors that interact with gender norms, such as religion, caste, class, or political ideology. We hope that the features and dynamics of digital feminism in India and China discussed in our reports generate more interest in the development of and backlash against digital feminism as an important topic both regionally and internationally.

Notes

1. Kerala is a state on the southern edge of India, on the Malabar Coast that is famous for its trans-oceanic trade relations with different regions, especially with the Arab world, which date back to at least the first century AD. Malayalam is the regional language, and a resident of Kerala and speaker of Malayalam is called a Malayali.
2. This refers to the movements, concealment, and modifications associated with the body.
3. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was a renowned scholar and social reformer from India who worked on several themes including the anthropology of caste, democracy, and social inequality.

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Notes on contributors

Athira B. K. is a Research Scholar at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Jue Jiang is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow and Teaching Fellow at the School of Law Gender and Media at SOAS University of London, London, UK. Her research interests lie mainly in the areas of criminal law and justice, gender/sex/sexuality, human rights, civil society, socio-legal studies, and law and politics in China.

ORCID

Jue Jiang 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5058-3249

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