Positive Energy and Negative Incidents

The Role and Strategies of Chinese Journalists in Reporting Sexual Assault Cases Against Women in China

Siyu Chen

Abstract

Via in-depth interviews with twenty-two journalists based in China, this article explores how Chinese journalists recognise and construct sexual assault against women within the Chinese socio-political context. Analysis of the interviews indicates that reporting sexual assault cases does not satisfy the Chinese authorities' political requirement to disseminate 'positive energy'(*zheng nengliang*) in the media, which has greatly limited the wider development of the Chinese #MeToo movement and news reporting of sexual assaults in the Chinese press. As a result, Chinese journalists (and those who work for state-owned news outlets in particular) begin to justify sexual assault news reporting via employing official/authoritative sources and attaching importance to the education function of sexual assault news reporting, which marginalised the experiences and testimonies of victim-survivors and forged stereotypes, myths and gender inequalities in Chinese society.

The global #MeToo movement and its extensive media coverage have brought together female victims/survivors from different cultural backgrounds to resist sexual assault and harassment collectively. Responding to #MeToo, the Chinese official media outlet *China Daily* published an opinion piece in October 2017, stating that China has fewer incidents of sexual harassment compared with Western countries (see Hassan, 2017). 'Chinese traditional values and conservative attitudes tend to safeguard women against inappropriate behaviour from members of the opposite gender,' according to Hassan (2017, para.8).

However, data published by Chinese NGOs and higher education institutions reveals the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment in China. In 2010, a study found that 25.4% of college students studying in Guangzhou, China had been perpetrators or victims of sexual violence (Wang et al., 2015). In 2017, a Chinese feminist activist Wei Tingting collected 6,592 questionnaires on sexual harassment at colleges and universities from all

over the country, revealing that nearly 70% of the participants said they had been sexually harassed to varying degrees, and most of them were women (Wei, 2017). Moreover, when the #MeToo movement swept across China in 2018, sexual assault cases against women were revealed in business, academic, public welfare, and religious sectors (Chen, 2018; Zuo, 2018).

News reporting of sexual violence against women can have positive or negative consequences. News reporting, on the one hand, can draw public attention to sexual violence issues and help disrupt rape myths and gender stereotypes (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012). On the other hand, it can justify/reinforce prejudicial and stereotyped beliefs about gender, sex and power in society (Easteal, Holland & Judd, 2015; Wood, 1994). At present, studies of news reporting on sexual violence against women are mostly based on Western contexts (e.g. Askanius and Moller Hartley, 2019; Hindes and Fileborn, 2019), whereas discussions on the Chinese #MeToo movement focus primarily on social media and cyber resistance to censorship (Fincher, 2018; Sun, 2020; Zeng, 2019, 2020), overlooking Chinese journalists' role and reporting strategies in dealing with this movement and reporting sexual violence.

To address this, this article explores the role and strategies employed by Chinese journalists in covering sexual assault against women in China. I interviewed twenty-two Chinese journalists in four different Chinese cities; six were male, sixteen were female. Of these participants, nine described their workplace (*danwei*) as a party news organisation; another seven stated that they worked for commercial news outlets. In addition, two independent journalists work professionally in making news but without institutional backing. The remaining four were citizen journalists who self-publish online news content on women's rights issues. In this article, I protect these participants by keeping these four cities confidential and giving them an English name at random.

#MeToo versus "positive energy"

Discussing the limited impact of the #MeToo movement in China, a number of researchers (e.g. Fincher, 2018; Sun, 2020; Zeng, 2019; Zhou and Qiu, 2020) have attributed it to online censorship and government suppression. Analysis of the interviews reveals that some journalists were not aware of #MeToo. When I asked them about #MeToo, their accounts offer insights into the constraints under which journalists work in the Chinese context. For instance, Bill asked, 'is there a #MeToo movement in China?' Eudora inquired, 'can you explain a bit what #MeToo is?' While other participants knew what #MeToo was, they associated it as a taboo subject; Grace said, 'I know #MeToo, I suddenly remembered that we are not allowed to use this word at all.'

Participants mentioned a specific socio-political factor that restricted the development of this movement and news reporting of sexual assault cases, namely the political agenda of disseminating positive energy required by the Chinese authorities. They pointed out that sexual assault cases are not promoted because they are incompatible with the wider socio-political environment that requires promoting 'positive energy'. As Bandurski (2014) argues, disseminating positive energy in the Chinese context of news control means suppressing the dissemination of negative news from all walks of life and preventing public opinion from discussing China's negative issues in society. Under the

circumstances, Lucy, who works for a market-oriented news outlet, commented, 'sexual assault news that does not promote positive energy (*zheng nengliang*) will be hit.' Likewise, Anna, who has been working in the party media for eight years, described the press environment promoted by her current employers.

> Now the leaders also ask us to highlight the central themes of the times (*hongyang zhu xuanlv*), disseminate positive energy (*chuanbo zheng nengliang*), and build consensus (*ningju gongshi*). As such, we have to make sure there is such a shift in our mind, and then be more inclined to such a tone when reporting news. Sexual assault cases tend to be negative, so we will not follow them up easily.

The requirement to 'disseminate positive energy' reflects the Chinese socio-political context. Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, promoting ideological and cultural work has occupied an important place for Chinese President Xi Jinping (Xinhua Net, 2017). At the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference in 2013, Xi emphasised that the whole country must persist in consolidating and strengthening mainstream ideological and public opinion; that is, highlight the central themes of the times, disseminate positive energy, and empower society to unite and forge ahead (Communist Party website, 2013). Since then, 'positive energy' has become a crucial propaganda term emphasised in news reporting and propaganda work for consolidating the regime and reducing criticism and negative content production (Bandurski, 2014; Chen, Valdovinos Kaye & Zeng, 2020; Yang and Tang, 2018). Simultaneously, all media, especially the state-owned news outlets, has begun to disseminate the propaganda and report under the purview of the ruling party.

Within this 'positive energy' context, news reporting of sexual violence against women is inevitably categorised as 'negative', since it exposes social problems such as power asymmetry, gender inequality and the problematic judicial system. Women's resistance against hegemonic gender order (China's #MeToo movement, for instance) also poses dangers to China's male-dominated rules and the stabilities of the Chinese regime (Ho et al., 2018). Therefore, sex-related topics such as sexual violence against women become a key area curbed by the regime (ibid.).

My research shows that the participants' daily practices of reporting sexual assaults are influenced by the political climate of disseminating positive energy. Two participants (Anna and Ada) said that they would consider giving up reporting sexual violence and paying more attention to the positive achievements of the ruling party. Nonetheless, most of the participants indicated that reporting sexual assault cases is conducive to preventing sexual crimes, helping victims, and driving media traffic. As such, they argued that it is necessary to report on sexual assault cases and employ strategies to 'harmonise' sexual assault news reports with the socio-political context. In other words, they need to exercise self-censorship and report sexual assaults in a correct/positive way.

Self-censorship means employing non-critical perspectives on power holders and thinking twice before publishing a news report relating to politically sensitive topics (Lee and Chan, 2009). Regarding self-censorship, many scholars (e.g. Hassid, 2008; Lee and Chan, 2009) point out that this poses great harm to press freedom and suppresses

journalists' ability to report factually. As Lee and Chan (2009) note, exercising self-censorship requires journalists to be cautious when choosing topics on which to report since what is considered sensitive changes with the socio-political climate. Journalists' ambivalence about topic selection and fear of breaching sensitive borders make media self-censorship a potent means of controlling the press (Hassid, 2008). Tong (2009), however, suggests that Chinese journalists' self-censorship helps increase media freedom, since it helps to 'bypass political minefields' (p. 593) and increases the likelihood of making politically sensitive issues visible via implied criticism and euphemistic expression.

Participants in my research, especially those who work for state-owned news outlets, conducted self-censorship/strategies to justify such reporting, despite its potential negative consequences. An analysis of my interviews indicates that the strategies for reporting sexual assaults can be categorised into two main themes: attaching educational significance to reporting sexual assault cases and relying on official/authoritative sources. Some participants argued that sexual violence reporting needs to educate readers. Clara, who is working for a state-owned news outlet, said:

> Along with disseminating the facts, I also hope that it can play a role in educating the public and then popularise related laws and regulations. After reading our news reporting, the public gradually becomes interested in talking about this issue and seeking legal help after suffering from sexual assault. This means that they are educated by news articles.

Likewise, Anna, working for a state-owned news agency, stated:

> The most important thing is to think clearly, what kind of message you prefer to convey or what you expect the public to learn from your article after reading it, instead of role-modelling to them how to behave like perpetrators and sexually assault others. This would be a failure.

In the 'positive energy' setting, it can be seen that these journalists are trying to find good reasons for covering sexual assault cases. These efforts include guiding the public to care about the issue, enhancing the public understanding of sexual violence and popularising relevant laws and regulations. These participants attach importance to the education function of sexual violence news rather than media sensationalism, which from their perspectives helps to develop journalistic objectivity and establish the stable and safe social environment required by the state.

In addition, the participants (especially those who work for state-owned news outlets) also stressed the significance of ensuring the accuracy of sexual assault news, which means they prefer not to report contested sexual assault incidents. For instance, Colin, working for a state-owned news outlet, said:

> Our priority is to be accurate, which is the most important thing. I don't post anything that I am unsure about, especially sensitive

topics such as sexual violence. Under what circumstances can we report? If the police have filed an investigation and posted a statement, we can report the case; because the official entity has spoken.

Molley, who worked for another state-owned news outlet, commented:

Even though a particular rape case draws a lot of attention and causes intense cyber discussions, we insist on waiting for the official statements before reporting. It doesn't work if I report on this controversial case. We really need an official, authoritative answer.

According to these participants, waiting for official statements is necessary in reporting sexual assault cases, since it makes the news appear accurate and credible. Simultaneously, integrating official information into their reporting also offers implicit permission to publish sexual assault news, since it emphasises the crucial role of the state organs (the police and courts in particular) and regards their investigation and statements as authoritative. This practice reduces the media exposure of controversial cases. Nevertheless, this practice also illustrates that whether sexual violence happened primarily relies on the investigation results published by the police and judges rather than the experiences and testimonies of the victim-survivors, disempowering the voices of women in the news reporting.

This kind of 'positive' sexual assault news shaped within the Chinese 'positive energy' context is not always in the interests of victim-survivors, especially from feminist perspectives. Feminist studies indicate that journalists should shape credible media images of victim-survivors in news reporting rather than accusing them of lying (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012). But in China, when a court has not convicted the accused offender (e.g. Liu Qiangdong's rape case, Bao Yuming's rape case), rape complaints are prone to be labelled as lies by news outlets (see for example, Zhao, 2018). Many studies (Pugach, Peleg & Ronel, 2018; Serisier, 2017; Tanner, 1994; Vandervort, 2012) note that criminal justice systems in many countries (e.g. China, Canada, Israel, India) perpetuate sexist stereotypes that discredit rape complaints. I therefore argue that media images (liar/victim) of sexually assaulted women should not be firmly tied to the outcome of the criminal justice system, which is contrary to building gender-sensitive news media and empowering victim-survivors.

Conclusion

This article revealed how the Chinese journalists I interviewed adjust their news reporting of sexual assault cases to keep within the boundaries of what is acceptable to the party and state. They discussed how to make news reports of sexual assault against women more valuable and accurate so that the Chinese authorities can see the positive side of reporting these 'negative' incidents. These journalists working for state-owned news outlets suggested that they attach educational value to these stories and recount official statements to ensure accuracy and consistency. Nonetheless, since the participants relied on the voice of state organs and their spokespersons, they may neglect and

marginalise the experiences and testimonies of victim-survivors. Likewise, I argue that the verdicts of the criminal justice system should not serve as the only reliable sources for journalists reporting on sexual assaults, especially when it forges stereotypes, myths, and gender inequality.

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