



**PERFORMING
GENDERED
DISASTER
NATIONALISM
AND ITS
FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN CHINA
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
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KEYWORDS

Covid-19, feminist activism, disaster nationalism, performativity

关键词

新冠疫情, 女权活动, 灾难民族主义, ‘表演性’

SUMMARY

The essay investigates gendered ‘disaster nationalism’ during Covid-19 which objectified female bodies and strengthened gender performativity in China. It also examines the performative subversive interventions launched by feminist activists. Borrowing Butler’s concept of ‘performativity’, in particular, the performativity of gender, of national identity, and of public assembly, the essay argues that gender and national identities converged in the pandemic, contributing to a Covid-initiated, gendered disaster nationalism in China. This performative nationalism was open to repeated subversive feminist interventions, which the essay argues, had strong performative capacity. The essay first maps out performativity theory in gender studies and its extension to studies of nationalism, particularly of Chinese nationalism, and applies it to the exploitation of female bodies during the pandemic. Further, the essay extends performativity to the analysis of feminist resistance against such exploitation. The essay concludes that performative feminist resistance destabilised the performative constitution of gendered nationalist subjects.

摘要

自新冠疫情爆发以来, 多数国家上演了‘民族主义表演’以缓解公众舆论压力。本文聚焦疫情期间的中国的‘性别民族主义表演’, 即性别歧视与民族主义的合流, 及随后的女权表演。借用巴特勒 (Butler) 的‘表演性’ (‘performativity’) 概念, 本文指出, 社交媒体上由话语构成的女权表演挑战了性别民族主义表演的合法性。

INTRODUCTION

As one of the greatest public health crises in human history, Covid-19 has posted unprecedented challenges to all countries across the globe. In response to the pandemic, leaders in different states around the world adopted militarised rhetoric and metaphors to mobilise citizens and unite the country, which gave rise to a new wave of nationalism, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Across borders, war as a figurative frame has been used consistently. According to the analysis of speeches made by political leaders in twenty countries, including USA, UK, France, Norway, Russia, Bangladesh, and others, seventeen of them adopted war metaphors to describe Covid-19 and their responses (Dada, Ashworth, Bewa, and Dhatt 2021). One example was the speech given by the French President Macron who stated on 16 March 2020 that ‘we are at war, admittedly a health war [...]’ (ibid.). Some of the nationalist and militarised rhetoric had a gendered dimension.

China was certainly not an exception in the rise of nationalism, in particular in gendered terms. As a way to stand up to public scrutiny, the state staged nationalist performance in the disaster context, during which nationalist discourses and disaster discourses intertwined. Such performance featured individual sacrifice for the greater cause, national solidarity, and patriotic sentiment. Female healthcare workers accounted for ninety percent of all workers dispatched to Wuhan, the epicentre of the first outbreak of Covid-19, according to the Shanghai Women's Federation (*Shanghai Fulian*).¹ These female healthcare workers were made to be the major actors in this nationalist performance. Their bodies, in particular, turned into a performance site when their heads were shaved and their self-sacrifice depicted to conform to female gender stereotypes, as evidenced by two hundred and forty-nine audiovisual reports on social media posted by four mainstream media sources from 20 January 2020, when the coronavirus was officially identified by the Chinese authorities, to 8 April 2020, when the Wuhan lockdown was lifted (Feng 2020). Yet unlike performances in previous disasters where the state was the only actor and absolutely owned the narration and performance, the state-led nationalist performance in the Covid-19 pandemic was actively joined by nationalist subjects with their own nationalistic agency on social media whilst simultaneously provoking feminist activists' resistance.

1. Xin Hua Net reported the survey conducted by Shanghai Women's Federation (*Shanghai Fulian*): http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-03/08/c_1125679333.htm [accessed 23 January 2022].

Performing Head-Shaving: Butlerian 'Performativity' and Performative Femininity

At the early stage of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, healthcare workers and medical equipment across the country were dispatched to the front line of the epidemic in Wuhan. A group of fourteen female nurses from Gansu Province in north-central China, ready to be dispatched to Wuhan to fight the Covid-19, were filmed having their heads shaved by several male barbers.² Though this was claimed to be a voluntary act on the part of the women by their hospital, the Gansu Provincial Maternity and Child-care Hospital, several nurses still shed tears as barbers showed them their just-shaved ponytails. Cameras on the scene zoomed in and documented their grieving faces. Later with shaved heads, the female nurses and their only male colleague, who did not have his head shaved, took a group picture with clenched fists, a gesture to show their commitment and resolution to fight the coronavirus. On the same day, *Gansu Daily*, the local news agency approved by the central Government published an article entitled, 'Having their Beautiful Hair Shaved, They Are Ready for the Battle' (*Jianqu Xiufa, Tamen Zhengzhuangchuzheng*). When scenes of female nurses having their heads shaved were broadcast across China by the state-sponsored media and disseminated on social media, within the act of shaving, be it voluntary or mandatory, gender performativity and disaster nationalism converged.

2. Gansu Daily published the article titled 'Having their Beautiful Hair Shaved, They Are Ready for the Battle' (*Jianqu Xiufa, Tamen Zhengzhuangchufa*) on their website: <http://gansu.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2020/02/16/017354946.shtml> [accessed 23 January 2022].

What is meant by performativity here? I refer to performativity as defined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (2006) to challenge the dominant conceptual frame of gender studies at the time, premised on a division between culturally constructed ‘gender’ and biological ‘sex’. Butler questioned the ontological status of the ‘natural’ sexed body and argued instead that there is only ‘gender’ understood as a ‘performative act’ produced by repeated discourses. These discourses generate the ‘effect’, not a fact, of a naturalised, stable, internal core-sex. Butler used a theatrical metaphor when elaborating on the appearance of substance, that is gender, as ‘a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ (2006: 192). The appearance is created through the repeated, discursively produced, gendered practices in daily life which constrain gender identities to the binary of either masculine or feminine, and sexuality to heterosexuality. The constraining gender reality as such points to the political dimension of Butler’s argument. The concealment of gender’s performative character and the limitation of the performative possibilities to the restrictive binary frame is ‘politically regulated’ (Butler 2006: 189). To become a woman is to fit in the naturalised feminine category and appear the same through ‘practices of discipline and regulation’ (Samuel and Carver 2008: 37). There is a strong link between performativity and discourse. Examples in China include dress codes codified into school regulations to reveal two genders, and repeated media discourses about motherhood and the fragile womanhood of female healthcare workers during the pandemic.

Before applying performativity to this Chinese gender case study, I will review how previous Chinese gender studies gained their theoretical insights from performative theory. Drawing from Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and many others, particularly their ‘implications for how a subject is formed and the political implications of that

formation’ (Hershatter 2020), Butler proposed a performative theory deeply engaged with French feminism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. Therefore, applying the Butlerian performativity to Chinese gender studies requires a solid justification. Performative theory’s unveiling of discursive formation of gender identity and the sexed body has been a useful theoretical and methodological framework for Chinese gender studies scholars. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* has been cited either explicitly or referred to implicitly by scholars in their analysis of the discursive formation of Chinese women and femininity, ranging from the early Republic (Wang 2005), the People’s Republic of China (PRC) under Mao (ibid.), and post-socialist PRC (Rofel 2007). In different historical situations, Chinese women were constructed through narratives formed by ‘men across the political spectrum, as well as smaller but vocal number of women intellectuals and activists’ (Hershatter 2020). The performativity of Chinese women throughout modern history can be drawn from Butler precisely in the following sense ‘to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker’ (2006: 199). Examples include the Maoist ‘iron women’ in the early Republic formulated through the party-state’s discourses surrounding the liberation of Chinese women from families to factories for the socialist construction of a new China (Wang 2005) and the neoliberal feminist discourses articulated by female social media influencers through which economically independent female consumers come into being in a post-socialist China with free market economy (Wu and Dong 2019).

Yet in the so-called ‘afterlife’ of *Gender Trouble* in China, Hershatter (2020) observes that Butler’s ontological challenge of gender as the ‘metaphysics of substance’ (Butler 2006: 30) and their questioning of ‘women as a subject of feminism’ (6) are less compelling to scholars in Chinese gender studies than the substantial gendered concerns. For these scholars, to address gendered concerns specific to Chinese

women in different historical contexts is to admit the existence of gendered subjects. This is a move away from the Butlerian post-structural destabilisation of gender difference to a sociological framework with ‘subject’ and ‘agency’ at its core. The above-mentioned gender case studies bring Chinese women and their gendered concerns to the front stage, i.e., Maoist ‘Woman-as-state-subject’ (Hershatter 2020), and the effort of post-socialist feminists to expand the definition of Chinese women confined in the Maoist scope (Wang 2005), in so doing, ‘reinstantiating’ rather than ‘destabilising’ gender and sex differences (Hershatter 2020). The shift away from Butler’s post-structural focus in the Chinese application of performative theory reflects a debate over ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’. The distinction between the two terms in *Gender Trouble* points to the contradiction of Butler’s theory.

For Butler, ‘performativity’ does not involve subjects performing gendered appearance as there is no ‘interior self’ (1988). Therefore, the capacity for subjects to enact gender is questionable. She argues further: ‘gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice’ (1988: 526). ‘Performance’ mainly appears in Butler’s analysis of drag’s subversive performance destabilising the line between the natural and the fabricated (2006: 189). Yet Butler’s use of performance seems to imply the existence of gendered selves with subjectivity and agency to enact subversive gendered acts. If ‘performative’ is the fabricated character of gender, ‘performativity’ is the process of making the production of a fabricated gendered essence visible. ‘Performance’ is then the act enacted by gendered subjects, their interactions with, more specifically, their conforming to or subverting the gendered norms. For scholars in Chinese feminism, this contradiction seems to better fit the Chinese gender reality. They borrow ‘performativity’ to reveal the discursive formation of gendered subjects, and further examine their subjectivity as different gendered subjects, either ‘women-as-state subjects’, socialist women who contribute to the Chinese modernisation, or

independent female consumers contributing to the rise of the neoliberal market economy in a post-socialist China. In this essay, I use both ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’: ‘performativity’ is used to analyse how Chinese women came into being in what I call, following Zhang (2020), ‘a disaster nationalism’; ‘performance’ is to make clear the subjectivity of gendered subjects, nationalistic subjects, the state, and feminist activists, each with their own agency in constructing discourses that contribute to the performativity, or the de-naturalisation of that performativity, of gendered nationalist subjects.

For this essay, I collected data of the gendered discourses during the pandemic, including state-owned media reports during the SARS epidemic and hashtags on Weibo during Covid-19, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, to analyse the performativity of gendered subjects and its convergence with nationalism. The data also includes feminist discourses on Weibo which de-naturalised the gender binary and made visible the performativity of the gendered nationalist subjects.

The performativity of gender, in this case femininity, is rooted in, and the effect of, the state-sponsored media discourses. At first, the Gansu local news agency dominated the discursive stage by naming these bald female actors in the head-shaving theatre as ‘the most beautiful counter-marching person’ (*zui mei ni xing zhe*). This is a frequently used term in the context of disaster describing healthcare workers, firemen, and military personnel who, unlike ordinary people escaping from the dangerous zone, walk in the opposite direction towards it. Furthermore, instead of broadcasting their professionalism in healthcare, terms emphasising conservative female gender performativity such as ‘mother who feels sorry for not taking her son’ (*Dui Bu Qi Er Zi*), ‘vulnerable’ (*Rou Ruo*) (Feng 2020: 37), ‘angel in the white gown’, and many others emerged in almost all two hundred and forty-nine Weibo posts by four media, including the state-owned People’s Daily (*Ren Min Ri Bao*),

CCTV news (*Yang Shi Xin Wen*), The Beijing News (*Xin Jing Bao*), and The Paper (*Peng Pai Xin Wen*). These various discursive formations of Chinese women in the context of audio-visual propaganda extract direct political benefits from female bodies. Hoping to display healthcare workers' resolution and their 'no regrets' to win victory over the battle against Covid-19, the state expected empathy from the audience and their pride for not only those who were ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause, but also the state's capacity to mobilise healthcare workers from across the country.

The performative femininity produced by the state-sponsored media discourses was in sharp contrast to the lack of substantive support to female healthcare workers. Almost at the same time when bald heads of female nurses became the theatre of gender performativity, the public were exposed to behind-the-scenes stories about female healthcare workers lacking sanitary products, injecting progesterone to delay their periods, working on the frontline ten days after a miscarriage or when nine months pregnant.³ These struggles and sufferings particularly related to female bodies and sexualities made the shaving-head performance an act of taking part of their bodies away from them and thereby depriving them of their femininity for nationalist and patriotic propaganda.

3. News article entitled 'Nurse in 9-Month Pregnancy Working in the Frontline? Putian Center of Disaster Control Responded' (*Hushi Huaiyun Jiugeyue Haizai Yixian Kangyi? Putian Weijianwei Huiying*): <https://news.china.com/domestic/945/20210918/40054263.html> [accessed 25 January 2022].

Performative Gendered Disaster Nationalism: The Convergence of National and Gendered Subjects

Differing from the mundane gendered performances in daily life, performative femininity during Covid-19 is a particular instance as it converges with nationalism, which I argue is also performative. The extension of Butler's notion of performativity to the study of nationalism is central to my argument about the construction of Chinese national unity during the Covid-19 pandemic. My main thesis is that gender identity and national identity converged in the pandemic, each reinforcing the other's performativity, and whose convergence contributes to a Covid-initiated gendered nationalism in China. Before unfolding the argument, it is vital to distinguish two slippery terms — 'nation' and 'state'. I borrow Wu's definition in his study of Chinese nationalism: 'Nation is a subjective entity, only existing in the minds of the people who associate themselves with certain culture, history, ethnicity, or all of the above. State, on the other hand, is an objective entity, including the political institution, the sovereign territory, the government, and its leadership' (2007: 478). Rooted in the nation's fight against foreign invasions, nationalism in China has a long history since the 1839 Opium War (Harris 1997; Xu, Kaye, and Zeng 2020). Since the establishment of the sovereign state, the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained its legitimacy 'in fighting for China's independence and prosperity' (Wu 2007: 481). Its legitimacy has been challenged tremendously in the free market economic reform since the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In response to this, CCP launched several state-led campaigns in the 1990s, such as the Patriotic Education Campaign (PEC), to secure its legitimacy (Zhao 2004). Why ‘patriotic’ and not ‘nationalistic’?

Discovering the links between patriotism and Chinese nationalism not only helps us to understand both state-led, top-down nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also justifies the use of nationalism in this essay. Since the old communist ideology about class struggle and communist internationalism had lost its force, the CCP resumed its legitimacy in the new narratives of rapid economic development and the revival of traditional Chinese culture. Zhao (2004) argues that these narratives are highly nationalistic. First, they adopt the nationalist conception that the interests of China outweigh that of other countries (Zhao 2004: 231). Second, they strengthen national unity and pride by linking the party-state with the traditional cultural heritages (210). Zhao, thus, defines Chinese patriotism as a state-led nationalism such as the PEC launched in the name of patriotism and which precisely promotes the concepts of ‘Chinese tradition and history’, ‘territorial integrity’, and ‘national unity’ to ensure ‘loyalty in a population that was otherwise subject to many domestic discontents’ (2004: 9).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the state-led nationalism was evidenced by Xinhua Net reports about China’s ‘achievements from the epidemic prevention’ and ‘unity among Chinese people’ (Yang 2021).⁴ It also merges with the grassroots cyber nationalism manifested in nationalistic discourses such as ‘copy homework’ (*chao zuoye*) coined by some internet users and disseminated through hashtags such as

#CopyHeNan’sHomework# (*Lai Chao Henan De Zuoye*) with eight hundred and thirty million views and four hundred and twenty thousand posts and reposts, urging other countries to copy the Chinese model of Covid-19 containment.⁵ The present essay explicitly adopts nationalism instead of patriotism because, unlike the SARS-related nationalism, the nationalist discourses during the Covid-19 were not just state-led, but were actively engaged by nationalist subjects.

Such discourses featuring individual sacrifice for the greater cause, national solidarity, and patriotic sentiment have been a common strategy for the CCP in the context of disaster. It can be traced back to every nation-wide crisis facing China. The suppression of SARS in 2003 was dramatised as the ‘People’s War’ (*Renmin Zhanzheng*) as Hu Jintao, the former president, made his appearance on the scene (Fewsmith 2003) and complimented frontier workers as ‘scouts’ (*zhenchabing*) and ‘task forces’ (*tujidui*) in ‘a war without gunfire’ (*meiyou xiaoyan de zhanzheng*) in his visit to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Tianjian, a northern city near Beijing on 1 May 2003.⁶ In news articles on *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of CCP, patriotic discourses such as ‘great national spirit’ (Fewsmith 2003: 253) in the ‘war’ against and victory over SARS, and ‘self-sacrificing heroes’ (Xu 2012: 120) were commonplace. The party-state restaged such nationalism in 2008 when the northeast part of Sichuan Province was hit by a 7.9-magnitude earthquake. In what scholars called ‘state rituals’ (Xu 2009: 117), ranging from the national mourning to the Premier’s ‘bodily copresence’ (ibid.) with the victims in Sichuan, ‘a humane touch’ (Zhang 2020: para. 8)

4. News article on Xinhuanet entitled ‘We Are on the Same Boat: A Comprehensive Review of China’s COVID-19 Fight’ (*Tongzhougongji Zhanyiji-Zhongguo kangji Xinguanfeiyang Yiqing Quanjishi*): http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/06/c_1126459514.htm [accessed 25 January 2022].

5. Hashtag #CopyHeNan’sHomework# (*Lai Chao Henan De Zuoye*) on Weibo: <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=1> [accessed 25 January 2022].

6. News article entitled ‘Hu Jintao: Fighting a People’s War to Contain and Treat SARS’ (*Hu Jintao: Qunfangqunkong Dayichang Fangzhiyibing De Renmin Zhanzheng*): https://www.cas.cn/zt/kjzt/fdgx/cs/200305/t20030503_1710395.shtml [accessed 25 January 2022].

was added to the nationalist discourses aimed at national solidarity. The most visible ritual was performed by Wen Jiabao, the former Premier of China who immediately visited the disaster zone, shed tears, and hugged victims in front of the camera. This scene was later broadcast to the whole nation, which gained him nation-wide applause and the title of ‘grandpa’,⁷ turning the nation into a corporeal human.

Zhang (2020) defined nationalism in the context of disaster as ‘disaster nationalism’, referring to ‘the particular mode of messaging and emotional mobilisation that the propaganda machine deploys in times of crises’ (para. 3). The national mourning of the death of the whistle-blower, Dr Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, who was detained by the police due to his early warning to his colleagues, is a case in point. Li, who died of Covid-19, stirred a huge backlash on social media and later was officially recognised as a ‘martyr’ (*lie shi*) by the state (Zhang 2020: para. 5). Further easing the public outcry, the police officer was held accountable and the reprimand the police forced Li to sign was revoked. Furthermore, from staging the mobilisation and self-sacrifice of healthcare workers from across the country to launching two virtual social media influencers, these performances that staged national solidarity to win audiences’ empathy and pride for the country would ease public anger and potential social instability. Such disaster nationalism in the Covid-19 pandemic features ‘heroic sacrifices of individuals as well as cohesion of the national community’ and aims to ‘distract attention from structural problems within the system itself persists’ (ibid.).

I take Zhang’s argument about disaster nationalism a step further by arguing that disaster nationalism during Covid-19 consists of not only top-down, state-led nationalism but also grassroots cyber nationalism. Focusing solely on the top-down model risks ignoring the nationalistic agency of citizens, the major *spect-actors* in the nationalist performance. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the party-state has been trying to ally with cyber grassroots nationalism, particularly adopting the playful language of fan culture, taking advantage of the dissemination and interaction capacity of social media to fuel the nationalist sentiment rooted in nationalist subjects online, publishing its own and appropriating user-generated nationalist content online. One example is the state’s construction of a gendered personalised Chinese state, a male idol named Brother Ah Zhong (*A Zhong Gege*) or Brother China, in support of China’s stance in the Hong Kong issue in 2019. The state-owned CCTV News created hashtags on Weibo such as ‘#BrotherAhZhong-HasMoreThan1.4BillionFans#’, with more than fifty million views and fifty-nine thousand posts and reposts (Yang 2021).⁸ Following suit with the state, one internet user named ‘Brother Ah Zhong’s Anti-antifan Platform’ (*Ah Zhong Gege Fanhei Zhan*) created more hashtags including ‘FandomGirlsSupportingBrotherAhZhong’ with five hundred and forty million views and three hundred and nineteen thousand posts and reposts to support China against protesters in Hong Kong.⁹ The utility of Brother Ah Zhong as a symbolic identity of China was rediscovered in the disaster nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hashtags such as ‘#GoBrotherAhZhongWithBravery#’ (*Ah Zhong Gege Yongganfei*) swept Weibo, highlighting the state’s achievements in fighting Covid-19. Witnessing the rise of fandom culture in line with grassroots

7. News article entitled ‘Wen Jiabao: I Am Concerned about the Earthquake-stricken Area, Particularly the Kids There’ (*Wen Jiabao: Wo Dui Zaiqu Feichang Guanxin, Zui Guaqian De Haishi Haizimen*) in which Wen was called ‘Grandpa Wen’ (*Wen Yeye*): http://www.gov.cn/zlft/content_1246450.htm [accessed 25 January 2022].

8. Hashtag ‘#BrotherAhZhongHasMoreThan1.4BillionFans#’ was created by CCTV News on 17 January 2021: <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=2> [accessed 25 January 2022].

9. Hashtag ‘#FandomGirlsSupportingBrotherAhZhong#’ was created by an internet user named Brother Ah Zhong’s Anti-antifan Platform (*Ah Zhong Gege Fanhei Zhan*): <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=3> [accessed 25 January 2022].

cyber nationalism, the Communist Youth League launched two virtual influencers, the male *Hongqiman* and the female *Jiangshanjiao*, encouraging Chinese people to support these two idols. This case, which I will elaborate in detail in the following section, is a solid example of Covid-initiated gendered nationalism.

Both state-led nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism have the Butlerian performative quality. Identifying performativity of disaster nationalism is crucial to understanding how actors — the party-state and the nationalist citizens — in disaster nationalism collectively perform the national unity through repeated social media discourses. More importantly, performativity also helps make clear the convergence of two performative identities, nationalist identity and gender identity, and the way they reinforce each other, contributing to what I argue is a performative gendered disaster nationalism.

In his ground-breaking *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (2006: 5) pointed to the imagined nature of nation. He defined nation as ‘an imagined political community’ (6), suggesting national essences are fabricated and constructed through the imaginations of its citizens. Anderson compared gender as one element of subject identity with nationality as the other: ‘in the modern world everyone can, should, will “have” a nationality as he or she “has” a gender’ (8). This imagined nature of nationality, I argue, shares the same ontological ground as Butler’s challenge to the essence of gender and sexed bodies. The subject identities, nationalist and gendered, are both imagined/constructed in the sense that the core/internality/essence/substance/ontological status of them is fabricated, yet appears to be natural, thus making them performative. In fact, many scholars have extended Butler’s notion of performativity to their studies of nationalism. Feldman (2005) analyses how the European nation-state is constituted in repeated legal and diplomatic discourses which ‘reproduce, and are produced by’ binary

oppositions such as ‘citizen/alien, majority/minority [...] domestic/foreign’ (214). Some scholars have also applied performativity to the study of Chinese nationalism. Woronov (2007) drew on Butler’s concept of performativity in her investigation of children’s nationalism in China performed through repeated nationalist practices on a daily basis. She argued that Chinese children’s nationalist agency is ‘constituted as a national subject through repetitive performances of the nation’, i.e. ‘essays and drawings about Macao and Hong Kong returning to the Motherland’ and the ‘Little Red Pioneer Pledge’, which are highly performative in bringing nationalistic children into being through the daily chant: ‘I am a Little Red Pioneer! [...] I will study, work and labour diligently, and that I am prepared to dedicate all my efforts to the cause of communism’ (Woronov 2007: 659).¹⁰

Nationalist discourses and gendered discourses have long been converged, and so is the case with two performative identities, national identity and gender identity, each reinforcing the other. Female bodies and femininity, in particular, have been historically tied closely to land and nationhood. Scholars have identified two types of gendered nationalism. One is the gendering of the nation. ‘Women as mothers’ of the nation, who are responsible for the nation’s ‘physical, cultural and social reproduction’ (Pettman 1996: 187), is typical of the gendered language of nationhood. Another type is the use of women in the construction of national borders. In war nationalism, female bodies are symbolised as sites for the performance of metaphorical domination, whose safety and honour need to be protected by their sons or fathers from foreign invasion. There is a great risk in such a gendered dimension of nationalism

¹⁰. The pledge was firstly proposed in 1958 on the Third Plenary Session of the Third Central Committee of The Chinese Youth League (*Zhongguo Gongqingtuan Sanjie Sanzhongquanhui*). It can be found on the Chinese Little Pioneers Constitution (*Zhongguo Shaonian Xianfengdui Zhangcheng*) published on the Chinese Youth League website: https://qnzz.youth.cn/qkc/202007/t20200727_12425625.htm [accessed 22 February 2022].

due to the ‘burden of representation — with women coming to represent national unity and its distinctiveness’ proposed by Yuval-Davis (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020: 436). The gendered nationalism ‘singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity’ (Kandiyoti, cited in Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020: 436), therefore simplifying gender as a “natural”, essential dichotomous order, based on positioning men and women in hierarchical locations in terms of power, and in so doing, employs a heteronormative vision of gender identities’ (Saresma 2018: 178).

In disaster nationalism during the pandemic, female bodies in Iran were displayed in a masculine manner and appeared ‘de-gendered or even masculinised’ (Tafakori 2021: 4). Female health workers wearing masks which ‘function to masculinise women’ (5) were equated to the male soldiers wearing gas masks during the 1980s war. Though ‘unmaking and redoing’ (6) gender in such a way blurred gender roles, its legitimacy is only conditioned by the nation’s victory over the disaster. Similarly in China, female bodies were also made to be the sites of nationalist performance; yet in so doing, only further confining them to the constraining gender binary frame. Nationalist subjects were produced through discursively generated performative femininity. Performative femininity, such as motherhood, self-sacrifice for a bigger institution, i.e. family or nation, had been used to unite the whole nation in the fight against the pandemic. During the SARS outbreak in 2003, *People’s Daily* published an anonymous heartfelt piece¹¹ which staged the female medical worker as the heroine fighting against SARS at the expense of her life and the sacrifice of her role as the caretaker of her family. In the convergence of repeated gendered discourses and

nationalist discourses during the SARS epidemic, performative Chinese women in the disaster context came into being.

Performative gendered disaster nationalism reached its peak in the pandemic when the Propaganda Department of CCP’s Youth League launched two virtual social media influencers on their Weibo account (Fig. 1). The same day the video of the bald-headed nurses went viral on social media, Youth League launched a male avatar whose name was *Hongqiman* (Red Flag Flutters Freely), and his female counterpart *Jiangshanjiao* (The Beautiful State) to celebrate the temporary victory against the virus achieved by the nation with the support of Chinese men and women. These two names allude to Mao’s poems which were written in the war against Japanese invasion in 1936. *Hongqiman* and *Jiangshanjiao* thus gained strong patriotic connotations. Appropriating the fan culture, the Youth League personalised itself as gendered ‘virtual idols’ (*xuni ouxiang*) and Chinese citizens as fans of two gendered idols in its very first social media post (Yang 2021: 2). Further, the Youth League called for the public to ‘cheer for’ (*da call*) the idols, a term originated from the Japanese entertainment industry, referring to fans interacting with the performing artists in the concert, i.e. moving their glow sticks and singing together with the artist to show their support.

Drawing on the theory of performativity, I argue that citizens cheering for the virtual idols is a highly performative act, both in nationalist and gendered terms. The act of naming the virtual influencers created performative gender identities for the Youth League, which, unlike the real Youth League whose preaching might generate a negative response, were more personalised, entertaining, and easier for the gendered public to pick and choose according to binary gender roles to support. Moreover, performativity is further solidified through a set of bodily practices peculiar to the digital space such as liking, thumbs-up, following, retweeting, and creating ‘fanart’ (Guo 2020: 195), the creation or

11. News article entitled ‘My Doctor Wife Put Her Life on the Line to Fight SARS’ (*Wo De Qizi Zhandou Zai Zuiqianxian*) published on Henan High People’s Court (*Henan Sheng Gaoji Renmin Fayuan*) <http://www.hncourt.gov.cn/public/detail.php?id=1129> [accessed 25 January 2022].



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“忆往昔，红旗漫卷西风，凭栏望去。看今朝，江山如此多娇，迎春来到。”给大家介绍两位新朋友，团团的虚拟偶像红旗漫、江山娇。今天@江山娇与红旗漫Official 正式上线，快来给团属爱豆打call吧~

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FIGURE 1

Two virtual social media influencers launched by the Communist Party's Youth League. Quoting Mao's poem written during the Anti-Japanese War in the 1940s, the post is not only an introduction to *Jiangshanjiao*, the female influencer on the left, and *Hongqiman*, the male one on the right side, but also a call for action to support these two idols of the Youth League. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 5 May 2022]

recreation of the visual or computer-assisted art related to the performance of the idols to attract potential fans (Hou 2020: 16). Through these repeated citations and practices of gendered nationhood in the digital space, citizens exerted their gendered nationalistic agency, and gendered, nationalist subjects came into being and appeared to be natural and stable entities.

Butlerian Performativity of Digital Public Assembly: Performing Digital Feminist Resistance

Schneider (2018) identified a closer relationship between digital technologies and nationalist ideologies in Chinese networks. A case in point is the marriage between social media and nationalist narratives in the Covid-19 state propaganda (Yan 2020). The state's claim on virtual public space gained its legitimacy not just by censorship, a way to demobilise public assembly targeting the political system and structural problems, but also by the creation of new sites of performance and the appropriation of social media content that has the potential to promote national solidarity (Zhang 2020).

The launch of two virtual social media influencers not only built a performing space for gendered nationalism, but also exposed the performance to feminist resistance. Shortly after the head-shaving episode went viral on Weibo, the state's effort backfired. An article on WeChat,¹² was viewed over one hundred thousand times before it was censored. In the next few hours, articles like these swept across the digital space, through which activists and the public, who advocated against the exploitation of female bodies for nationalist performance, created a new

12. WeChat article entitled 'Please Stop Using Women's Bodies as a Propaganda Tool' (*Qing Tingzhi Shiyong Nvxing Shenti Zuowei Xuanchuan De Gongju*) was censored after its publication (original link: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/sM5HZ3ITRx_BSC5NsnRbMg) and reported by Phoenix News (*Fenghuang Xinwen*): <https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/7u8Qjy4pyjS> [accessed 25 January 2022].

performing space to stage their resistance. In one of the articles on the Zihu media platform,¹³ the activist author pointed out the strong connection between shaving heads and its sexist humiliation and cultural implication throughout history, in both China and the West, in reality and in films. The quotation of the article of law in the Qing Dynasty about shaving heads as a punishment, the display of pictures of people whose heads were shaved by the authority in public in the Qing Dynasty, women whose hair was shorn after WWII in Europe, and those who were humiliated as their heads were shaved in films, i.e. *Malèna*, were visually strong resistant acts against the state's performative propaganda. As these articles were gaining more influence across the country, they were all censored. Yet despite the failure, feminist resistance in the digital space recurred in another performing space — the female virtual influencer — already established by the state and challenged its legitimacy.

Drawing on Butlerian performativity in their study of public assembly, I argue that feminist activism against the performative gendered nationalism in the Covid-19 pandemic also has a strong performative quality. It is performative in two ways: first, feminist resistance has a performative capability which brings into being a new space of politics through utterances and acts of resistant assembled bodies; second, it consists of repeated subversive, and most importantly, parodic and satirical interventions which are highly performative.

'Space of appearance' is highly relevant for my argument here. It is a concept referring to the appearance of bodies exposed to precarity in the already established exclusionary 'space of politics'. The concept was

firstly proposed by Arendt (1998) and further elaborated by Butler in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). From performativity of gender to performativity of assembly, Butler keeps challenging ontological pre-given entities, gender in the former case, political beings, in the latter. Butler argues, by making an appearance in the public space, assembled bodies living in precarious conditions expose their 'constitutive exclusions', or 'structuring absence' (2015: 169; Riofrancos 2017). Their very bodily and discursive appearance calls into question the constitution of pre-existing political beings, a public space that only a few are entitled to occupy, and a world that those in vulnerable conditions find unliveable. In this sense, Butler argues that public assembly is performative for it calls into being a more liveable world that is yet to come through utterances, like protest slogans and corporeal resistance. When bodies congregate, act, and speak together, they 'exercise the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law and that can never be fully codified into law' (Butler 2015: 75). In the case of feminist resistance during the Covid-19 pandemic in China, feminist subversive discourses in digital space not only contribute to the rise of a feminist space of politics but are themselves the material support to the fight about by feminist bodies whose counter-narratives were excluded from the space of politics dominated by the nationalist narratives of the state and the nationalist citizens, the only legitimate bodies in the entire performance. The performative exercise of resistant assembly making an appearance that is not yet recognised by the legitimate political beings through feminist utterances is performative. Such performativity is particularly true in the digital world where bodies in virtual form, as non-living entities able to speak, act, agree, and resist, congregate in discursive manner and invoke the space of appearance. The wide circulation and dissemination of the social media posts, discourses, and narratives gives rise to a larger space of appearance that is unimaginable for offline public assemblies. Each post of the resistance, in particular feminist resistance to the state's nationalist performance,

13. Article entitled 'Forced to Have Their Heads Shaved, Liang Wendao: "Female Health Workers During the Menstrual Cycle", Who is Silencing Their Bodily Experiences?' published on Zihu, a Chinese social media platform on 15 March 2020: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/113282539> [accessed 25 January 2022].



FIGURE 2

A Weibo post 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?') using *Jiangshanjiao* to question the lack of sanitary products for female health care workers during the pandemic. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022]

ranging from hundreds of thousands of tweets and retweets on Weibo, likes and reposts of the WeChat articles, connects a greater number of discursive bodies, free from spatial restrictions.

The moment when *Hongqiman* and *Jiangshanjiao* were introduced on Weibo, feminist activists found the outlet to express their anger towards the exploitation of female healthcare workers for nationalist purposes.

These activists soon took over the space of performative gendered nationalism, particularly *Jiangshanjiao*, the female avatar, and reconfigured it into that of repeated satirical feminist interrogations. 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?'), a post questioning gendered nationalist performance, appeared on Weibo a day after the launch of the two avatars. It is a satirical question posed to the nationalist performance which took advantage of females' bodies yet in the meantime failed to provide any substantive support for female healthcare workers on the front lines, i.e. sanitary products (Fig. 2). Shortly after this harsh feminist inquiry, *Jiangshanjiao*, the space of nationalist narratives built by the authority and nationalist citizens, was destabilised and denaturalised by more subversive discourses mimicking the sexism Chinese women encounter on a daily basis (Fig. 3): 'Jiangshanjiao, are you still a virgin?', 'Jiangshanjiao, if your husband abuses you, do the police respond?', 'Jiangshanjiao, do you walk on the street alone at night?', 'Jiangshanjiao, did your parents want another child because you were a girl?', 'Jiangshanjiao, have you had your head shaved?', 'Jiangshanjiao, are you required to inject progesterone?'.¹⁴ Within ten hours, around ten thousand comments like these kept popping up in the comment section before the whole post was censored, turning *Jiangshanjiao* into a site of feminist performance which unveiled sexism in all aspects, from slut-shaming to domestic-violence, sex selection, and sexist nationalist propaganda in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Feminist activists took advantage of the established discursive space through their constant references to *Jiangshanjiao* and drew the already escalating audience's attention to their performance site where

¹⁴ These are just a few of the thousands of comments that were posing satirical questions to *Jiangshanjiao*, mimicking what she would have encountered as a woman in the Chinese gender reality. The original Weibo post has been censored but the screenshots of it and the comments can be accessed through: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022].



FIGURE 3

Some of the comments below the post read: 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?'), including 'Jiangshanjiao, why are you so close to Hongqiman, does someone name you a whore?', 'Jiangshanjiao, have you already given birth?', 'Jiangshanjiao, will you have better academic performance than boys when you get into high school?', 'Jiangshanjiao, would you go out alone at night?', and many others. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022]

women's sexist encounters were mimicked and staged. Unable to cope with the huge backlash, the Youth League deleted the social media account of the two virtual influencers five hours after its launch.

Drawing on Butler's metaphor of 'theater of legitimacy' (2015: 85), I argue that the performative feminist resistance calls into question the legitimacy of gendered nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Butler laments that bodies in the public sphere are 'presumptively masculine [...] presumptively free to create, but not itself created' and the feminine is confined within the private sphere (75). Butler further makes a theatrical analogy here: 'when male citizens enter into the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war, and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted as the architecturally bounded theatre of their speech' (76). When this theatre is left open to the resistance of 'pre-political' assembled bodies, i.e. the poor, slaves, and women, who are outside the pre-defined legitimate public sphere, such resistance becomes performative. The performativity is both bodily and discursive. Bodily acts were one of two performative strategies of 'Jiangshanjiao feminist activism'. 'How do *bodily acts* become performative?' (Butler 2015: 29), Butler answers this question by highlighting the importance of bodily alliance in expanding the recognition of disenfranchised groups and the space of politics for them. By underscoring 'we' instead of 'I', Butler proposes the plural form of political performativity which involves each individual performance in a collective action. Virtual bodies in alliance, in other words, feminist activists on Weibo, constitute a plural form of performativity. This bodily performativity is even pre-discursive. The fact that these virtual bodies made an appearance in the space of politics which excluded them posed a challenge to the constitution of that pre-established public space. The performative capacity of the bodily appearance calls into question the exclusive nature of the 'theater of legitimacy' (Butler 2015: 85) and 'norms constituting what it means to appear in

public and regulating who is allowed to publicly appear' (Thonhauser 2019: 205). Further, the performative capacity of assembled bodies brings into being new constitutive possibilities of space of politics by making an appearance in the public, reconfiguring the materiality of the space and laying claim to the pre-established theatre of legitimacy. In Butler's words, 'theater is no longer unproblematically housed in public space, since public space now occurs in the midst of another action, one that displaces the power that claims legitimacy precisely by taking over the field of its effects' (2015: 85). Satirical, discursive acts are the other performative strategy of feminists in *Jiangshanjiao* activism. Yang (2021: 3) defined *Jiangshanjiao* activism as political satire, a strategy of digital feminism in China. She differentiated it from the conventional feminist movements: 'the "Jiangshanjiao incident" stands out through its sarcastic narrative against a female character', through 'narrating sexualized sarcasm and insulting femininity' (4). The satirical, discursive act of feminist activists 'attacking' *Jiangshanjiao* is, I argue, a subversive performance. 'Subversive performance' appears in Butler's *Gender Trouble*, mainly in their examination of drag as a subversive performance which '*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*' (2006: 187). In the case of drag, men perform femininity by imitating women or the other way around. In purposefully and repeatedly imitating Chinese women's femininity, feminists in *Jiangshanjiao* activism underlined the misogynistic gendered reality in China. Interrogations of *Jiangshanjiao* destabilised the taken-for-granted subordination of Chinese femininity. Such femininity is defined by their anatomical sex paradoxically as a taboo and a reproductive tool, manifested by interrogations such as '*Jiangshanjiao*, do you get your period?' and '*Jiangshanjiao*, have you already given birth?'. It is also defined by their victimhood in violence against women, domestic and public. Interrogations such as '*Jiangshanjiao*, do you go out alone at night?' imitates the warning facing women which limits their freedom to the domestic, while '*Jiangshanjiao*, if your husband abuses you, do

the police respond?' unveils to the structural ignorance and passivity of the authorities in handling domestic violence.

The link between the theatre of legitimacy and public space faces ontological challenges as public space is only brought into being when assembled bodies act, just as gender identity only comes into being through bodies performing gendered discourses and acts. In the case of Covid-initiated gendered nationalism, the established performing space of nationalist ideology became available to feminist activists in digital space where they reconfigured into their own use the space of politics previously dominated by bodies of the state and the nationalist citizens. When the spotlight of the performative gendered disaster nationalism was put on the heads of female healthcare workers, a virtual public space was established, which then became the site of conflict where the feminist activists who advocated against sexist nationalist propaganda assembled. Their performative capacity, that is, subversive satirical feminist interrogations and content-producing digital practices, brought into being a feminist space of politics, posing a challenge to the space of performative nationalism, the constitution of which was partially based on nationalist use of performative femininity of Chinese women.

CONCLUSION

From the performativity of gender, to that of national identity and public assembly, Butler's conceptual frame of performative theory has become a way of thinking that challenges the essentialist status of entities whose constitution remains unchallenged and concealed. Performance is a capacity, a powerful act which is able to destabilise the naturalisation of gender configuration, constitution of national subjects and space of politics. The capacity of Chinese feminists' performance of resistance uncovers the concealment of the naturalisation in the constitution of dominant performative identities or entities, like binary gender oppositions, heteronormativity, nationalist agency, space of politics in China. Unveiling the naturalness of the constitution of these identities brings into being more performative possibilities through subversive discourses, gestures, acts. Following Butler's conceptual frame, this essay argues that gender and national identities are performative, and identifies the performative capacity of subversive feminist resistance in the Covid-initiated gendered disaster nationalism in China which called into question the constraining gender politics upon which nationalist narratives partially relied to produce gendered, nationalist subjects. •

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