

#MeToo in East Asia: The Politics of Speaking Out

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The global diffusion of #MeToo has sparked case studies and scholarly discussions (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Lee and Murdie 2020; Noel and Oppenheimer 2020), but the East Asian experience remains understudied, especially from a comparative perspective within and outside the region. The internet hashtag movement emerged from quality investigative journalism, and the movement has done what the law could not (MacKinnon 2018). Examining tweets that include the English version of the hashtag, Lee and Murdie (2020) found that women are more likely to engage in #MeToo in countries where their political rights are better protected. This finding, however, does not seem to fit East Asia's experience. The region's earliest and longest democracy, Japan, had a much milder movement than neighboring South Korea. Many South Korean women publicly named their perpetrators, but Japanese women, when sharing their experience of being harassed, mostly remained anonymous (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). Moreover, Taiwan, arguably the most gender-equal country in this region — if measured by women's political representation (42% in the national legislature) or by policies toward sexual minorities (it was the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage) — has had virtually no #MeToo movement.

Neither China nor Hong Kong is democratic, but both had vibrant #MeToo movements that were eventually repressed by the

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increasingly authoritarian governments of China and Hong Kong. The Chinese #MeToo Archive, with more than 2,600 pages compiled by volunteers for cases reported between January 2018 and July 2019, has mostly real-name victims publicly identifying their perpetrators. Hong Kong, until recently, was the textbook example of having civil liberties without democracy, but not anymore. The government's increasing subjection to Beijing led the #MeToo movement to converge with the protest movement in 2019, when the protection of Hong Kongers' civil rights was shrinking.

The variation in East Asia's #MeToo experience, as illustrated by these Critical Perspectives essays, reflects the variation in what Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019) call "the politics of speaking out." All breaking cases of the #MeToo movements in East Asia had credible victims, but the roles played by the mainstream media and the political environments faced by social media were different among these countries. Democracies such as Japan and Taiwan theoretically should be more favorable environments for women to speak up, but the Japanese media's lack of gender awareness and the Taiwanese media's lack of quality journalism inhibited the #MeToo movements in those countries. In contrast, South Korea's strong and militant #MeToo movement is related to the crucial role of the mainstream as well as social media. Nondemocracies such as China and Hong Kong faced governments that selectively supported or tolerated the movements until they began to challenge the government or showed mobilizational potential.

CREDIBLE VICTIMS AND BREAKING CASES

Credibility is crucial in people's perceptions of sexual harassment and assault, however unfair this is to the victims. #MeToo gained momentum when prominent women stood up against powerful men (see Chao-ju Chen's essay in this issue), and it is not surprising that all of the victims of the breaking cases of #MeToo in East Asia — the cases that attracted media attention — are prominent women. Those who first spoke up include a prosecutor in South Korea, a journalist in Japan, an award-winning hurdler in Hong Kong, and a PhD-holding researcher residing in the United States who had emigrated from China. The powerful men whom they stood up against

included a high-level government official in South Korea, an established journalist and biographer of the prime minister in Japan, an experienced coach in Hong Kong, and a professor at a top university in China.

The breaking cases did not necessarily take place after the U.S. or global #MeToo movement. Japan's Shiori Ito went public with her accusation in May 2017, months before Harvey Weinstein's crimes were reported. After #MeToo emerged later that same year, Ito's case became the symbol of the movement, partially because many Japanese victims remained anonymous when identifying themselves as sexual harassment or assault victims (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; see also Mari Miura's essay in this issue).

Though these cases were not always successful in the criminal courts, like the cases in Hong Kong and Japan, some of the perpetrators were indeed punished or disciplined. The accused Korean official was sentenced and imprisoned for abusing his power, and the Chinese professor was removed from his job. The Japanese journalist who raped Ito, though acquitted in criminal court, lost in the subsequent civil suit filed by Ito. It would be hard to ignore the impact of #MeToo on the way these accusations were handled. The breaking cases led other victims, prominent or not, women or men, to come into public view.

THE POLITICS OF SPEAKING OUT

The politics of speaking out is mostly affected by the quality and gender awareness of the media. Without quality investigative journalism from the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* to validate the claims of those who came forward in the first place, the hashtag movement on the internet might not have been possible.

Democracies, unfortunately, do not guarantee the quality or gender awareness of the media. Though Taiwan has been widely recognized as having full freedom of the press, its media quality has long been a thorny issue in the country's democracy (Fuchs 2014). According to a 2019 survey, nearly 96% of respondents said that the Taiwanese media did a poor job of verification (Maxon 2019). If the mainstream media has no ability to guard due process to validate a victim's claim, then speaking out would be a risky act

for women, especially if they are prominent women (see Chen in this issue).

At the height of the global #MeToo movement, a well-known senior female journalist posted on her Facebook page that she had been sexually harassed after drinks many years ago by a politician who was a current minister. She did not name the politician, and a day later, in her Facebook post, she thanked the president for caring about her accusation and appreciated the president's instructions for an investigation. Soon, the media reported that the accused politician, still unidentified to the public, did not remember the incident and that he had already quit drinking. The presidential office never revealed how the investigation was done, or who conducted the investigation. No further media reporting has been provided regarding this case. No other prominent woman has ever publicly talked about being sexually harassed or assaulted.

The problem of Japan's media is more about gender awareness. Japan has a well-known press club system. All government agencies have their own press clubs, to which the journalists of major newspapers and television stations belong. Originally a coordinated effort to press the government and protect the public's right to know, the press clubs, after decades of development, may also produce the opposite effects because of the close relations among journalists and between the media and the government (Freeman 2000; Kuga 2016). This could help explain why many Japanese media did not report Ito's case when it first appeared (see Miura in this issue). Ito pointed out in a BBC interview in August 2019 that "[t]he Women in Japanese Media Network was created to protect female journalists and women in media from sexual harassment. Members of the network, however, choose overwhelmingly to remain anonymous, as they fear online aggression and backlash."¹ The soft approach of the Japanese #MeToo movement could therefore be viewed as Japanese women's negotiation with a prevailing silencing culture that is exacerbated by a patriarchal and male-dominated media environment.

Unlike Japan's #MeToo movement, which focused more on supporting the victims rather than holding the perpetrators

1. "Shiori Ito: Japan's Attitudes to Allegations of Sexual Violence Are Locked in the Past," BBC News, August 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3z44Njyr5wzm3wbVMGZ7tFr/shiori-ito-japan-s-attitudes-to-allegations-of-sexual-violence-are-locked-in-the-past> (accessed June 15, 2021).

accountable, South Korea's #MeToo movement has brought down many powerful figures in various fields, including a provincial governor and the mayors of the country's two largest cities. The cable network JTBC's interview with prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun ushered in South Korea's #MeToo movement. JTBC's largest holder is the major newspaper *Joong Ang Ilbo*, and the network was the one that broke the case of the corruption and abuse of power of South Korea's former president Park Geun-hye. At the height of the #MeToo movement, the network devoted lengthy program time to educate the public on the topic of sexual harassment and violence through personal accounts of victims and interviews with gender experts (personal observation in Seoul, March 2018; see Ki-young Shin's essay in this issue). JTBC and South Korean society responded to each other and sustained the momentum of the #MeToo movement.

The politics of speaking out in Hong Kong and China unavoidably faced more political constraints. When #MeToo first emerged in Hong Kong, the conventionally progressive Hong Kong media joined forces to raise the public's gender awareness. The Hong Kong government also responded. However, as Ruby Lai shows in her essay, when female protesters against the Anti-Extradition Law reported sexual abuse while they were in police custody, no investigation was conducted. #MeToo in Hong Kong therefore became meshed with #ProtestToo, and this created paradoxical effects. On the one hand, those who might not have been supportive of #MeToo subsequently became supportive; on the other hand, some feminists worried that such support could cause #MeToo to be used for political purposes (see Ruby Lai's essay in this issue).

China's #MeToo activists made great efforts to shape the narrative of the victims' stories on the internet. The Chinese government and courts responded to the movement initially (Zhang 2020; see also Xiong Jing and Dušica Ristivojević's essay in this issue). Those who joined or supported the movement had done serious work, exemplified by the huge volume of the Chinese #MeToo Archive and the dissertation-like document regarding well-known Buddhist Master Xuecheng's sexual assault of his followers. The Chinese government's media censorship, however, was conducted in a peculiar way. Accusations made against prominent NGO

activists or liberal intellectuals who had a track record of challenging the government were much less censored (Guo 2019, 190). The hashtag was not censored until many joined it on the internet and the movement began to show mobilizational potential. Chinese netizens fought against the censorship with various online strategies such as using nicknames and memes, and the close connection between overseas Chinese feminist activists and local activists helped keep the movement alive (see Xiong and Ristivojević in this issue).

#MeToo in China also exacerbated the complex rift between liberal intellectuals and the feminist camp. A well-known female liberal intellectual questioned #MeToo and compared it with the Cultural Revolution, and her work incited huge debates between the two camps (Chen 2019, 240–45). While some activists felt encouraged by #MeToo's political potential in challenging the government, others pointed out that, unlike in other countries, there was almost no accusation against any government official in the Chinese #MeToo movement, even though it has touched upon fields such as higher education, the mass media, and civic organizations (Guo 2019, 191).

NO FREEDOM WITHOUT EQUALITY

The very existence of #MeToo reveals how powerful the patriarchy remains, despite laws that already existed prohibiting sexual harassment and assault in these East Asian societies. The greatest challenge is to make people understand that there is not much freedom without equality (MacKinnon 2019). Most sexual assaults are committed by victims' acquaintances within the family, at school, or in the workplace, and a future relationship with the perpetrator is almost inescapable for the victims. Maintaining that relationship is a way to survive. Some victims of Harvey Weinstein and Matt Lauer, for example, used the word "transactional" to describe their relationship with the perpetrators, and they felt ashamed (Farrow 2019). However, if people stop looking at sexual harassment or assault through a patriarchal lens, then one thing becomes clear: when a woman is involved with someone more powerful than she is, it is often not because she wants to get what she does not deserve, but rather because she wants to keep what

she has, or to get what she should have had if no one had abused their power.

Structural inequalities are difficult to change, and the extent to which a post-#MeToo East Asia will be able to combat sexual harassment and violence more successfully remains to be seen. Understanding how much our culture has condoned those behaviors is probably the first step toward moving the society beyond #MeToo.

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#MeToo in China: How Do the Voiceless Rise Up in an Authoritarian State?

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Amid the global #MeToo movement, the #MeToo movement in China started in early 2018. For over a year, several influential cases, broad civic participation and engagement, as well as extensive discussions shocked and shook the whole country, creating a sociopolitical dynamic that was unusual in the context of persistent suppression of civil society and strict restrictions on freedom of speech. As feminist activists and researchers — Jing living and working in China, Dušica doing her fieldwork in Taiwan at the time — we were astounded by the powerful challenge that #MeToo has posed to misogynistic societies around the globe. What we have been trying to understand is how the #MeToo movement emerged and grew even as so many other social movements were suppressed in China, and what strategies the survivors, volunteers, and activists in the #MeToo movement used to break through the overwhelming censorship and restrictions.

In this essay, we address these two questions by drawing on Xiong Jing’s experiences as an activist and on her interviews with three core survivors and volunteers in the #MeToo movement, as well as our analysis of the national and transnational sociopolitical environment in which #MeToo in China emerged and evolved. We argue that three central features of the #MeToo movement in China enabled it to form and spread in the context of an authoritarian, oppressive, highly controlled and surveilled party-state: (1) decentralized organizing by numerous nonprofessional activists, (2) extensive use of social media, and (3) active domestic and overseas collaboration. These three features, as we also discuss, have