ROTTEN GIRLS AS KILLJOY FEMINISTS?

Unpacking Women's Perception on Gender Inequalities in Post-Socialist China

Xiaofei Yang
RMIT UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Gender inequality and feminism are topics of increasing visibility in China's increasingly digitized mass culture in recent years. Given the hype, successive research has attempted to bring forth the relationship between individuals' affective engagement with online feminism and their challenge or consolidation of gender inequality. Nevertheless, how negative affects can serve as a methodological framework for assessing individuals' role in promoting or hindering feminism is still underexplored. This article examines a particular population, namely the 'rotten girls' (female fans of male-male romance) as killjoy feminists in post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. It argues that rotten girls are at once killjoy feminists interrogating neoliberal gender normality and killjoys of their own feminist dreams, internalising the very norms. These nuances and paradoxes constitute a Deleuzian micropolitics, initiatives starting from bodily affect, that may nonetheless bring changes to public, collective life. Thus, this article complicates existing scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in the context of post-socialist China, providing insights into solidarity among feminist practitioners against the ostracization of feminism transnationally.

KEYWORDS

Post-socialist China, "rotten girls," feminist killjoys, Deleuzian micropolitics

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Introduction

Gender inequality and feminism are topics of increasing visibility in China's evermore digitized mass culture in recent years. From hashtag activisms to feminist podcasts, people share their gendered life experiences, reflecting on gender norms, and in so doing constituting communities of solidarity (Yang 2021, 2022; Yang and Hu 2023). Increased feminist consciousness is accompanied by rising antagonism, from top-down and bottom-up. In mainstream media reports and online discussions, feminism is often framed as a 'foreign force' aiming to destabilize China's harmonious society, while those who advocate for women's rights, regardless of genders, are addressed as 'female boxers' (女拳师) or 'extremists,' emphasizing their irrationality other than letting off steam (BBC 2021; Beijing Evening News, 2022). These dynamics constitute an arena that is at once discursive and affective, attracting increasing scholarly attention. Successive research has attempted to bring forth the relationship between individuals' affect and their challenge or consolidation of gender inequality (Yang 2021, 2022; Zhang 2022; Huang 2023; Yang and Hu 2023), as well as the structural disparities in contemporary Chinese patriarchy more broadly (Wu and Dong 2019; Yin 2022). Particularly, scholars highlight the important roles of negative affects (e.g., anger) people often feel in their engagement in feminist discussions or debates online. This raises the question of how we can conceptualise individuals' negative affects as a methodological framework for assessing their role in promoting or hindering feminism, a question that remains unanswered.

This article explores the role of a particular population, namely the 'rotten girls,' as killjoy feminists who feel wronged amidst and thus interrogate gender inequalities in post-socialist China. Rotten girls[1] are female and woman fans of Boys' Love (BL), a multimedia genre featuring male-male romance (Welker 2022). This article is part of my PhD project on the lived experiences of Chinese rotten girls.[2] In my individual, semi-structured interviews with the participants, I enquired about how they emotionally consume BL both commercially produced and fan-made, and how their everyday fan engagements inform their gender(ed) identities in post-socialist China. I discovered that the rotten girls' consumption of BL is often accompanied by their exposure to and engagements in the broader feminist discussions across multiple social media. While BL incites predominantly positive affects such as joy and excitement, the rotten girls often report anger and powerlessness in reflections of their own lives as women. What these negative

affects can do to the rotten girls and to feminism in China intrigues me deeply. As previously stated, rotten girls' negativity is ambiguous and paradoxical. It raises feminist consciousness among these women, giving rise to a communal feminine identity and envisioning a better future. Yet the very negative affects also lead to their further subjugation to China's patriarchal system. I propose understanding these nuances and paradoxes as a Deleuzian micropolitics (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), initiatives starting from bodily affect, that may nonetheless bring changes to public, collective life.

In the rest of this article, I firstly summarize gender inequalities in contemporary China's patriarchy[3] to contextualize the negative affects of the rotten girls in their everyday lives. This is followed by my theoretical considerations in interpreting the rotten girls' perception of gender inequalities. I then set up the methodological framework of the killjoy as a way of uncovering rotten girls' agency vis-à-vis China's patriarchy. I draw on Ahmed's (2010, 2017) concept of the killjoy and explore the insufficient application of this concept in scholarship on China's feminist politics. My discussion discloses the need to establish a detailed model of the killjoy with Chinese characteristics. I show that the rotten girls are at once killjoys of neoliberal gender normality and their own feminist dreams. Finally, I elaborate on how rotten girls' initiate micropolitics against post-socialist Chinese patriarchy.

Thus, this article complicates existing scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in post-socialist China. The significance of this attempt goes beyond the national border of China, as issues of gender have been framed as an 'ideology' threatening the stability of families and societies, serving as scapegoats for the precarity of life due to "neoliberalism and financialisation (the imperative to increase assets at the expense of securing fair wages)" on a global scale (Butler 2019, 1). Indeed, Wu and Dong (2019) propose that public frustration against class disparity upon China's neoliberal transition is often appropriated and channeled to a containment of feminism as an external dividing force (e.g., 'foreign force'). This resonates with Butler's (2019) argument that gender is refuted to sustain Christian families amidst the neoliberal states' outsourcing of social services to the Catholic churches in the Global North. In this sense, how individuals, particularly rotten girls, engage with (online) feminism and possibly forge solidarity in China provides insights into solidarity among feminist practitioners against the ostracization of feminism transnationally.

Gender Disparity in Post-Socialist China

Gender inequality in the Chinese patriarchal system needs to be understood in its current, post-socialist political economy. Post-socialism incorporates two interlocking trends, a neoliberal transition in national economy and a conservative turn in ideology (Rofel 2007; Bao 2020). For the former trend, since 1978, the communist party-state initiated marketization of national economy to counter the sociocultural and political economic chaos caused by the series of socialist revolutions (1949–1976). It took the form of privatization of enterprises, inflow of foreign capital (direct investment and im/material products), as well as an increase in international trade. Meanwhile, the state withdrew from its social welfare responsibilities, such as healthcare and housing, shifting these burdens to the private sector and individual households. This brought about social inequalities like class disparities and rural-urban divide as more labour force flushed to the cities for better income and accompanied sociocultural resources. Intensified social conflicts aroused a series of democratic protests, culminating as the governmental military crackdown on civilians at Tian'anmen Square in June 1989 (Rofel 2007). In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen movement, the state accelerated the economic reform. It is against this backdrop that the second trend towards conservative ideology came into play.

To advance the political-economic agenda, national ideology was meticulously managed, shaping gender relations in contemporary patriarchy. Specifically, neoliberal ethos saturated the public. Individualistic values such as romance, sexuality, and possession of im/material goods were increasingly seen in mass media (e.g., magazines, TV, the internet). The satisfaction of these desires, often through consumption, was seen as a way for individuals to assert their identity autonomy (Lee 2007; Song and Lee 2010; Meng and Huang 2017). Indeed, Rofel (2007) argues that marketisation in post-socialist China has given rise to a 'desiring subject'—"the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest" (3).

Meanwhile, these values and desires are highly gendered. Especially in recent years, the state sees the urgency to promote reproductive nuclear families in the aftermath of the single-child policy (1979–2015) and to boost China's market economy. Through multiple rhetorics, it emphasizes the domestic sphere as

women's rightful place (Leung 2003). For instance, the state promotes gender-essentialist discourse in multiple governmental documents, highlighting women's physical and intellectual inferiority to men, rendering them less of a competent labor force than men (Leung 2003). Meanwhile, ridiculing vocabulary like 'left-over women' (剩女) to describe well-educated single women over 27 years of age has been invented by the Ministry of Education and promoted across China's mainstream media, condemning those who fail to align with the feminine ideal (Fincher 2016). Thus, under neoliberalism, Chinese women are autonomous and independent, but only as consumers: "consumers in chief" of self-grooming products that could highlight their femininity, or of daily supplies for the household "in their designated roles of wife and mother" (Meng and Huang 2017, 667).

This general background explains some demographic features of the rotten girls in this article. Born in the 1990s along with China's neoliberal transition, they enjoy increasing material and immaterial wellbeing, more so as they are members of the single-child generation with no siblings to share their parental resources with. All of the rotten girls are of urban upbringing. They have received tertiary education and above. Many have studied and settled down overseas. Their digital and physical mobility have exposed them to international media productions among which BL is a typical genre. Likewise, they have been exposed to different ideas on femininity and gender. These ideas, coming from diverse sources both digital and physical, are ambiguous and often contradictory, simultaneously advancing and impeding feminism. This article attempts to uncover these nuances.

Theoretical Concerns

Three concepts require further elaboration. First, despite its complex connotations, throughout the article I follow the rotten girls' idiomatic understanding of feminism[4] as a cause to promote equal rights between men and women by interrogating the gender inequalities women experience in everyday life.

Second, the rotten girls' understanding of the concept of gender oscillates between nature and nurture, as both biological differences between men and women and imposition of gendered cultural norms. While following the rotten girls' reasoning, I interpret gender through Butlerian performativity. Gender is individuals' "compulsory performances" that starts at the bodily level (Butler 2011, 181). One is assigned a sex as male or female based (solely) on their sex organs (penis/vagina) and is expected to display, or 'cite' acceptable masculinity or femininity throughout their life as a man or woman. The citation of norms by individuals

is compulsory as it defines their (sexed) bodies and gives them (gendered) identities through which they become and remain viable subjects. Yet this compulsion overregulates itself when the citation is hyperbolic, or the sexed bodies and gendered performances do not quite match, such as in drag, or in cases where a rotten girl argues that girls "can be handsome as well" (Carrie). This is where individuals' agency comes in. This dialectic between constraints and freedom helps understand the rotten girls' simultaneous rebuttal and internalisation of patriarchal norms.

Third, by affect I mean a general motivational force impelling or inhibiting individuals' bodily actions, often ineffable but intuitively felt as a 'hunch' (Gibbs 2010; Hickey-Moody 2013, 79; Zhang 2021). It unfolds in certain concrete social forms and structures (institutions, formations, beliefs, etc.), yet being a motivational force, is excessive to these static social discourses, updating them, thus sustaining the vitality of culture (Grossberg in Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Williams 2015). While extensive research has addressed the nuanced overlaps and distinctions between emotion, affection, and feeling (e.g., Massumi 2002; Shouse 2005), in this article I see them as "the entire gamut of words of affect" (Lee 2007, 20). It is because affect, affection, emotion, and feeling are in nature non-separable, manifest often in the everyday, lived experience as what Stewart (2007) calls 'ordinary affect': "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation" and "stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (2). In the context of rotten girls' feminist engagement, these ordinary affects are often negative. They are individually felt but form points of resonance. These negative affects constitute rotten girls' (albeit ambiguous) agency in Chinese patriarchy.

The Killjoy

When it comes to their engagement with feminist issues online, the rotten girls are best represented by the icon of a killjoy. The killjoy is theorized by Ahmed (2010, 17; 2017, 22) as a "feminist killjoy," one who feels "something is wrong" in terms of gender or race among other dimensions in what should be promising (e.g., a polite conversation during a joyous family dinner). The killjoy speaks up about this feeling of wrongness and the cause(s) of it (e.g., sexism, racism) but feels "wound up" in her speaking-up, as she has ruined the atmosphere and killed

the joy of others (Ahmed 2010, 65). In turn, the killjoy is condemned (usually in affective terms) as in-/over-sensitive for making claims of sexism or racism, which is her own hysteria or paranoia, a problem to be solved at her individual level. This false attribution of unhappiness adds another layer of unhappiness to the killjoy, circumventing her in a vicious circle, stopping her "from getting through" (Ahmed 2010, 68). In other words, the killjoy is a figure who is unhappy about gender, racial, and other societal structural disparities, yet whose unhappiness has been trivialized and dismissed by others as her own sensationalism. The purpose is to ostracize the killjoy to reestablish the veneer of happiness in a certain socio-cultural environment and the multiple relations of power underneath.

Starting with Ahmed (2010, 2017), the concept of the killjoy has been developed by scholars studying feminist politics in China. Zhang (2022) and Yin (2022) acknowledge that women in post-socialist China often act as feminist killjoys on social media like Weibo (Chinese Twitter) and Wexin (a mega instant messaging platform), where feminist discussions proliferate. These women point out gender injustice muted in the dominant narrative of a socialist "harmonious society" (和谐社会) (Chen and Wang 2019, 211), "get[ting] in the way" of others' happiness (Ahmed 2017, 37) Similar to Ahmed's (2017) analysis of how the killjoy is charged as sensationalist, Chinese feminist killjoys are stigmatised as "angry troublemakers" and are stripped of their "political commitment" (Yin 2022, 990).

Should joy-killing and joy-being-killed often be the case in one's engagement with feminism?[5] What should we make of these negative feelings? What is their significance (if any) in alleviating gender inequality and patriarchal system? Ahmed (2017) argues that unhappiness may lead to a strategy of "compromise" among the killjoys whereby one "shrugs [the unhappiness] off" by not naming its source(s) or taking it for granted, "making that fatalism [their] fate" (36). Indeed, Yin (2022) also points out that the stigmatisation of feminists in China has led to some women becoming "discouraged," where they "step back, and refuse to identify with feminism" as a way of shrugging off the unease (990). For Ahmed (2010, 2017), it is a survival mechanism for living with injustice especially when no easy resolution is available.

Yet this unhappiness may also lead to a feminist consciousness. The sense of unease dislocates the killjoy from the "happiness scripts" of what should make people happy and who is entitled to be happy (Ahmed 2010, 59). The very alienation motivates her to ponder over the cause of her unhappiness and look at the happiness script from a distance. Thus, she uncovers "the violence and power that are concealed under the language of civility and love [as a false consciousness]" (Ahmed 2010, 86). These power relations are the structural dispositions

sustaining the society in which the feminist killjoy lives. By disclosing structural issues, further personal and even social change towards equality may be initiated. Meanwhile, in these "moments of self-estrangement" (Ahmed 2010, 86) from her quotidian, another world/horizon is opened for the killjoy, beyond, and very likely broader than the one that is finely, thus narrowly tuned as a happy life. In this new horizon, as beautiful as it might be precarious, an alternative sense of solidarity is established through affective connections with other killjoys. A world has been built (Ahmed 2017).

This scholarship informs my usage of the killjoy to understand rotten girls' lived experiences in contemporary China's patriarchy. As I show in the rest of the article, the women report frustrations of multiple shapes and forms, and demonstrate complicated ways of coping with these frustrations that simultaneously consolidate and subvert the gender hierarchy in post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. By uncovering this complexity, my analysis goes beyond Ahmed's (2010, 2017) theorisation of the killjoy in Anglophone societies. Meanwhile, it also complicates scholarship on the Chinese feminist killjoy, which mentions women's position as killjoys as opposed to China's post-socialist patriarchal system only in passing[6] (e.g., Yin 2022; Zhang 2022). My aim is to uncover the rotten girls' agency in interrogating China's gender inequality and patriarchy.

Rotten Girls as the Killjoy of Feminist Dreams

INTERNALIZING NEOLIBERAL GENDER NORMS

Despite their condemnation of disparate discourses between men and women, the rotten girls also take in the anxiety born out of the multiple disparate, gender-essentialist discourses, and identify with it as the ordeal of their identity as women.

To the women, there is "truly" a distinction between men and women (Bamei). This distinction is first of all ontological. As Leonie commented: "In terms of gender equality, I do think women should be given extra care. After all, pregnancy and labor can only proceed in a woman's body. This is determined by biology." It is presumably in the similar vein that Momo highlighted that "it might be a bit harsher for the girls" in her aspiration for the diminishment of

the double standard in the socialisation of men and women: "I want a common consciousness, that the standards applied to boys and girls be the same, even if it might be a bit harsher for the girls."

Meanwhile, this ontological difference is entwined with the modulation of socio-cultural dispositions. As Bamei confided:

> To some extent I truly feel girls and boys are different. For example, I'm very fragile emotionally. Boys can take up trails and errors in life alright. But for a girl, when you are drifting and wandering, unable to settle down, you want a boy to keep you company. You want him to solve some of your problems…I'm twenty-five now, so I feel very anxious. I want to settle down and find a boyfriend quickly, otherwise it might get too late.

Bamei's "innate emotional fragility" as a young woman fueled her desire to rely on her special other, despite her unwillingness to gamble her life onto another person (e.g., unwillingness to marry for *hukou*). These intricate feelings and opinions in-between nature and nurture are further complicated by the governmental gender-essentialist discourse (Leung 2003; Meng and Huang 2017). These gender-difference discourses have been taken on and lived through by Bamei. The sensationalism and agism in her narratives recall the 'leftover women' icon—a sad single woman over twenty-seven years old—which has (already) thrown her into anxiety at the age of twenty-five.

Adding to the women's already difficult negotiations with disparate gender discourses is the neoliberal underpinning of post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. Like their simultaneous acknowledgement and internalisation of sexist norms, the women may rebuke, but nonetheless identify with neoliberal logic, particularly its ethos orienting around individuality and individualistic desire. Momo explained further her aspiration for the "common consciousness" in the equality between men and women: "I think if you expect less of a girl, she expects less of herself. If you expect something profound, she will explore things profound in herself."

The gender equality that Momo aspired to, as a countermeasure to the discriminations she has experienced or witnessed, is largely defined in individualistic terms, in accordance with the neoliberal agenda. It is seen as an individuality with a "psychological space" ("things profound in herself") and the mastering of that space by exhibiting autonomy and self-responsibility (see also Lee 2007, 36; Wang and Ge 2020). The problems, for Momo, were rooted more on the representational level—differences in "public opinions" allocated to men and women as shown in

the media—and were seen to be resolved at the level of the individual, with the societal political-economic structure largely untouched. Neoliberal patriarchy is to be confronted with neoliberal tools.

Presumably, it is out of the same individualistic values that Bamei, as per her previous comments, while internalising the "essential" difference between men and women and aspiring to rely on her special other, did not want to gamble her life onto others after all: "So rather than staying in Beijing, perhaps I can go to a less developed city where I will be able to settle down by myself, and then [me and my partner] can build a life together on an equal basis." In this sense, Momo and Bamei are representatives of the rotten girls who are constantly put into confrontation with imbalanced relations in China's post-socialist, neoliberal patriarchy through their feeling of wrongness, but are also constantly putting up with the unease as they get around the world.

THE TECHNIQUE OF COMPROMISE

In this article, I consider the women's putting-up-with-the-unease as a strategy of compromise. As per Ahmed (2017), it is a refrain from naming the structural issues like sexism and racism that lead to one's unhappiness by shrugging the unhappiness off or taking it on as a "fatalism" (36). This reaction is evident among the rotten girls. The feminist and misogynistic fights on the market accounts got on the nerves of Ruowei and others: "At the beginning I would feel really upset [糟心], and furious too, wondering 'what has happened to this world.'" Yet Ruowei learnt to get along—"later I realized that this [anxiety] is unnecessary"—by distinguishing the polemics on the marketing accounts from "serious and rational feminist discussions and movements" and identifying the former's neoliberal logic. This was accompanied by Ruowei's turning an indifferent eye on and filtering out of the antagonistic discussions on issues of gender (shrugging them off) that were becoming "too radical," be them clout-chasing or otherwise: "On Weibo, I would now only browse through the feminist discussions without engaging too much." Similarly, Keira justified her unwillingness to participate in the online discussions of gender issues: "You see [different ideas] and have already acquired your own stance. So, you learn to disengage from and filter out the irrational content."

For Ahmed (2017), the purpose of the mechanism of compromise is to get on with one's life: "resistance to recognizing something might be a way of coping with or living with that thing" (36). The strategy is especially justifiable when the 'thing' that leads to one's unhappiness is structural, and that naming and clinging onto the structural issues do not necessarily 'resolve' them (Ahmed 2017, 9), as Carrie commented: "Even as I see [the patriarchal system] now, there seems very little that I can do, so I also feel powerless." As a Chinese woman, Carrie was thrashed further into her frustrations due to the huge disparity between her own strength versus a system that exceeds national, racial, and geographical boundaries regardless of its specificity in each culture and her realisation of something wrong in a conversation between a white male scholar and a white female student in the US. In this regard, the rotten girls, by shying away from their unhappiness, become the killjoy of their own feminist aspirations.

Under these circumstances, how do we understand the rotten girls' multiple dimensions of unhappiness and contradictory ways of coping in China's post-socialist, patriarchal culture? I explore the dynamics in the following section.

THE KILLJOYS AS MICROPOLITICS IN CHINA'S PATRIARCHY

Despite my aim to bring out the agency of the rotten girls, I acknowledge that this agency is structured and constrained by gender norms and consumer capitalism underpinning the post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. It is perhaps for this reason that the women, even with, or precisely because of their feminist consciousness and identification with the collective feminine identity, feel nonetheless "powerless" (Carrie). Nevertheless, it is still crucial to do justice to the rotten girls' conditional agency.

In this article, I understand the initiatives of the killjoy rotten girls as a Deleuzian micropolitics (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Micropolitics describes the flow of bodily affect in the assemblage of a culture that, with affect's excessive nature, can escape multiple cultural constraints. It is micro due to the 'mass,' or ever-presence of the excess of affect that motivates bodily actions (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 217). This excess may drive individuals' revolt against the sociocultural rules, leading to macro sociocultural transformation(s), but not necessarily so. Being a neutral force, it may well lead to (re)disciplining of bodies, thus a retaliation of cultural rules and curtailing of sociocultural change (Fox and Alldred 2022). Hence, micropolitics is political more as a potential for the affective excess to bring around any form of change, positive or negative, macro or micro, than as mass social transformation for good.

Indeed, the rotten girls dis/engagement with feminism is motivated often by negative affects as unhappiness and powerlessness. These negative affects may be curbed by the women's internalising neoliberal gender norms and shying away from feminist discussions online tout court, which, I emphasize, features nonetheless as their coping, even survival mechanism. As Bamei showcased, despite her anxiety as a single, non-Beijing-native, and to-be-leftover woman, she managed to find joy in her identity as a rotten girl by setting aside (at least temporarily) her frustrations and retreating into the fantastic world of BL: "Significant [in solving your life problems] or not, [BL] makes you feel the delights in everyday lives."

Yet the negative affects may also bring around concrete changes on a collective, hence social level. The multi-layered unhappiness each individual rotten girl perceives in their encounter(s) with gender inequality and consumer capitalism resonates with each together, constituting a community of killjoy feminists who are willing to voice their discontent. This community embodies the excess of affect that bypasses discursive confinement, evidenced as Otama's commitment to a feminism that transgresses class and demographic disparities in China's patriarchal discursive system.

More importantly, the excess also overcomes the unpleasant present through an envision of the future. As Carrie summarised:

> Carrie: I think for me this sensibility is still positive, even if I can't really do anything [to change the system]. For example, if I were to talk to other teenage girls, I wouldn't say anything like "You need to be cute. You need to be docile." I'd say instead that "You can be strong, and you can be handsome as well." Also, I would seriously consider if my future kid should take my last name. Just these sorts of things. It does have impacts on me.
>
> Me: Is it more like a hope for the future?
>
> Carrie: Yes, and I think I'm willing to pass these ideas around.

Thus, rotten girls' agency in Chinese partiarchy is an affective one. It is their ordinary, negative affects arisen out of their daily encounters with feminist discussions and debates. These affects navigate *through* as they are *against* gender discourses. Regardless, they give rise to a sense of potentiality. Arguably, it is exactly this sense of potentiality that testifies a micropolitics in the rotten girls' everyday engagement with feminism online, helping them to survive the restrained here and now, while providing hope towards a better then and there (Bao 2020).

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Conclusion

This article discussed the potential of negative affects as a methodological framework for assessing individuals' promotion or hindrance of feminism in post-socialist China. I focused on a particular population, namely the rotten girls, and unpacked their roles as killjoy feminists in their encounters with gender inequalities in their everyday lives, both online and offline. I showed that this killjoy identity is multi-layered and paradoxical. Motivated by feelings of wrongness, the rotten girls identify and interrogate gender inequality and neoliberalism in Chinese patriarchy, confirming their communal identity as killjoy feminists. Yet they also internalise or ignore these structural disparities which are the sources of their unhappiness, thereby killing the joy in their feminist potential. Nevertheless, I proposed understanding these dynamics as a form of micropolitics. The unhappiness of the rotten girls possesses a potential that will always work around (as compromise or subversion) gender inequality in neoliberal China, bringing around senses of hope and futurity. As such, this article adds to scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in post-socialist China, which resonates with feminism and antifeminism worldwide.

Notes

1. The term 'rotten girls' is a customary English translation of the Japanese word *fujoshi*, which literally means both 'rotten girls' and 'rotten women.' It is a self-deprecating, yet also proud identifier for female BL fans. The term was imported to China along with Japanese BL culture in the 2000s. In the Chinese context, 'rotten girls' encompasses both female sex and gender. While fans of other sexes and genders are present in BL fandom, they have largely been coopted by the rotten girl community (McLelland and Welker 2015; Shao and Wang 2018). This article focuses on female and woman BL fans.

2. I conducted online, semi-structured interviews with eighteen self-identified rotten girls of Chinese nationality and upbringing. Interviews were conducted from September to December 2020. The project was approved by the author's home institution, following relevant human research ethics. Participants are presented under pseudonyms in this article.

3. Harrell and Santos (2017) define contemporary Chinese patriarchy as one of hybridity, "a system of family and kinship that produces and is produced by gender and generational inequalities both within and beyond the domestic sphere…intersect[ed] with other variables such as class, education, sexuality, regional location, and, most importantly, China's rigid but loosening rural-urban divide" (10). This article takes the perspective of gender, exploring the rotten girls' affective encounter with gender inequalities and feminist critique of them as a miniature of their engagement with Chinese patriarchy writ large.

4. Feminism is, admittedly, a concept more complicated than laid out here. Yin (2022), for instance, summarises the principles of feminism as "justice for all, through collective action to end the interlocking domination, including sexism, racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and cisgender normativity" (982). This article examines particularly the rotten girls' feminist interrogation of sexism in contemporary Chinese mass culture.

5. While unhappiness/bad feelings/killjoy frequently show up in feminist theories or other forms of discussions, it is not always the case. For a start, Braidotti (2002) bases her feminist philosophy on an "ethics of joy and affirmation" (13).

6. Extensive research discusses Chinese women's negative affects in feminist discussions online without acknowledging their position as "killjoys" (e.g., Yang 2021; Yang and Hu 2023). Among research outputs that do, Zhang (2022) identifies feminist groups and activists as feminist killjoys in a short paragraph to serve for her broader case study on the role of emotions in online feminist discussions and how the platform affordances of Weibo contribute to these dynamics. Similarly, Yin's (2022) acknowledgement that post-socialist feminists are stigmatised as killjoys (angry troublemakers) and that this demonisation further disengages women from feminism is only a segment of her historical review of feminist discourses in China from the socialist to post-socialist era. Thus, it is more of a statement than an analysis.

7. In the interview, Ruowei used the Chinese words "*konghun* (afraid of marriage)" and "*kong lian'ai* (afraid of being in a relationship)". I translated these two phrases into "gamophobia" and "philopobia" for the flow of the narratives.

8. During the COVID outbreak, some hospital administrators in Wuhan were reported to reject donation of sanitary supplies for the frontline female medical workers, considering them as "unessential" (Yang 2021, 17). This incident aroused great controversy.

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