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When Movement Widens the Gap: The Contingent Effect of the Chinese #MeToo Movement on Feminist Attitudes

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Abstract

Social movements are often associated with various cultural outcomes, including shifts in public opinion regarding movement-related attitudes and ideologies. This study examines the shift of feminist attitudes among the public following the Chinese #MeToo movement. We develop a sociotechnical contingency framework that emphasizes how identity-based movement relevance and access to information channels shape the shifts in public opinion following social movements. Using nationally representative data from the Chinese General Social Survey (2010–2023), we find that the #MeToo movement was significantly associated with an increase in pro-feminist attitudes. These changes were unevenly distributed across groups, revealing widening attitudinal gaps along gender identities and digital divides. Our findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how contemporary digitally mediated movements catalyze cultural change and underscore the need to contextualize their impact as it interacts with structural dynamics.

Keywords

China, digital divide, feminist attitudes, MeToo movement, public opinion, survey

Introduction

Today, the global rise of social movements both online and offline, such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter (BLM), features the communication power in driving social

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change (Castells 2015; Jackson et al. 2020). Some studies have extensively examined the essential elements and antecedents (Diani 1992; Tilly and Wood 2015), configurations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Freelon et al. 2018), and temporal dynamics and processes (Lee and Chan 2018; Tarrow 1993) of social movements. Others focus on social movements' cultural outcomes, such as public values and beliefs about broader social issues, through examining the shifts in public opinion regarding movement-related attitudes and ideologies (Banaszak and Ondercin 2016; Shuman et al. 2022). Addressing this movement-related outcome is critical for three reasons. First, it helps substantiate the impact of digitally mediated social movements, the influence of which is often considered limited (Morozov 2011). Second, examining broader cultural change over a long period challenges the assumption that these movements are short-lived and produce only minimal effects. Third, it expands our understanding of movement outcomes to broader social beliefs, values, and lifestyle changes. Given that many movements explicitly aim to bring about social changes in culture and lifestyles (Pichardo 1997), shifts in attitudes toward broader social issues should be treated as key indicators of movement outcomes.

This study examines the relationship between the #MeToo movement and feminist attitudes. Specifically, we develop a sociotechnical contingency framework to demonstrate how these shifts are shaped by both social and technological factors. As an initial step in testing this framework, we investigate one social dimension—identity-based movement relevance—and one technological dimension—internet access. Given that identity is a pivotal element in the #MeToo movement, women advocating for equal rights should arguably respond more favorably to the movement, whereas men may react defensively and even form counter-movement misogynistic attitudes (Dickel and Evolvi 2023). Meanwhile, as #MeToo discussions are mostly sparked and circulated in the online sphere (Breuer et al. 2015), digital inequalities shape how individuals engage in the movement, with those lacking internet access receiving less information about the movement and its related discourse. Overall, these contingencies indicate a widening gap in feminist attitudes following the movement across different social groups. This pattern is associated with increasing polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), defined here as a process in which the distribution of public opinion becomes progressively bimodal (Jost et al. 2022). Although polarization can take multiple forms (Lelkes 2016), it is commonly understood to involve two core components: increased heterogeneity between groups and greater homogeneity within groups (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Mehlhaff 2024). The widening gap anticipated in our study reflects the former, as it diminishes the degree of opinion overlap across social groups. While polarization is often framed as a threat to social cohesion, some scholars contend that it may also constitute a natural—and at times necessary—outcome of struggles for social justice (Kreiss and McGregor 2024).

We test this framework through the case of China's #MeToo movement, which emerged in late 2017. The persistence of patriarchal norms rooted in Confucian traditions makes this setting well-suited for assessing its explanatory power. First, the stark contrast between #MeToo's pro-feminist discourse and China's traditional gender hierarchy makes attitudinal shifts more readily observable. Unlike Western contexts

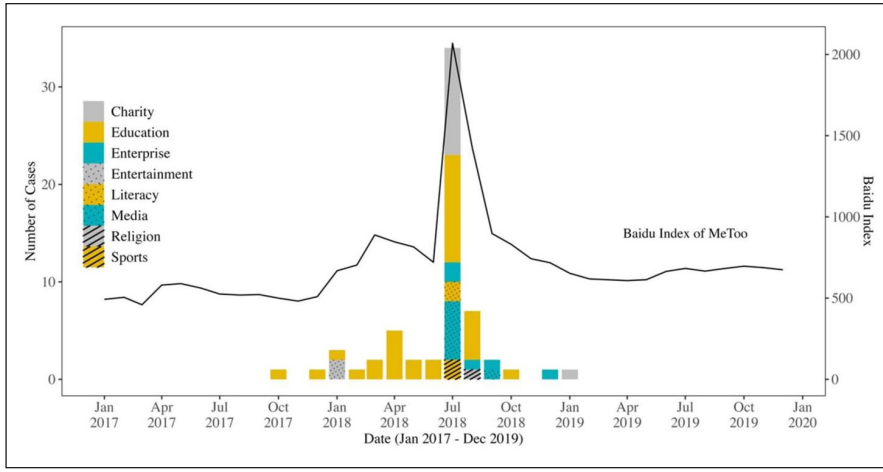


Figure 1. #MeToo in China.
Note. Baidu (the largest search engine in China) Index is a metric based on search volumes, and here we averaged it by month. We also plotted the number of cases based on documents compiled by feminist activists (https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/616135.html and https://metoochina.me/).

where women's rights movements have long histories and feminist ideas are more institutionalized (Buechler 1990), Chinese discourse of gender equality has been shaped by a state-centered "women's liberation" framework rooted in the socialist period, coexisting with enduring patriarchal gender norms and a relatively constrained discursive environment (Wu and Dong 2019). These conditions contribute to comparatively lower familiarity with feminism as an explicit discursive framework, potentially rendering the cultural impact of Chinese #MeToo more pronounced. In addition, the movement's rapid proliferation across diverse social sectors (Figure 1) has expanded public exposure to its discourse, particularly through the internet, thereby enhancing its capacity to generate broader impact. Finally, like most Global South contexts, China still presents an uneven distribution of digital access, with 59.6 percent of the population having access to the internet in 2018 (China Internet Network Information Center 2019), the year right after the movement burst out, which provides a compelling opportunity to assess the contingent effect of the information channel.

Using repeated cross-sectional data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) from 2010 to 2023—a nationally representative opinion poll—we find that the #MeToo movement coincided with a significant increase in pro-feminist attitudes among the public. Consistent with our contingency framework, these changes were unevenly distributed: women and internet users exhibited larger increases in pro-feminist attitudes, revealing widening attitudinal gaps along gender identities and internet access. Although the study does not rely on random assignment and therefore rests on quasi-experimental assumptions, we subject our estimates to extensive robustness tests that increase confidence in a causal interpretation. Our findings

contribute to a nuanced understanding of how contemporary digitally mediated movements catalyze cultural change and underscore the need to contextualize their impact within structural dynamics.

Literature Review

Social Movements' Impact on Public Opinion

Studies on the consequences of social movements have primarily focused on three types of outcomes: personal, political, and cultural. Specifically, social movements can leave a life-course impact on participants in both their personal and political lives (personal consequences); they also bring about changes in policy and political structure (political consequences) and exert influences on social norms and behaviors of the general public (cultural consequences; Bosi et al. 2016; Giugni 2008). Cultural consequences, considered an enduring and widespread impact of social movements, remain less studied among the three (Amenta and Polletta 2019; Bosi et al. 2016). Giugni (2008) attributed this lack of scrutiny to both theoretical and methodological obstacles. Social movements shape contention repertoires, public ideations, and cultural artifacts, though the conceptualization of their cultural impacts remains debated (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018). Methodologically, cultural change often unfolds over long timeframes, both shaping and being shaped by social movements, or occurring independently (Amenta and Polletta 2019; Earl 2004), making causal relationships hard to establish (Shuman et al. 2022).

One specific cultural consequence we examine is a change in public opinion. Public opinion is a multidimensional concept. Prior studies of social movement consequences have mostly examined how movements shift attitudes toward specific policies or political actors, such as support for immigration reform or evaluations of political candidates (e.g., Branton et al. 2015; Gethin and Pons 2024; Reny and Newman 2021). Such attitudinal shifts capture public sentiment related to the formal political processes. However, social movements also touch on everyday beliefs, new forms of knowledge, and emerging practices. These broader cultural consequences operate through the transformation of belief systems rather than immediate political behavior (Amenta and Polletta 2019). In this sense, changes in ideological orientations can be understood as aggregated personal consequences that enable political outcomes (Giugni 2008) and contribute to broader cultural transformations (Meyer and Whittier 1994).

Social movements can shape public opinions by functioning as "critical moments." Berelson (1949) theorizes that events can influence public opinion by reshaping individuals' value structures. Pollock (1994) describes "critical moments" as high-salience political events that define or redefine how the public responds to issues. Research shows that events such as political campaigns, protests, and presidential assassinations can significantly affect public attitudes (Boomgaarden and De Vreese 2007).

Based on these notions, we argue that social movements shape public opinions by raising awareness, influencing attitudes toward the movement itself, and shaping

views on broader social issues. First, according to the Receive-Accept-Sample model (Zaller 1992), individuals are exposed to movement-related information, decide whether to accept it, and then draw on these considerations when forming opinions. Accordingly, research shows that exposure to social movements, ranging from the 1960s black protests to the recent BLM, increases issue salience, as indicated by search activity for related keywords and self-reported perceptions of issue importance (Gethin and Pons 2024; Wasow 2020). Second, social movements derive their impact through the resonance of their frames with the public. When movement frames align with the existing values and beliefs, individuals are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward the movement, its participants, and its goals (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Bonilla and Tillery (2020) found that exposure to Black Nationalist, Feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights frames had differential effects on people's willingness to support and canvass the BLM protests. Finally, social movements can shape public opinions on broader social issues beyond those explicitly addressed by the movements. This occurs through priming, a process by which prior exposure to certain content increases the accessibility of related ideas when individuals evaluate subsequent information (Amenta and Polletta 2019; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. 2007). For example, Banaszak and Ondercin (2016) show that U.S. women's movements shifted public perceptions of gender roles in a more liberal direction by priming people to think about gender equality rather than traditional norms.

The Case of the Chinese #MeToo Movement

Since emerging on social media in 2017, #MeToo has encouraged thousands of victims of sexual harassment to share their stories, sparking online discussions on gender issues, and attracting significant public attention (Clair et al. 2019; Loney-Howes et al. 2022). As a prominent case of digitally facilitated social movements, #MeToo has transcended national borders and become a global event. Despite its prominence, the cultural consequence remains unclear. The topical focus of #MeToo on Twitter, for example, swiftly shifted to unattributed, superfluous, and redundant messages as well as hate speech and trolling after the initial explosion (Lindgren 2019). Feminist theorists also debated whether this high-profile movement successfully transformed gender norms through widespread attention or gained popularity because it avoided a direct confrontation against established gendered power dynamics (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020).

The #MeToo movement in China provides an opportunity to observe how cultural change stems from a social movement. Echoing the global #MeToo waves, the first high-profile case in China emerged in October 2017: Dr. Xixi Luo accused her PhD advisor, Prof. Chen Xiaowu of Beihang University, of sexually harassing her during graduate school. Later, the movement expanded beyond higher education to various sectors, and numerous men faced accusations, including NGO organizers, media figures, and religious leaders (Figure 1). The #MeToo movement is the very first case that demonstrates the potential for substantial public engagement with feminism in China (Yin and Sun 2021), which is uncommon in a country where online expression

conducive to collective action is largely restricted (King et al. 2013). As it was inspired by events outside the country, the #MeToo movement faced criticism for its disconnection from the modern Chinese context (Ling and Liao 2020). Here, we consider #MeToo in China a largely exogenous event out of previous gender culture, presenting a chance to analyze a movement's cultural impact.

Chinese #MeToo Movement and Pro-Feminist Attitudes

This study focuses on the impact of the Chinese #MeToo movement on feminist attitudes among the public. Feminist attitudes refer to the views held by individuals about what roles men and women should play in society (Horst 2014). The gender roles encompass various areas, including reproduction, household labor, and work (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). Sociologists distinguish traditional gender role attitudes from egalitarian ones (Qian and Sayer 2016). Traditional gender role attitudes (anti-feminist) hold that men continue to hold dominance over women, as manifested in the perpetuation of traditional female roles within the household. In contrast, egalitarian gender attitudes (pro-feminist) embrace the notion of gender equality, holding that women bear no less responsibility, if not more, than men in different spheres. While public attitudes about gender roles are relatively stable, these attitudes could be malleable due to individual life changes and social transformation.

Chinese society has experienced significant tensions between traditional and modern thoughts of gender equality issues. Confucianism's emphasis on patriarchy and collectivist goals has led many people in China to embrace traditional gender role attitudes, emphasizing that women take care of the home and men serve as breadwinners. However, exposure to more individualistic and nonconformist values from the West has led more Chinese people to adopt more egalitarian views regarding gender roles, advocating gender equity in both public (e.g., women as working professionals) and private domains (e.g., equal household labor division between men and women; Yang 2023).

We argue that the #MeToo movement in China can shift public opinion on gender roles in a pro-feminist direction. As discussed earlier, #MeToo can function as a "critical moment," creating conditions for public opinion to become more susceptible to change. Evidence from both the United States and China shows that the #MeToo movement increased awareness of sexual harassment and related gender issues (Chen et al. 2020; Castle et al. 2020). Beyond raising awareness, #MeToo challenges deep-seated patriarchal structures by amplifying victims' voices and contesting traditional gender norms. #MeToo's influence extends beyond individual cases to the cultural realm. Similar to other women's movements promoting gender equality (Banaszak and Ondercin 2016), #MeToo discourses can encourage individuals to reassess gender roles through a more egalitarian lens rather than traditional norms. Klar and McCoy (2021), for instance, show that #MeToo provoked Americans to reflect on their intuitions when evaluating politicians' sexual misconduct. They conceptualize this process as a form of cultural impact, where social movements reshape how individuals interpret social issues and, in turn, influence public opinion.

A similar process is likely to occur in the Chinese context. During the #MeToo movement, various actors framed the movement by criticizing existing social hierarchies and questioning the institutional arrangements of gendered divisions of labor (Li et al. 2021). These frames directly challenge the broader structural foundations that sustain traditional gender roles. Through the reflective process conceptualized by Klar and McCoy (2021), the movement encourages individuals to reinterpret familiar social arrangements from a more critical perspective, thus shifting societal understandings of gender roles toward greater egalitarianism. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Pro-feminist attitudes increased following the emergence of the Chinese #MeToo movement.

The Contingency Framework for Understanding the Impact of the Chinese #MeToo Movement

The impact of social movements on public opinion is not uniform. In this study, we propose a sociotechnical contingency framework that considers two groups of factors—social and technological—that condition how this movement reshapes public opinion. Drawing on two theoretical traditions, we highlight how both sets of factors play significant roles in shaping the impact of social movements. First, the political process theory (McAdam 1982) identifies three key elements that influence social movements: political opportunities, organizational resources, and *cognitive liberation*. While the first two elements focus on macro- and meso-level factors, the third delineates a social psychological process, whereby individuals come to "define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action" (McAdam 1982: 51). This realization may depend on how individuals situate themselves in relation to the issue and groups implicated in the movement. We therefore focus on identity as a key factor that conditions the impact of social movements on public opinion. Previous research shows that people with different identities react to social movements differently. During farmers' protests, group identification significantly influences processes of consensus mobilization (i.e., the dissemination of the movement's viewpoints) and action mobilization (Klandermans 2014). Another example is that the 2020 George Floyd protests mostly shaped perceptions of racism among liberals with low prejudice (Reny and Newman 2021; also see Jiménez-Sánchez et al. 2022; Wouters 2019).

Second, we argue that the technological factor, particularly individuals' access to and use of digital technologies, conditions how social movements shape public opinion. In the pre-digital era, the impact of movement was largely confined to those with access to movement information (e.g., Ayoub et al. 2021). Contemporary movements, as suggested by connective action theory, rely on widespread access to digital technologies and personalized forms of participation (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), which expands the potential for research of these movements. However, digital access is unevenly distributed (Robinson et al. 2015), and this inequality shapes individuals'

exposure to movement-related information and, consequently, the degree to which they are influenced by it. Empirical evidence supports this conditional relationship: exposure to specific information channels significantly shaped public attitudes toward Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (Lee and Chan 2018). Furthermore, political use of social media continued to predict more favorable evaluations of the movement among young people even after five years of the protest (Lee et al. 2020).

Social Movement, Gender Identity, and Public Opinion

We focus on gender identity as a key social factor in our contingency framework and examine how it conditions the Chinese #MeToo movement's influence on public opinion. Gender identity is a multi-layered concept. At the individual level, gender functions as a key component of self-concept, which shapes how individuals perceive and understand themselves being a man or woman and their social roles; at the collective level, gender reflects shared experiences, social positions, and life perspectives that arise from socialization and broader societal arrangements (Wood and Eagly 2009).

Gender identity is particularly salient in the #Metoo movement in China. The movement both amplifies women's shared experiences of sexual harassment and promotes an agenda of making changes toward women's rights and gender equality in society, thus challenging entrenched patriarchal norms (Yin and Sun 2021). This movement exerts impacts on identity reconstruction among both participants and bystanders, such as reconstructing the self-identity of those harassment victims (Lin and Yang 2019) and reshaping bystanders' understanding of gender dynamics (Han 2021). As a result, gender becomes a key lens through which individuals interpret and respond to movement messages.

Gender identity conditions the way that individuals react to the Chinese # MeToo movement through both cognitive and emotional mechanisms. From a cognitive perspective, gender identity shapes how individuals perceive sexual harassment and evaluate the legitimacy of feminist claims distributed in the #MeToo movement. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their knowledge of their group (Tajfel 1981). Because sexual harassment and assault are disproportionately committed by men against women (Marshall 2003), unequal gender power relations contribute to systematic differences in how men and women interpret and respond to #MeToo. Research reveals that women in China are more likely to express support for the movement, whereas men are often less engaged or even oppositional on gender-related issues, sometimes expressing misogynistic views (Sun 2020; Yin and Sun 2021). This divergence reflects contrasting perceptions of the prevalence and severity of sexual harassment. Individuals who recognize sexual harassment as a systemic problem rooted in gendered power structures are more likely to accept feminist claims (Szekeres et al. 2020), which in turn fosters pro-feminist attitudes. In contrast, skepticism about the pervasiveness or seriousness of sexual harassment, more commonly observed among men, is associated with resistance to feminist movements (Lisnek et al. 2022), reinforcing anti-feminist attitudes.

For emotional mechanisms, gender identity can shape individuals' affective responses to the #MeToo movement, which may change or reinforce their gender-related attitudes. Tajfel (1981) argues that one's value and emotional significance attached to the group is critical to the formation and functioning of their identity. Consequently, events that are perceived as relevant to one's gender group are likely to evoke emotional responses. For example, one study shows that gender identity influences how individuals perceive discrimination against their own gender group by inducing stronger negative emotions toward themselves (McCoy and Major 2003). During #MeToo, both men and women have been found to experience intense negative emotions, including anger and collective humiliation (Ayanian et al. 2024; Castle et al. 2020). These emotions may lead to different responses across gender groups in that negative emotions may strengthen support for #MeToo among women, but foster defensiveness and opposition among men.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that gender identity plays an important role in shaping how #MeToo in China influences public opinion. But existing research offers mixed evidence. While some studies document a persistent gender gap, with women expressing greater support for #MeToo than men (Hansen and Dolan 2023), others demonstrate that #MeToo had similar levels of impact across women and men on dismissal of sexual assault (Szekeres et al. 2020) and interest in political participation (Castle et al. 2020). Given the enduring patriarchal gender norms and relatively low baseline familiarity with #MeToo discourse in China, we anticipate that the feminist attitudes following #MeToo are likely to diverge more sharply across men and women. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2. The increase in pro-feminist attitudes following the Chinese #MeToo movement should be larger among women than men.

Social Movement, Digital Divide, and Public Opinion

Many scholars believe that the internet should empower social movements in various aspects, as it allows participants to produce and disseminate information related to social movements at a lower cost (Mosca and Della Porta 2009). Specifically, Della Porta and Mosca (2005) highlighted four benefits of the internet on social movements: offering organizational resources for those lacking them; enabling direct expressions of protest; providing a medium for identification; and informing and shaping public opinion.

As access to and usage of the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are not evenly distributed across the population, the issue of the digital divide and broader digital inequalities becomes relevant (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). The concept of digital divide originally referred to the gap in access to the internet and digital technologies. This notion was further expanded to digital inequalities, considering varied usage, skills, and benefits accrued from the internet (Robinson et al. 2015). Scholars have specifically endeavored to investigate whether the internet

exacerbates inequalities in movement engagement (Schradie 2018, 2019). However, they noticed that the inequalities related to online activism are highly contingent on the contexts and the characteristics of individuals, which may simply reflect offline political involvement. Norris (2001) coined the term democratic divide to argue that given the fragmentation of sources in digital spaces, the internet may not mobilize the general public and could instead further increase divisions between those who are politically active and those who are not. A few studies on digital activism and online social movements (Calenda and Mosca 2007; Elliott and Earl 2018; Stalker and Wood 2013) suggested that participation indeed reflects offline civic engagement, such as interest in political issues and embeddedness in supportive networks. Notably, internet access itself hardly explains participation in social movements.

Most of these studies focus on mobilization and participation, but the reception of movement information, which may be critical for the outcomes of most social movements, was largely overlooked. Here, we argue that the divide in internet access should condition the effects on attitudes and beliefs shaped by online movements. The internet, with various digital platforms and information channels, allows movement actors to disseminate messages that are often less circulated by mass media (Breuer et al. 2015). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in China, where state censorship and media regulation limit news media coverage of activism and social movements (Zhang et al. 2024). While the global #MeToo movement has been dominated by platforms such as Twitter/X—which are not directly accessible in China—Chinese #MeToo discussions were primarily sparked and disseminated through domestic digital platforms and online spheres, including Weibo (Li et al. 2021; Ling and Liao 2020). Once such cases involving public figures emerged, they often generated nationwide discussion within these digitally mediated spaces, indicating that the internet served as the primary arena for movement-related information diffusion in China (see Online Appendix D in SI). Meanwhile, the internet facilitates incidental exposure to political information as well as inadvertent learning of political knowledge (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Kobayashi et al. 2020), even for those less interested in news and political information. This pathway may also explain how information about the #MeToo movement reaches the broader public.

Given these facts, we argue that unequal access to the internet—the digital divide—creates inequalities in opportunities for exposure to movement-related information. Prior research has leveraged digital media use or access as an indicator of opportunities for exposure to movement-related information, which in turn leads to mobilization (Lee et al. 2020). In this study, internet access serves as a condition for access to critical movement information. As a result, internet users are more likely than non-users to experience changes in relevant feminist attitudes following the Chinese #MeToo movement. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3. The increase in pro-feminist attitudes following the Chinese #MeToo movement should be larger among internet users than non-users.

Methods

Data

The longitudinal data were drawn from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), carried out in more than 28 provincial units in mainland China from 2010 to 2023. Initiated in 2003, CGSS is a nationally representative survey project administered by Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Renmin University of China. The samples were selected using a combination of probability-proportional-to-size and multistage sampling techniques. Taking the phase I survey (2003–2006)[1] as an example: (1) a total of 125 primary sampling units (PSUs; counties, county-level cities, and city districts) are selected; (2) four secondary sampling units (townships, towns, and city subdistricts) are selected from each PSU; (3) two third level sampling units (TSUs; villages, neighborhood committees) are selected from each TSU; (4) ten household are then selected from each selected TSU. Note that within each stratum, all sampling units are ranked according to the percentage of eligible survey respondents with a middle or higher educational level ranked, and the sampling units are selected using the "proportionate to population size" method. The households, as well as the respondents from the household, are randomly selected from the TSU using the Kish random numbers.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews (with part of the 2023 data through telephone interviews) with an overall response rate of 70 percent. The average interview time lasts thirty to ninety minutes. Given our primary interest is feminist attitudes, we pooled data from 2010 (N = 11,783), 2012 (N = 11,765), 2013 (N = 11,438), 2015 (N = 10,968), 2017 (N = 12,582), 2018 (N = 12,787), 2021 (N = 8,148), and 2023 (N = 11,326) that contained this measure, along with social demographics and other measures (for specific question wordings of key variables, see Online Appendix C). Missing data were excluded using list-wise deletion.

Measures

Post #MeToo Movement (#MeToo). We created a dummy variable to indicate whether a survey was conducted after the outbreak of the Chinese #MeToo movement (0 = pre-#MeToo, or 2017 and before, 1 = post-#MeToo, or 2018 and after; with 36 percent of the sample collected in the post-#MeToo period).

Pro-Feminist Attitudes. We measured pro-feminist attitudes by four items on a five-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree), including "Men should prioritize their career and women should prioritize family," "Men are naturally more competent than women," "Marrying a good man is better than having a good job," and "During an economic recession, women should be fired first." All four items were reversed coded (M = 3.16, SD = 0.86, Cronbach's α = .70), with higher scores indicating stronger pro-feminist attitudes (i.e., egalitarian gender roles; for details on scale construction, see Online Appendix A).

Internet Access/Use. To measure internet access, we referred to the item of internet use in CGSS, measured by a single five-point item (1 = never, 5 = very frequent), asking respondents to indicate how often they used the internet (mobile internet included) in the past year. We formed two related variables. One is internet access (0 = no access to the internet, 1 = internet user, 52.7 percent indicated they used the internet in the past year), which was included in the main analysis. The other measure is the five-point internet use frequency ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.67$), which was used for robustness tests.

Gender. We employed a binary variable, with man = 1 and woman = 0 (48.9 percent were men in the pooled sample).

Control Variables. We also included several social demographic variables in the analysis, including age (1 = 18–24, 2 = 25–34, 3 = 35–44, 4 = 45–54, 5 = 55–64, 6 = 65 and above, $M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.55$), education (1 = no formal education, 2 = primary school, 3 = secondary school, 4 = high school, 5 = college or higher, $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.31$), income (annual household income, truncated at 10 million RMB and logged transformed due to the high skewness, $M = 10.38$, $SD = 1.85$).

Moreover, we employed two extra demographic variables in robustness tests, which were often considered in the Chinese context (Lu 2021; Pan et al. 2011): rural/urban residence (54 percent living in rural areas) and Chinese Communist Party membership (12 percent with CCP membership).

Analysis Strategy

We used the following model to test H1:

$$\begin{aligned} Y = {} & b0 + b1\text{MeToo} + b2\text{Time} + b3\text{MeToo} \times \text{Time} + b4\text{Age} + \\ & + b5\text{Education} + b6\text{Income} + b7\text{Gender} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Here, the term b_1 denoted the change in feminist attitudes following #MeToo, whereas b_2 indicated the temporal trend and b_3 indicated the change in the temporal trend of feminist attitudes following #MeToo. We added other items as control variables.

To test the interaction effects (H2 and H3), we ran two extra models with each adding one interaction term: one between #MeToo and gender and the other between #MeToo and internet access.

We conducted three groups of robustness tests. First, we tested whether our results were contingent on particular model specifications, which considered various sets of demographic variables, different measurements, and the inclusion of the interaction term between time and treatment. Second, we conducted three placebo tests, examining whether the effects remained when we looked at an alternative time point, reran the models on another irrelevant attitude item (the attitude toward mobility[2]), and tested the effect based on another medium (TV). The effects we expected to see on feminist

attitudes should disappear. Third, we conducted a raking exercise based on census data published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China. We included all details of robustness tests in Online Appendix B.

Results

We first examined the change in feminist attitudes following the Chinese #MeToo movement (H1). After controlling for a series of demographic variables, the presence of the Chinese #MeToo movement was significantly associated with an increase in pro-feminist attitudes ($b = 0.061$, $se = 0.010$, $p < .001$), corresponding to an increase of approximately 0.07 SD on the pro-feminist attitude scale (Table 1 and Figure 2). This result supported H1.[3]

Second, we tested whether the impact of the Chinese #MeToo movement on feminist attitudes was contingent on gender. An interaction term between gender and the presence of #MeToo was added. The interaction demonstrated a significant effect ($b = -0.059$, $se = 0.013$, $p < .001$), which supported H2. We presented the interaction effect in Figure 3, which showcased that the gap in pro-feminist attitudes between the two gender groups following #MeToo increased from 0.13 to 0.20 SD—while both groups had higher levels of pro-feminist attitudes after #MeToo, such an increase was larger for women.

Finally, to understand how the Chinese #MeToo movement was associated with the gap between internet users and non-users, we added an interaction item between internet access and the presence of #MeToo. The interaction term exhibited a significant effect ($b = 0.114$, $se = 0.014$, $p < .001$). We presented the effect in Figure 4. Notably, in the presence of #MeToo, the gap between internet users and non-users regarding their pro-feminist attitudes increased from 0.08 to 0.22 SD, supporting H3.

We conducted various robustness checks, and the results aligned with the main findings above (see Online Appendix B).

Discussion

This study examines the change in feminist attitudes among the public following the Chinese #MeToo movement. Through analyzing nationally representative survey data from CGSS over a decade (2010–2023), we found that the emergence of the Chinese #MeToo movement was followed by a significant increase in pro-feminist attitudes, after controlling for several key social demographic variables. The overarching shift in feminist attitudes suggests that the #MeToo movement in China, like its U.S. counterpart, which prompted similar reflection among Americans (Klar and McCoy 2021), may encourage Chinese people to reconsider their intuitions about gender roles in society. This individual-level reflection illustrates the process of cognitive liberation described by McAdam (1982), which in turn contributes to broader shifts in values and belief systems. Our findings underscore the fact that social movements can be linked to broader cultural shifts, suggesting the potential for contemporary digitally mediated social movements to catalyze long-term, unintended, and intangible cultural change.

Table 1. Regression Results.

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
#MeToo	0.061	0.088	−0.013
	0.010 (<.001)	0.012 (<.001)	0.014 (.324)
Time	0.016	0.016	0.013
	0.001 (<.001)	0.001 (<.001)	0.001 (<.001)
#MeToo × time	−0.007	−0.007	−0.012
	0.003 (.017)	0.003 (.017)	0.003 (<.001)
Age	−0.032	−0.032	−0.019
	0.002 (<.001)	0.002 (<.001)	0.002 (<.001)
Education	0.203	0.203	0.190
	0.003 (<.001)	0.003 (<.001)	0.003 (<.001)
Income	0.026	0.026	0.022
	0.002 (<.001)	0.002 (<.001)	0.002 (<.001)
Man	−0.133	−0.115	−0.129
	0.006 (<.001)	0.007 (<.001)	0.006 (<.001)
Internet			0.072
			0.009 (<.001)
Man × #MeToo		−0.059	
		0.013 (<.001)	
Internet × #MeToo			0.114
			0.014 (<.001)
Observations	74,264	74,264	73,469
R^2	.138	.138	.138
Adj. R^2	.138	.138	.138
RSE	0.793	0.793	0.792

Note. Cell entries are OLS coefficients with the associated standard errors and (*p*-values) below.

Notably, we reveal a gender gap regarding the impact of the Chinese #MeToo movement on feminist attitudes. While both gender groups exhibit higher levels of pro-feminist attitudes after the movement, the increase for women was significantly higher than that for men. This evidence suggests that social identity plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of social movements. The Chinese #MeToo movement could enable women to speak out and act collectively with others who experienced sexual harassment or assault. This process created a shared identity among women that promoted solidarity and a desire for change to the current patriarchal structure (Lin and Yang 2019; Yin and Sun 2021). Women could feel empowered in a broad sense. For men, the movement's tendency in highlighting the issue of masculinity and harmful behaviors may not produce the same level of personal resonance as for women, which leads to a smaller increase in pro-feminist attitudes.

The absence of a backfire effect—that is, the Chinese #MeToo movement decreasing men's pro-feminist attitudes—warrants discussion. We reckon that many Chinese men may see the movement as targeting those in positions of power rather than

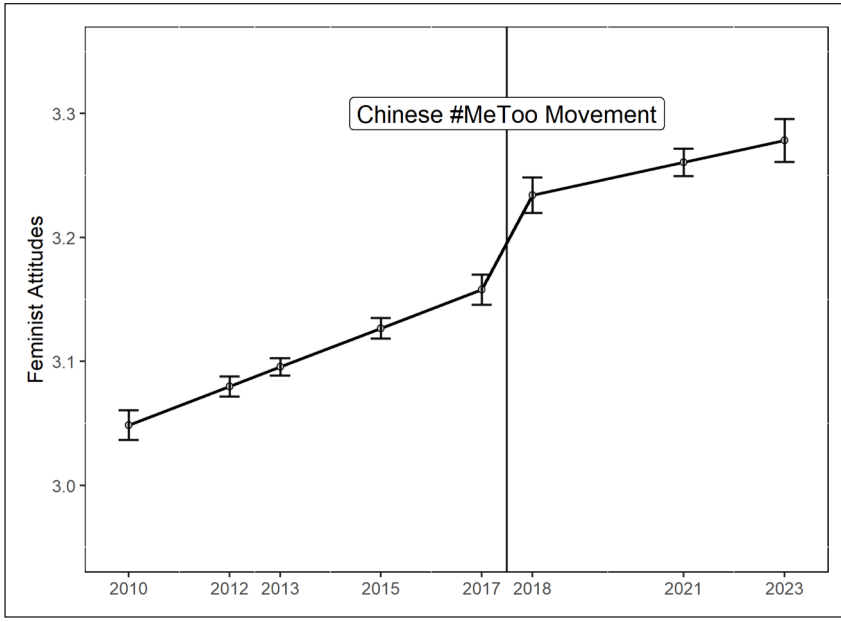


Figure 2. Main effect of #MeToo movement.

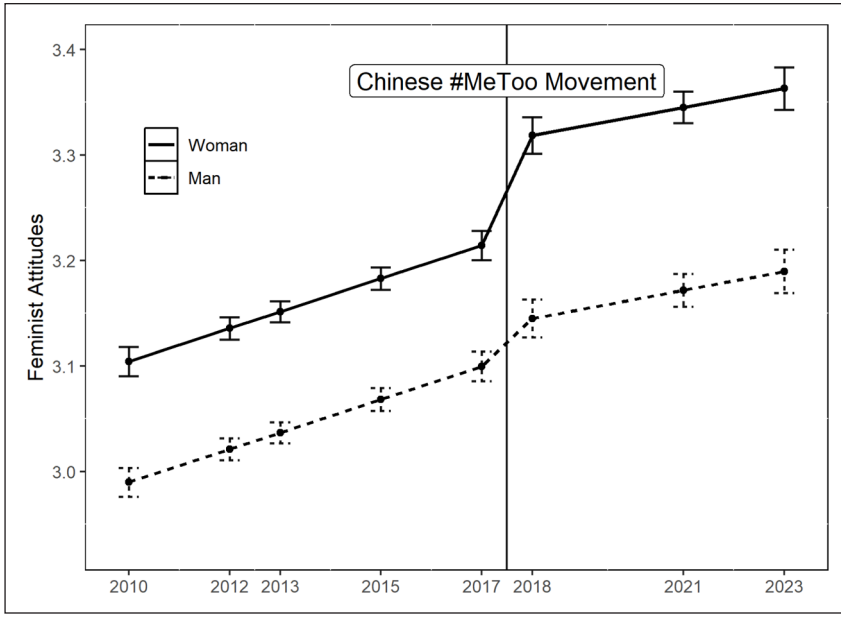


Figure 3. Interaction effect between #MeToo movement and gender.

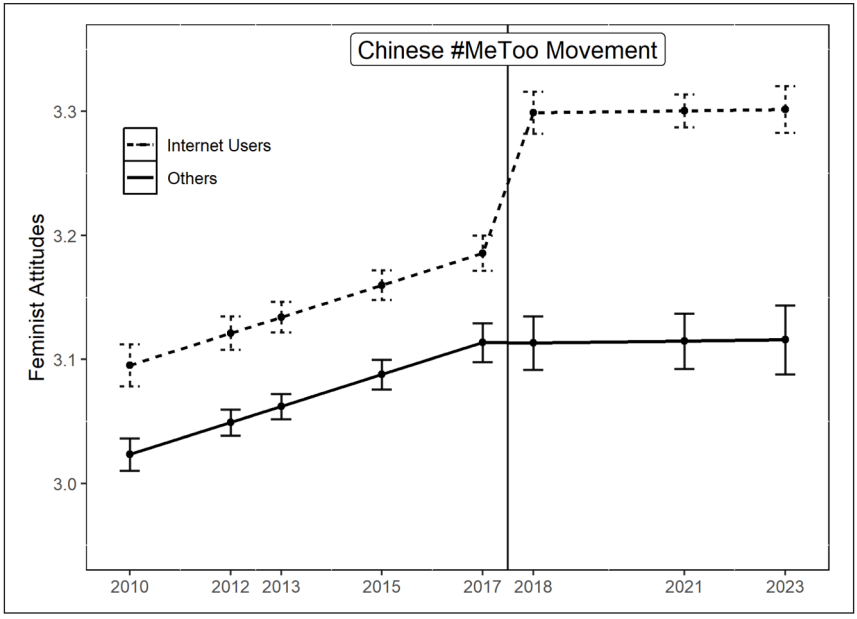


Figure 4. Interaction effects between the #MeToo movement and internet access.

ordinary men. They may not have felt directly attacked or implicated by the condemnation of perpetrators. This reduced sense of identity threat may have fostered empathy toward victims and even encouraged some men to support and participate in the movement (Li et al. 2021; Liu 2023). Consistent with this interpretation, previous research suggests that criticizing #MeToo does not necessarily translate into negative attitudes on related gender issues (Szekeres et al. 2020). We also caution that this absence of a backfire effect may reflect offsetting responses (for the cancel-out impact of social movements, see Meyer and Staggenborg 1996): While some men became more sympathetic toward feminist causes, others reacted defensively by rejecting the movement and reinforcing traditional gender norms. This increase in within-group heterogeneity, which our analyses did not directly address, may have resulted in the small overall effect observed among men.

In addition, we identified a contingent effect on internet access. Individuals with internet access exhibited a larger increase in pro-feminist attitudes compared to those without. This difference between the two groups became more pronounced, indicating a widening attitudinal gap. The digital divide in many Global South contexts is rooted in structural factors such as redlining and socio-spatial segregation (Valenzuela-Levi 2021). Such segregation may further hinder the diffusion of movement information through other channels, such as interpersonal networks. Other information channels, such as TV, cannot replace the role of the internet. We thus believe that a fragmented information landscape with people using different channels may contribute to the

formation of various publics holding diverse opinions and ideologies, which prevent the formation of a consensus that paves the way for institutional changes. Traditional mass media should play a role in unifying society and promoting social cohesion.

Overall, the sociotechnical contingency framework highlights that the impact of social movements should be profoundly conditional on both social and technological factors. This theoretical advancement could inspire further exploration of understudied dimensions and how these factors shape the roles of various groups in social movements. This lens, which highlights differences between groups, has long been used to understand asymmetries in participation and mobilization in social movements along other dimensions, such as partisanship and class (Schradie 2019), as well as more specific political use of digital technologies. Considering how different groups exhibit varied levels of participation, mobilization, and impact in social movements could reveal a fuller picture of how social movements shape power relationships and social changes in general.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing valuable insights into the impact of the #MeToo movement on public opinion in China, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while the repeated cross-sectional survey design allows for examining changes in public opinion over time, it cannot fully rule out alternative explanations for the observed shifts in pro-feminist attitudes. Other concurrent social, political, or economic changes may also have influenced gender role attitudes, making it difficult to isolate the causal impact of #MeToo. Future research could strengthen causal inference by employing longitudinal surveys to track the same individuals over time or experimental designs to identify the movement's causal effects. Another limitation concerns the movement's temporal and spatial variation. While our method captures the movement's major impact during its peak period of public attention, it overlooks its episodic and spatially heterogeneous nature. Individual #MeToo cases, although exhibiting relatively smaller impacts, may still have occurred at different times and reached different segments of the population across regions. These dynamics could be better captured by leveraging more specific measures of movement activities and more sophisticated research designs.

Second, our analysis focuses on changes in the attitudinal gaps between groups, rather than shifts in the overall distribution of feminist attitudes. Examining such distributional changes would more directly capture the manifestation of polarization (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Lelkes 2016) and thus warrants further investigation. We also acknowledge that our measure of gender is a demographic trait and does not capture the nuances of gender identity. Although we argue that gender identity shapes gender-related attitudes during the Chinese #MeToo movement through both cognitive and emotional mechanisms, we do not explicitly measure them. Future research should incorporate measures of gender identification, cognitive responses (e.g., perceptions of the severity of sexual harassment), and emotional responses (e.g., anger, distress, or anxiety) to directly test these sociopsychological mechanisms.

Another limitation is that internet access used in the current study is conceptually distinct from actual exposure to #MeToo movement-related information. Our intention was to use this upstream measure to capture an earlier condition or opportunity that can lead to movement outcomes (i.e., gender-related attitudes), following prior research (Lee et al. 2020). We have also conducted additional tests from a different context supporting the relationship between internet access and exposure to the #MeToo movement (see Online Appendix E in SI). Nevertheless, the internet comprises multiple platforms and information channels that differ in the movement content they circulate, their visibility, and their affordances for dissemination. As such, this measure cannot capture heterogeneity in exposure across specific platforms or content types. Future research would benefit from more fine-grained measures of movement information access to better understand how different information channels and content shape movement outcomes.

Next, our study focuses on the #MeToo movement in China, where patriarchal norms are deeply rooted in Confucian traditions and reinforced through authoritarian governance (Jing and Ristivojević 2021). By challenging these entrenched patriarchal structures, #MeToo could contribute to shifts in public attitudes toward gender roles. The process, however, is not unique to #MeToo. Other identity-driven social movements, such as those advocating racial justice, may likewise produce lasting changes in public opinion, particularly in societies where historically embedded white supremacy persists or resurges. Movements like #BLM, which seek to dismantle systemic racism, may reshape how Americans across racial groups perceive and evaluate issues related to race and inequality over time.

Finally, we note that our sociotechnical contingency framework treats internet access as a key axis of analysis, as the influence of digitally mediated activism such as #MeToo is likely to depend, at least in part, on patterns of connectivity in the context of China. However, this dimension may be less consequential in settings characterized by near-universal internet penetration. We therefore encourage scholars to adopt more detailed measures of digital engagement to better capture how technology structures the impact of online activism on public opinion. Rather than relying solely on internet access, future work could consider variation in usage patterns, such as forms of online engagement (e.g., posting, sharing, or commenting) and exposure to movement-related content on different platforms, which may reflect how reception of movement-related information shapes its influences in a nuanced manner.

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Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article are available at https://osf.io/xqemb/.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The post-2006 design was slightly modified to reflect the changes in development in China.
2. Feminist attitudes and positive views on mobility both reflect broader liberal and post-materialist ideological orientations. However, mobility attitudes are not expected to be directly influenced by #MeToo movements. As such, this broadly related yet conceptually distinct variable serves as a placebo test, allowing us to assess whether our findings stem from #MeToo or alternative mechanisms, such as the overarching ideological trends or the modeling specifications employed in our analysis.
3. To understand the magnitude of the effect, we compared this effect with the effect of gender ($b = -0.133$, $se = 0.006$, $p < .001$), an important factor shaping pro-feminist attitudes. The effect of the Chinese #MeToo movement is about half that of gender (46 percent).

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