

VAWIP in a State-Monopolized Political Field: The Case of Chinese Feminist Activism

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The literature on violence against women in politics (VAWIP) implicitly treats such violence as boundary enforcement: a political field already exists; the violence women encounter marks the edge they are not permitted to cross; and the state stands as the guarantor of protection and redress under the rule of law, whether or not it delivers (Krook 2020; Krook and Sanín 2016). In high-capacity authoritarian states like China (Johnston 2019), the premise of this framing does not hold. The political field itself is monopolized and policed by the state, which determines what counts as politics, who is recognized as a legitimate political subject, and what forms of political action are permitted.

Within such a field, women activists challenge the very definition of politics: asserting themselves as legitimate political subjects, introducing gender equality into the political conversation, and developing alternative political practices that the state has not authorized. The authoritarian state responds to them, not as the protector that VAWIP assumes but as both orchestrator and executor of political violence in order to maintain the stability of its rule. Such violence is less a set of isolated incidents than a process that permeates and harnesses the state's everyday apparatus of social control, including the gendered power it weaponizes.

Violence against women activists, or VAWIP-A, under high-capacity authoritarianism therefore calls for a recognition related to but distinct from the VAWIP theorized in democratic and hybrid regimes. What follows develops this recognition, drawing on the case of contemporary Chinese feminist activism. I examine how Chinese feminists have sought to rewrite the political map, how the state has responded through what I call state-orchestrated distributed violence, and what recognizing this structure implies for VAWIP research.

Feminist Activism in Contemporary China

China's autonomous feminist activism first emerged in the late 1980s and coalesced into a movement after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which introduced the vocabulary of "gender perspective" and of autonomous civil society and helped catalyze a wave of women's organizing (Wang and Zhang 2010). The movement pursued a concrete agenda of gender equality, including opposition to domestic violence and sexual harassment, resistance to employment discrimination, and recognition of gender and sexual minorities. This substantive program, however, could not proceed through the political pathways taken for granted in other contexts (Htun and Weldon 2012).

There were no electoral openings to contest, no legislative advocacy coalitions to join, and a nearly-absent civil society infrastructure independent of the state through which to channel reform demands. What activists did instead was to build, improvise, and sustain forms of political practice that did not exist in China's political landscape, were not permitted within it, or had never before been undertaken by women. To do so, feminists leveraged their respective social positioning and capacities when windows of opportunity surfaced. The movement's first-generation leaders were scholar-activists who drew on their professional standing and intra-institutional ties and collaborated strategically with the All-China Women's Federation, the state-affiliated women's organization, to pursue an institutionally embedded form of reform (Qi, Wu, and Wang 2020; Zhang 2009).

By the early 2010s, a younger generation of feminists was rising: urban, university-educated women who chafed at pervasive gender discrimination yet held no institutional resources and no recognized voice of their own (Xiao 2015). As they turned to a strategy of advocacy from outside the system, the relative tolerance of the late Hu Jintao years and a marketized media receptive to controversy gave them room to act. The repertoire included collective petitions and legislative advocacy, public interest litigation, and performative public action (Wei 2015). The first public action came in February 2012, when three young feminists wearing bloodstained wedding gowns marched down a crowded street in central Beijing carrying signs that demanded legislation against domestic violence, until the marchers were stopped by police. To circumvent China's prohibition on protest, activists framed their public actions as "performance art," staging them in cities across the country around a range of themes and drawing wide attention from both the media and the public (for more examples, see Lü 2016).

After Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, the space for civic activism contracted markedly (Chen 2020). Feminism, at first peripheral to the broader crackdown, was soon swept in as well, signaled by the detention in March 2015 of five young feminists planning a multi-city campaign against sexual harassment on public transport (Zhu and Lu 2022). In the years that followed, the movement developed along two lines.

On one hand, a committed core never abandoned the search for openings to mount organized collective advocacy, such as collective petitions, hashtag campaigns, coordinated photo releases. However, they now kept themselves as organizers out of view, drawing fully on the connectivity the internet afforded (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) and maneuvering nimbly around censorship (Engebretsen and Zeng 2024). For instance, a 2020 petition drew some 65,000 signatures within ten days, demanding stronger legal protection against sexual assault, by one account the largest signature drive in the history of Chinese feminist organizing (Huisheng 2020).

On the other hand, a substantial part of the movement gravitated toward dispersed, small-scale activities. Their actions were deliberately depoliticized in appearance and even disguised outright, aiming to keep feminist consciousness in circulation and supplying mutual aid that formal channels no longer offered. Such activities included tight-knit peer support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence; creative projects in writing and art, undertaken by individuals or small collaborating groups (Chang 2025); and internal discussion sessions convened in small or even itinerant venues like bookstores, cafés, outdoor outings.

For all their differences, feminist activism along both lines pursued concrete ends rather than symbolic ones, drew their authority from no source but themselves, and improvised precarious forms outside templates the state allowed. This compound character gave Chinese feminist activism a political significance beyond its specific policy content. In principle, a particular reform proposal may be absorbed by state power or settled through negotiation. What cannot be absorbed is women's foregrounding of themselves as political subjects in public life, together with their widening of the field of legitimate political action, moves that contest the state's authority to define what counts as "politics" in the first place (Dong 2023; Hou 2020).

State-Orchestrated Distributed Violence

Where the VAWIP literature pictures discrete, legally legible acts, the violence directed at Chinese feminist activists differs less in degree than in form. What the state seeks to suppress is not a set of individual actions but the continuous political potential of a group – or, more precisely, the conditions under which political action becomes possible. Suppressing such a target requires that violence be preemptive, sustained, and woven into daily life rather than reactive and episodic. Equally important, the violence must preserve plausible deniability (Poznansky 2022), since any visible act of repression would grant suppressed activists the very political visibility the state seeks to deny them.

I call this form of violence state-orchestrated distributed violence: a repressive process in which the state activates and coordinates a dispersed network of perpetrators, each exerting pressure through the logic native to their own domains. The network spans government agencies, private institutions, and intimate relations, involving actions such as workplace discipline, property rights, academic procedure, platform compliance, and familial care. Pursued as thoroughly as possible, the configuration erodes activists' everyday conditions for action, wears down their will to act, and constrains their capacity to do so, pushing them toward withdrawal from challenging the regime (Qiu, Zhao, and Cheng 2026). The distributed nature of this violence also diffuses the costs of repression, shields the state from accountability, and forecloses public backlash.

A Chinese feminist who has engaged in advocacy around anti-sexual harassment may, within weeks, find police visiting her parents, her employer suggesting she resign, her landlord citing unspecified concerns to terminate her lease, her social media accounts banned in cascade, and her building management surveilling her movements (Xiao 2017; Xiao 2018). None of these actions needs to be announced as political. Each can be framed in the idiom native to its domain. Yet their convergence, timing, and coordination reveal a single orchestrating logic, as one activist's account of an eviction captures:

“The landlord's voice grew louder and his face flushed.... ‘This is my house,’ he said. ‘I can take it back whenever I please.’... The police, off to one side, played the kindly bystander, repeatedly soothing him: ‘Speak calmly, don’t get so worked up, mind your health.’... The landlord cared nothing for what we had actually done, or whether the police had any case; all that mattered was that they cause him no trouble”.

(Xiao 2018)

For activists identified as “dangerous,” the predicament is not a single crisis but a persistent and recurring condition of deprivation, one that endures long after they have moved apartments, resigned from their jobs, relocated to another city, gone silent online, and cut their ties with the feminist community. After 2015, with rare exceptions, feminist activists have faced no criminal charges.¹ Yet in the end, what drives many from the movement is a lost sense of security, exhaustion of body and mind, and a sense of powerlessness. As this reaches enough of the movement’s core organizers, the movement loses its anchors.

Three features of this order make such a configuration possible. The first is the state’s combination of coercive capacity and penetrative reach (Greitens 2016; O’Brien and Deng 2015). Coercive capacity supplies the implicit sanction that makes every other node’s compliance possible. Penetrative reach gives the state access to the relational infrastructure through which activists live. Through this granular apparatus, the state can map a given activist’s employer, landlord, social ties, and family members, and locate points of pressure with little friction.

The second feature is the incomplete autonomy of the market from the state (Gallagher 2002). In the Chinese economy, firms operate within licensing, tax, financing, and regulatory regimes that the state actively manages. Landlords are required to obtain clearance from the local police and building management before leasing their properties. Online platforms similarly operate under political supervision (Roberts 2018). For economic actors, cooperating with a political directive is thus not a deviation from ordinary business but part of what ordinary business consists of. When the state signals that an activist’s employment, tenancy, or digital presence should be terminated, there is no structural position from which such a signal could be legitimately refused.

The third feature is the availability of gendered social orders as instruments of discipline. Chinese patriarchal norms, operating through hierarchical kin relations, gendered labor markets, sexualized workplace cultures, and the feminization of moral respectability, already discipline women’s political voice and public mobility (Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Li 2021; Deng and O’Brien 2013; Wang 2020). The state can activate these norms at targeted moments and in intensified forms, weaponizing latent gendered disapproval into acute pressure on feminist activists.

Under the state's direction, this distributed violence tends to be both arbitrary and extralegal. The violence is arbitrary in that activists cannot predict when and how it will occur: no clear rule connects specific actions to specific consequences, and no threshold reliably triggers or avoids response. This unpredictability is itself a mode of control, constraining not only action but the ability to evaluate one's own situation. The violence is extralegal not in the sense of breaking existing laws but in the sense that it operates outside the reach of legal adjudication altogether (Liu 2020). Unlike the VAWIP seen in democratizing contexts, the violence discussed here is not a failure of legal mechanisms (Piscopo 2016) but, rather, the state's strategic suspension of any legal measures at all.

The intersectional dimensions of this violence also require reassessment in context. Intersectional scholars treat categories of marginalization as pre-existing identities whose intersection compounds vulnerability to violence (Kuperberg 2018). In China's context, some of the categories that differentiate activists' exposure, such as ethnic classification and household registration status, are themselves products of state classification regimes, not pre-given social facts.² A Han urban graduate student and a Uyghur organizer with feminist commitments face different configurations. The categories structuring these differences are inseparable from the repressive apparatus itself, taking form through state classification rather than preceding it.

Implications for VAWIP Research

The Chinese case examined in this essay shows the logic of VAWIP-A under high-capacity authoritarianism. The state suppresses women activists to maintain its monopoly over politics, which their activism contests. The suppression takes the form of a distributed, deniable process the state directs and routes through the ordinary machinery of social control, integral to governance rather than exceptional to it. For VAWIP research generally, the study of authoritarian VAWIP-A points to four far-reaching implications. First, women political actors who act through extra-institutional means to push women's claims onto the political agenda deserve more attention. Their activism can expose them to brutal treatment that goes unacknowledged because of their marginal position. Second, the state itself warrants recognition as a possible perpetrator, along with the coercive capacity it can bring to that role. The state is most apt to take up the role when a challenge reaches its rule itself, when what activists contest is perceived to endanger the foundations of the regime's power. In such

circumstances the danger to the activists is grave – a danger that an era of rising authoritarianism only sharpens.

Third, such violence is better read as a structural process than as a series of isolated, visible incidents. The process activates state power already lodged in everyday institutions, where violence has become a routine aspect of governance. The strategic suspension of the legal order belongs to this process too: the withholding of law is itself one of the forms the violence takes. Fourth, extending VAWIP's premise that the exercise of violence is gendered shows more clearly how violence works by weaponizing the gendered power that runs through a wide range of everyday domains, including the private sphere. Working in this way, the violence comes to be normalized and remains deniable, and its reach exceeds what any single actor could do. The resulting suffering is prolonged, one of encirclement and exhaustion, and those it targets can scarcely resist.

Notes

¹ In 2022, feminist Wu Yi (online alias) was sentenced to eight months in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”; in 2024, #MeToo activist and journalist Huang Xueqin was sentenced to five years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power.”

² Ethnic identity in China is fixed at birth by state classification, and certain groups, such as Uyghurs, are flagged by the security apparatus as politically sensitive. Household registration (*hukou*) is likewise fixed at birth and largely determines a person's lawful place of residence; activists living outside their registered locality may face arbitrary police eviction.

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